GARRYOWEN

by Kevin Hannan

Garryowen is named after the public garden, or park, which was situated outside the walls in the south eastern side, and not far from John's Gate. Though we have a number of contemporary accounts of the place, the recording of its exact position was, apparently, thought unimportant. The finest description of Garryowen was written by Gerald Griffin in the opening chapter of "The Collegians". Griffin, who was born in Limerick in 1803, when the garden was still popular, tells us that the place was situated "...on the aclivity of a hill near the City of Limerick commanding a not unpleasant view of that fine old town."

This information would suggest the area between the old Spittal Boreen and the waterwords at Gallows Green. It seems most likely that "Owen's Garden" was called after a person of that name, "who was the owner, about half a century since, of a cottage and plot of ground on this spot". Plots of ground attached to cottages are usually small, and altogether unsuitable for the accommodation of crowds of pleasure-seeking citizens; but it is possible that a large area around this plot could have been used as an amenity by the people and called after Owen, who may have been something of a "character" in the district.

It must be accepted that Garryowen was a commonage, or the forerunner of the public parks provided by the Corporation in recent years. Commonages rarely become private property, and it is noteworthy that such a commonage existed up to the time of the Garryowen housing development, twenty years ago, in the area of Green Hills, between Ryan's (Bulleen) farmhouse and the waterworks at Gallows Green. If this was the site of the famous recreational garden, then Griffin's description of it would have been correct.

The late A.J. O'Halloran, in his interesting book "The Glamour of Limerick", seemed to have no doubt but that the "...original Gardaeogain, 'John's Garden' was situated outside the walls where the Devil's Battery presently forms portion of the bounds of St. John's Hospital."

This account fits exactly the grounds of St. John's Hospital on the southern side. This area, with its southerly aspect, and its protection from northerly winds by the city wall (which was not demolished in the general clearnence of 1760), would have been ideal as a recreational area.

Wherever its exact location, Garryowen has left its mark, and still remains a popular synonym for Limerick itself. Gardaeogain was the quiet retreat for the citizens from about 1775 to the opening years of the nineteenth century. At that time, there were no footpaths by the river or good roads to take them on foot away from the festering streets and lanes of the uncongenial city. The garden was obviously an attractive and salubrious haven for young and old alike.

However it was also the rallying place for the famous "Garryowen Boys", whose exploits are so graphically chronicled in the quaint verses of the famous song Garryowen in Glory. The redoubtable gang was made up of the sons of the wealthy merchant classes, the sedentary nature of whose occupations (or want of them) conserved the energies that were to be expended in the various exercises of smashing street lamps, rattling door knockers, and baiting the hard-pressed night watch. Apparently, these high-spirited activities were looked upon with a tolerance that certainly would not be countenanced for similar behaviour by the sons of the working classes.

The Garryowen boys must have been treated with healthy respect in other parts of the city. Their riotous rampages in the "Parish" did not escape the notice of the Bard of Thomond. In his best work, Drunken Thady, Michael Hogan describes how the gang rudely shattered the simple celebration of the Christmas Eve midnight scene in Quay Lane:

The sweet-toned bells of Mary's tower,
Proclaimed the Saviour's natal hour!
And many an eye with pleasure glisten'd!
And many an ear with rapture listen'd!
The gather'd crowd of charm'd people
Dispersed from the gazing at the steeple;
The homeward tread of parting feet,
Died on the echoes of the street;
For Johnny Connell, the dreaded man,
With his wild-raking Garryowen clan,
Clear'd the streets and smash'd each lamp,
And made the watchmen all decamp!

The inspiration and driving force, behind the infamous clan was undoubtedly the legendary Johnny Connell.

The Connell family owned one of the two breweries in Garryowen but Johnny showed more interest in making mischief than in brewing porter. The unknown poet who wrote the old song, Garryowen in Glory, immortalised the wild-raking man:

Johnny Connell's tall and straight;
And in his limbs he is complete;
He'll pitch a bar of any weight,
From Garryowen to Thomondgate.

The song also gives us the name of another leading member of the fighting fraternity. This was Harry O'Brien, whose family, tradition tells us, were engaged in the horsetrading business in the vicinity of Garryowen. (Was he, one wonders, an ancestor of Kate O'Brien, whose father had a livery stable in Mulgrave Street?) Harry literally jumped into history when he

...leaped over the dock
In spite of judge and jury.

The unknown poet neglected to list the offence for which Harry was being tried when he made his dramatic leap from the dock, and we have no way of knowing whether he was ever recaptured.

After Connell's removal to Cork city, where he engaged in business for a long number of years, the Garryowen gang disbanded and, inexplicably, the popularity of the garden began to wane. The same anonymous poet tells us:

Garryowen is gone to wreck
Since Johnny Connell went to Cork.

One would have thought that the place would be far more congenial without the "playboys" but this did not follow. It may be of interest to mention that co-incidental with the disbanding of Connell's gang the development of the towpath from the Canal Harbour to Plassey was completed and provided the citizens with the delights of the glorious riverside walk that has regaled all lovers of the out-of-doors down to our own time. Perhaps the popularity of Gardaeogain was superseded in this way.

Connell's exile in Cork was said to have been motivated by the strong desire of his folks to get him away from the "devilment". The drastic move had the desired effect, not only on Connell but on his pals in the old gang, whose boisterous and wayward activities ceased forthwith. Like the "Bishop's Lady" who returned "...But never more to dance and dine." Connell returned, not as leader of the Garryowen boys, but as a mature and responsible citizen who had outgrown his youthful inclination to lawlessness. Witht he exception of his donation to the Dominicans of the site for their church in Baker Place, his many benifactions to the citizens of Limerick are not recorded. He has left us a legend, and will be remembered for his youthful escapades and as the hero of Garryowen in Glory.

He is buried in the ancient churchyard of Donoghmore, near Limerick, and his tombstone bears the following inscription:- "This tombstone contains the remains of Turlough O'Connell, who descended from the ancient Barons of Upper and Lower Connelloe, his son John, and also his grandson John O'Connell, and Margaret Clanchy, wife of said John - it also contains the remains of George John O'Connell, son of the second John, who died 13th February 1853 aged 52 years.The last of his race. May their souls rest in peace."

But the enduring international fame of Garryowen is due to that forgotten versifier who wrote the lively lines that, when set to a rousing martial air, gave new life and spirit to weary marchers in battlefields in many corners of the globe. Soul stirring and all that it was, it had no charms for the Red Indians, who had good reason to hate it. To the Sioux it was "devil's music".

The song was first adopted in America in the early 1860's by the 69th New York Regiment (the famous fighting 69th) which was made up of Irish and Irish-Americans. It was played by the 1st New York Regiment when it marched to Quebec in 1775, and was the regimental march of the 7th U.S. Cavalry, whose regimental shield carried the words "Garry Owen".

The same piece of music was well known and loved in the British Army. It was the original regimental march of the first Battalion (83rd foot) Royal Ulster Rifles, and was played by the 28th Glocestershire Regiment at the Battle of Waterloo. The air was also popular with the 18th foot and the 18th Royal Irish Rifles.

It was to the tune of the famouis air that Lieut. Col. George Custer and Capt. Myles Keogh (from Co. Carlow) marched to their deaths at the historic battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. It is to be regretted that Garryowen in Glory was besmirched on this, and on many other such occasions, when it helped to impel the forces of savagery against the poor ill-equipped Indians, who were merely fighting for the right to live as they always did in their own country.

It is sadly ironic that Capt. Keogh, who must surely have heard of the sack of Drogheda by Oliver Cromwell, took part in the massacre of more than one hundred Cheyenne villagers, including their old Chief Black Kettle, and his wife. The poor unsuspecting people, man, woman and child, were butchered in the November snow of 1868, in what was euphemistically called the "Battle" of Washito (Oklahoma). This shameful butchery was led by Custer. Perhaps it was only fitting that both Custer and Keogh should have received their just deserts at the hands of those whom they so relentlessly persecuted, on the bloody banks of the Little Big Horn, twelve years later.

Today, after the passage of more than two centures, Garryowen has altered much from the happy hunting ground of the dashing young blades of the 1780 s. The intact little community, of more recent memory, is no more. Sarsfield Avenue, the first local housing venture under the new Irish government, and completed in the mid-twenties, the earlier houses in Upper Pennywell Road, and a few family names are all that remind us of another age.

The old girls' school, which stood for a hundred years, was one of the finest educational buildings in Limerick and was built, in 1870 through the munificence of Surgeon Frith, who died in that year. That notable benafactor of the people of St. John's parish lived at Charlotte Quay, in the house lately occupied by Mary Costello. Here he had a Medical Hall, which was ever open to the poor. This charitable, gentleman also endowed five cottages for poor widows; these formed the boundry between the

hierachy of rural life there are the farmers, the priest, the doctor and, to a lesser extent, the teacher. The snug in the village pub is a testimonial to them; here they drank with their compeers, physically isolated from the lower orders. There were very few books in their houses. As a class they are at the best indifferent to book learning, at the worst hostile and decidedly anti-intellectual. (There are of course, exceptions, just as there were families who treated their servants with kindness, generosity and humanity, but they remain exceptions.) Indeed there is a solid comparison to be made between them and the hill farmers and coastal dwellers, who traditionally had a hunger for education, a hunger fuelled by economic necessity but a reality nonetheless. They shared with their labourers a mutual hositility. To their critics they were the 'bodach' farmers - conservative, narrow, mercenary.

No history of the agricultural labourer in Ireland has been written. And in fact very little has been written about them at all - novels, poems, short stories or plays. No diaries or letters, for neither the farmers nor the labourers were very literate. There are a number of songs - some about hiring fairs, some about working conditions. The most famous ballad-'The Galbally Farmer" has, appropriately enough, a County Limerick background and was written by a Tipperary spalpeen, Darby Ryan.

It is easy to understand the mentality of the farmers - they exploited what was exploitable for their own material advancement. What is more difficult to understand is why this great tale of misery suffering and despair is not mentioned in the school histories. This, the true history of the rural masses, has been conveniently ignored. The children are told about the tyranny of the landlords but not about the more embracing and, for many, the more immediate tyranny of the farmers. Maybe it is time a beginning was made.

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school playground and Garryowen road. The houses were known as the "Widows' Homes" and the "Penny Alms Houses". The girls' school was, for many years, known as "Frith's School".

A further sum was bequethed by Surgeon Frith's wife, who died in 1879. This money was used in the construction of a new wing in the following year. This work was carried out by direct labour, under the supervision of the same clerk of works who was engaged in the building of the Cathedral tower. In 1893, the boys' school was added to the complex, the Board of Works contributing £450 towards the work.

Surgeon Frith gave everything he had to the poor of St. John's parish. He wanted nothing in return, and got nothing, save the fervent prayers of the Sisters of Mercy, who were always grateful for the many marks of his bounty which they received during his lifetime. Streets, parks and avenues were named after small-time politicians, many of whom contributed nothing to the community: but Frith and his noble works of humanity, are forgotten. But if one pushes aside the long grass on his grave in the Mount St. Lawrence graveyard the following inscription may be seen :- "IN LIFE HE HELPED THE POOR, AND IN DEATH HE DID NOT FORGET THEM."

Garryowen quarry, which yielded an abundance of fine limestone that polished just like black marble, was important enough to command the attention of the builders of churches and big houses. It was situated at the end of Sarsfield Avenue, and was entered by a remarkable archway, which was said to have been taken from the grounds of Richard Harold's estate in Pennywell. A few hundred yards further south, across the road, was another quarry which was later filled in to form the famous Markets' Field.

For fifty years the Markets' Field was the cradle of the G.A.A. in Limerick. In September, 1888, the first great Gaelic sports under the rules of the G.A.A., and I.C.A. was held there. The roar of the crowd and the clash of the ash were familiar features of Garryowen in those days. Some of the great names in Munster hurling made their reputations here, and many a County final thrilled capacity crowds.

The prestige of Garryowen has been enhanced by the famous Limerick rugby team that bears its name. A tactical "up and under" movement, known as the "Garryowen" first developed by the club, is known and practised wherever the game is played. To many of its great players of the past representing the home countries in faraway clashes in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, the words, "Come on Garryowen" whispered in the steaming, bonecrushing rucks and mauls often revived flagging energies and may have, on some occasins, made the difference between victory and defeat.

Many outstanding battles were fought out on this ground between rugby teams from the far corners of the globe. One of the most outstanding of these games was played in 1906 between Munster and the All Blacks. The home team suffered a crushing defeat in what has always been regarded as a classic exhibition of how the game of rugby should be played. On another occasion a French team played Garryowen in a contest that has gone down in the annals of local rugby history as one of the most robust ever played there. Another notable game was that in which the famous Shakespearean actor, Sir Frank Benson, led a team from his company. They gave a good account of themselves before going down to Garryowen.

Interprovincial championships, Munster Senior Cup, Musgrave Cup, Munster Shield and Charity Cup, were contested on this little patch of green 'under the tower'. After the liquidation of the Limerick markets many years ago, the ground was administered by the High Court, from whom the Garryowen club held a lease. This ended in 1937, and, in that year, the last rugby cup match was played there; it was a Munster final between Garryowen and U.C.C.

The home club had an historic association with the old familiar place, going back half a century to its foundation in 1886. Alas, the thunderous applause that once reverberated from the hills of Singland, Newcastle and Kilbane, has given way to the yelping of greyhounds, and the sporadic sounds of elation from a die-hard soccer following.

A little further south, on the space enclosed by Fair View Terrace, Geraldine Villas, Garryowen Villas, John's Avenue and the Rope Walk, stood the famous Garryowen Brewery of Johnny Connell. But despite its household name, it was not long before the last of the celebrated Garryowen porter came out of the vats to make way for the less preposessing pigs' blood which was processed there and converted into much sought after manure, by the Dublin and Wicklow manure company. The bulk of this valuable commodity was exported, as the cost was too high for local market gardeners and farmers, who, in those times could have hardly have been expected to purchase for money that which they could acquire by the dint of hard labour.

For along time the people of Garryowen suffered from the dreadful effluvia from the factory, especially during the heat of summer. Deputations to the management and to the Corporation were put off from time to time with the assurance that the processing operation presented no danger to health. There was never any reference to the smell, which was the only issue at stake. The authorities disregarded all complaints about the nuisance, mainly because they lived far away from it, and for some other reasons which nobody could ever understand.

The records of the Limerick Health Committee for the year 1886, contain the following report from Dr. Holmes: "...I inspected the Blood Factory at Garryowen, which was complained of in September last. I examined the place on several occasions and found nothing injurious or dangerous to public health".

In the many such reports for that year, and for part of 1887, no mention is made of the overpowering smell, nor is there even a remote reference to the legions of flys and bluebottles that invaded the houses in the district. At an inquiry, held in 1887, in which the chief protestors were the Governer of the County Jail, and Rev. Fr. Ambrose, C.C., St. John's, Mr. A. Shaw disclosed that the blood of 336,000 pigs, killed annually, was processed at the Garryowen factory. Things were only brought to a head when Dr. O'Dwyer, the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, and Chairman of the Mental Hospital Board, stepped into the fray: The following item occurs in the Health Committees records:

The matter with reference to the dangerous nuisance complained of owing to the offensive smell coming from the Blood Manure Factory at Garryowen, having been again brought under the notice of the Board. It was proposed by James G. Barry, Esq., seconded by Robert Hunt, Esq., and resolved - 'That the Board are of the opinion that a nuisance does exist on the premises at Garryowen, and are not satisfied that the Corporation, as Sanitary Authority, to have the nuisance abated.

That our Medical Superintendent afford every assistance to the Corporation in prosecuting the parties offending.'

Edward Thomas
Bishop of Limerick
Chairman

Like many other antagonists that fell before the redoubtable bishop, the Dublin and Wicklow Manure Company was banished ... away out to the isolation of Russell's Corn Mill on the windblown bands of the Groody river at Singland, where the business was carried on without fear of further complaint. Back in Garryowen the people were once again able to breathe freely, unassialed by the stifling stench of manure and the bacchanalian revels of the "Boys".