A Limerick Childhood

BY DOROTHY McCall

Our father's stories of his Irish childhood seemed to me and my brothers and sisters just the ordinary family lore, beloved of most children. Later on I realised how unusual was our relation to them, for we were the offspring of his latter years, and he the seventeenth child of his mother.

Thus it is that I, still in middle life, can reconstruct at first hand something of the ways and means, the work and play of a very large family growing up in Ireland more than a hundred years ago.

Indeed some of the tales he told us lay well back in the age of hoops and patches, as when we would listen enthralled to a story of our great-grandfather, who, in the island of superstition, was said to be gifted with the second sight. He accepted a challenge from his boon companions to walk right round a large churchyard in Limerick at dead of night and brave the spectres. A ghost appeared in due course, needless to say, near the gate on the return journey, but my strong-minded ancestor dealt with him so faithfully that the practical joker had to be revived with spirits of another nature at the inn where the bet had been laid.

Of the ghost layer, I may add that he practised the law in Limerick and had seven sons. Of his seventh, my father was the seventh, and lived to repeat the tale of seven sons — accounted most lucky in Ireland.

My grandparents began their married life in Limerick at the beginning of the nineteenth century. My grandmother came of the Celtic Irish stock and followed the Quaker faith before her marriage. She never relin quished the beautiful and simple dress of that community, and out of a portrait in oils her tender brown eyes still gaze. From a filmy hood and soft draperies of lawn, on the grandchildren she could never have known until both the export and the home trade were damaged by an unhappy measure calculated to assist the West Indian planters. This was an order to use sugar instead of corn in the Irish as well as the British whiskey distilleries. The writer above quoted Edward Wakefield — quaintly laments that "Had illicit stills been introduced in this country (Limerick) in the same measure as they have in the northern counties, the market created by them would have given a stimulus to the industry of the people and have proved the primary means of rendering the land more productive". The moral question he waves from him with an airy touch.

My grandfather, unlike his predecessors in the corn trade, never made a modest fortune, and must have sighed to be able to build such a trim house as the many which graced the Shannon banks outside Limerick — fruits of earlier successes in that business. Great Britain was already not able to supply her population with sufficient home-grown corn, but both the export and the Irish home trade were damaged by an unhappy measure calculated to assist the West Indian planters. This was an order to use sugar instead of corn in the Irish as well as the British whiskey distilleries. The writer above quoted Edward Wakefield — quaintly laments that "Had illicit stills been introduced in this country (Limerick) in the same measure as they have in the northern counties, the market created by them would have given a stimulus to the industry of the people and have proved the primary means of rendering the land more productive". The moral question he waves from him with an airy touch.
It was thus a declining industry on which my
grandfather had to bring up such a large family, but to his
credit he gave them as good an education as was to be
had in their native city, and the schools, like those of
Scotland, were surprisingly good for so poor and harassed
a country. He was certainly not greatly helped by the fact
that my eldest uncle, who had become his partner before
the youngest of his brothers and sisters had emerged
from babyhood, had no taste whatever for such mundane
things as trade. Their business gradually declined as the
years went on; the deterioration of the harriers at
Limerick and eventually the advent of railways were
destined to deal a death blow to these old leisurely ways
of trading. Nevertheless, my uncle managed to keep the
firm alive up to the forties of the last century.

My eldest uncle's real trouble was that he was dowered
with more than a fair share of that doubtful blessing —
the parasitic teems upon the Shannon. It left a serious
scarcer in the corn business. Alarmed at the prospect of
making the punishment fit the crime.

He married a wife of like tastes, who would lie on a
sofa all day, buried in a novel. Had they been born later,
no doubt this well-matched couple would have found
salvation in writing best sellers in collaboration. The
divine spark came out mildly in one of their many
children, who was known to the mid-Victorian era as a
writer of sentimental tales; and a grandson — Graham
Ponsonby Moore — wrote music of some distinction.

My grandfather inhabited a rather tumbledown
Georgian house, the back of which looked out on to the
Shannon.

Into the cellars of the house the water from the river
flowed at high tides, and the four youngest children, who
always hunted the devil in couples, were never so happy
as when sailing their shoes as boats upon this god-given
ocean. At length one of Joseph's shoes sailed forth to join
the parental ships upon the Shannon. It left a serious
vanished to America; a very large continent, whose boun-
daries were so hazy to her generation that track was soon
lost of adventurers thereinto. Only an echo of two
children born to her ever reverberated.

We always longed to know more of the real Sister Anne,
who clearly had her share of the Celtic inheritance. Alas,
whom my eldest uncle, who had a remarkable gift for
reading, and so much did he hate the sordid but necessary
keeping of accounts that he roped in his young brothers to
do them after school hours, while he gave his mind to
higher things! They took this forced labour in wonder-
fully good part.

Another time the schoolmaster was in milder mood.
At this school the boys obtained a very thorough
classical and mathematical education, in spite of some
very free Irish translations being current coin. The open-
ing lines of the first book of Virgil were jocularly sup-
posed to run: "They were all County Kerry men and they
houlded their tongues!"

Legend crowded thickly round John 'Tirrible' Baylee's
exploits with his dreaded cane, and before ever "The
Mikado" immortalised the principle, he was a believer in
making the punishment fit the crime.

At night the river lived as the old man having become
in milder mood. My uncle, Charles, throwing stones at his lawful enemies
in a narrow alley on his way to school, managed to knock
off an old gentleman's nightcap as he stood shaving at his
bedroom window. In great wrath the injured gentleman
pursued Charles to the school, thirsting for his blood.