

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 own 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 relinquished 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 grass-lawn, on the grand-children she could never have known in life. A hint of a fur robe behind the shoulders shows up an unforgettable picture of a wife and mother greatly loved, who does not seem to have found boredom or rebellion in her lot, which was to bear twenty children and be granted no aftermath to those strenuous years. Loss and sorrow she had, but love and tenderness to the end. Did she have any inkling of the healer her seventh son would afterwards become, as she lifted the corner of the table-cloth one evening to show her husband a tiny boy who had crept under the table to rub her weary feet in secret? He had overheard a direction from the doctor, and his heart was heavy with a child's intuition of impending loss. She left him a memory of something very lovely to hold while life should last. His grown-up sisters could hardly hope to fill her place.

My grandfather came of the harder stock descending

from the Cromwellian settlers, and this union of bloods made for a curious combination of the practical with the dreamer in the family.

Many of the children died young, but the household in Limerick must usually have numbered a round dozen or so, and the names and some of the leading characteristics of at least nine were known to us intimately. Only one or two of them overlapped my own birth, though they were of the generation above me.

My grandfather, being so much a younger son, had no chance to follow the law with his father. He went into business as a corn broker on a wharf near the famous Treaty Bridge over the Shannon. Processions of farmers with heavily laden waggons would wind into the city after the harvest, bringing their corn to sell to him. This he would ship overseas to England or up the river and the canal to Dublin. The Grand Canal was the latest thing in transport, but, as a writer of 1812 laments, was begun on a more magnificent scale and carried to a greater width than was suitable for any merchandise it could hope to carry. It should have met the Shannon farther south and avoided the several changes from canals to lake and river. Nevertheless, it was the regular means for carrying not only goods but passengers from the west to Dublin, owing, no doubt, to the rudimentary state of the roads in Ireland for wellnigh half a century afterwards. The same writer records the astonishing fact that the boat on which he travelled reached the capital only two minutes behind its appointed time. And he was an Englishman!

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.



A 1786 view of old Thomond Bridge and King John's Castle, with St. Mary's Cathedral in the background.

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 harbourage 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 artistic temperament. He had a passion for novel 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 wonderfully good part.

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 blank in the family wardrobe, with money ever becoming scarcer in the corn business. Alarmed at the prospect of owning up, the ingenious boy rooted round for an old buckle shoe cast off by his father and took his walks abroad for a long time in this oddly assorted footwear, helped out by tying on the usurper with a handy piece of string. So happy-go-lucky was the regime of his sisters that he was never detected in his crime.

In the same cellar a great treat was wont to take place. Above the four 'divils' in age came a popular sister named Anne, who had a remarkable gift for story-telling. Only in the dark setting of the cellar did she feel able to do justice to the tale of 'Bluebeard' with suitable local colour. From its grimmest recess she would peer forth in a blood-curdling manner, as she repeated the terrible refrain of "Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?" At the third repetition the nerves of her younger brethren would invariably give way and they would rush, shrieking with terror, upstairs. Yet they never failed to demand repeat performances.

We always longed to know more of the real Sister Anne, who clearly had her share of the Celtic inheritance. Alas, she made a match in the teeth of parental opposition and vanished to America; a very large continent, whose boundaries 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.

In the house by the river lived not only the family, but several apprentices to the corn trade. In their indentures it was set out that they must not be given salmon for dinner more than three times a week. Meat was clearly not the staple diet, but butter and eggs were plentiful and probably the subject of barter with the incoming far-

mers.

Hardly a subject for joking — tea — as a Quarker aunt of the family also thought, when her witty sister would ask politely, after her third cup, "Friend, hast thee a little more water in thy teapot?"

Potatoes were at the other end of the scale from tea, and the boys were often sent to buy them from the old women in shawls, who sat upon the bridge, with their baskets, to chatter. The ruling price was six pounds for a penny, and a free sample was always taken home first, to be cooked and eaten before the final bargain was struck. My father would often describe the method of cooking pursued in his father's kitchen, and sighed for an English cook to treat his favourite vegetable with equally becoming reverence. The potatoes were flung into a pot of cold water and put on the fire, and "when the white horses came to the top", more cold water was added and the process repeated. I have heard of white horses on the sea, but it takes an Irish imagination to see them on a pot of boiling spuds.

The market women on the bridge also sold apples at the astonishing price of twenty brown russets for a halfpenny. Young Joseph, who was a great hand at mathematics, did a thriving trade in apples, for he worked out his less gifted schoolfellows' sums at a fixed rate of a halfpenny a sum!

So much for the food question. Of the schools attended by the family, we got a very vivid picture.

First there was the dame's school, which the principal seems to have run on the same utilitarian lines as the immortal Mr. Squeers. She taught her scholars to catch rats and mice, and practically nothing more. The dunce's cap was still in use here, presumably for lack of prowess in the chase.

Having exhausted the resources of this academy, the boys next went on to a remarkable school kept by a worthy Quaker — one John Tyrrell Baylee. He was popularly known as John 'Tirrible' Baylee, for his pacific philosophy did not run to the extent of withholding corporal punishment, and his cane — 'Tickler' — was held in great awe.

He had a tender habit towards his wife, and at eleven o'clock each morning she would appear at the schoolroom door, murmuring, "John, my heart," to which he would reply, "Jane, my love," and follow her out. An envious whisper of "Oysters" would then arise amongst the desks!

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 opening lines of the first book of Virgil were jocularly supposed to run: "They were all County Kerry men and they houlded their tongues".

The Quarker clearly infused a very real desire for learning in such of his scholars as cared to profit by his teaching. My father would quote the classics, as though they held magic for him, to the end of his long life. After he left school and was learning the rudiments of medicine with an apothecary in Limerick, he read all the books of Euclid for pleasure while walking out arm-in-arm with his father for an evening, the old man having become very deaf and afraid to face the mild traffic of those days alone.

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.

Another time the schoolmaster was 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.