



Hidden History



Maurice Lenihan died in poverty in his adopted city in 1895. His major work, "The History of Limerick", was published in 1866, but it was not until after his death that the book began to attract attention. Not all of this attention was uncritical. A writer in "The Irish Book Lover" called the history "an accumulation of undigested facts", adding that "materials for a History of Limerick" would have been a more suitable title "and saved it from more censure".

Though Lenihan states in his preface, "The reader will find in the Index the fullest references to almost everything in the book besides what is contained in the table of contents", the claim is not always accurate. But a careful reading of the book will reveal many little known aspects of our history, often hidden away in copious footnotes.

An example of one such important but forgotten chapter in the lives of the people of the city is to be found in a few lines of Lenihan on pages 364 and '5. The years 1771 and '72 were a bleak period in Limerick. Unemployment, poverty and famine were widespread among the working classes. In 1771 the Pery Charitable Loan Fund was established for the relief of tradesmen by loans of three guineas to each, to be paid in instalments of 1s.4d. per week.

Though this fund helped to alleviate the distress of a large number of tradesmen, it did not prevent the hardship and misery from biting deep into the poor. A number of schemes were started to provide work for the unemployed, but by May 1772 work, money and food were still as scarce as ever.

Matters came to a head on 12 May, 1772, when a starving crowd gathered outside the Lock Mills seeking food. The people believed that a quantity of corn was hoarded in the building. The Mayor, Christopher Carr, called out the soldiers, and the mill was occupied by a sergeant's guard. The hunger-maddened crowd refused to disperse and were fired on by the guard. Three men on the opposite side of the canal were killed.

The killing of the three men did nothing to assuage the anger or hunger of the people. On the following day another large crowd assembled in the Irishtown to again seek out bread or corn at the mill. The military was once again sent for and the 24th regiment was marched against the starving men and women. Three more people were killed, including a poor Park woman who was selling milk in Broad Street at the time.

No further attempts were made to seek food at the mill. Charity, that ancient stand-by for all the social ills of the world, was again called into service. The Honourable Dean Crosbie revived a neglected charity in the same year of 1772. This charity, known as the Widow Virgin Charity, was provided from a fund left by a widow named Mrs. Virgin in her will dated 30 August, 1732. She bequeathed to the Dean of Limerick, in trust to the poor of St Mary's parish, a sum of 40 shillings per annum to purchase bread, to be distributed on every Christmas Day and Whit Sunday.

Forty shillings' worth of bread hardly went far among the famished poor but the widow's dying thought was a generous one. Apart from the fact that the Widow Virgin left a house in Quay Lane, held by Simon Holland at forty shillings a year, little else is known about this woman.

More is the pity. One would like to know much more about a person with such a rare and intriguing name.

