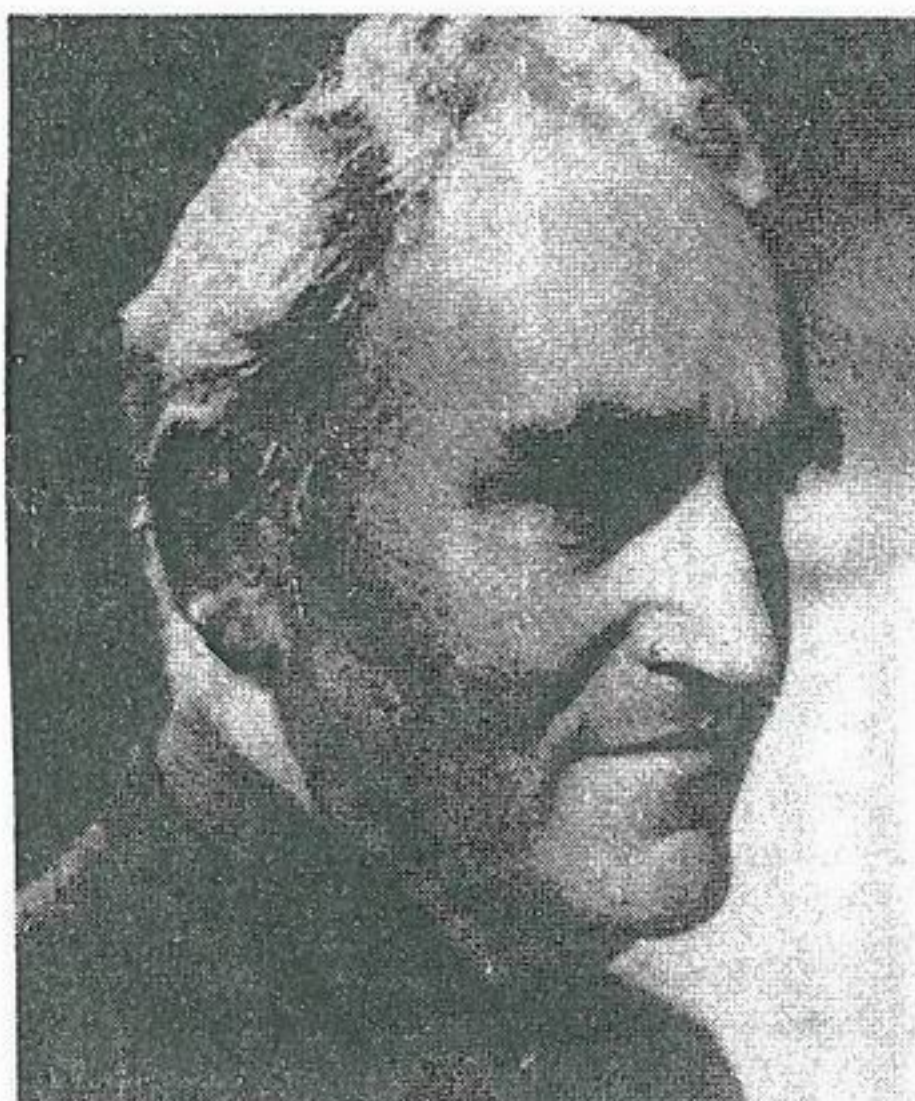




As Through A Mirror

LIMERICK IN THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES

By Gerry Gallivan



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Someone once wrote that people in the main are unexceptional, most of us live relatively similar lives ... the difference being our perception of what we have lived through. So it is with my recollections of events and people while growing up in Limerick city, a personal rag bag of memories that are quite different to those of contemporaries who experienced the same situations from different viewpoints.

Since I was born in 1920 my earliest recollections are of the late twenties. I believe my memory to be correct in most respects but as this is a free-wheeling ramble I am not checking out the dates. Limerick has always been a great place for sport of all description. The Regatta was a big affair in our family. My three brothers and myself all rowed for Limerick Boat Club at one stage or another. I think it was in 1926 that Boat Club won the Union Cup (All Ireland Title) and our big disappointment was that my eldest brother Cyril had to drop

out of the winning crew through illness a week before they won the championship. However, he was back in the Eight the following year when Boat Club made almost a clean sweep at Limerick Regatta, winning seven of the eight events. Shannon robbed them of a complete whitewash by winning the Senior Four, stroked by the popular Jack Glasor. St. Michael's and Athlunkard were quiet that year but their times were to come later.

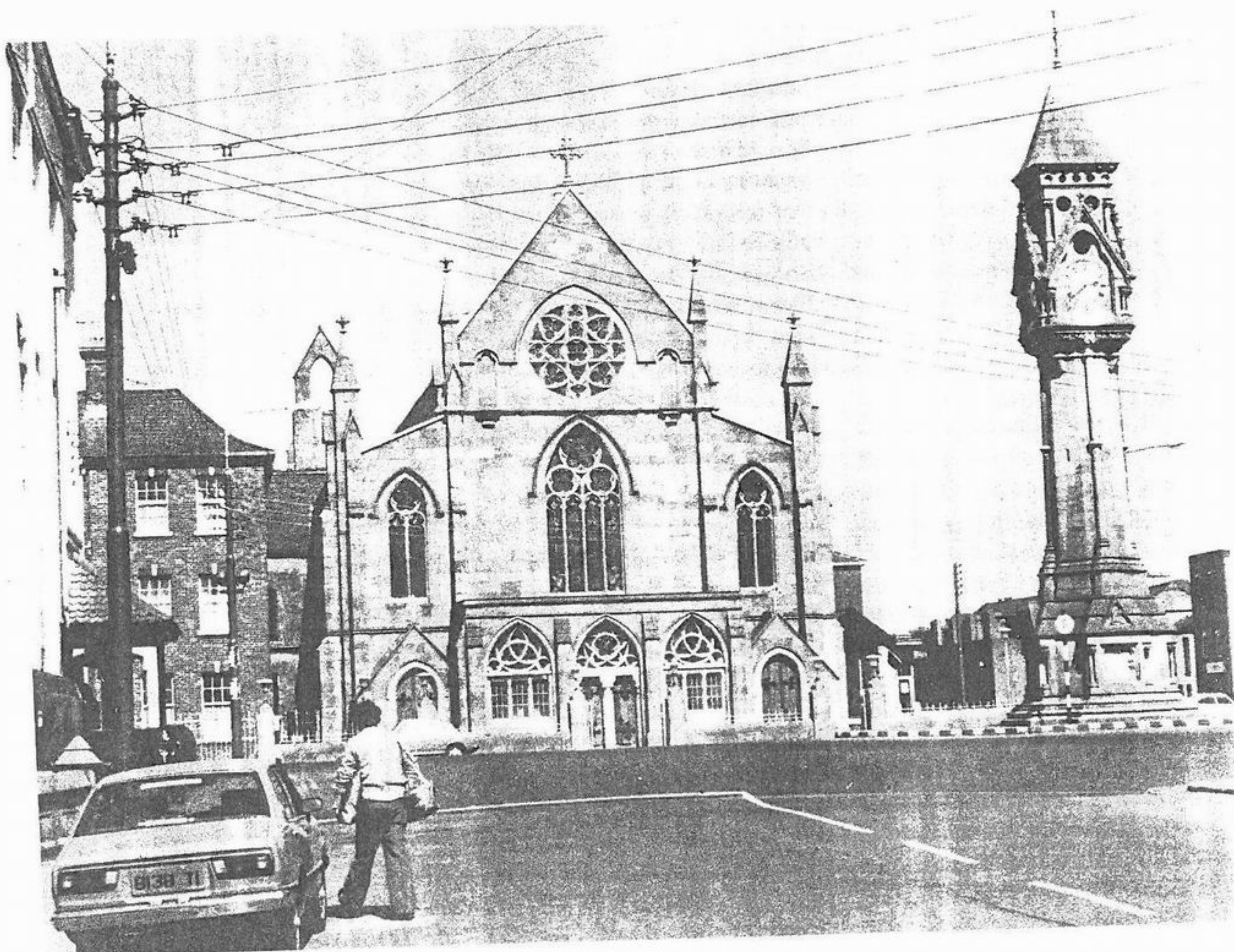
The following year, 1928, was a great year for Limerick Rugby. Young Munster... the boys from the Yellow Road... brought the Bateman Cup (All Ireland Club Championship) to Limerick. They beat a star-studded Lansdowne side in the final and this was to inspire a song beginning with the lines "Lansdowne won the Leinster Cup but Munsters won the Bateman". They were almost mobbed on returning home, met at the station by the Mayor, bonfires along the Yellow Road and the band-led procession through the city. The names of Charlie St. George, Murty King, Ter Casey, Frank Garvey and Danaher Sheahan will always be associated with that victory... Garryowen never won the Bateman but, where the Munster Cup was concerned, they headed the honours list, winning it at frequent intervals while the newcomers, Bohemians, had already started to make their mark, having won it in 1927.

It was also in 1928 that Colonel Fitzmaurice of the Irish Air Corps with German colleagues, Von Huenfold and Koehl made the first east to west crossing of the Atlantic by plane. It so happened that the flight coincided with

the weekend when Young Munster won the Bateman. Last summer when I travelled to Limerick to attend Charlie St. George's funeral, the priest in the course of his homily, recalled Charlie telling him that everywhere they went people were asking for news of the fliers. I remember well when the fliers came to Limerick. They got a huge reception. Perched high on my father's shoulders, I was one of the crowd outside Cruise's Hotel when Mayor 'Tiger' O'Brien told them that they had blazed the trail.

Another German influence at that time was the Shannon Scheme, with dozens of their technicians and families moving into the area. The Strand Barracks took on a new lease of life and the power station at Ardnacrusha became a showpiece for the nation.

Around the houses motor races were a feature of the thirties... and Limerick was not to be outdone. For a couple of years we had our own 'round the houses' and attracted some of the big names of the time, including Prince Bira and Stanley Woods. Stanley was something of a national sports hero though, to be fair, he had established his reputation as a motor cyclist being pretty well world champion at that sport. The fact that it was a new sport to him did not in any way diminish our expectations of victory. Everyone was out to spot his car and it was a sad blow when half way through the race, he came walking down the course, having abandoned his car through mechanical failure. One of these races was marred by a fatal tragedy. The Duke of Grafton's car went out of control somewhere in the Sexton Street area and the crash resulted in his death. To the



The Dominican Church with Tait's Clock to the right of it - two of Limerick's best known landmarks.

Photo: Tom Tobin

disappointment of most, this venture was abandoned after a few years, probably because of the financial burden involved.

The thirties was of course the golden age of Limerick hurling. It was certainly the time to be alive and following Limerick... over a period of seven or eight years, Limerick won a string of All Ireland and National League titles. Their dash and skill made for vibrant exciting hurling that won them admirers all over the country... and beyond. Many shrewd judges would hold that these teams ranked amongst the greatest of all time, and it's easy to support this viewpoint when one thinks of players of the quality of the Mackeys, the Clohesseys, the Ryans, Jackie Power and Paddy Scanlon. In my mind's eye I can still see the artistry of Stokes, the brilliance of Power, the great saves of Scanlon and the sheer magic of Mick

Mackey surely... despite the claims of Ring, Langton, Keane and Doyle... the greatest hurler of them all. Do you remember the cheers that would go up when he kicked off his boots to play in his stockinged feet, the signal that it was now time to really get down to serious business. And at that time too, Ahane must have been the best club side in the country since the majority of the county side came from their ranks. I'd give a lot to be back again on a sunny afternoon in high summer cycling to Thurles for a Munster final. God be with the days. Great players, great teams, great times, will we ever see the like again?

Hockey was also pretty strong in Limerick in those days. As I recall, the main teams were Young Men's, Institute, Rathbane and Shelbourne. Stan de Lacy was the top star of the period and he also

distinguished himself in athletics. And, speaking of athletics, John Joe Barry was in his prime around then and was always a great drawing card at the Markets Field which was also the headquarters of the Limerick soccer team. Many memorable games were played there and some of the big names included Reich Carter and Dixie Dean.

Drama and music was well catered for in the city. Most of the talked of plays found their way to the stage and, musically, I can remember versions of 'The Pinafore', 'The Belle of New York' and 'The Desert Song'. Many professional artists and companies were attracted to Limerick, including Anew McMaster's Shakespearian Company and the Sadler's Well Opera Company. I remember hearing the famous Australian baritone Peter Dawson at St. John's Pavillion. On that occasion he forgot the

ords of the ballad 'My Fairest Child' and was pleased to accept a prompt from the audience. Some time in the early thirties, I heard John McCormack singing at the same venue. This time I was standing outside the hall, in company with hundreds of others and heard him through the windows that had been opened to allow some air to get inside. I'll never forget the purity and beauty of that voice. In 1938 I was to hear him again at the Savoy Cinema, during his European Farewell Tour and, in the intervening years, the voice had darkened by a perceptible degree. It was in the same year, and at the Savoy too, that I was privileged to hear Paul Robeson sing; such a gloriously resonant voice, such a warm personality.

Limerick has always been a great cinema-going city. The Coliseum had the early talkies including the first, 'The Jazz Singer', but my first experience of the talking film was a real sentimental weepie called 'Mother's Boy', starring and Irish American tenor named Morton Downey. I read recently that one of the top television talk show hosts in the states is Morton Downey. I wonder if he could be a son or grandson of the man I saw?

I think it was around 1934 or '35 that the Savoy Cinema opened in Limerick and I can tell you that it caused quite a stir. The first film shown was 'Brewster's Millions' with Jack Buchanan and Elsie Randolph, and among the other big films that followed were 'Les Miserables' and 'Anthony Adverse' with Frederick Marsh, and one featuring Pat O'Brien bearing the impressive title 'Oil for the Lamps of China'. The Grand Central, not to be outdone, presented two of my favourite musicals films, 'Rio Rita' and 'The Desert Song', both starring John Boles. I only wish that I still had some of the old recordings.

It was the Savoy Cinema that introduced the theatre organ to Limerick. There was always a tingle of pleasurable anticipation when the film ended, the lights came up slowly and then, in a soaring surge of melodious sound, the organ would emerge from what seemed

like the bowels of the cinema to entertain us with light classics and the popular tunes of the day for fifteen or twenty minutes. Between regulars and guest performances, the Savoy afforded us the opportunity of hearing the best theatre organists in the country during the years that followed. I wonder how many of you remember Gordon Spicer, John Enright, Fred Bridgeman and my old friend Norman Metcalfe? ... We could also boast some excellent church organists at that time, each with his own particular following... Pat O'Connor was very popular, as was Sidney Boyer (father of Brendan), but my own particular favourite was 'Shaughs' at the Jesuits. I'd go early on a Sunday to hear him warming up before mass with Mendelssohn's 'Spring Song' or 'To a Wild Rose'.

The Stella Restaurant was also a child of the thirties. There was a great rush for the first week and my brother Eddie's enthusiasm became a family joke after he had dashed home to exclaim with outstretched arms: "Such value. Sausages this length and a bucket of mash for ninepence". Well, whatever about that, it was soon to become the 'in' place to eat in the city.

So many places, so many people as memories keep crowding in. Sir Alan Cobham's Air Circus that would base itself at Bawnmore, where you could thrill to all kinds of barnstorming and, if you had the nerve, take your stomach in your hands for a loop-the-loop... Doing the Seven Churches on a Holy Thursday evening when half the city would be on the streets, their paths criss-crossing as they made their pilgrimage... Roller skating at St. John's Pavillion. Do you remember when they had a rink there? For a couple of years it was all the rage, professional instructors and all, a happy fusion of grace and tumbles to the strains of 'The Skater's Waltz'. And there was ice skating too at Loughmore, some miles out from the city on the Ballinacurra side. Once word got out that the lake was frozen there'd be a continuous trek by bike and foot with scarves and skates slung around the neck or, if you didn't have skates, you'd get

just as much fun from sliding. It was a fair old walk to Loughmore but in those days we were well used to it and enjoyed footing it out. Indeed, on Sundays there'd never be a shortage of those doing the Mungret walk, out the Dock Road and back by Ballinacurra or, if you preferred it, the other popular trek, out by Parteen and back through Corbally...

Who now remembers the old Abbey Cinema where I saw 'Michael Strugoff' or the Tivoli where we queued for the 'following up' ones... And the Rita Carnival, just across the bridge at Belfield, where teenage summer romances blossomed to the unlikely backing of the Andrews Sisters and 'The Beerbarrel Polka'... Cycling to Foynes in the mid-thirties for the arrival of the first transatlantic Clipper. All of us (including Dev) standing on the jetty facing to sea and trying not to look embarrassed when the plane came from behind us... And 'The Baron Hanley'. Does that strike a chord? It was a name that ran through my early teens. Legend had it that the Baron was a Limerick man who had made it good in the States, either a legitimate millionaire or a genuine gangster. We never knew which and it didn't matter a damn. He'd arrive in a fantastic limousine equipped with a distinctive musical horn. Once the word got out that the Baron was home, it was like the Pied Piper all over again, everyone anxious to get a glimpse of the car and a real live millionaire or mobster...

The shops too, each in their special place: Shanahan's for groceries, Whelan's for milk, Carr's for toys, Naughton's for pigs-toes, O'Mahoney's for books but Dick Meskell for Christmas Annuals, Hutchinson's for papers and Mullaney's for a cup of tea or a mineral... The cattle pens at the foot of O'Curry Street... and the Windmill with its own tight-knit community. It ran into Henry Street, where I lived and an abiding memory is of the gentle harmonising of the Windmill gang as they sang shirt-sleeved on sweltering summer nights. And that's as good a memory as any to take with me.