



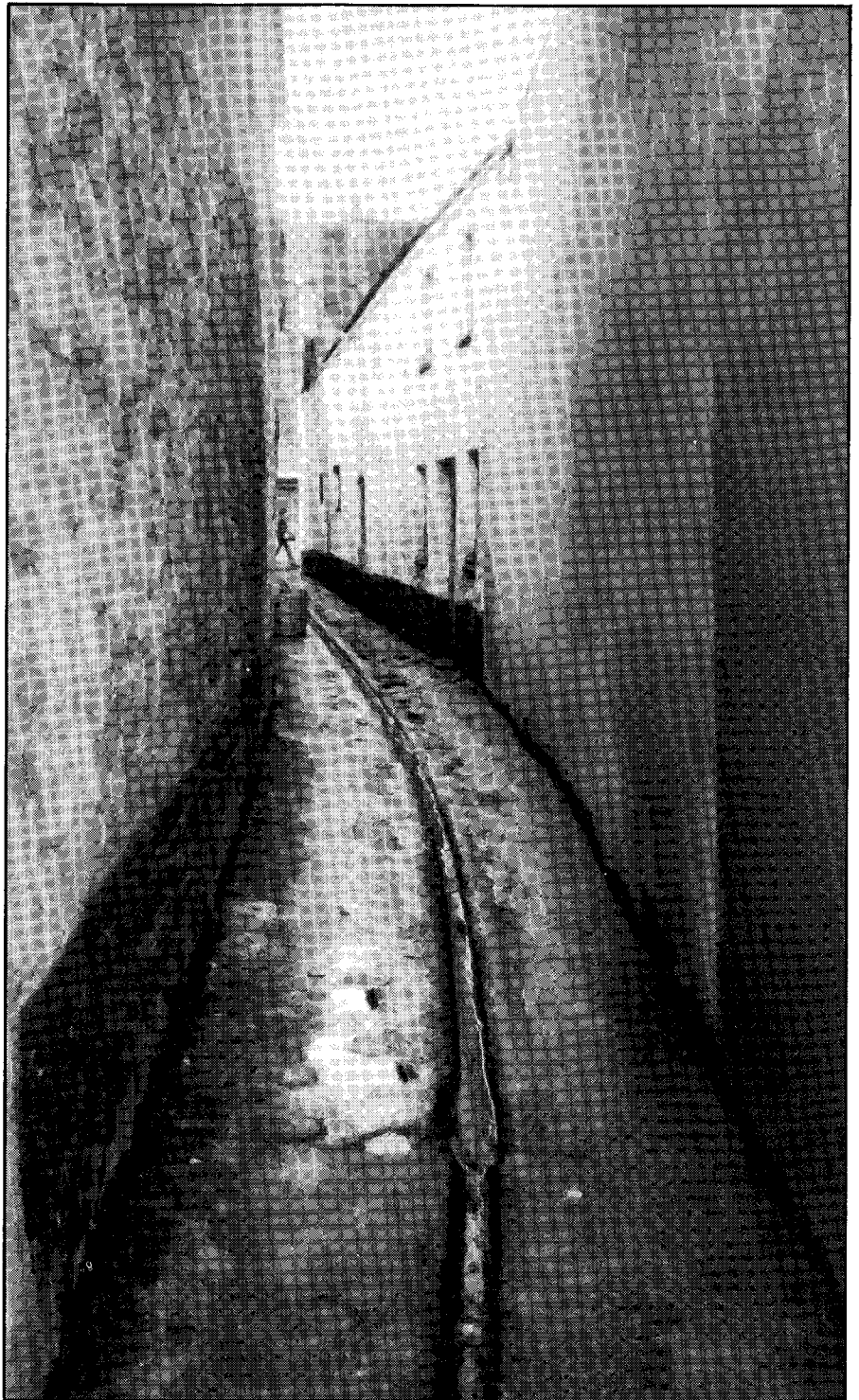
Good Fridays, as I remember them in Limerick, were days of fast, abstinence and church services. A shroud of gloom seemed to envelope the whole city as all commercial and social activity came to a halt. Few were to be seen on the barren streets and of those that were out and about it could be taken for granted that their journey was *bona fide*; either going to or coming from religious services. It was unthinkable that anyone on that day would engage in any form of manual labour as no sane person would draw public odium on himself and his family by being guilty of such a heinous crime. No! This was a day for mortification, contemplation and prayer. Of course, there were those husbands who found the tedium of spending a whole day at home reading the *Cork Examiner* or listening to Mozart on Radio Eireann a little bit too much. Propelled by boredom and frustration many were driven to undertake such Herculean tasks as digging a garden or cleaning a chimney, and though they never as much as drove a nail in the house for the rest of the year, their prodigious feats on Good Friday redeemed their flagging domestic reputations.

But not all of Limerick's citizens were caught up in the religious fervour or domestic boredom of Good Friday. To the dedicated drinking fraternity it was a day of great challenge, and though all public houses were officially closed, they refused to be intimidated by the prevailing unfavourable conditions. Like Christmas Day, it was a time for initiative and daring, with reputations and new friendships put to the test. Some, I know, were quite content to take a few 'dannos' home with them on Holy Thursday night, but such an unimaginative solution found no response in the hearts of the dedicated drinkers. This behaviour was almost akin to failure. Better to have tried your luck on Good Friday and failed, than not to have tried at all. The sad visages were to be seen at street corners looking wistfully across the road at the shuttered windows of closed hostelrys. They sought, but they did not find; they knocked but no door was opened. And now, huddling together for moral support, their pathetic appearances seemed to conform to the prevailing mood of gloom. To add to their despondency they were well aware of the fact that others more fortunate than themselves were quaffing pints of black porter, comfortably ensconced in some accommodating pub. 'Twas enough to drive a body into the Pioneer movement!

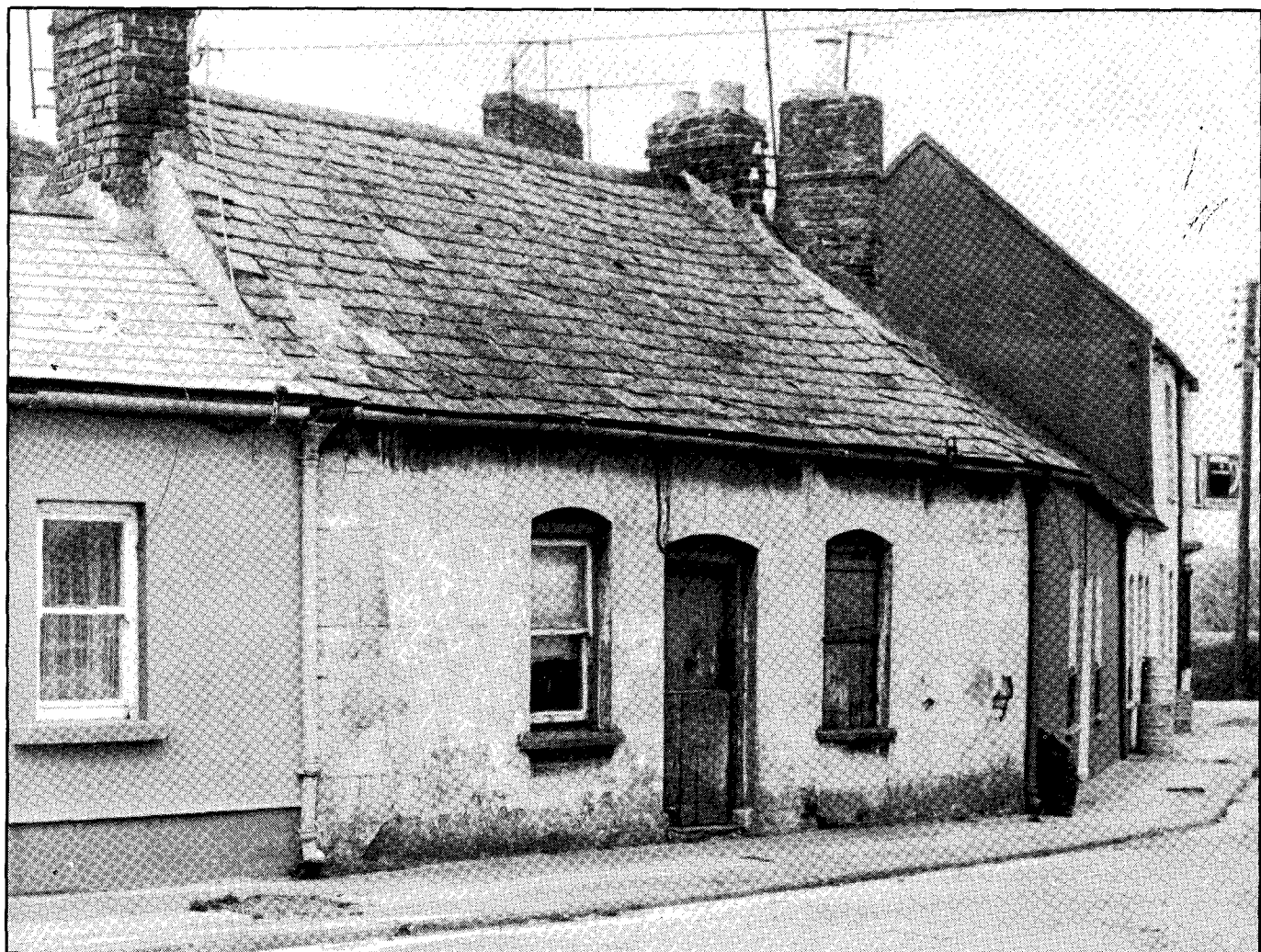
But those that were successful, of course, had their homework well done. Not for them the hazardous game of

Limerick - Behind Closed Doors

by Finbar Crowe



Lane off Upper Gerald Griffin Street.



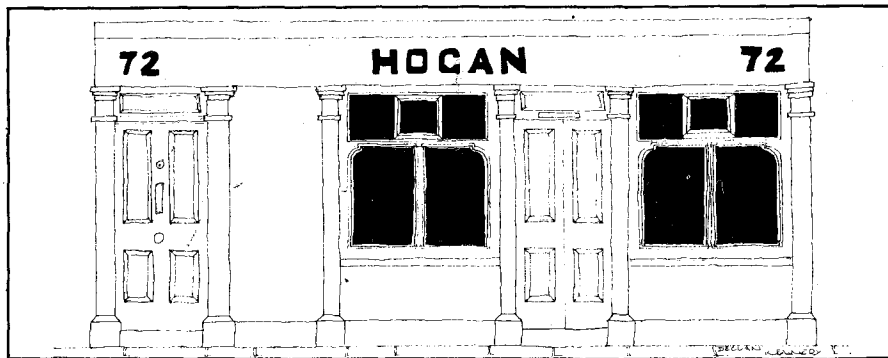
Keyes Row and the Sandmall.

leaving all to mere chance. Not alone did they know where to seek but they came equipped with the necessary entry requirements; a secret tap or a pre-arranged signal. Like Sarsfield at Ballyneety, they had the 'password'. And it was sheer joy to watch them in the execution of their duty. You might, for example, see one of them leaning listlessly against a pub door, his bloated corporation leaving the unwary to suspect that he was using that position for temporary support. As he appeared to look aimlessly up and down the street, an innocent by-stander could be forgiven for not hearing the secret code being tapped out by his heel against the pub door. The next movement had to be closely observed, for if one were to blink an eyelid it could be missed completely. When the pub door was slightly opened, in many cases, hardly wide enough to admit an anorexic cat, the waiting imbiber would expertly waltz through the narrow opening, with a nimbleness of foot that would do justice to a youthful Fred Astaire. In some instances, a waiting 'buttie', who had been judiciously positioned nearby, would, with equal agility, float quickly in behind him. When the door was closed, usually in a

matter of seconds, the by-stander could be forgiven for doubting his own sanity; for what he had just witnessed would have defied all the laws of time and motion as he had understood them. Fearing that if he recounted what he had just seen he might be taken for a fool, he was very likely to keep quiet about the whole affair.

A colleague of mine told me of an unnerving experience he had some years ago which is pertinent. He related how he had been driving into town, one morning, along Nicholas Street. The street, he recalled was deserted except for one gentleman who was standing rather listlessly on the right-hand pavement, some way ahead of him. As he drove nearer, the man suddenly darted across the road and ended up on top of the car bonnet. My friend braked in panic and, on looking through the windscreen, saw the man smiling apologetically at him before sliding off. He then disappeared from view somewhere behind him on his left-hand side. Now, as every door on that side of the street was locked, my friend was at a loss to explain what had happened to the man, as it appeared that he had simply vanished into thin air. He got out of the car and checked underneath

but to no avail. He did think that he had heard the door of an adjacent pub closing but he could not be sure of this. Besides, the time factor involved would not have allowed the person to extricate himself from the bonnet of a car and escape by that route without being seen. At no stage, he recalled, did he actually see a door open. He became convinced that he had seen a ghost. Subsequently, when he was told that Nicholas Street, being one of the oldest streets in the city, was haunted, his worst suspicions seemed confirmed. "And tell me, Tim", said I to him when he broached this matter with me, "When did all this happen?" "I can remember it well", he replied, "'Twas a Good Friday morning in nineteen...". "Say no more", I smilingly interjected, "but 'twas no ghost that you saw". He looked at me in mild amazement. "No", I repeated, "'twas no ghost that you saw, if by ghosts you mean pure spirits. But what you probably saw was a mere mortal in pursuit of pure spirit". And, of course, that was the more logical explanation, for the whole of Ireland knows that on a Good Friday the dedicated imbiber would risk car accidents and even death itself in order to gain entry to a pub.



Hogans, Catherine Street, from a drawing by Declan Kennedy.

But, once inside a pub, there was a certain decorum to be observed that seemed to conform to the sanctity of the day. In the semi-darkness of the shuttered premises (no sane publican would risk a light) drinks were ordered by nods and winks and all conversation was carried on by a sophisticated sign language that seemed intelligible to one and all. Sometimes, in the middle of an animated discussion, a person would be forgiven for breaking into a whisper to emphasise a particular point or to refute a serious allegation. But, generally speaking, these were exceptions and the throat muscles were used only in the legitimate pursuit of quenching a thirst.

There was always a character, of course, who, having been over-generous in his consumption of porter, thought that a verse of 'Mother Mac-hree' would enliven the rather subdued atmosphere. Having ventured a bar or two, he would mis-interpret the frosty silence as a mark of appreciation, and continue with increased gusto. But he would quickly be brought to heel and you could depend on it that he would spend the rest of his Good Fridays like a pariah at some street corner regretting his indiscretion.

It also happened on these occasions that an over-inebriated guest, warming to the subject under discussion, would become excessively demonstrative in making a point and send someone's glass of drink crashing to the floor. This was likely to send a wave of tremors through the hushed throng for these furtive drinkers knew not the hour when the 'knock' might come for them. And that dreaded Garda 'knock', and the terrifying pronouncement, 'Guard on duty', were feared as much by drinkers as miscreants of old feared the donning of the black cap by a hanging judge. For a true drinker, to use a Mafia expression, 'makes his bones' by after-hours drinking and his reputation depends to a large extent on his ability to find accommodating publicans for his Christmas Day and Good Friday carousings. To be 'found on', then, is to have one's reputation shattered and to be pointed out by your fellow-drinkers as being a failure. Like the truant who is apprehended, you are deemed to be incompetent at your job and a source of

embarrassment to the profession. An early retirement to the Pioneer Movement might be an acceptable solution all round. It is for this reason then that the after-hours drinker fears detection and would do anything rather than face the humiliation of prosecution. If he were a fish he would jump ashore; if he were a boat he would run aground – anything but to be 'found on'.

I recall a girl, whose parents ran a public house in the vicinity of Upper Henry Street, telling me of an occasion when they were raided on a Good Friday. Five or six customers were 'found on' but one gentleman, fortuitously, happened to be in the toilet when the Guards arrived. With that alertness, peculiar to all after-hours drinkers, he quickly sized up the situation and locked the toilet door. Then he broke the toilet window, scrambled out as best he could, through the broken glass and made good his escape, down a back-alleyway. But not, unfortunately, without some cost to himself. His escapade left him badly gashed and he ended up in Barrington's Hospital, requiring a few stitches. His good suit, which he had been wearing, was blood-stained and torn and had to be written-off. Yet, back he came to the pub on the following week, paid £5 for the broken window and cheerfully told everyone of his good fortune. It might be added that the usual court fine, at that time, for the offence was ten shil-

lings (50p). But that mattered not to him and there was little point in telling him that it was a pyrrhic victory. He had not been 'found on' and his drinking reputation was still intact.

Anyone who frequents public houses is well acquainted with the type of customer who takes the onus of running the premises on himself. Although not having any official contract with the proprietor, he generally makes himself busy by collecting empty glasses, looking after the fire or assisting in the calling of 'time'. "Come on now lads, *we've* had a good break and *we* can all come back again tomorrow morning". The latter statement can be interpreted as putting the proprietor on notice that *he* will be back again the following morning to collect his dues, and 't'would be an ungrateful publican that would begrudge him a pint or two for his troubles.

A friend of mine was telling me of an incident that happened in a public house near the top of William Street, one Good Friday morning, and it involved one of these characters. It happened that about a dozen customers were in the bar when the dreaded pronouncement 'Guards on duty' was heard outside. As the banging on the door grew louder the 'customer-manager', true to form, immediately took charge of the situation. The proprietor, shaking in his shoes, was instructed to delay entry to the Guards while all the 'guests' were ushered out to the back yard. The wall surrounding the yard was about 8 feet high and the 'manager' proceeded to assist his colleagues over this wall. When all were safely out of sight, he suddenly realised that there was nobody left to give himself a helping hand. Frantically, he tried to scale the wall but without success. In desperation he ran back inside to seek the aid of the proprietor. However, by now the proprietor had lost his nerve and, at this juncture, was opening the door to the Gardai. Frustrated by their long wait they had little mercy on the



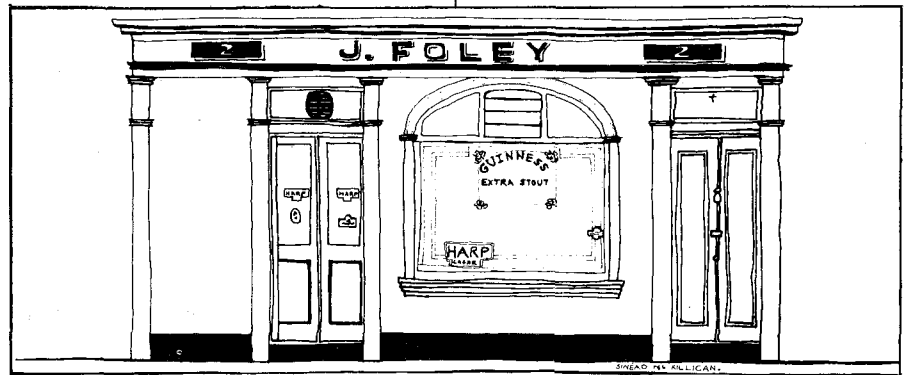
Tom Collins, Cecil Street, from a drawing by Martin Haren.

one customer 'found on' and both he and the publican were duly summoned. Now, you might have thought that he would have been praised by his colleagues for his resourcefulness, but he had no such luck. The drinking fraternity are not that charitable in their dealings and he was teased for being 'an awful eejit'. And was the proprietor grateful for his valiant effort? "Only for you", the publican bluntly reminded him, "I wouldn't have had my bloody licence endorsed!".

But, of course, it is not only the imbibers that have been 'found on', during the 'holy hours' of Good Friday. A relative of mine (it would be dangerous to be more specific), with three other friends, managed to gain entry on a Good Friday, to a hostelry in Co. Clare, somewhere beyond the city borders of Athlunkard Bridge. They congratulated themselves on their good fortune because, not alone had they got the place to themselves, but the pub, being beyond the precincts of Limerick City, was deemed to be a 'safe' house. After all, they had argued, didn't the Guards have enough to do besides skulking around the backroads of Co. Clare on a Good Friday. A reasonable supposition to make, by all accounts. Well, the day went so well for them that by evening none of them was in a fit condition to undertake the long walk back to the city. But the drinking fraternity are never short of ideas. This relative of mine rang his brother-in-law, Joe, who was a hackney driver and, it being Good Friday, was spending the day quietly at home with his family. Joe was prevailed upon to come and collect them and, being the Good Samaritan that he was, he duly obliged. When he arrived at the pub, they weren't yet ready (are they ever?) and he ended up having a glass of orange 'for the road'. It was then that the Clare Gardai showed how awkward and contrary they could be. The place was raided. Two of the drinkers, who had appeared 'legless' up to that point, gave a bewildering display of athleticism and made good their escape across the fields. Two more gave false names and addresses (perhaps in their intoxicated state they couldn't recall their correct ones!), and a judge was subsequently to vow that the pair of them would face jail if the Guards could find out who they were. But luck was with them and, like the Bard of Thomond's 'Drunken Thady', they got off 'unmolested'. Joe, however, was not so fortunate. With his hackney cab outside the door, he could neither abscond nor give a false name. He was summoned to appear in the court. On the morning of the case, he was hanging around the corridors of the courthouse when he met a solicitor, whom he had often driven around the city. "And what brings you here, Joe?", the solicitor inquired. Joe explained his

predicament to him. "And have you anyone to represent you?", asked the solicitor. Joe replied "no", as it had never occurred to him that he had to be professionally represented. "Well, think no more of it", said the obliging solicitor, "I'll look after you". Joe's case came up with a batch of others and he was fined the usual ten shillings. He cursed his bad luck (and his relative) but, being philosophical about it all, said that it could have been worse. How right he was! A few days later, he received a bill for thirty shillings (£1.50) from his 'friend' the solicitor. As Joe said later, "I'd have been better off if I'd done the three hours agony above in the Crescent with the Jesuits!" (The Jesuits had a special three-hour service on Good Fridays to commemorate the Agony of Christ). I suppose there were many Good Friday drinkers who would have echoed Joe's sentiments.

stantly conspiring to waylay the unwary. As I remember those 'innocents', they always left home on Good Friday to go for a walk, an honest intention by all accounts. But Good Friday, if one could believe them, seems to be a day when Satan is at his diabolical worst, prowling the city streets to ensnare the innocent. For, as they would afterwards relate (and they all seemed to relate the same story), they were innocently passing by a pub when the door mysteriously opened wide and they were literally 'sucked in'. They were barely inside when some people whom they had never met before 'poured drink into them', in spite of their protests. "Why didn't they come home then", they would later be asked "and extricate themselves from their predicament?". "How could they", they would answer indignantly, "didn't the publican have the door



Foley's, Lower Shannon Street, from a drawing by Sinead McKillican.

But it seems to be a law peculiar to Ireland that as long as pubs remain closed people will try to get in. It matters not that they are open on 363 days of the year. Most drinkers seem to develop an insatiable thirst on the other two days.

A character in 'The Parish' acquired this insatiable thirst one Good Friday. He decided to try his luck at a well-known 'Parish' hostelry where he was a regular customer. Having proceeded to the side door, he gave a couple of judicious knocks. Eventually, the proprietor came on the scene. 'Who's there?' he hissed from behind the door. "'Tis mé, Joe", came the pleading reply. "Joe who?" barked the proprietor, "Joe Spillane", came the hopeful response. "And what do you want, Joe?" demanded the proprietor. "Is there any chance of an oul' pint, Dick?" he replied, while adding diplomatically, "I'm on my own". "Well, why don't you buzz off and get a crowd!", came the rapid reply. I never heard whether nor not he did manage to get a crowd. Perhaps he 'saw the light' and buzzed off to the Jesuits.

Finally, I must mention those characters who, ostensibly, never set out to have a drink on Good Friday, yet always manage to end up 'paralytic'. It would appear when it comes to abstaining, man is not always master of his own destiny, and the fates are con-

bolted and refused to open it for them!". Yes, indeed; publicans have a lot to answer for.

But I often say to myself what a dull city Limerick would be without all those wayward individuals whose activities on Good Fridays – and at other times – have added spice to our city's history and enlivened our dull existences with many a colourful yarn.

There are those, of course, who find little humour in the doings of such people and would have their city like their lawns, weed free. They have a point, no doubt, and they can eloquently paint a picture of a futuristic Limerick that conforms to the ideal in every way; litter-free streets, modern buildings and every citizen diligent and responsible. I have, in the past, been almost convinced by them until the ghost of Garard Manley Hopkins stirred uneasily within me and his lines passed reproachfully through my mind:

"What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet".

Amen, I say to that. Long live the weeds, wilderness and all those Limerick 'characters'. Long live the Good Friday drinkers!