
THE GREAT EXPLOSION OF 1837

by Mary McMahon

On 3rd January 1837, an explosion of gunpowder took place in the city of Limerick between the hours of 10 and 11 o'clock at night, when ten lives were lost, four houses destroyed and all windows

on both sides of George Street, Patrick Street and Arthur's Quay were blown in. Damage to the extent of £9,000 was caused.

The explosion occurred at Richardson's, gunsmith, of No. 1 George Street. The cause will never be known, as the only person near where the powder was stored met his death by being blown to pieces.

Mr. Richardson had no family and usually went out after business. On the day of the explosion he received some casks of gunpowder. One or two of these were opened, which, probably, left traces in the store, which must have ignited with a spark.

During the evening the caretaker went out with a friend to a tavern nearby, where, it was stated, he had two tumblers of punch, and then returned to the house, carelessly smoking a cigar. Some time afterwards the explosion was heard.

There were four other people in the house at the time, the house-keeper, her husband, a neighbour and a young lad, Teskey, an apprentice. The first three were killed instantly; the boy was blown out of his bed into the street, receiving injuries from which he recovered some time after.

In the house next to Richardson's in Denmark Street lived a baker, Thomas McMahon, who, with his wife, son and servant, was buried alive in the ruins. Another son and daughter were saved. The latter, telling her experiences afterwards, said that she was standing at the shop door when she was violently



O'Connell Street, circa 1880.

struck on the back of the neck, and thought the ground had opened and swallowed her. Then, feeling that she had died suddenly and that her soul was going before her Maker to be judged, and being in great dread of not being happy, she prayed and tried to feel sorry for past sins. Next she found herself in the street, and nursing a dislocated shoulder, her body bruised and the back of her neck badly burned.

No. 2 George Street, most of which was demolished, was a lodging-house, run by a widow, Maria Ryan. She had two sons, a daughter and sister-in-law living with her. They were miraculously saved, as she herself related in tears. She had been lying unconscious under the ruins for some time and on recovering heard her 8-year-old daughter call "Mama where are we?". She supposed an earthquake had occurred or else that it was the last day. "Mary, dear", she said, "pray to the Almighty, in whose presence we must shortly ap-

pear". "I will, Mama, but sure it is no harm to cry out; someone might hear us and come to our help". They were rescued some hours later.

One of the boys was blown up in the air on his mattress as it blazed around him; he did not awaken until the flame caught his cheek, just as it reached the ground. He received no injury.

The situation of the elder brother, though different, was equally perilous. The corner of the floor where the bed had been could be seen days after from the street like a shelf without support. He crept along the broken floor and let himself down to the room below and succeeded in opening the shutters of a window in the front wall, then got outside and hung by his hands, shouting for help. His cries were heard and a ladder procured and a few moments later he stood among his friends.

Catherine Ryan, aunt of the children, did not remember anything until next morning, when she found herself in a



O'Connell Street, 1922, during the Civil War.

public-house in Arthur's Quay. She had been blown out on to a heap of rubbish in the street with a beam of timber on top of her; it required the services of several men to lift it. She received a compound fracture of the collarbone, and her head was swollen and bruised.

A servant sleeping in a room next to Catherine Ryan's was blown into the wall of Wm. Wilson's, No. 3 George Street, and died in hospital. Another servant at No. 2 was also killed.

The Wilsons were upstairs in the parlour about to read a chapter of the Bible, when the door suddenly burst open and the room was enveloped in a cloud of smoke and dust. There was a noise like cannon fire. The mother rushed to the door with her youngest child in her arms, and called the others to follow. She tried to make down the stairs but fell as the upper part was blown away. Their fall was broken by a pile of debris, and they succeeded in making their way out by the back.

John Ellard, a grocer and wine merchant, lived opposite Richardson's, with his wife and family. He had just gone to the door of his shop to see if the other shops around him were closed, when suddenly he was lifted off the ground, dashed across the street and buried under rubble. He had no recollection of how he got out of it. Trying to get back, he looked for Richardson's house, but a heap of ruins met his eyes. He was so stunned that

he did not recognise his son, who later brought him to a neighbour's house, where his family was safe and sound.

Through a remarkable co-incidence, the younger son had guessed what had happened, having dreamt the night before that Richardson's house was blown up with all the other houses up to Alexander Bros., which was what actually occurred. There were several chests of tea in Ellard's blown open and the contents sent flying; also many gallons of spirit flowed into the street.

A man who lived in Burke's house, opposite Richardson's, was about to get into bed, when pieces of iron, gun barrels and several pistols were impelled across the street and lodged in the bed.

The family of Tracy at No. 13, Patrick Street, were in the parlour when they felt a shock as if the house were struck at the base by an immense power. The folding doors, which were bolted, sprung open, just as one of the girls threw herself to the floor, thinking it was thunder. The windows blew in and the shop shutters, with goods, were scattered in all directions.

At No. 10, Patrick Street, all the children, being in bed, jumped up in terror and ran into the street. The maid was crossing the yard when her cap and comb were blown from her head. Mr. Richardson's nephew had arrived in Limerick that afternoon and could get no bed at his uncle's, so he was accommodated next door at Mac-

Mahon's. He had a few calls to make before turning in. While he was out, the two houses were blown away and 8 of the occupants killed. One of the Mac-Mahon's was employed as a clerk at the Dublin Coach Office, and was at that time awaiting the arrival of the day coach, which was delayed. When it arrived the explosion had taken place and it could not come up Patrick Street.

One of the large beams blown from Richardson's house killed a young physician, Dr. Healy, outside Burke's.

Two men who lived at the Crescent had a narrow escape. They left the Coach Hotel and were walking towards Richardson's when both decided to go home. They were not far gone when the explosion took place and large boards passed over their heads and fell on the flags before them. Had they not turned back they would have been close to the fatal spot.

The blast of the explosion extinguished most of the gas throughout the city, which added to the confusion.

Had the explosion taken place at an earlier hour it is appalling to think how many more might have been killed, as the street is one of the most populous thoroughfares in the city.

As it was, nine people lost their lives from wounds and bruises received in the explosion. Equally tragic was the fact that the other fatality, a woman, died of fright.