the 12 HISTORICAL JEWELS OF LIMERICK

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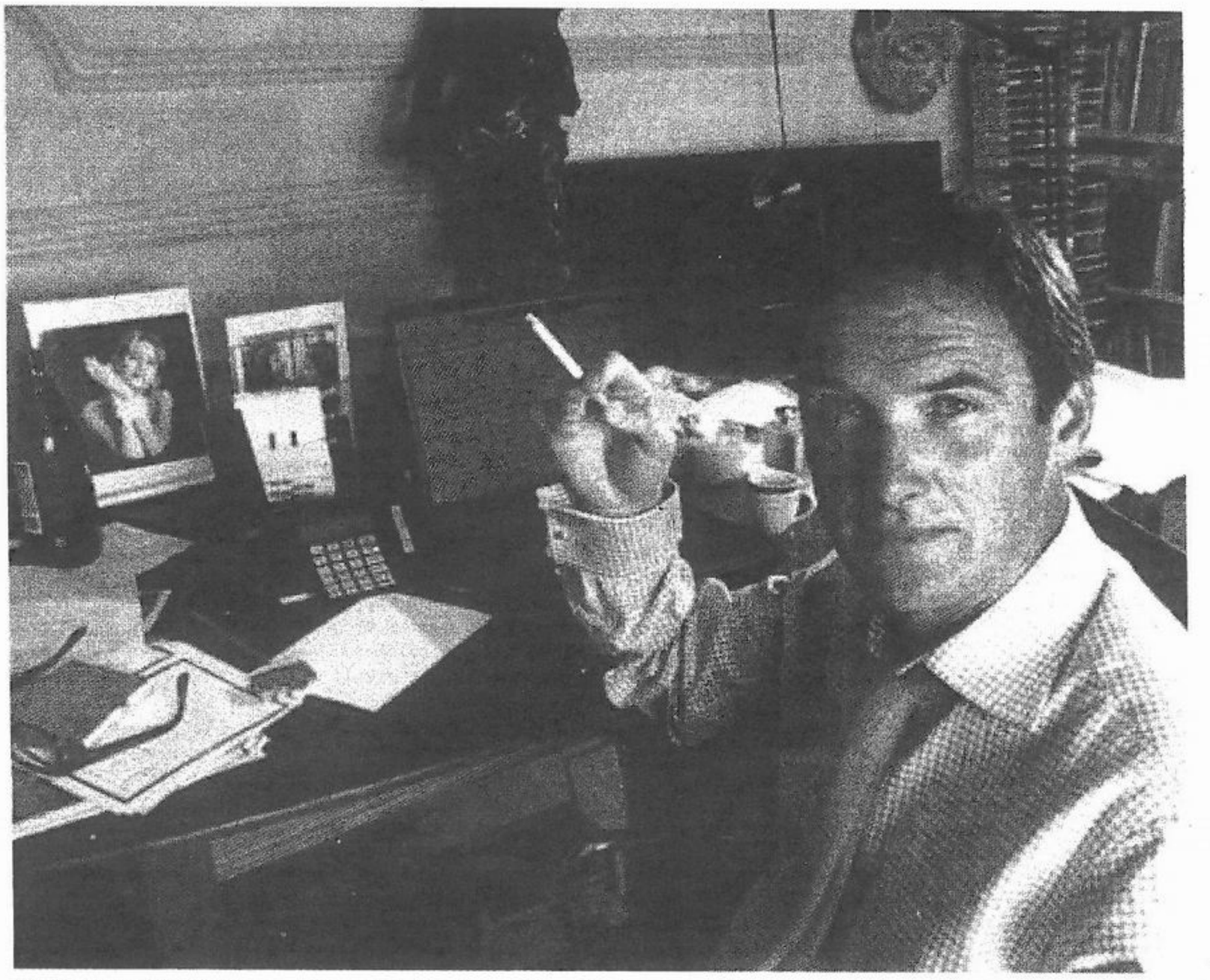
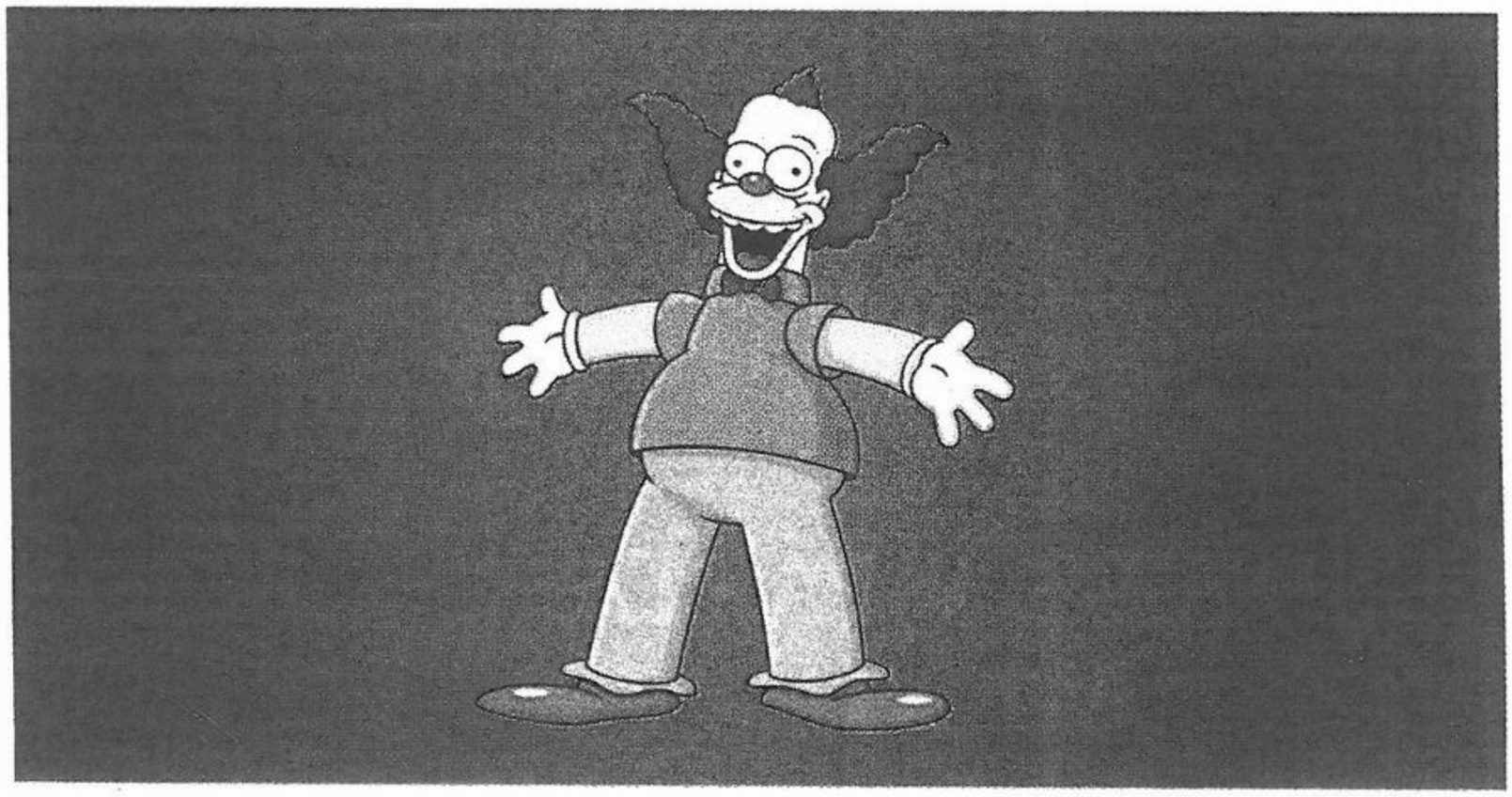


The late Journalist AA Gill presumed there to be three types of limericks: those appropriate for women to hear, those suitable for the company of clergymen, and those that could only be repeated when both were out of earshot.

"The limerick is furtive and mean; You must keep him in close quarantine Or he sneaks to the slums And promptly becomes Disorderly, drunk and obscene"



Krusty The Clown - The limerick has thoroughly penetrated western culture – as testified by repeat mentions in The Simpsons. Krusty the Clown, for example, began one verse with the memorable line "There was a young man called Enis..."

RACHAEL KEALY

The limerick is one of the most treasured forms of poetry, practiced by everybody from medieval bards to literary giants of the 20th century.

It is also resolutely local, both in name and form. According to American writer Brander Matthews, it is "the only fixed form which is actually indigenous to English." It appears that the English language is particularly predisposed to the metre and rhythm of the limerick, due to the structure of its words and their syllables.

What, precisely, it has to do with our city of Limerick, is not yet proven, but there are suggestions, more on which later.

The limerick is defined by historian Matthew Potter as "a five-line poem made up of one couplet and one triplet, with the rhyme scheme AABBA". He goes on to elaborate that "in poetry, a foot is the basic unit of poetic rhythm, and consists of a group of two or three syllables... the limerick uses two (feet): the anapest, consisting of two short syllables followed by a long one (ta-ta-TUM) which is the most common form, and the amphibrach, consisting of a long syllable between two short ones (ta-TUM-ta)."

There are theories which trace the history of the limerick all the

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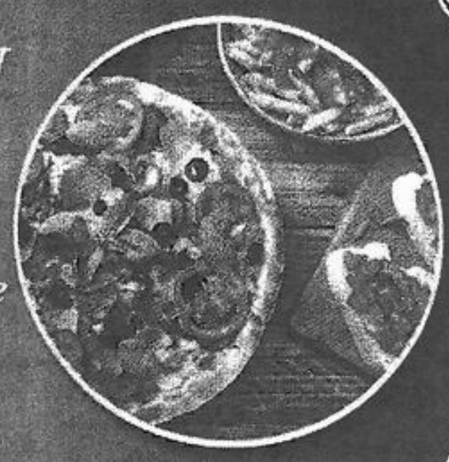

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way back to Ancient Greece. A comedic dramatist, Aristophanes, included the form in his work The Wasps (422BC):

"An amateur, driving too fast / from his car to the roadway was cast; / And a friend kindly said / As he bandaged his head- / Mr Cobbler, stick to your last."

The form could also be found in 14th century Italian writing, and the academic Gershon Legman drew a correlation between the modern limerick and a type of verse found in Latin, particularly in the writing of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). In his analysis of these early references, Mr Potter wisely points out that they do not take the form of a limerick in their own languages. The limerick appears in common use in English in the 13th century, as part of a hugely popular round (a type of harmony, to be sung by four people) written in Wessex, called Sumer is Icumen In. It is also featured in a simple, oft-repeated poem: "The lion is wondrous strong / And full of the wiles of wo; / And whether he pleye / Or take his preye / He cannot do but slo (slay)."

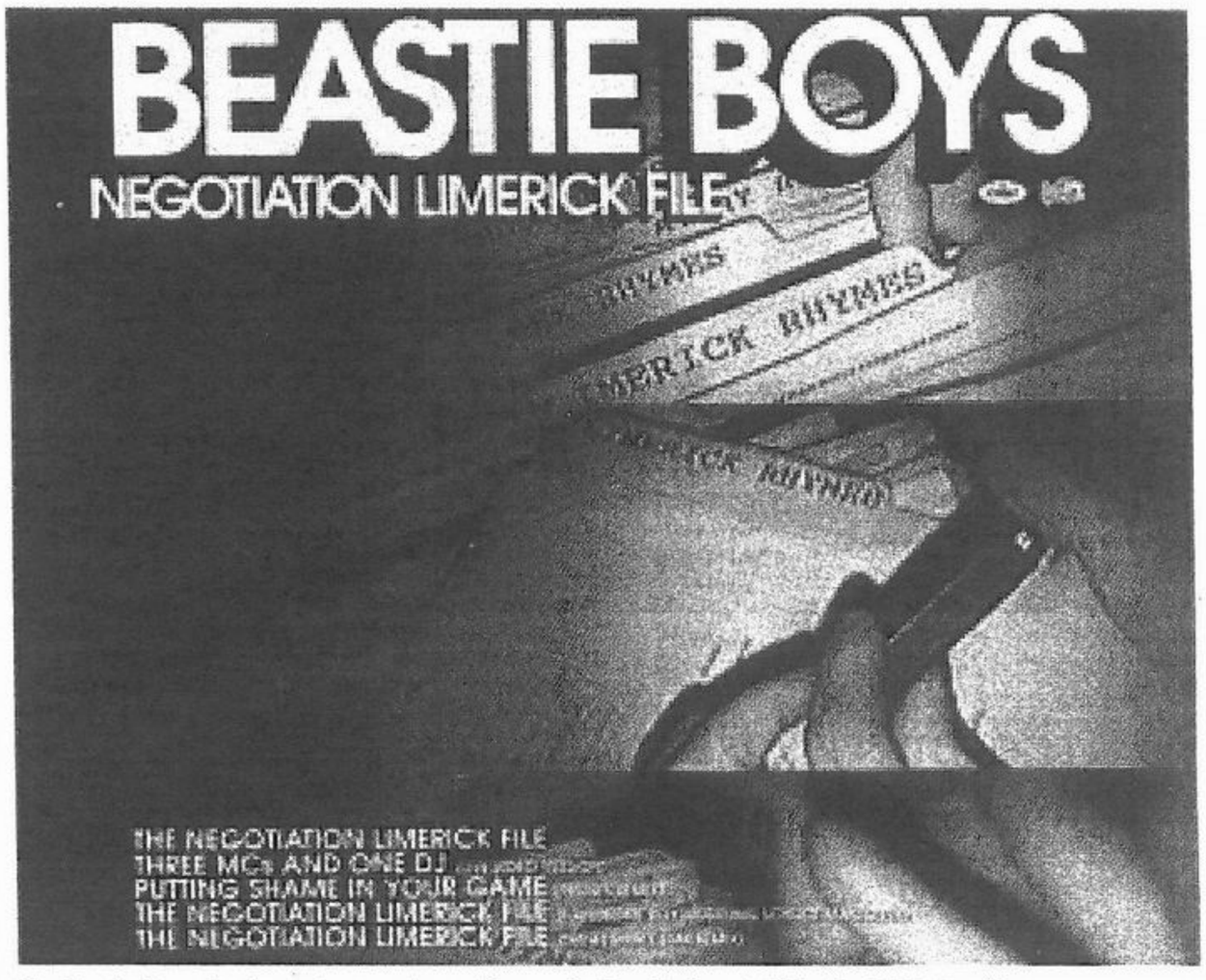
The limerick next emerged as a widespread form of verse in the 16th century, popularised by vagrants who wandered through the English countryside and towns, reciting poetry in exchange for alms. Mr Potter links the poor mental health (real or feigned) of these beggars with London's famous Bethlem Royal Hospital (from which the term 'bedlam' is derived). These travelling bards were known as 'Tom O'Bedlam', also the name given to one of their most famous creations, penned around 1600.

Interestingly, when the form of poetry appeared in Shakespeare's work, it was usually employed by a character undergoing mental health difficulties, or imbibing alcohol. In Hamlet, for example, the song Ophelia sings, in her addled state in Act 4, is a variation of the limerick. As is Iago's drinking song in Othello, and the magic spell chanted by Edgar (disguised as a deranged 'Tom O'Bedlam') in Act 3 of King Lear.

While also used by Shakespeare's contemporaries, the limerick fell out of fashion as a form of coarse entertainment. When it reappeared again a century and a half later, its purpose had been transformed: it was now being used as a basis for nursery rhymes. Many of these are recognisable today, such as Hickory Dickory Dock (1744) and Little Miss Muffet (1805). Publishers at this time were beginning to release books aimed specifically at children, and memorable rhymes of simple construction were popular. In 1820 J. Harris and Son of London published The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women, a collection of humorous limericks designed for children, the first of its kind. One such example is: "There dwelt an Old Woman of Exeter / When visitors came it sore vexed her, / So for fear they should eat, / She lock'd up all the meat; / This stingy Old Woman of Exeter."

Scholars generally agree that it is with limerick-based children's rhymes that the genre of literary nonsense has its roots. Hey Diddle Diddle would be one such example, having been first published in 1765. Its content – a cow jumping over a moon and a dish running away a spoon – doesn't make actual sense, and was probably crafted more for its sound, rhythm and vibrant imagery. The Belgian playwright Emile Cammaerts wrote that nonsense is a "wholly English tradition" and academics surmise that the genre sprang from folk stories and nursery rhymes in the first instance, later growing into a more sophisticated vehicle for parody and satire.

The works of English writers Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear best embody literary nonsense in the Victorian era. Lewis Carroll wrote the much-loved children's books Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, both of which were based in entirely imagined – and regularly nonsensical – worlds. His poem The Jabberwocky is a good example of literary nonsense, mixing familiar rhythms and sentence constructs with made-up words, to jarring effect.



The Beastie Boys who famously rapped an entire song in limerick format, titling the 1999 piece 'The Negotiation Limerick File'.

Edward Lear was a poet, known for crafting The Owl and the Pussycat. Under the nom-de-plume Derry-down-Derry, he also compiled a book of limericks, titled A Book of Nonsense (1846). While never using the word 'limerick', he used the poetic form to play with logic, subverting expectations and delivering humorous distractions. However, his rhymes differed from the modern limerick in that the last line generally repeated the first, providing a more rounded finish, but a less sophisticated construction. Lear initially self-published two editions of the book, but it was his third, in 1861 – containing 112 poems and drawings – which brought him enormous success. From there, popular demand meant it was never out of print, appearing in twenty-four editions in Lear's lifetime alone. Matthew Potter asserts that it was A Book of Nonsense that ushered in the 'golden age' of the limerick.

In 1863 the widely-read satirical magazine Punch hosted a limerick competition. The public responded with a flurry of entries, many of which were considered so obscene that the competition was shut down. Mr Potter points towards the paradox between ostensible Victorian prudery and the public's secret taste for the erotic. The limerick had come full circle, returning to its bawdy roots after a brief foray into the innocent world of children's literature.

> *One common suggestion is that the Maigue Poets invented the rhyme - even though the limerick predated the Croom poets by about 500 years*

An American writer, Morris Bishop summed up the duplicitous nature of the verse: "The limerick is furtive and mean; / You must keep him in close quarantine / Or he sneaks to the slums / And promptly becomes / Disorderly, drunk and obscene". The late Journalist AA Gill presumed there to be three types of limericks: those appropriate for women to hear, those suitable for the company of clergymen, and those that could only be repeated when both were out of earshot. Readers may consult his book, Pour Me A Life, to see an example of the latter type

The failed Punch experiment did not halt the public's appetite for limericks, which developed into a fully-fledged craze by the beginning of the 20th century. Competitions promising vast prizes – including villas and £1,000 in cash – attracted some 10 million entrants. Clean limericks became an accepted literary art form, resulting in major collections by writers such as Langford Reed in Britain (1924) and Carolyn Wells in the United States (1925). The popularity of the form waned by the 1930s, but limerick competitions are still regularly held today.

Of understandable interest to the local reader is the connection between Limerick (the place) and limerick (the poetic form). Matthew Potter has carried out a great deal of research in this regard, examining all the theories. One common suggestion is that the Maigue Poets invented the type of rhyme and that their home – Croom, Co. Limerick – gave rise to its name. Mr Potter makes the obvious point that the form of poetry predated the Croom poets by about 500 years, so they couldn't have invented it, but they may well have contributed to its moniker, which first came into common use at the turn of the 19th century.

Named for the River Maigue, the group flourished in the mid 1700s, gaining prominence as a renowned Cuirt Filiochta, or court of poetry. These gatherings were popular at the time; ad-hoc literary groups met to recite, discuss and analyse poetry, loosely structured as a parody of the law courts. The poets were tough critics too, handing out 'summonses' and 'sentences' in satirical verse to those deemed less talented. They largely met in taverns, entertaining the locals and becoming a key part of Irish culture and rural society. Sean O'Tuama was both a publican and a poet, and together with his great friend, Aindrias MacCraith, ran a court of poetry from his tavern in Croom. Unfortunately, they had a falling out in the 1750s and their highly skilled war of words – conducted in limerick format – became leg-

Johnny Depp's Edward Scissorhands was taught human emotions through medium of a limerick

In 1863 Punch hosted a limerick competition. The public responded with a flurry of entries so obscene the competition was shut down

endary. Historians in later years have suggested that their work was carried back to England by travelling actors, who lent the verse the title 'limerick' after the home of the Maigue poets.

Mr Potter speculates that the attributing of the limerick to the Maigue Poets arose in part from efforts made by William Butler Years and George Sigerson to reclaim the literary form from the English (Edward Lear in particular) during the Irish Literary Revival.

Other theories highlighted by Mr Potter include the use of the word 'limerick' to describe a turn-of-the-century party piece, popular at the time. Each participant had to contribute an original verse, ending with the lines 'Will you come up, come up? Will you come up to Limerick?' It was related to a traditional jig of the same title, known as a slang phrase in the USA meaning 'get to the point'.

A slightly more exotic suggestion involves the Irish Brigade, formed after the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, who served in France for much of the 18th Century. It has been proposed that these soldiers took the format back from France as a type of ballad, adapting it into the limerick we know today.

An altogether more straightforward idea is that Limerick is simply one of the more difficult place names to use in a rhyme. Writer Arthur Deex highlights locations such as Aberystwth, East Wubley, Shrovetide and Greenwich, but the most challenging, he asserted, was the 'Unrhymable Limerick'.

However it came into being, the limerick has now thoroughly penetrated western culture – this is proved, as with all great things in life, by repeat mentions in The Simpsons. Krusty the Clown, for example, began one verse with the memorable line "There was a young man called Enis..." The Beastie Boys famously rapped an entire song in limerick format, titling the 1999 piece 'The Negotiation Limerick File'. It was also a limerick that Vincent Price recited to Johnny Depp's Edward Scissorhands, in an attempt to teach him human emotions, such as humour.

Over the years, the form has been employed by such esteemed writers as Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, Dante Rossetti, George Bernard Shaw, HG Wells, James Joyce and WH Auden, proving that the limerick has high literary credentials, as well as an accessible comedic function.

In Limerick itself, the poetry is regularly celebrated with competitions, publications and festivals. Modern poets have again turned their attention to the form, leading Brian J. Slattery to coin the term 'Lymricist' in 1991 to describe his work as a writer of limericks.

Perhaps, given their close proximity and importance in the history of the limerick, we should leave the last word to the Maigue Poets. Affronted by Sean O'Tuama's demand that he settle his bar tab, Aindrias MacCraith savaged his former friend, using the neat rhyme in which they were experts: "You're a man who sells drink by the splash / Your brandy and ale are a mash / All who drink your bad booze / Their memory lose / And their brains are confused in a hash."