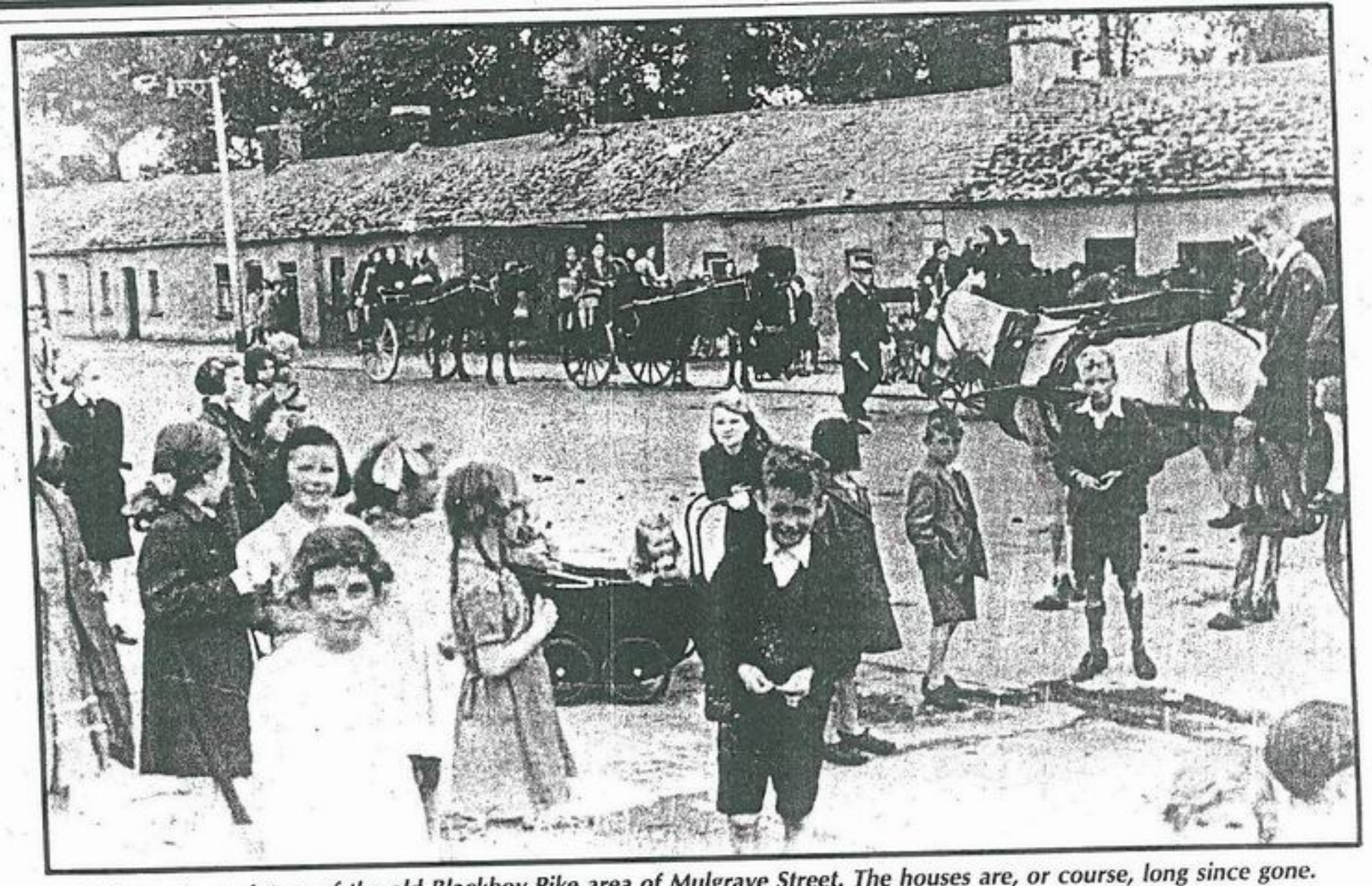

This is a unique picture of the old Blackboy Pike area of Mulgrave Street. The houses are, or course, long since gone.

Garryowen in Glory

Garryowen is named after the public garden, or park, which was situated outside the walls of Limerick on 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 the place 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 waterworks 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 somewhat of a "character" in the district.

It must be accepted that Garryowen was a commonage, possibly 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, in the area of Green Hills, between Ryan's (Buleen) farmhouse and the waterworks at Gallows Green. If this was the site of the famous recreational garden then Griffin's description of it would be 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 part of the bounds of St. John's Hospital."

This account fits exactly the grounds of the 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 clearance of 1760), would have been ideal as a recreational area, but the place, dominated by the city wall, did not as Griffin described ". . . command a not unpleasant view of that fine old town."

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.

THE GARRYOWEN BOYS

However it was also the rallying place for the notorious "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 occupants (or the want of them) conserved the energies that were to be expended in the various exercises of smashing street lamps, tearing off door knockers and baiting the hard pressed Night Watch. Apparently these high spirited activities were looked upon with a tolerance that 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 English Town did not escapt 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 glistened
And many an ear with rapture listened.
The gathered crowd of charm'd people
Dispersed from grazing at the steeple;
And homeward tread of parting feet
Died on the echoes of the street;
For Jonnie Connell, the dreaded man,
With his wild raking Garryowen clan
Cleared the streets and smashed each lamp,
And made the Watchmen all decamp!"

The inspiration and driving force behind the infamous clan was undoubtedly Jonnie Connell.

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

"Jonny 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 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 Jonny Connell went to Cork!;

One would have though the place would be far more congenial without the "playboys" but this did not follow. It may be of interest that co-incidental with the disbanding of the Garryowen gang the development of the tow-path 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 time. Perhaps the popularity of Garryowen 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. With the exception of his donation to the Dominicans of the site for their church in Baker Place, his many benefactions 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.

In accordance with the tradition of his clan he was buried at midnight, by torchlight, in the ancient churchyard of Donoghmore, a few miles outside the city, and his tombstone bears the following inscription:

This tombstone contains the remains of Torlough O'Connell, ancient Barons of Upper and Lower Connelloe; his son John and also his grandson John O'Connell and Margaret Clancy, wife of the second John. It also contains the remains of George John O'Connell, wife of the second John, who died 13th February, 1853, aged 52 years. The last of his race. May they rest in peace. Garryowen in Glory!

'But the enduring international fame of Garryowen is due to that forgotten versifier who wrote the lively lines that, when set to that 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 1860s 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 it was the official marching tune of the 7th United States Cavalry, whose regimental shield was emblazoned with 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 1st Battalion Royal Ulster Rifles, and was played by the 28th Gloucestershire 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 famous air that Lieut Col. George Custer and Capt. Myles Keogh (from Co. Carlow) marched to their deaths at the 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 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 the Cromwellians, took part in the massacre of more than 100 Cheyenne villagers, including their aged 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 desserts at the hands of those whom they so relentlessly persecuted on the bloody banks of the Little Big Horn, twelve years later.

CHANGES

Today, after the passage of more than two centuries, Garryowen has changed much from the happy hunting ground of the dashing young blades of the 1780s. The close knit little community of more recent memory is no more. Sarsfield Avenue, the first new housing development in Limerick under a native government, was completed in the mid 20's, the earlier houses in upper Pennywell Road and a few family names are all that remind us of another age.

The old girls school, built in 1870, which was in use for almost a century, was one of the finest educational buildings in the city, and was built through the munificence of Surgeon Robert Frith, who died in that year. This notable benefactor of the people of St. John's parish lived on the Assembly Mall, where he also had a medical hall, which was ever open to the poor widows; these formed the boundary between the school playground and Garryowen Road. These compact little cottages were known as the "Widow's Homes", or the "Penny Alms Houses". The girl's school was known for many years as "Frith's School".

A further sum was bequeathed by Frith's widow, 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 clerk of works who was engaged in the building of the Cathedral tower. In 1893 the boy's school was added to the complex, the Board of Public Works contributing £450 towards the work.

Robert Frith gave much to the poor of St. Johns parish. He wanted nothing in return, and got nothing save the prayers of the Sisters of Mercy, who were always grateful for the many marks of his bounty which they received during his lifetime. It is tragic that a man who gave so much to the city is almost entirely forgotten. The only memento of his worth and benevolence can be seen in Mount St. Laurence Cemetery if one pushes aside the rank vegetation that smothers his gravestone inscription which was couched while his good deeds were fresh in the minds of a grateful people.

GARRYOWEN MARBLE

Garryowen quarry, which yielded an abundance of fine marble, was important enough to command the attention of the builders of churches and great 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 Harrold's estate in Pennywell. A few hundred yards further south, across the road, was another quarry which was later filled in to provide afterwards the famous Markets Field.

THE MARKET'S FIELD

For fifty years this centrally situated arena was the playground of the GAA in Limerick. In September, 1888, the first great Gaelic sports under the rules of the GAA and ICS, 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 name of Garryowen has become well known internationally through the famous rugby club that bears the 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 far away 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 occasions, made the difference between victory and defeat.

Many outstanding battles were fought out on this ground with teams from 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 a classic example 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 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 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 UCC.

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