

IN MY OWN TIME



Nell Organ at her fish and fruit stand.

The inflation that was experienced in Limerick during the 1914/1918 war years was more than offset by the increase in trade and commerce, and to a not inconsiderable extent by the circulation of "separation money" - allowances paid to wives of soldiers on active service. These women were the envy of their less fortunate neighbours, some of whose husbands, sons or brothers were members of the Irish Volunteers. This situation gave rise to bad feelings in communities which heretofore had enjoyed harmonious relationships. Industry was booming; the Bacon Factories, Tanneries and Flour Mills were never so busy and the Limerick Clothing Factory and the Condensed Milk Factory of "Cleeves" reached an all time peak in production. The wool merchants, too, were on a bonanza. Things were looking up, but the anti-climax of 1916 was still hanging over the city like a shroud.

Limerick had always been proud of its resistance to tyranny and oppression in the past. As school children we had learned of the noble resistance of the men and women of Limerick to the onslaught of the invaders in 1690/91, and of the heroism of the garrison during the Cromwellian siege: but when fighting men were needed in the 1919/21 campaign, they were all too few. The Mid-Limerick Brigade of the Irish Republican Army consisted of a mere handful who ran all the risks and did all the fighting. It is painful to contemplate

by Kevin Hannan

the cowardice and dishonesty of the hundreds who claimed afterwards to be in the "movement", when, in fact, many of them were sheltering behind their women folk. Indeed, if these claims had any substance the Black-and-Tans would have been killed in the crush.

Ironically, the greatest danger to the men doing the fighting did not come from the enemy they knew but from the one they did not know - the informer from within their ranks. The few who were found out were executed, and those lucky enough to get away with it, were merely carrying on the tradition of Fennel and Luttrell. The breed showed up to our deadly cost in every conflict in the city since its foundation.

Apart from the atrocities of the Black-and-Tans, 1920 came in with a dramatic increase in the prices of most commodities. As you might expect, the increase in the price of the pint of porter to nine pence caused the greatest outcry. The bottle of stout at seven pence, and the glass of whiskey at one-and-sixpence, caused a lesser howl, because those who drank spirits could not afford to let it be said that they would inveigh against paying a few extra pence for their drink - after all, the drinking of a small whiskey was a status symbol. The increase in the price of the four pound loaf to nine pence ha'penny, and a corresponding increase in the price of other essential

foodstuffs seriously affected the woman with the "houseful of children" - and there were many houses full of children in those days, as women were encouraged to have large families, irrespective of the means of providing for them. In the poorer districts, families were crowded into earthen-floored cabins having only one or two small apartments, or huddled in the garrets of cotted houses. There was incredible squalor and overcrowding with all the attendant disease and a high mortality rate among children. I remember seeing two boys going with a bucket into the street to collect mud for the purpose of repairing a pot-hole in their bedroom floor.

The women of Browne's Lane and Dickson's Lane, in Boherbuoy took full advantage of the local lime-kiln and used it to cook their dinners on Sunday afternoons - the assistance of this free, if inconvenient, method of cooking was hardly necessary for the week-day dinners. Elsewhere in the poorer districts all cooking was done on a fire grate set between two whitewashed hobs. Coal at half-a-crown a bag (twelve and a half pence) was usually purchased in small lots, sometimes as small as a stone (14 lbs.). Turf and wood blocks were always available from the many "turf and block men" who made their sales from horse and donkey creels through the lanes and streets. Turf was sold at five sods for tuppence and blocks at

sixpence a dozen. These vendors came mainly from the Castleconnell area.

The great slump of the twenties was further aggravated by the difficulties facing the infant government. The effects of the inflation which were imperceptible during the war were now a harsh reality. There were no social welfare hand-outs as we know them to-day, except for the niggardly mites handed out to the very poor at the City Dispensary every Friday by the relieving officer. This unenviable office was held for many years by Tom Keane, a native of Parteen. Tom was a gentle giant of well over six feet, and weighed about seventeen stone or thereabouts. He had a powerful bellowing voice that could be heard at the off side of Gerald Griffin Street as he used his only weapon against the crowd of pitifully plaintive supplicants who gathered around his office in the drab Dickensian building. His name was a by-word in Limerick for more than thirty years. People in extreme poverty were advised by others to "go to Kane". It was just like sending them to the devil. Most of those who had to endure the humiliation of the Dispensary had nothing good to say of Tom. To some he was a "dog", to others a tyrant and a savage. In reality, he was kind and considerate and felt compassion for those at whom he roared in order to convince them that he had only a small sum of money to distribute among far too many. He was a splendid character who had to endure the weekly insults of the poor people who believed him to be a fairy godfather who was keeping all the money for himself. The weekly budget was so small that the average sum payable to families was about a half crown (twelve and a half pence). It was well known that Tom's compassion was often so stirred at the plight of a disappointed applicant, when the last shilling had been doled out, that he gave some assistance out of his own pocket.

However, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul relieved much hardship among the poor at that time. They visited the hovels and saw conditions for themselves. They helped in a practical way with bedding and clothing where they saw the greatest need.

In those days the uncluttered streets were the playgrounds of the city. Each district had its own special building or gable-end as a handball alley. Hurling and football were played on the streets. I remember playing cricket and "rounders" in Cathedral Square, where funerals always upset the game, as the best place for the wickets was in front of the Cathedral door. Of course the appearance of a Civic Guard caused a scatter until the coast was clear again. As late as 1935, the householders of Roche's Street complained of the danger to their windows from the footballs and

hurling balls of those playing games on the streets. Fancy playing a game of football in Roche's Street to-day!

Pawnbroking, which can only thrive on poverty, was going strong in the 'twenties - and well into the 'fifties. I remember the black-shawled women crowding into Patey Browne's old world pawn shop in Broad Street on Monday mornings. Many much needed articles were left here as pledges for small loans - bed-clothes, wearing apparel, tools and household ornaments. Among the more unusual pledges recorded in city pawnbrokers' ledgers were artificial limbs and eyes. These articles were always regarded as gilt-edged securities for loans, but were only accepted directly from the owners, who had to be well known to the pawnbroker. Saturdays saw the release of most of these pledges, especially the wearing apparel which was to lend a little respectability for Sunday wear, and the wooden leg which gave the cripple a little short-lived independence.

Broad Street had two other pawn shops at that time, Jack Clifford's and John Dowd's. Mikey Jackson's in Denmark Street was a busy pawnshop in the bad times, as were O'Brien's in High Street and Parker's in Parnell Street.

Despite the rigours of the time, the young people made the most of the cinemas and the dance halls. The balcony at the Tivoli Cinema was excellent value at six pence and nine pence, while the Abbey was quite good at the same price. The up-town cinemas were often out of bounds for the poorer classes, though the "gods" at the Lyric were great value at four pence. I might mention here that the Tivoli was the former Courtney's Theatre, better known as "The Gaff", which was the most talked about and important institution in the city, next to the Theatre Royal. Some of the finest theatrical companies played to packed houses here for many years. It was a well-conducted place, provided the entertainment was acceptable to the hypercritical audience, who were ruthless in their treatment of sub-standard entertainers. But the proprietors may have gone a little too far in erecting barbed wire between the sixpenny and tuppenny seats!

A local apple-stand proprietor Moll O'Brien had the privilege of bringing her stock into the theatre during the intervals, much like the chocolate and ice cream girls who were a feature of our big cinemas in later years. She was a buxom lady with a fiery temper and, I believe, looked a formidable adversary to anyone who thought about haggling over the price of her apples, which she sold at four for a ha'penny. Being a confirmed "rise", she was often the victim of a knife-carrying joker, who deftly slit the bulging apron, causing the apples

to roll down the sloping floor towards the stage, none of which got that far, as they were all accounted for in the free-for-all that followed the rumbling noise of the rolling apples and the unprintable imprecations of Moll.

Almost all the young couples who enjoyed the "pictures" were first brought together at one or other of the many well patronised dance halls in and about the city. "Todsies" (St. Mary's Hall) was a great favourite and was said to have the best dance floor of the lot. Other such centres of romance were the "Transport" (Transport Union Hall) in O'Connell Street, "Wembley", at Watergate, the "Abbey" in Creagh Lane, the "No. 9" (Sarsfield Band Room), in John Street; "Chinatown", in Moore's Lane, off Clare Street, and the "Stella", in Shannon Street. In the summer many cycled to the "Faugh", on the Ballysimon Road, and to Meany's at Doonass. Nearer home there were the "La Scala" and the "Hop" on the Dublin Road. The admission prices to all these places averaged four pence. Some may be surprised to know that there were no commercial dance halls before the ratification of the Treaty. Heretofore, dances on a small scale were organised by local committees. These were the urban counterparts of the rural crossroad platforms.

The 'fifties saw the end of the apple-stands which were such a conspicuous feature of the city up to a few years before. Annie Rice's stand, at the corner of Denmark Street and O'Connell Street was as much an institution as that of Nell Organ's at the junction of Broad Street and Mungret Street. Kate Halloran's famous pitch at St. John's Churchyard wall has been vacant since the late 'thirties. These outdoor hucksters were part of the Limerick scene for hundreds of years and their passing was so gradual as to be hardly noticeable.

The fish stalls took up the traditional stands formerly occupied by the "eel fry women". These were the vendors of elvers, or young eels, fresh from their 3,000 mile journey from the Sargasso Sea. These little fish were kept in large tubs and sold by the pint. They were considered an excellent dish when boiled in milk. The elvers were gathered in screens - a loosely woven fabric stretched on large hoops.

Then there was Mrs. Cassidy with her mobile periwinkle mart. This lady was so regular on her Friday evening rounds that you could set your watch on her arrival at certain street corners. Her donkey cart was always well laden with baskets of periwinkles, dilisc and cockles. Her familiar cry of "fresh pennywinks", brought her regular customers flocking to her cart, along with youngsters who could afford a penny for a thermos flask cup full of the tasty molluscs.

The most romantic and exciting of all

the street traders were those comely and athletic young women who carried their whole stock-in-trade in a large, flattish basin balanced on their heads. They sold fresh - really fresh - fish for most of the fishing season, and in the springtime they had cresses and

wooden box - over his shoulder by a leather strap; this contained his tools and pieces of tin plate and other odds and ends connected with his trade, and was used as a seat while repairs were being carried out. He always sat outside the door when doing a job, except

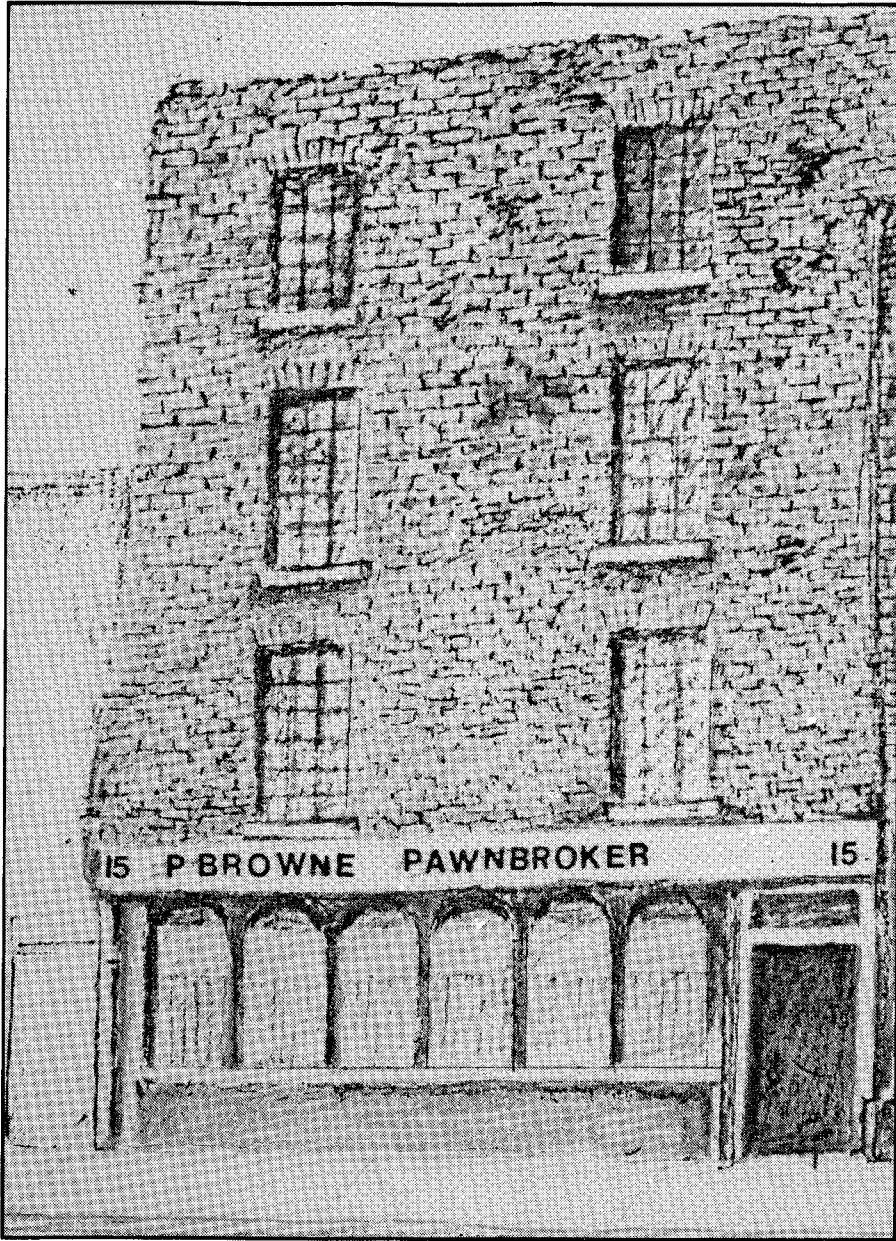
Hundreds of Limerick men slaved in the mud and water for five years for the paltry wage of eight pence ha'penny an hour (one pound and seventy pence per week in modern currency). Though the wages and conditions were bad, the undertaking gave a little prosperity to many families.

It was, of course, the time of the great Redemptorist Confraternity with its hell-fire sermons and public processions. Limerick's boast that it had the greatest confraternity in the world was probably right, I never heard it questioned. The "Fathers" (as the Redemptorists were better known) had an extraordinary influence over the people. They were dedicated workers and even the most sceptical could never doubt their sincerity. Some of the directors of the Confraternity had served for long stints as missionaries in the Phillipine Islands and did not shy away from the more daunting task in Limerick. They had the welfare of the people at heart, but they were victims of the times they lived in, just like the Confraternity men whom they conditioned to endure a refined form of mental torture.

Every parish had its "mission" from time to time. These services, which were usually conducted by one of the missionary orders, were specially geared to rope in all Catholics, and not merely members of confraternities or sodalities, who might be considered to be more or less on the safe side of the slippery path. On these occasions missionaries took great pains to arrest the declining interests of those who were known to be neglecting their religious duties, and when the soutane-clad missionary was seen visiting houses in any part of the parish everyone knew who he was after. The missionary was usually presented with a detailed dossier on all those who were inclined to stray from the straight and narrow path.

Up to 1930, the lamplighter was as well known as today's traffic warden, but far more popular - except, of course, with courting couples, who, more or less, depended on the welcome mantle of night to shield them from, among other things, the unwelcome attentions of the odd, marauding clergyman whose practice it was to seek out such evildoers and put them to flight, usually to a darker and more inaccessible place, thus defeating the very purpose of his assiduity. In those days "company keeping" was regarded by the clerical authorities as one of the gravest sins, and some of their more zealous members found that the application of a blackthorn stick often achieved - though in the short term - what fire and brimstone sermons failed to do.

Except for the main thoroughfares the city was illuminated by gas (I use the word "illuminated" figuratively).



Patey Browne's Pawnshop in Broad Street. (Drawn by Kevin Hannan).

radishes. I can still hear that almost singing chant that broke the stillness of early spring mornings more than sixty years ago ... "Raad-Shees".

I remember the very last of the tinkers. His name was Martin. I never knew his surname nor did I ever hear it from anyone else. He was a tall, good-looking man who always wore a hat, which in those years was regarded as more respectable than a cap on one of his calling. He walked the streets and lanes of the city calling out in a soft voice: "Pots, kettles to mend". He was a highly skilled craftsman and could repair almost any household utensil. He carried his budget - an oblong

in bad weather. He vanished at the end of the 'twenties and I never heard of him again.

In the mid 'twenties the main topic of conversation was the "Shannon Scheme". This was the great Hydro Electric Works which was to provide power for industry and light for our cities and towns. It was a gigantic undertaking at the time and entailed the cutting of a canal from Cussane, above O'Brien's Bridge, to a point below the Lax Weir at Parteen, and the building of a dam across the Shannon at the intake. The most important feature was the powerhouse and boatpass at Ardnacrusha.

This was a poor substitute for street lighting as we know it to-day, though looking back through the years one cannot help feeling a little sad and romantic. The light was soft and mellow and not hurtful to the eyes, and the areas mid-way between the lamp-posts were usually shadowless, except where the beam of an oil lamp through the window shutter joinings relieved the gloom with a soft ray. Every window had shutters, not through fear of "break-ins", but rather in observance of a tradition handed down from mediaeval times. The gloom was also lightened by whatever stray beams escaped through the cluttered windows of the many huxter shops which were an essential feature of every lane and street.

The lamplighter's job was to light the lamps in the evening and extinguish them in the morning. He was a familiar figure with the long pole which he carried lengthwise in his hand, grasped - to use a military term - at the point of balance. His appearance marked the end of another day, and, for the very early riser, the beginning of a new one.

There was little vandalism in those days and wanton damage to the lamps was uncommon, though lights were sometimes extinguished by youngsters shinning up the fluted lampstandards.

Before the introduction of gas mantles at the turn of the century the lamps had open jets and provided only a fitful and less brilliant light than the mantled gas. At that time the lamplighters' job was far more difficult and uncongenial: the jets had to be lighted directly by hand - not an easy feat on stormy winter nights.

Each lampstandard had two arms stretching out horizontally from below the lamp for the purpose of providing a stable anchorage for the ladder, which had to be carried at all times. These arms were a godsend to children who adapted them for fixing the ropes which enabled them to swing around the standards in ever-decreasing circles.

A century ago the strike weapon was about as effective as the bow-and-arrow is to-day, yet we have records of the poor lamplighters taking this desperate action to further their claims to a modest rise in their pitiful wages. In July 1870, the Limerick lamplighters downed tools - or ladders - in support of a claim for an increase in wages. One of their number, who preferred lighting to striking, continued his rounds as usual but, despite being accompanied by two stout policemen, his labour was in vain: the strikers extinguished the lamps as soon as they were lighted. Unfortunately, we do not know how the strikers fared in their action but it is likely that they suffered considerably, seeing the time of year they chose to take action.

Newcastle West was in total darkness for one week in 1911, when the lamplighters went on strike for better wages. The County Council showed little sympathy with their plight and had no scruples about employing a new gang of lamplighters at the old wages.

The first real threat to the ancient order of lamplighters came in 1878 when the following advertisement appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*: "Electric light with Seimens' patent apparatus will be exhibited at the Rink on every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, commencing Saturday, the 30th. inst., from 7.30 to 10.00 p.m. The Forrester's Band will attend. Arrangements have been made for a grand fashionable exhibition commencing on Saturday the 30th. inst., and every Saturday until further notice, from 4.30 to 6.30 p.m., to afford ladies and gentlemen an opportunity of seeing the electric light without the inconvenience of staying late in town. Admission one shilling; skates six pence; engine and machine room free. A military band will attend".

A press reporter had this to say after visiting the exhibition: "Just as we were going to press this evening Seimens' Electric Light was exhibited at the Skating Rink. We have only time to say that in every sense of the word it was a brilliant success. The light was in a glass globe which adds much to the effect. When displayed this evening it was remarkable to observe how much the gaslight was thrown in the shade. Owing to the mechanical arrangements not being thoroughly completed so as to render the light continuous, an interval of 15 minutes was required between each exhibition. The first consisted of the naked light, the second of the light with a globe and the third in comparison with gas".

Though hundreds visited the Rink on that occasion, few, if any, were imbued with the hope of seeing the "miracle" develop further. Encouraging reports of successful experiments in America were in constant circulation and, in 1880, news of Thomas Edison's revolutionary advances in the development of a practical electric lamp were making headlines in the world press and, late that year, it was announced that the great inventor had successfully tested a new filament made of carbonised paper which ensured a constant brilliance over a long period. This extraordinary device was described at the time as "...a small coil, or horse-shoe, of drawing paper which has been turned to charcoal by partial burning, this coil is enclosed in an exhausted glass globe, and glows without being consumed".

In the same year, England's most popular seaside resort, Blackpool, was illuminated by nine powerful electric lamps, placed at a height of 60 feet

along the seafront, each producing light equal to 600 candles.

Back in Limerick, the gas interests were in a state of panic. Only a short time before, the Limerick Corporation, which was already in possession of the Citizens' Gas Company, was so full of confidence in the future demand for gas that it had purchased the United General Gas Company for £26,000 - a staggering sum in those days. This latter company was established in Watergate in 1837, and enjoyed a monopoly of business for a long number of years until the citizens, infuriated at the high cost of gas (fifteen shillings per 1500 feet), set up their own company and offered the same quantity of gas for a third of the old price.

Only those who opposed the takeover had hoped for the success of the electric light; the others longed for its failure. These latter, who were, no doubt, in a majority, succeeded, in 1882, in influencing the decision of the Town Council in the erection of "four new really effective gas lamps at the intersection of George's (O'Connell) Street and William Street". These were the renowned flat flame shadowless lanterns that came too late in the day. While these were a wonderful improvement on the old lamps, they were not good enough to make a favourable comparison with the electric lamps which were erected at the docks by the Harbour Commissioners.

From that time, the writing was on the wall for street lighting by gas. The bigger stores installed their own generators and the Corporation threw in the towel. They established a municipal generating plant at O'Curry Street. This concern provided lighting only in the principal streets. The gas lamps were to remain in the old city for another 40 years.

In 1930, shortly after the completion of the Shannon Hydro Electric Scheme, Limerick Corporation ratified the recommendations of Lighting Committee which proposed the complete lighting of the city by electricity. Mr. F. Algar, Director of Public Lighting Contracts of the Electricity Supply Board, undertook the supply of 892 lamps at a cost of £3,986, annually, for a period of three years, commencing on April 1st., 1930, the figure to cover the cost of maintenance, renew, repairs and current.

This was to be the lamplighter's swan song: henceforward the city lights were to be controlled by a number of simple switches in a comfortable control room. The pole-carrying, shadowy figures would no longer be seen on their rounds. They were to disappear into the mists of time.

They were not missed at the time, so intriguing were the wonders of electricity, but afterwards people began to recall events that occurred in the "days of the lamplighter".