



Jail Journal

Historical Walkabout: Exploring Links



It is not an easy task to explore the links between Limerick and Australia over the past two centuries in a short article. For many Irish

schoolboys, one of the first times that the name of Australia cropped up in print was in John Mitchel's book *Jail Journal*. In the first decades of this century a copy of this work was to be found in many Irish households, and the book was compulsory reading for most nationalist families at that time.

John Mitchel was a man of strong opinions (to put it mildly), and was noted for his dislike of the British. He was transported to Van Diemen's Land with the other Young Irelanders, and *Jail Journal* contains an account of his impressions of the colony. As he prepared to leave Van Diemen's Land on 20th July, 1854, he summed up his impressions:

... we are fast shuttling down the coast of Van Diemen's Land below the red horizon, about to stretch across the stormy Bass Straits. The last of my island prison visible to me, is a broken line of blue peaks over the Bay of Fires. Adieu, then beauteous island, full of sorrow and gnashing of teeth! - Island of fragrant forests, and bright rivers and fair women! - Island of chains and scourges, and blind, brutal rage and passion!

Mitchel strongly disapproved of transportation as a form of punishment:

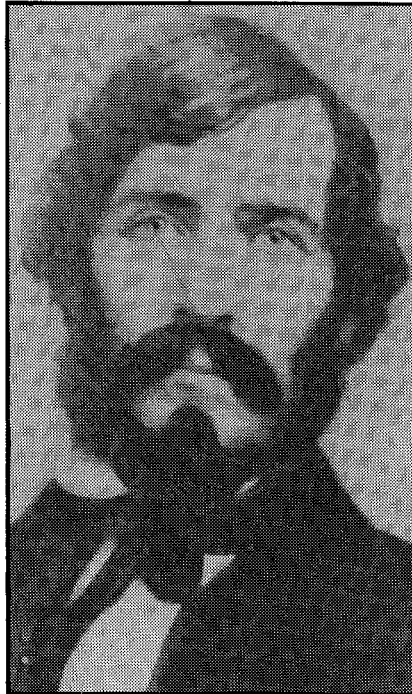
The British transportation system is the very worst scheme of criminal punishment that ever was contrived ... One main feature in convict life I have ascertained to be a deep and heartfelt respect for atrocious villainy - respect the more profound as the villainy is more outrageous. If anything can add to the esteem which a man in the felon world secures by the reckless brutality of his language and manners, the extent of his present thievings, and ingenuity of his daily lying, it is the enormity of the original offence for which he is supposed to be suffering ... And then I curse, Oh! how fervently, the British Empire. Empire of hell! When will thy cup of abominations be full?

John Mitchel had little sympathy for the plight of his fellow convicts. One day, while travelling on horse-back to Brown's River, he came across a party of convicts working on the roadside. This is how he described them:

And as we follow the winding of the road through the romantic glen, we meet parties of miserable wretches harnessed to gravel carts and drawing the same under orders of an overseer. The men are dressed in piebald

by W.W. Gleeson & Jim Kemmy

suits of yellow and grey, and with their hair close cropped, their close leathern caps, and hang-dog countenances, wear a most evil, rueful, and abominable aspect. They give us a vacant but impudent stare as we ride by. I wish you well, my poor fellows;

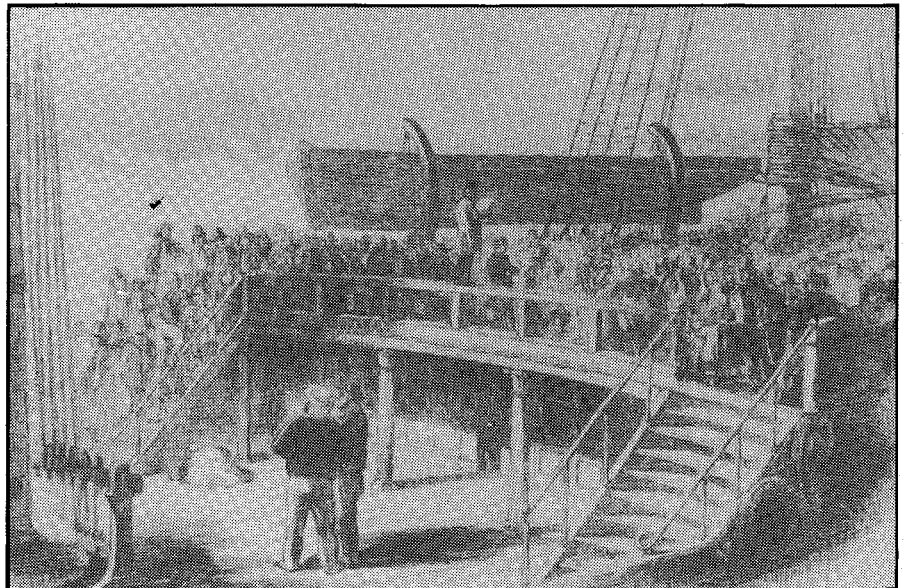


John Mitchel '... Wild and menacing words' in a paper he called 'The United Irishman'.

but you ought all to have been hanged long ago!

The discovery of gold in Australia caused Mitchel further distress. 'The late discovery of gold mines in Australia, which tempts multitudes of Tasmanian ruffians over the strait, interests the colony of Fort Philip very vehemently in the same cause.' He wrote:

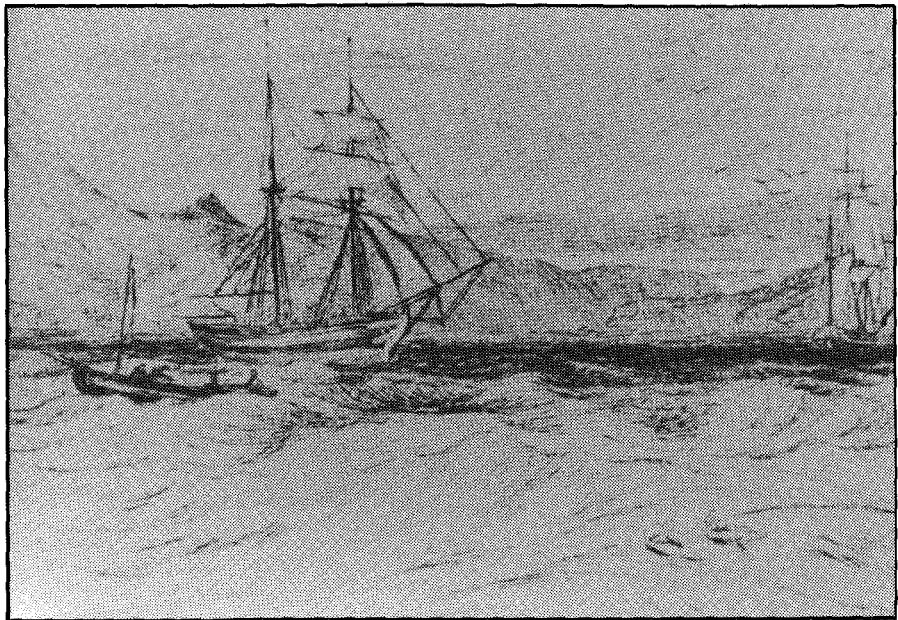
I am prosecuting my hay-harvest diligently, with the aid of two or three horrible convict cut-throats, all from Ireland - and all by their own account, transported for seizing arms. This is considered amongst these fellows a respectable sort of offence. The rascals could earn ten English shillings per diem, at harvest time; and they live all the year round like Irish kings, not to speak of Irish cut-throats. They don't like to work too hard, and require a good deal of wine. They come early from their work, smoke and chat with one another all evening in the yard, and go to sleep in their opossum rugs in the barn. Yet, with all this high reward they receive for their crimes, this paternal care to make thievery happy, and munificent endowment of rascality, the creatures are not utterly bad - not half so bad, for example, as the Queen of England's Cabinet Councillors. They are civil, good-natured with one another, and not thievish at all - partly because they are so well off that there is little temptation, and partly because the punishments are savage. It would be



Conditions on board sometimes as appalling as anything in Ireland. 'Would more than two-thirds be alive on arrival?'



pleasant enough to see these creatures comfortable, and tolerably decent in their behaviour, but for the thought that this whole system is in truth a fruitful "breeder of sinners," and that the same hateful Government and state of society in England, which so richly reward these men for their villainies, punish, starve, and debase the poor and honest, for being poor and honest. Many a time, therefore, as I look upon these quiet, well-behaved men reaping, not too arduously, singing or smoking in the fields, or cheerfully "following the plough upon the mountain side," or tending their masters' flocks in the far forest pastures, like human husbandmen and simple Arcadian shepherds - instead of rejoicing in their improved conditions and behaviour, I gaze on them with horror, as unclean and inhuman monsters, due long ago to the gallows-tree and oblivion...



The entrance to the River Derwent, the destination of the emigrant ships which took months to get there.

One of the convicts engaged in the hay-saving was a Limerickman. The lure of the gold, however, was to prove more attractive to the convict than the pastoral life:

...the hay was all stacked, and the men came to be paid. One of them, a civil and hard-working cut-throat, from the County Limerick, asked me to sign a printed paper for him. It was a certificate that he had been in my employment, and had behaved moderately well. "I'm off for the diggin's in Port Philip," said he, "to-morrow; my 'conditional pardon' had come to hand, and I must have this paper to show the magistrate to-morrow morning, when I go to take out my free papers."

"I wish you luck, Mike; don't spend all your money in Maskell's public-house to-night," "By my soul, sir," said Mike, "I must drink to-night to ould Garryowen, and the sky over it. Good night, sir. To-morrow I ride down to Hobart Town, and am to return by New Norfolk."

Writing to the *Nation* on 25th January, 1851, Mitchel recorded his order of preference for Tasmania and its inhabitants: 'First and best ... the women; second, the dogs; third the horses; fourth, the kangaroos; fifth the men, and sixth, the opossums and wallabys.'

The Irish Transport

But the women at home in Ireland held more attractions for some of the other convicts. Perhaps it was a Co. Limerick man like Mike, in captivity in Van Diemen's Land, who composed, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the convict ballad 'The Irish Transport', as

a lament for his Polly, 'who lives in Limerick town':

*In the county of Limerick, near the town o'Ramshorn,
My own native country wherein I was born,
But to some foreign country I was sent for a slave,
Since in my own country I could not behave*

*It's not those long travels that is a trouble to my mind,
Nor yet those foreign islands where I am close confined,
But if we are on ship board and my Polly with me,
Bound down in strong irons I should think myself free.*

*Oft times have I wonder'd how young women love young men,
And oft times have I wonder'd how young men love them,
Since a woman has been my ruin and my sad downfall,
Which has caused me to lie between lime and stone walls.*

*God bless my old father that lies in cold clay
Likewise my dear old mother that is living until this day,
But the time is approaching when I shall be set free.
Then I'll go straight home to Ireland my Polly for to see.*

*My Polly lives in Limerick town, a girl that I love dear,
And when I get my liberty with her I'll make my fare,
And when I gain my liberty with my Polly I'll remain,
I will bid adieu to Vandiemans Land, likewise the raging main.*

The Presentation Sisters

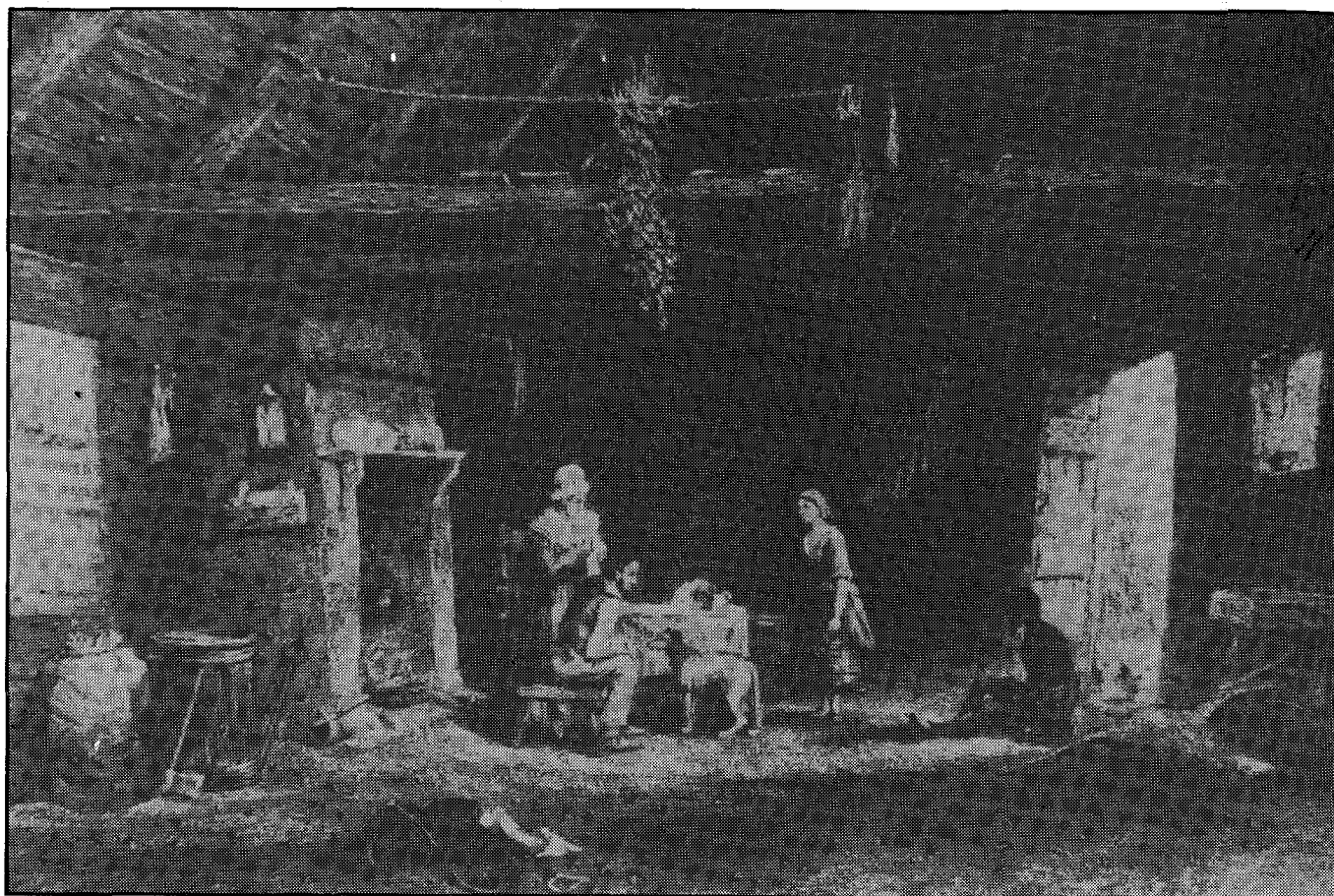
Although John Mitchel and the anonymous author of 'The Irish Transport' complained bitterly about their fate, there is ample testimony that other Irish people settled happily into their new surroundings in Australia. For instance, the story of the Presentation Sisters from Sexton Street, Limerick, who travelled to Victoria in 1873, provides a contrasting picture.

Responding to the invitation of the Limerick-born priest, Fr. James Francis Corbett, who was then private secretary to the Bishop of Melbourne, J. A. Goold, seven pioneering nuns, led by Mother Paul Mulquin, set out on the long journey. An account of this venture and the nuns' settlement in Victoria is to be found in the book *Adventure in Faith* by Kathleen Dunlop Kane, published in 1974 in Australia.

In his letter of 28th January, 1873, from St. Mary's, St. Kilda, Victoria, Fr. Corbett wrote:

*Dear Reverend Mother,
From the ends of the earth I write to you for help ... You can contribute very materially ... by sending three or four Sisters, to whom I shall give my house, which is sufficiently commodious for even six Sisters ... I am directed by the Bishop to ask you for four Sisters also for Melbourne, for whom his Lordship will provide a house and schools in the city. Cork recently sent several Sisters to the neighbouring colony of Tasmania and I shall be very disappointed indeed if your own old city cannot spare a few from your flourishing community.*

The Presentation Sisters in Limerick replied and posed some questions. On



The interior of an Australian shepherd's hut during the early years of settlement.

17th June, 1873, Fr. Corbett again wrote, and in answer to the queries, paints a flattering picture of life in sunny Australia in contrast to the 'wintry' gloom of the Emerald Isle:

With regard to the climate, I have only to state that it will compare favourably with that of any other country, it is on the whole a good one. Its air is pure, dry and exhilarating, it has its hot winds and these are comparatively few, but it has not the days of wintry gloom, the keen and cutting forests, and the blinding snow storms and nasty fogs of the Emerald Isle. The hot days are tempered by cool sea breezes and the winters are more like the balmy spring days you now enjoy ... The voyage is no doubt a long one but once you pass the first week on sea it becomes agreeable, the passage is a very pleasant one through generally quiet seas ... In fact, I should feel as little concerned about the voyage as of a trip by the old 'Garryowen' from Limerick to Kilrush ... There will be no difficulty in erecting schools which shall not be, by any means, subject to Government or other secular inspection, but shall belong to the Church and be under its control alone.

The contrast is well presented between the keen and cutting frosts, and the

blinding snow storms and nasty fogs' and 'exhilarating' alternative, but one must say that Fr. Corbett is drawing a long, long bow when he compares a voyage half-way round the world with a short jaunt down the Shannon Estuary from Limerick to Kilrush.

The priest went on to add a post-script: 'I wish to inform your community, lest they should be under a misapprehension of the geographical position of these parts, that Melbourne is the capital of Victoria. Fr. Corbett received a reply. With the consent of Dr. George Butler, Bishop of Limerick, to whom he had also written on 17th June, the seven nuns set off on 22nd October, 1873. So protracted was the parting that the train was half an hour late in leaving Limerick. After a voyage of almost two months, the nuns arrived at Sandridge (Port Melbourne) on Sunday, 21st December.

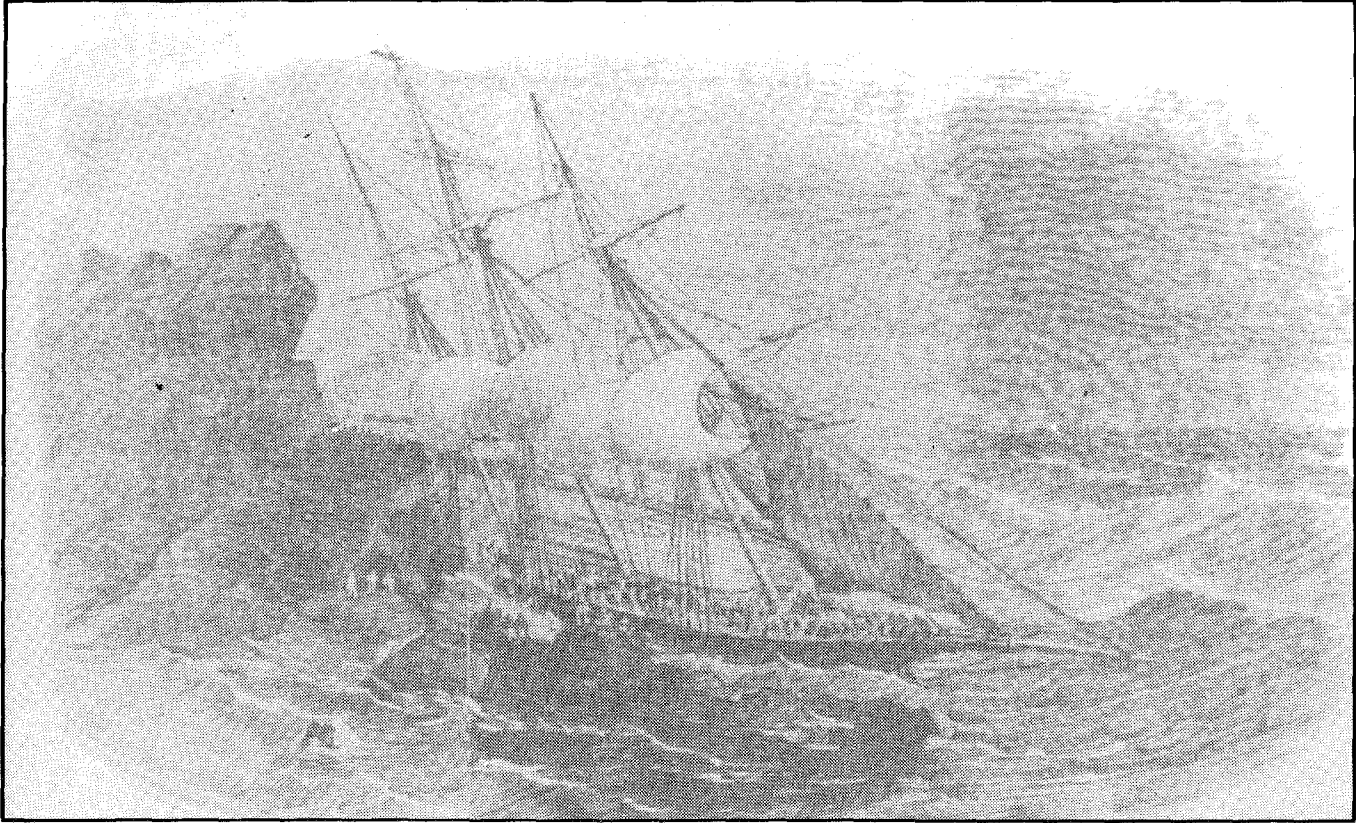
The Adare, Co. Limerick-born, Mother Mary Mulquin was then just 31 years old, but showed herself to be a spirited woman in the diary she kept on board the ship *Great Britain* on the voyage from Liverpool, and in her educational work in Australia. *Adventure in Faith* and an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* provide much interesting information about the nun and her life's work.

Ald. Michael Joyce, M.P.

Nowdays travelling to Australia from Shannon Airport is a 24 hour, one day's journey. But for the Limerick seamen who made the voyage in the last century it was often a difficult and dangerous journey. One such seaman was Michael Joyce.

He was born on 4th September, 1851, at Merchants' Quay, once the busy Limerick port, and was educated by the Christian Brothers at their Quay Lane school. It was only natural that young Joyce should fix his mind on a sailor's life, like his father and grandfather before him. In 1867, his first year at sea, he was shipwrecked near Rotterdam, and two years later he was nearly shipwrecked again. Before he became a Shannon Estuary pilot in 1887, he was to experience hurricanes, tornadoes, typhoons and pamperos, as he voyaged around the world. Unlike most other Limerick people who travelled to Australia at that time, he returned to tell the tale.

Apart from being a master mariner, Michael Joyce was also a talented actor and raconteur. While he was in his teens he distinguished himself in



The 'Tayleur' set sail from Liverpool for Melbourne in January, 1854. She was wrecked off the rocks of Lambay Island in Dublin Bay.

amateur theatricals in Limerick. He entered politics and served as an alderman on the Limerick City Council for 27 years. In 1900 he became a member of parliament and served at Westminster for 18 years. In 1905 he was elected as president of the United Kingdom Pilots' Association, and such was his prestige that when he died at the age of ninety in 1940, one of the many obituary notices said of him: 'To him more than anyone else, credit must be given for having on the British Statute Books that charter of liberty for pilots - the Merchant Shipping Act, which was passed in 1913.' He was shipwrecked for the last time on 10th October, 1918, when the ill-fated S.S. *Leinster* was torpedoed while he was on his way to his parliamentary duties in London.

In the last twenty years of his life, Michael Joyce hugged the Shannon shore and regaled his friends with stories of Australia and other far-away places. While in the House of Commons, he met many distinguished people. T.P. O'Connor introduced him to Mark Twain as 'the Shannon Pilot to the Mississippi Pilot'. He also met John McCormack, Ada Rehan, the famous Limerick-born Shakespearian actress and a great beauty of her day, Eva O'Connor, the Australian soprano, and, of course, all the leading parliamentarians of the day. Limerick could hardly have had a better ambassador to Australia in his voyages there more than 100 years ago.

Some Rugby and other Links

Rugby has long been an international sport, and one of the many sporting links between Australia and Limerick was recently recalled by the publication of a photograph of a Shannon juvenile rugby team, winners of the Tyler Cup in the season 1905-06. A short time after the photograph was taken, six of the team - Jack Bourke, Tom O'Connell, Paddy O'Halloran, Tony Quin, Martin Clohessy (captain), Patsy Carroll - emigrated to Australia.

As time passed, so encouraging was the news of their success in their adopted country that others such as Joe and Tom O'Halloran, Bob and Paddy Burke and their two sisters, were added to those 'pioneers'. Charlie Mac-Namara and Paddy Clohessy were to be followed by Turlough Griffin, his sister and her husband, and soon they made up a Limerick 'colony'. Later Fanny Lynch and the present Irish Ambassador to America, Paddy McKiernan, from Garryowen, were to augment this group and helped to form a goodly sprinkling from the Treaty City.

Among the other Limerick people who made their mark in the land of the Southern Cross were the Broadford-born Bishop of Brisbane, James Duhig, and former Director of the Limerick Archconfraternity, Edmund Gleeson,

who went on to become Bishop of Maitland, N.S.W. Bishop (Sir) James Duhig, during his visit to his native county in 1950, let it be known to his fellow Limerick people that he would encourage all the unemployed young men and women in Ireland to emigrate to Australia. Perhaps the depressed state of the country and the high unemployment rate at the time influenced his judgement.

There is one more Limerick connection with Australia which should not be forgotten. Archbishop Daniel Mannix was born just over the Co. Limerick border at Charleville, Co. Cork, and his mother (nee Cagney) came from Tuagh, Adare, Co. Limerick. When sailing from America to Ireland, at the height of the Black and Tan terror, he was arrested and placed on a British destroyer. Nonplussed, he said to the British captain: 'This, surely, must be the biggest English naval victory since the Battle of Jutland!'

'For All That I Found There...'

Not all the Irishmen who went to seek their fortunes in Australia hit the jackpot like Paddy Hannan of Quin, Co. Clare, who eventually struck it rich in the Kalgoolie goldfields. Three Limerick Quakers - Gabriel ('Gabe')



Sailing ship 'Eudora' in the Limerick floating dock, June, 1907, with a cargo of 300 tons of Australian wheat.

Fisher Unthank, Rueben Alezander and Edward Robinson – became smitten by the gold fever in 1853, and decided to set out for Australia. However, they had poor luck, and Gabe, the last of the Unthinks, returned home with just enough gold to make a wedding ring for Margaret Merrick, whom he later married in Dublin.

Limerick, New South Wales

Not many people in Ireland or Australia will have heard of Limerick, New South Wales. Thanks to the help of the Australian Embassy in Dublin and its Dept. of Foreign Affairs, we now know that there is a Limerick down under and that it is located near Crookwell, in New South Wales. At one time it had a hotel, post office, general store, houses and other buildings, but now, sadly, there are no longer any public or commercial buildings to be found there. In fact, today Australia's Limerick is completely taken over by farming, and only one family, named Laverty, lives there.

Three Garryowen Boys

Garryowen, situated beside the old Walls of Limerick, has long been

immortalised in song, story and rugby lore. I would like to conclude my brief exploration of some of the links between Limerick and Australia by mentioning three young men from Garryowen who went to live and work in Australia.

Munchin Sheedy was born into an old Garryowen family in 1907. After leaving school, he worked at Shaw's Bacon Factory in Mulgrave Street. However, the call of the religious life was strong and he joined the Cistercian Order and entered their Roscrea House in 1934, when he was aged 27 years. In 1954 he left Ireland and travelled off to Tarrawarra Abbey, Victoria. He continued his quiet labours there until his death on 20th October, 1980. Although he had joined a contemplative order, his colourful personality could never be submerged or suppressed for too long, and he gained a wide circle of friends in his adopted country.

Liam (Bill) Hanrahan was born in the 1920s under the shadow of St. John's Cathedral. He was the son of Jimmy Hanrahan, the well known Limerick pigbuyer, but the buying and selling of pigs held little attractions for him. After leaving school, he joined the British Merchant Navy and served in many parts of the world for more than twenty years. On leaving the navy, he went to Australia and found employment as a

pilot in Sydney Harbour. He worked for more than twenty-five years in this big and busy port. After his retirement, he returned to his native city in 1986 and renewed old acquaintances with John and Donal O'Connell, Frank Whelan, Martin and John Clancy, Joe and Michael Sheehan, Jim Kemmy and a host of other neighbours from 'under the Tower'. Today Liam lives out a contented and well earned retirement in Sydney. His two sisters, Maureen and Joan, also live in Australia, where their father was to spend the last 18 years of his life.

Tommy O'Connell, another one of the O'Connell brothers from Garryowen, was born in 1924. Like his father and brothers, he served his apprenticeship as a carpenter. He played rugby for his local team, Richmond, and won a Munster Junior Cup medal with the club in the season 1945-46. He was a strong and intelligent wing forward, and went on to win a place on the Young Munster senior team. He loved the Shannon River, and was an intrepid Plassey boatman. While still in his early twenties, he emigrated from Limerick to Canberra. His untimely death in that city in February, 1950, at the age of 26, robbed Australia and Ireland of an open, generous and warm human being.