

St. Brigid's Burial Ground . ("Paupers Graveyard")

THE "YELLA HOLE"

Your report on plans for the renovation and care of St. Brigid's cemetery in Ballynanty Beg must be welcomed by every citizen, and those connected with the project are to be congratulated. This long neglected valhalla is closely linked with the greatest peacetime disaster in the history of our city, and recalls some aspects of that terrible time.

Far back as one can go in the tortuous history of our city there is abundant evidence of snobbery and sectarianism. Even to-day, in this enlightened age, we are living in a class society. Perhaps the best example of this intolerance is to be seen in the treatment, in times past, of those who were landless, homeless and penniless - the pariahs of our society - the paupers. The strength of this class lay only in their numbers. The very poor were looked down on by those who had a little more than them, and they in turn suffered the same fate at the hands of their more fortunate neighbours, and so on.

Thus the paupers of the last century were denied a covering of earth in the parish churchyards. even where there was space for new graves in some of these places objections to the interment of paupers were made by the owners of adjacent grave, though at the height of the cholera in the mid 1830's indiscriminate burials took place, except in St. Mary's, St. Munchin's and St. John's, where the Church of Ireland authorities maintained an orderly control. It is sad here to reflect on the action of the rector of St. Patrick's, who, on seeing the demand for consecrated earth reaching an all time high, increased the burial fees at Killalee from one to two shillings, at a time of great poverty and distress.

Before the Union Workhouse (now the City Home and Hospital) was ready in 1841 there was a great number of paupers (the lucky ones) around who had to settle for the more primitive 'comforts' of the House of Industry, and a free grave in the abandoned graveyard of Old Church (Little Killrush), in the parish of St. Munchin. Before the founding of the House of Industry in 1774 the destitute starved to death in their hovels, by the roadside or in the ditches.

The building of the Union Workhouse started a new era in relations with the poor. Those who struggled in from the rural hinterland in their thousands lost their identities as they underwent the new process of subjugation by the Poor Law bureaucratic juggernaut and ended up as numbers on a ledger.

Before the terrible cholera epidemics of the 1830's paupers who died in the House of Industry were buried at Old Church, and by the end of that decade all the parish churchyards were in an insanitary state from the great numbers of burials, not alone of paupers, but of the citizens generally, rich and

poor, who had succumbed to the merciless plague. The clergy in St. John's and St. Michael's appealed to their congregations to restrain their dogs from devouring the corpses in Killalee and Killeely graveyards. From records in St. John's Hospital we learn that there was "...an average of fifteen funerals a day from the hospital to Killalee graveyard, and as many more to St. Michael's and St. Patricks, and as far away as Killeely". In the summer of 1849 the Limerick Chronicle published an account of two boys who "...were bringing ten corpses every day (to Killalee graveyard) and as they were unable to bury them the dogs were devouring the bodies. Some of the animals were killed by their owners, while others were seen taking large pieces of human flesh across the country". But the poor starving dogs were not the only culprits. The same paper records that "...Constable Nash arrested, in the Irishtown, a woman named Mary Touhy in the act of selling 1 cwt. of human bones which she had removed from the burial ground, outside Clare Street. The miscreant had also a quantity of shrouding and caps worn by the dead"

By 1849 the overcrowded and insanitary state of the parish graveyards was such that the authorities were forced to take action. 16 acres were purchased at Gortnamanna, in the old redundant parish of St. Laurence and prepared as a cemetery. While the clergy urged their congregations to avail of this new facility the people were slow to depart from the traditional practice of burying their dead with their ancestors. In other words Mount St. Laurence was slow to catch on. As late as 1875 the following appeared in the Chronicle:

"We are credibly informed that the state of Killeely cemetery calls for immediate attention at the hands of those whose interest or duty it is to look after the health of the community.

The cemetery ...is already overcrowded, and the interments which are made there from time to time cannot, as a matter of course, take place but in a manner calculated to prove injurious to the health of the populous district close by.

It is even alleged that dogs are in the habit of prowling through the cemetery nightly - with what purpose can be readily imagined - and that the smell emanating from it is something frightful. We could add to these sickening details were it not that enough has, in our opinion, been already said to show the desirability of having immediate steps taken to remedy such a shocking state of affairs".

Sadly, no provision was made for the workhouse paupers in Mount St. Laurence for many years, nor paupers from anywhere else either! In the same year as the opening of Mount St. Laurence the Board of Guardians - conscious of the urgency for the provision of a burial place for the deceased inmates of the Work House, leased a plot of ground in Ballynanty Beg

from one Daniel Cullen, who in turn had it leased from the Earl of Lansdowne. Whether this middle-man intended to have the property - paupers and all - returned to the titled owner after the expiry of the lease I could never find out, though it is certain that no one ever tried to wrest ownership from the Board of Guardians or their successors.

The little cemetery was dedicated to St. Brigid, and Fr. Daniel Synan, of St. Munchins had it blessed and consecrated before the first interment.

A few years ago I wrote, as Secretary of St. Senan's Historical Society, to the late City Manager, Mr. McDermot, outlining a proposal of the Society to have the place cleaned up and set out as a memorial park. In a short reply I was told that since the Corporation did not own the place, nor know who the owners were, no assistance could be given.

From the beginning this sacred spot was seldom given its proper name, "St. Brigids", to the local people it is still the "Paupers", but the older name, seldom heard nowadays was the "Yella Hole".

Like Kileely Churchyard, St. Brigids was set in pleasant rural surroundings before being engulfed by the great masses of concrete and roof tiles that went to establish the fine housing complex in the district

It is a quiet place now but contemporary accounts tell us of a crowded workhouse and daily funerals to the 'Yella Hole'; but these were no ordinary ceremonies. The hearse was a common dray cart and the coffin a plain unvarnished deal box, without mountings or embellishments of any kind. It was a complete do-it-yourself service without any of the frills of a 'respectable' funeral - not even a priest, though the burial service was read before the corpse left the Workhouse.

St. Brigids would probably have been vandalised out of existence years ago were it not for the daunting influence of the magnificent wooden cross which has been casting its shadow over its charges for more than a century, though now-a-days that great symbol of our faith means little to some vandals. One other memorial, now long sunk beneath the surface, marked the grave of a school master who was employed in his professional capacity at the Poor House for many years. This brave and humble man saw the total equality in death and choose the paupers for his final companions.

In your welcome report it was stated in error that the great baratone, Frank Land, was buried in St. Brigid's. This is not so, Frank is awaiting the final trumpet call in St. Munchins.

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Far back as one can go in the tortuous history of our city there is abundant evidence of snobbery and sectarianism. Even to-day, in this enlightened age, we are living in a class society. Perhaps the best example of this intolerance is to be seen in the treatment, in times past, of those who were landless, homeless and penniless, the pariahs of our class society - the paupers. The strength of this class lay only in their numbers, and if this circumstance proved an incumbrance to the authorities it caused little embarrassment to those who preached on the 'dignity' of poverty, though there were those among the clergy, catholic and protestant, who made great sacrifices on behalf of the poor.

It was a vicious circle. The very poor were looked down on by those who had a little more than them, and they in turn suffered the same fate at the hands of their more fortunate neighbours, and so on.

Thus the paupers of the last century were denied a covering of earth in the parish churchyards. even where there was space for new graves in some of these places objections to the interment of paupers were made by the owners of adjacent graves. It is ironic that after a century and a half the same brand of snodishness and selfishness towards that section of our people described as "travellers" is all too obvious - everyone seems to want to see them go somewhere else!

Before the Union Workhouse (now the City Home and Hospital) was ready in 1841 there was a great number of paupers around who had to settle for the more primitive 'comforts' of the House of Industry, and a free grave in the abandoned graveyard of Old Church (Little Killrush), in the parish of St. Munchin. Before the founding of the House of Industry in 1774 the destitute starved to death in their hovels, by the roadside or in the ditches.

The building of the Union Workhouse started a new era in relations with the poor. Those who struggled in from the rural hinterland in their thousands lost their identities as they underwent the new process of subjugation by the Poor Law bureaucratic juggernaut and ended up as numbers on a ledger.

Paupers were still being buried at Old Church, and the cholera of the 1830's, and the great famine went a long way towards filling up all available space there. There is evidence, too, that some poor were buried outside the walls of Kileely churchyard. A quantity of human remains were unearthed there during the housing developement there in 1940.

The need for a new paupers graveyard was fulfilled in 1849

when the Board of Guardians - the administrative body of the Union - purchased a plot of ground in Ballynanty Beg from Daniel Cullen, who in turn held a lease of the property from the Earl of Lansdowne.

Whether this middle-man intended to have the property - paupers and all - returned to the titled owner after the expiry of the lease I could never find out, though it is certain that no one ever tried to wrest ownership from the Board of Guardians or their successors.

A few years ago an effort was made to have the place cleaned up and set out as a memorial park but no official owners could be found.

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