

The Drumcollogher Cinema Tragedy

By Barney Keating

The Assembly Rooms in Cork, or "Diessens" as it was popularly known, is no more. It had been founded in the first half of the last century with the exclusive and restricted title of "The Cork City and County Protestant Hall and Assembly Rooms". It is now just a grubby facade on the South Mall. While the entrance hall remains, the rest of the structure has been demolished and is open to the skies. Lavender now grows wild where once many generations of film goers were entertained by "flickering images on its silver screen".

The advertised programme for the Assembly Rooms Picturedrome, for Friday and Saturday, 3rd and 4th September, 1926, was a cowboy film entitled "The White Outlaw". It was described as "A very remarkable drama of the open, starring Jack Hoxie and Scout the Wonder Horse". The supporting film was a two reel comedy "Baby be Good". There was no programme advertised for the Sunday because the Assembly Rooms remained closed on the Lord's Day. This strict observance of Sunday was to contribute indirectly to the tragedy in Drumcollogher. Mr. Patrick C. Downing was employed at the Assembly Rooms as the Assistant Projectionist. One of his responsibilities was to pack the films after the evening show and get them ready for despatch to Dublin by train early on the following Monday morning.

In Drumcollogher, County Limerick, Mr. Patrick Brennan was the owner of a two-storey shed at Church Street. A quantity of timber and glass was stored on the ground floor. At one side a wooden ladder with a hand rail led up to a narrow door through which one gained access to an upstairs room, which measured about 60ft. in length and some 20ft. in width. At the far gable end two small windows, barred on the outside, flanked a small narrow room which was partitioned off from the rest of the room and was used, on occasions, as a dressing room for amateur dramatics. Portion of the room was covered with felt.

Mr. William Forde, a hackney car owner in Drumcollogher, decided to rent this upstairs room from Mr. Brennan for a film show. Five "Cinematograph Entertainments" had already been staged, mainly by Hurleys of Charleville, in the same venue. However, this seems to have been Mr. "Baby" Forde's first venture into the travelling cinema business. He arranged with Mr. Downing to travel down from Cork, by train, on Sunday afternoon. Forde could collect Downing at Charleville, the films being carried in a Gladstone bag. To lighten the load, the films' metal cases were left in Cork. The show was scheduled for that evening - Sunday, 5th September, 1926.

Sergeant Long, from the local Civic Garda barracks, hearing of the proposed film show, contacted Mr. Brennan, Mr. Forde and Mr. Downing, separately on different occasions during the week or so preceeding the film show. He informed them of the various safety regulations to be observed under the Cinematograph Act, 1909. Sergeant Long, who had been trained as a fireman while in the British Army at Aldershot, placed special emphasis on the provision of blankets, buckets of sand and water, and exits. It was to be shown subsequently that these regulations were not attended to.

At least one hundred and fifty men, women and children climbed up the ladder that fateful night and passed through the narrow door in single file. Mr.

Forde was just inside the door collecting the money. He was standing at the end of a long table which lay lengthwise across the centre of the room. He had two candles on the table beside him which were lit when the first film started. This enabled Forde to examine the money coming in and give change. Once inside, the patrons sat on forms and some wooden chairs.

Downing stood further up at the centre of the table operating the projector. Around him lay rolls of film completely exposed; the engine of a lorry parked outside on the footpatch was kept running during the performance - this provided only electric power for the projector.

From evidence later, it would appear that the film show started at about 9.10/9.15 p.m. Some twenty-five minutes later the supporting film - the two reel comedy - concluded and the main picture commenced. The two reels of the first film were left lying loose on the side of the table nearest Forde when a portion of one film was ignited by a candle. Being celluloid, it flared immediately and burned furiously.

Sergeant Long was on duty that night in the hall and was standing beside the table. He stated later that, as he was about to make a grab at the burning film, somebody pushed past him and struck it with a cap, spreading the flames and setting fire to the rest of the films. Sergeant Long, before he was pushed out of the door in the stampede, managed to kick one of the blazing reels out through the door where it fell and lay burning on the bottom step of the outside ladder.

In the hall, the flames spread rapidly over the top of the table and across the floor. Panic rained in an instant. Most of those sitting behind the projector and immediately in front of it managed to escape while those up in front, near the screen at the rear of the building, were trapped. The fire blocked them off from the only door and, as it took hold, forced them back to the rear wall where the barred windows were.

One survivor, Mr. John Gleeson, the local Parish Clerk, who had been sitting with his wife up in front of the projector, described what happened:

"Everything happened so quickly that it seemed as if it were but three minutes before the whole hall was in a blaze. The flames in front of the door cut us, at the back of the hall, off from the only exit. I thought of the windows and rushed to the one near the screen. I knew that there were iron bars on the window but that they would not be hard to remove. I worked frantically at them while my wife stood at my side. I could feel the heat growing intense. My ears were deafened with noise and crackle of the flames and burning wood while my eyes and mouth were full of smoke. I got my wife through the window at last and then turned to assist a grey-haired woman whom I heard moaning at my feet. I helped her to the window and pushed her through. I made to help another woman through but, quite suddenly, flesh came off my hands in chunks. I looked and saw the flesh all wrinkled and shrivelled - yet I had not been touched by the flames. The heat and suffocation were so terrible that I then made for the window myself and got through on to a rick of hay outside".

Mr. Dan O'Callaghan, retired principal of Drumcollogher National School, told me that this small partitioned room at the end of the hall had been used as a venue for local IRA meetings during the "troubles". To guard against a surprise raid by the British Forces during such meetings, the bars in the windows had been sawn through in the middle. This would have helped any of the "boys" present

escape immediately if there was a sudden raid by the Black and Tans. Luckily, for the six people who escaped through these windows on the night of the fire - Mr. Gleeson, being in the local IRA, had been the person responsible for originally cutting through the bars many years before.

Guard Davis had also been on duty in the hall that night. His fiancée had been there as well and had lost her life in the fire. Davis had been badly injured while making rescue attempts. He later told how he had been separated from his fiancée in the mad rush for the door. "I saw a terrible sight, where the people were behaving like savage beasts, mauling, tearing and struggling with one another. They were holding one another in a frenzied deadly grip. They were shouting, screaming and fighting. I did not know where the girl was, the crowd had knocked her out of my hands and separated us. By then the hall was a blazing inferno. The smoke was terrible and it was a miracle that I was not suffocated. The crowd at the back were behaving like a hive of beasts - the men knocking down the women and children in their frenzy."

From various reports afterwards it would seem that a stout woman eventually got jammed in each of the two small windows - thus blocking off the last remaining routes of escape. Those still trapped inside were quickly overcome and suffocated. First, the ladder to the upper room; then, the floor and, finally, the roof collapsed. Within ten minutes from the start of the fire the whole building was a raging inferno. Within half an hour it was gutted. Forty six people lost their lives in the fire while two of those seriously injured died later in hospital.

The village of Drumcollogher was stunned. Harrowing scenes were witnessed as the next-of-kin tried to identify the bodies, many burnt beyond recognition. Widespread grief attended the Requiem Mass and funeral. Messages of sympathy were received from every corner of the world. The victims were buried in a communal grave in the grounds of the parish church over which now stands a large Celtic Cross.

A relief fund was started and met with a generous and worldwide response. Will Rodgers, the famous Hollywood star and comedian, who was appearing at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin at that time, held a special charity show with many well known Irish artists. The proceeds went to start off the fund. I am informed, again by Mr. Dan O'Callaghan, that over £16,000 was eventually raised. This sum was invested and administered by the Government.

Eight days later, at the inquest in Drumcollogher, the jury returned a verdict that the victims had died from asphyxiation and burning, that Mr. Forde was careless in leaving a lighted candle on the table and that Mr. Downing was guilty of negligence in leaving the films exposed on the table. After the inquest both Forde and Downing were arrested and sent forward, with Brennan, for trial on charges of manslaughter.

Five months later, in the Central Criminal Court in Dublin, Brennan was acquitted while the State entered a nolle prosequi against Forde and Downing who were then discharged.

William Forde emigrated to Australia sometime after the tragedy. Several people have told me that he got a job as a cook with a party of rabbit exterminators in the outback. One day, while baking bread, it seems that he mistook arsenic for baking powder with the result that three of the party died. William Forde was one of those that died. I tried to trace some, at least, of Patrick Downing's subsequent history but with little success. Evidently, he was employed again

projectionist in at least one of Cork city's cinemas. It would appear he died of cancer in St. Luke's Hospital, Cork in the 1950's. I believe Patrick Brennan died sometime in the late 1960's.

The Drumcollogher Cinema disaster happened 54 years ago. It is, I suppose, easy to be highly critical now, with hindsight, of what certain leading figures in this tragedy did or did not do, of precautions not taken or of needless risks that were.

It was folly to allow over 150 people - men, women and children - into an upstairs room of a building, dry as a tinder box with combustible materials stored underneath. I believe that some dry holly and ivy branches were intertwined in the latted work in the upstairs room, decorations left over from some previous entertainment. It was also the height of folly to have lighted candles anywhere near loose celluloid films. But there must have been many other unsuitable venues all over both rural and urban Ireland where, in the twenties and later, similar travelling cinema shows were held - all without accident until that Sunday night in Drumcollogher.

Finally, it was unfortunate that Sergeant Long allowed the cinema show to take place. He had previously informed the organisers that certain statutory fire precautions would have to be attended to. He was present in the hall on that night and could see for himself that these precautions had not been taken.



A View of the Tragedy.