

John Ford and the women of Limerick

BY JOE MALONE

"O, then tell me, Shawn O'Farrell,
Where the gathering is to be?"
"In the old spot by the river
Right well known to you and me."



o sang an old man outside the dismal walls of the prison, while inside a young republican prisoner awaited execution. This was to be the opening shot of the film, "The Rising of the Moon", a short dramatic piece by Lady Gregory, made by John Ford in Limerick, in the summer of 1956.

This episode will not be forgotten by local residents or the people who took part as "extras" in the film-making. King John's Castle was the location. The population of Nicholas Street flocked to the scene of action, excited but bemused, as the cameras and the accompanying paraphernalia were trundled into the Castle Barracks. A few of the old residents thought that the British were coming back, "They **are** Crossley tenders, I'm telling you", said one woman. "Look", she pointed at the

brightly coloured post box in the wall (it had been painted red the night before, along with a few more changes around the castle). "And there's some Black and Tans", she added.

When it was confirmed that a picture was being made in the area, rumours began to circulate. The streets soon filled up with people; houses were left unattended; shutters were put up on shop windows. A man ran from a barber shop, a mixture of blood and lather streaming down his face. The cobbler stopped his cobbling and the baker shut down his ovens; all attention was on the odd looking film people. Bulletins were being issued from street corners, and every little coterie had a know-all, with the latest inside information on the film.

The excitement and speculation increased when it became known that two hundred women extras would be required. In the late afternoon, the streets began to empty and the pubs filled up. The owner of the Dalcassian Arms stood at the front door of his pub waving the **Limerick Leader** and announced that the story was on the front page of the paper: "Redheads Wanted for Motion Pic-



Some of the film 'extras', outside King John's Castle, Summer, 1956.

ture". The frolicsome landlord and his wily apprentice 'Boots' settled down for a good night's feckmaking, Boots, the most notorious ballhopper in the Parish, was jumping up and down like a tic-tack man, as he related the qualities required for a part in the picture:

"You must have piety written all over your faces and deep crevices to match; having no teeth will also be an advantage", he declared. "Good God", what's he saying, said one old woman. "I'm telling you", responded Boots — "and I have it from the horse's mouth — the director of the film wants to show the American view of Irish women".

"Only women of class and quality will be considered", continued Boots. "Whats the name of the picture?" came a voice from the snug. "It's a remake of "King of Kings", came the reply, "but it won't be so easy to find a maiden around here to play the leading part, though there's no shortage of Mary Magdalens or Judases." This ribald remark brought loud guffaws from the snug.

"I can see the headlines on the paper tomorrow, 'From Pinky's to Pinewood'," said a man who was known as 'Mister Passremarkable'. "Ladies give up your talk a minute", he exhorted, "Boots is going to give you a sample of what to expect when you're being tested; so pay attention if you want a part in the picture".

The pints got a final slug, and all eyes drifted to the side door of the pub; the only sound to be heard was the creaking of Mike Curry's cork leg. Suddenly, the door flew open and Boots appeared holding aloft a pair of battered Geary's biscuit tins, studded together with bits of copper wire, and a rusty door hinge as a flap. The stillness was interrupted by a gasp, as the silhouetted, corrugated face of Danny 'Fog' came on to the wall.

"Take one", shouted Boots. In came Danny reciting 'The Blacksmith of Limerick'... "He grasped his ponderous hammer..." with a claw hammer clinched in his fist. The whole pub went into convulsions at the antics of Danny. Cries of "Well done, Gypo Nolan". Victor MacLaglan beware, Danny Fog is on his way".

The cheering came to a halt when a head was stuck through the door. "There's a big black car after stopping outside the castle, and 'tis full a toffs", said the panting boy. Even the precious pints were forgotten in the rush to King John's Castle. By this time, hundreds had gathered in the street to have a gawk at the capers. It was a hot, dry evening and out of work dockers and pork butchers mulled over the prospects at getting a few pints on tick on the strength of a part as extras in the picture.

While people waited hopefully in Nicholas Street for word of a start in the world of movie business, up town in a hotel a bogus, fly-by-night casting director was holding fake auditions. Peroxide blondes paraded on the steps of the hotel, a 'call-up and see me' look on their brightly painted faces. The culprit was later described in the blue room of a well known hostelry, as 'a no-good Crescent College upstart'.

On the following day, the focus shifted from the hotel to the Cecil Street entrance of the Labour Exchange, where an impressive-looking man stood, vetting the women as they passed under the arch. The women nudged and nodded at the get-up of the 'plus-foured eyefiddle'. When the hatches were opened, an assistant roared: "Anybody wanting a part in a picture go to Hatch C". There was a sudden rush across the floor. The film agent stood on a chair and, in a stentorian voice called for calm.

Many of the girls were from the canning department of Mattersons, as it was the slack season at the factory. "Have any of you acting experience", he said. There was a pause and a few giggles. One girl spoke up and told him that she had won the 'moonlight waltz' competition in Chinatown dance hall one time the girls were known for the good humour. Another girl put her thumb inside her

mouth and began to imitate the jewsharp. At this point, the play-acting got a bit too much for the bewildered agent and, in desperation, he told the whole lot of them to report to King John's Castle.

Hundreds were now gathered in Castle Parade. Empty porter barrels and upturned box-cars and prams were used as hop-ups, to gain better vantage points. Children were hoisted on to shoulders, and shrieked with delight as they watched the colourful antics around the castle. Not since the day that Geoffrey Baron was dragged from his house at 5 Nicholas Street, and brought to Gallows Green to be hanged, drawn and quartered, did so many people assemble in that part of town.

Suddenly, the teeming, poisy crowd was struck with awe. The time had come to pick the extra film stars. Lord Killanin and the film's 'technical adviser', Ernie O'Malley, walked through the hushed throng into an old fishmonger's yard. They told an assistant to send in the tall women first.

The big moment had arrived, but the occasion proved too tense for the nervous, expectant women. The strained bonds of decorum snapped and all the women surged forward, engulfing the besieged assistant Ernie O'Malley came out to investigate. One old woman recognised his face from his many visits to Limerick to see his friend, Johnny Raleigh. Drawing on all his military and guerilla experience, the superannuated gunman quickly sized up the out of control situation. There was only one answer. "Hire the lot of them", he hurriedly called out to the assistant, as he beat a hasty retreat back to the fishmonger's yard.

The women were carefully instructed in their role in the film. Dressed in shawls and bedecked with rosary beads, they were required to walk in rows of three in a circle outside the castle walls and to keep praying for the prisoner inside. It was subsequently alleged that this was the first time a few of the more notorious characters had handled a rosary beads or said a prayer since their childhood. As they traipsed around the beads dangling down their shawls, they looked like the women of Jerusalem at the foot of the Wailing Wall.

Next came the members of the city's Fire Brigade, unmounted and in full uniform. They began to hose the walls of the castle. "Maybe it's a Keystone Cops' film the're making", said one young bystander.

Soldiers from the Irish Army, dressed as Black and Tans took up positions in front of the castle. It was time for the filming to begin. Silence was called. Nothing was to be heard except the rumbling of the Curragour Falls in the background. And, then, out of a group of assistants, emerged the great man himself. The legendary John Ford, Hollywood's greatest filmmaker mounted his perch, and his one word 'Take' bounced back off the towers of the castle. As if by clockwork, the lights flashed, the cameras rolled, the army looked menacing, the firemen created artificial rain and the women walked and prayed.

The scene became more intense as two nuns appeared in a horse-drawn carriage.

The plot involved the two nuns entering the castle and the prisoner slipping out, dressed as one of the nuns. The scene seemed so real that the onlooker's faces tightened with tension. John Ford looked like a man overseeing an eviction.

Suddenly, the spell was broken when two rabbit-catchers, dressed in hand-me-downs, wandered in over Thomond Bridge. One had a crowbar on his shoulder and a ferret under his arm, and the other had a string of half-breed greyhounds and mongrel dogs trailing behind. As they walked right onto the set, these two disciples of the ditches brought foam to the mouth of John Ford. "Cut, cut, cut, get these two hicks off the set", he shouted. What a pity Ford had not been making 'Of Mice and

Men", remarked one of the crew.

As the preoccupied rabbit-catchers made their way through the crowd, one of them had remarked: "That's a very big funeral; it must be a priest or a rich man. There's nuns and guards and the army marching behind the hearse".

A break for tea was announced, a dressing-room being provided for the cast. One extra asked where her dressing-room was located. Some of the cast adjourned to Mick Halpin's pub. The scene was little different from the days when the British Army marched out of the Castle Barracks but instead of British voices, the soft and melodious tones of Denis Brennan could be heard reciting "The Lament of Patrick Sarsfield".

John Ford and Lord Longford stood outside admiring the front of the pub; later they went inside to the snug to join Denis Brennan, who was playing the part of an R.I.C. sergeant. Crowds assembled inside and outside Halpin's, as people strained to get a close up view of the distinguished visitors.

During the tea-break, the women divided into two camps; some crossed Thomond Bridge to the improvised dressingroom at the scout hall in Thomondgate; the remainder stepped into the St. Munchin's Church of Ireland diocesan hall, opposite the castle.

The women were tired, having been marching for hours rehearsing and filming, in the warm weather. They had been sustained by the prospect of refreshments and food. They were disappointed. Cold tea and stale buns was the unappetising cuisine that greeted the parched performers.

Tiredness soon turned to bad temper. And, to make matters worse, word began to circulate that the extras hired at the Labour Exchange would only qualify for reduced payment for their film roles. It was reported that the non-Labour Exchange extras were to be paid at the rate of 10 shillings a day and that the rest were to get 6s.8d. (the 3s.4d. was to be made up by the Labour Exchange).

When the significance of this intelligence dawned on the women, emotions ran high. (The women concerned had been led to believe that the 10 shillings a day would be paid on top of their dole money).

Emissaries were seen moving frantically back and forth over Thomond Bridge, as both groups of women conferred about the disclosure. Gradually one word began to rise above the buzz and babble of the talk: "Strike!" The call spread like wildfire among the women on both sides of the Shannon.

One enraged extra shouted: "We'll make a 'bonfire' out of the owl shawls, baskets and beads." Calmer counsels prevailed however. Throwing aside their costumes and accoutrements, both groups of women converged and set out to march on John Ford.

Back at Mick Halpin's pub, a shock went through the

crowd as two nuns, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, entered the pub and ordered a couple of gins and tonics. A sudden change of mood descended on the relaxed pub atmosphere, when word reached the premises that the extras had gone on strike.

"What's gone wrong?" asked John Ford. "I believe that the victuals are not to the women's liking", replied his lordship.

The composed, portly figure of Lord Killanin appeared at the door as the women approached. One extra, who had been appointed as spokesperson, detached herself from the group and came forward. She spoke: "Excuse me, your honour, but we have three requests to make. One: We want more pay. Two: The buns are hard. Three: We want porter as well as tay".

Killanin's aristocratic composure was rudely knocked out of joint by these demands. The serene look left his face. He looked down on the embattled woman. "Madam, we do not tolerate agitators in our company. I'll deal with you later", he dismissively retorted. "You'll talk to me now, me bucko", she replied. "The women of Limerick have always fought for their rights".

Knotting her arms across her chest she stuck her virago visage under Killanin's nose. The sight of the woman's porter-stained teeth discommoded his lordship. "Wait a while, until I consult Mr. Ford", he advised.

But before Ford was called on to adjudicate, an intervention came from an unexpected quarter. A curate from St. Munchin's, seeing the commotion, pressed forward. Quickly grasping the situation, the priest threatened excommunication on the hapless women if they did not resume work. The fear of hell and damnation stopped the women in their tracks. A few of the more spirited women tried to stop the retreat but to no avail. One elder extra said that "if we pray to Our Lady, like the pork butchers, the strike will soon be fixed and we'll get a day off when it is all over".

The filming went off without any more hitches. As the rescued prisoner disappeared into the night, many of the residents of the area went home; some went to the pubs to talk about the strange things they saw: nuns smoking and drinking half-pints and wearing lipstick, the dreaded uniforms of the Tans — and was John Ford going to make another film on the Siege of Limerick. Back in the Dalcassian pub, Boots was happy with his day's work. The latest discoveries of the movie world spent their modest salaries that night. But the big shock came on dole day when the extras discovered that they had been docked part of their unemployment benefit. "John Ford can do without me for his next picture; he can get Indian squaws instead", said one disgruntled 'walk-on'.

But despite the financial shortfalls, the film was in the can, and the women of Limerick had once again stepped instinctively into the breach of history.

**Taking
a break
on the
film set**

