

LAST OF THE LIMERICK HEDGE SCHOOLS

The Academy In The Glen

QUAINT SYSTEM OF TIMEKEEPING

(By J. D. H.)

In an interesting description of the times in which he lived, William Carleton, the novelist, found a place for his youthful experiences of an Irish Hedge School, and over a more extensive area Mr. P. J. Dowling, has, in recent times, collected much that might be written on the subject in his "Hedge Schools of Ireland." There were still, however, some places off the beaten track, like South-West Limerick, where the last of the southern hedge masters brought their honourable labours close to our own times.

It may be in the nature of coincidence, but the lot of the last of West Limerick's hedge masters was cast amongst the descendants of that Richard Woulfe, of Corbally, Limerick, whose lands were forfeited after the 1641 Rebellion.

While time and opportunity offer, and living witnesses survive to attest the facts, it may be helpful to recall a period, not so many years back, which marks the severance of the last link which brought the Irish Hedge School along from the dark days of the confiscation to the hills of West Limerick, on the Kerry border, and to the doors of the National Schools which severed it.

He was an old man when I first saw him, and it was with rather unquiet feelings that curiosity prompted me, while visiting some relatives, who lived half-way between Abbeyfeale and Athea, that I made the acquaintance of Master Michael Sheahan, at what came to be ironically known amongst his pupils as "Sheahan's Academy." Although the National School had penetrated the surrounding districts for many years previously, the Academy was still struggling on, but was seriously on the wane when I dropped in there one day amongst its mixed attendance.

NO LONGER HELD IN THE OPEN.

The classes were no longer held in the open under hedges, or in secluded valleys, and the fear had long before departed, when an informer might have easily changed the head of the master for a five pound note. However uncomfortable it might have been for the master, or his pupils, it was a vast improvement on the cross-roads, or the bleak mountain side, to find a thatched roof over their heads. The rough stones of the walls might be unsightly in the old out-house which was placed at their service by the late Mr. Richard E. Woulfe, the father of a very distinguished Commissioner of Public Works in one of America's largest cities, but its situation was ideally chosen amidst picturesque old world surroundings. The donor, who has long since past away, was a sound Gaelic scholar, a man of rare intellectual gifts, whose memory was stored with a fund of interesting traditions which some well-known Irish historians found helpful in their researches.

I have forgotten many faces since that winter morning long ago, when I set out for that famous Academy at "The Glen," Cratloe, but I can distinctly recall the kindly face of the old master.

He was of medium height with a black

There, in the big open hearth, at the end of the old house, they were piled to make the interior habitable, and send the blue and scented smoke through a "sauganed" opening above, and out among the centuries old trees that lined the slopes of the Glen. The old man's blood was no longer hot, and when the fire itself turned cold towards the winter evening, it was usually a suggestion for dispersing the classes. The crisis was often precipitated by an unscrupulous pupil, whose communal duty it was, if sitting next the fire, to hasten the departure of any lingering coals on the hearth by burying them beneath the ashes of their deceased companions, whenever the old man turned his back.

A CRY THAT BROUGHT MERCY.

He had not the reputation of a harsh master, but there are times in a school-boy's life when he must be punished in some form (an axiom only admitted by ex-pupils, who are assured that the school door was closed definitely behind themselves). Whenever occasion arose for any severe punishment the preparatory cry of the victim would ring loud and long enough in the school to bring Mrs. Woulfe hastening over the intervening yard from her kitchen, some yards off, scattering the farmyard fowl in her eagerness to make her appeal for mercy timely and effective.

As the days grew older, the ripened scholars divined that the master allowed the music of the condemned scholar to rise high enough, and suspended punishment long enough, through his homilies, to make certain that Mrs. Woulfe would be in full time to curtail the impending penalty.

His old pupils always took pride in repeating that Master Sheahan's boys always carried off the honours for Catechism before the Bishop on parish holidays, because of the assistance they derived from their knowledge of Latin, which their old tutor imparted to them. They also realised the idea that his equipment was a cause for surprise, and even a little jealousy too, amongst the more important national teachers, against whose excellent training they competed towards the end of the Academy's days. In justice, however, it must be added, that their training must have been of a very high order to enable them to compete successfully with the late Master Martin O'Sullivan, N.T., who was one of the most intellectual members of the profession then in West Limerick.

Sheahan was also an expert in handwriting, and had his head lines charged with the usual moral lessons, which left quotations floating through every day life in the district for a subsequent generation.

THE MASTER AND A PAST PUPIL.

It was customary for a past pupil, particularly if a matrimonial candidate for Shrove, to visit, with a free and easy assurance, his old alma mater, to have another go at his calligraphy for practice sake. This, usually on a day unfit for plough or scythe. One day the son of an old patron called the way, and sitting

face of the old master.

He was of medium height, with a placid face, clean shaven, except for a little grey stubbed beard at the sides. He spoke without affectation, and with an assured command of language, in a voice generally low. Sometimes it was raised, but in the heat of argument, such as when I once afterwards heard him maintaining some thesis of his against an enlightened past pupil. As a master he never seemed to look for any more deference because of his position than that which one of the more well to do farmers, amongst whom he spent his life, might naturally be entitled to expect. Prior to his advent to the Glen, he took over temporarily the charge of an earlier Hedge School, which had been held, time out of mind, at a place called Harnett's Cross, now Healy's Forge, at Knockbrack, about two miles from Abbeyfeale. This school appears to have been conducted by another popular teacher, Master Foley, until his death, probably about the middle fifties of the last century. There was also a Master Denny Wrenn teaching elsewhere at that time in an adjoining parish.

SAINT AND SCHOLAR.

From about 1860 to 1880, Michael Sheahan taught on an average 80 or 90 pupils. When burdened by approaching old age and debility, his attendance of scholars had fallen to five, in the year 1900. He apparently made no provision for the rainy day (if he had ever been enabled to do so), and with a pension, consisting only of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," he went into the workhouse at Newcastle West, where he died on the 5th of May, 1902—no doubt, another saint and scholar of the old country. Those who knew him would never have permitted his last days to be spent at the expense of the rates, but in his private affairs his innate principles permitted no sympathetic interference.

Amongst the better off farmers he was treated as a respected member of the family, and at stated times voluntary contributions of very small dimensions were accepted to meet the master's pressing needs; modest, but hardly remunerative. In return he taught their children entrusted to him, and according to a Mrs. John O'Connor, of Cratloe, a past pupil who still survives at the age of 98, he trained them well.

There were no maps on the rough walls of this humble school, and barely the furniture required to carry on without headaches. Interstices in the walls marked where mischievous pupils dug the mortar away to make pigeon holes for their inks and pencils. The seats consisted of plain or wooden planks, and the slates, which were worked for mathematics, on the scholars' knees, belonged to the common family of the roof tree variety. These had been laboriously polished, with a kind of sandstone, to a writing surface, at the Glen stream, which flowed beneath a one arch bridge, and sang through its pretty course, cheered by the rustling trees that overhung it. There also it lent its services to lick into shape the pencils in use in the school, supplied in rough form from its gravelled bed.

THE NEIGHBOURING CLOCK.

The school boasted no clock, but in a farm dwelling thirty yards away there was one, by which master and pupil alike might measure the flight of Omar's "Hunter of the East." The striking of the hours of this old friend brought more joy to the trained ears of some of those pupils than did the melody of Cathedral chimes in distant cities in after years. It is still associated with pleasant memories by the few who survive, because of its joyous signals of release when the days were warm and long, and the flower laden fields outside were teeming with the smiles of summer.

When the days were short and stern, and the clock was a tardy messenger, the limit of the school's hours

plough or scythe. One day the son of an old patron called the way, and sitting down amongst the students set about copying the current head line of the school. On this occasion Master Sheahan addressed a question to the visitor, while he was engaged, as much with the movements of his mouth as with the quill pen he was driving at some word or other, and was so intent on the process that he adjourned his answer until he had placed the customary flourish to the end of his labour. Irritated at the delay, the master charged him with ill-manners. The important student retorted by reversing the accusation, because he was disturbed, he said, with a question while struggling with a long word when the inspiration to execute it correctly lasted. The master reminded him that he had lost that respect for his elders, which he had tried to impress on him formerly, and the ex-pupil pleaded the deformity of his art that might have been risked by the courtesy of suspending his operation. And so to the delight of the scholars the interchange went on above their heads for almost half an hour, ending in an exchange of apologies.

The old man never forgot to devote one hour each day to religious instruction, which included the recital of the Rosary.

ONLY THE OLD-TIME SETTING REMAINS.

The Glen, with its old time setting, is still as charming as of old. The old school teacher—last of his patriotic profession—is gone, and left to his later pupils the distinction of having graduated in the last of Limerick's Hedge Schools. Gone, too, is the kindly donor of the school. The centuries old trees, which sheltered the old school from the winter blast, and the summer heat, have strewn their leaves full forty times over the paths the old teacher and his pupils trod. And still the little stream turns on below. It still runs on to join the Oulagh farther down the valley. Past the old culm and coal pits, which mark an industrial enterprise of a former landlord but not his perseverance. That innocent little stream did not always flow so gently though. Once upon a time a certain widow, who still survives in a happy home at Keale, had cause to remember its mood when it was angry some sixty years ago. One evening, hurrying home from the school in the Glen, she attempted to cross the stream at Reacock, which was in flood, and was carried a hundred yards along its course before being rescued, more dead than alive by the same man who had given the school to her master.

BORN IN PARISH OF ATHEA.

Master Michael Sheahan, I learned, was born in Knocknagorna, in the parish of Athea, and sprang from a respectable family of the farming class, one of whom, a young doctor, graduated with some distinction. Had he been at his kinsman's school he would not have been the only member of the profession indebted to him for his rule of three.

The future master himself spent his early years in Causeway, Co. Kerry, from which his mother, of the Lyons family, came. He had been intended for the priesthood, but some trivial indiscretion, while at college, together with the intervention of the "bad times," sent him adrift on the world to fend for himself, like many another genius of his time.

LIGHTNING TRAGEDY

All that remained of the body of Edward Braithwaite, a farmer of Liston, Warton, Lancs., after he had been struck by lightning was the front of his shirt, pieces of leather and wood, which had formed his clogs, and fragments of rag, which had been his serge suit. The man was killed instantly.

MOTORS IN COLLISION

During the week-end two motor cars came into collision in the Ennis Road, Limerick. Though the impact was rather