GARRYOWEN

by Kevin Hannan

The late A.J. O'Halloran, in his interesting book "The Glamour of Limerick", seemed to have no doubt but that the "...original Gardeogain, '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 clearance 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 un congenial 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

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 compers, 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 hostility. 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.

SOURCES
Reports from the Assistant Agricultural Commissioners, 1893-1894.
The Limerick Rural Survey, 1958-'64.
Duhallow Magazine. Article by Mrs. E. Casey.

Farmer and Labourer in pre-Famine County Limerick.

Tour in Ireland. Arthur Young, 1892.
Five Years in Ireland, Michael J.F. McCarthy.
(Hodges Figgis, Dublin, 1901).

Interview with Robert Cussen, solicitor, Newcastle West (1978).
Interview Patrick Roche (1978).
Interview Ann Crosbie, servant girl (1978).
Interview Pat O'Doherty, servant boy (1978).
Interview Jackie Hennessy, farmer (1978).
Interview Larry Begley, farmer and teacher (1978).
And many an eye with pleasure glisten’d!
The sweet-toned bells of Mary’s tower,
The homeward tread of parting feet,
For Johnny Connell, the dreaded man,
clan was undoubtedly the legendary Johnny Connell.

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
with his wild-raking Garryowen clan,
Clead’ the streets and smash’d each lamb,
And made the watchmen all decamp!

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

He 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
gliding down the river after the activities of the
out-of-doors down to our own time. Perhaps the pop-
ularity 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, who
boisterous and wild 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 him 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 remem-
bered for his youthful escapades and as the hero of Gar-
ryowen in Glory.

He is buried in the ancient churchyard of Donoghmore,
neat Limerick, and his tombstone bears the following
inscription: “This tombstone contains the remains of
Turlough O’Connell, who descended from the ancient
Baron of Upper and Lower Connell and son of
also his grandson John O’Connell, and Margaret Clancy,
wife of the second 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 line that
to when set to a rousing martial air, gav a 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
1880’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 regimen-
tal 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 (85th 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 famous 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 400 Cheyenne
villagers, including their old Chief Black Ket-
tle, and his wife. The poor unsuspecting people, man,
woman and child, were butchered in the November snow
of 1688, 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 centuries,
Garryowen has altered much from the happy hunting
ground of the dashing young blades of the 1780
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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 bequeathed 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 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."

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 occasions, 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 classed as a classic. The question 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 and winning the Munster Junior Cup, 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 which 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 Gar- ryowen 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 1866. 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 its celebrated Garryowen porter came out of the vats to make way for the less posessing 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 by the Corporation 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 flies and bluebottles that invaded the houses in the district. At an inquiry, held in 1887, in which the chief protestors were the Governor 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 Committee's 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, 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 of the Limerick Markets' Board

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, unassailed by the stifling stench of manure and the bacchanalian revels of the "Boys."