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# LOOKING BACK

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by Michael Kenevane

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I was on holiday in Limerick for Easter 1980 and perchanced to see the March copy of *The Old Limerick Journal* in a shop window in O'Connell Street and bought the book. Articles in the magazine and subsequent issues have brought back many pleasant memories of my old habitat. I was able to stand at the remaining door of No. 30 Denmark Street on Good Friday, April 4, to celebrate my 70th birthday. I wondered about the Poet Ryan. Could he be the Ger Ryan who visited our place in London on or about 1926? Did he have a sister named Stephanie who was a close friend of my family? The excellent article by Desmond O'Grady in the March No. 2 of the *Journal* and the poems by Ryan were enchantment itself.

The memoirs by Joe Malone (December 1979) sparked off many a dream of my early youth in Limerick. His way of describing the people and places brought back events that happened in my time. In the same issue the legend of **Drunken Thady** made great reading. I used to hear my father recite parodies of the legend, and he often referred to **Pencil Flynn**, who apparently was a bookie's clerk. There was a poem about Flynn by Michael Hogan the Bard of Thomond.

The article in the June 1980 edition of the *Journal* by J.F. Walsh about the Theatre Royal was of immense interest to me as I well remember the day of the fire. I was there that afternoon in January 1922. As a boy of twelve and on an errand which took me through Thomas Street, past the Fire Brigade Station, I saw the horses being harnessed to the fire engine. There was no finer sight to see than those animals prancing and raring to go. I overheard the Fire Chief Captain Hogan being asked the whereabouts of the fire and he rushed off through the highways and byeways round by Tait's clock and down into Henry Street where the flames were devouring the old Royal. I stayed there for hours that day watching the conflagration and completely forgot the message, whatever it was that I should have carried out. We used to be taken to the Theatre Royal in school parties - threepence the cost of our admission tickets. At one performance a character came on dressed as Charlie Chaplin and for ages I always thought he was the real Chaplin. A comedian named O'Dea, I think, sang a song which has never left my mind all these years. The words were "Carry your family round on Sunday morning but never take the horse-shoe from the door". Another well known comic in those days was Mike Nono; advance posters said of him, 'You know, I know, We all know Nono!' The Musical Seymours were also a very pleasant act performed by the father, mother and their five children playing various instruments.

Duffy's Circus whenever it came to town was a further exciting event for us small boys and to be taken there was a treat out of this world.

The regattas held by the Limerick boat clubs provided great entertainment. The greasy pole competitions and tub races gave us endless enjoyment. A fun fair I remember, Donnellys, with chair-o-planes, hobby horses and the old swing boats brought excitement beyond recall. Of course there were also some very fine cinemas throughout the city. I well remember sitting through hours of **Intolerance** at the first of our super cinemas, the Grand Central. On Saint Stephen's night there was a good selection of plays by amateur groups at St. Michael's or St. John's Temperance halls. Con-na-Shaughraun and The Colleen Bawn were good old regulars, the latter with its own local hero, Myles-na-gCopaleen, and villain, Danny Mann. So there was no shortage of worthwhile entertainment in the old days.

Reading about the various eccentric people in the December 1980 issue by Thomas Ryan reminded me of the characters that haunted the streets in my time. There was a fellow known as 'Horawarra' who carried a hefty ashplant and you had to be quick at your getaway if you gave him a "rise". Another was called 'Lick-the-Bowl' who was said to have been a bank

manager. There was a man named Armstrong who would pass by our swimming place at the Shannon Fields and ask one of the boys to fill his hat with water from the river. When the hat was filled he would promptly place it on his head much to the amusement of all. There was Steve Mack, a bowler-hatted gent who called himself a "mock toff" and used to stand outside the Franciscan Church. There was a yarn about him which said that when asked why he did not go into the church instead of standing outside during a service he replied: "I am not going in there again because the last time I did they were all singing 'Steve Mack, You're Late' and one does not need much imagination to know what hymn the congregation was really singing.

I served on the altar at the Franciscan's for about seven years, leaving in 1926 when my family moved to London. A prominent priest there was Father Bonaventure, and when he died there was a huge funeral from the church to Saint Laurence's Cemetery. As one of the altar boys heading the funeral with a lighted candle, some sort of fame was bestowed on me because my candle stayed alight all the way. I remember the names of several of the altar boys: there was Vinny Coughlan, the three O'Brien brothers, whose family owned the Standard Stores in Patrick Street, three lads from Thomondgate, a McInerney and two brothers whose surname escapes me but George and Willie were their Christian names and their father worked in the Custom House. There was a boy with the grand name of Breffini O'Rourke. One year we went to Athlone on a Franciscan Centenary celebration - a long and exciting journey in those days. Annually we had a party with the Dominican altar boys at their church and we reciprocated with a similar compliment; these were very good times. I wonder if they still have such happy gatherings? Christmas was a time of delight at the Franciscan's midnight Mass. The choir in particular with the Taylors always in great voice, and the beautiful rendering of the **Adeste Fideles** on his violin by Paul Bernard. All the altar boys had a lively time helping to prepare the decorations in the church for the Christmas services. There was a considerable feat involved in getting ivy all round the frame of the large picture above the altar. Whatever happened to that lovely picture?

If the eyes of any contemporaries fall on these *Journal* articles of mine perhaps they will enjoy a few moments of reverie and recall their own experiences of past years. It would be so delightful to read some more tales from such citizens. Surely many can recall the good - and not so good - days of long ago in our native city before such events are lost forever.

During my holiday at Easter 1980 it was not difficult to notice the progress apparent in the commercial life of the city. Another vacation was enjoyed by my family and myself in June 1970, so that I was able to make a comparison and to note the numerous developments for the better in the intervening decade. The business life of the city has greatly expanded - there are many more banks, investment houses, insurance offices and supermarkets, not to mention a hypermarket seen in Clare Street. The new office building, Sarsfield House, in Francis Street is as modern as they come. The new Civic Centre to be erected below Bank Place should further enhance that part of the city centre. Despite some shortcomings in planning and design, praise must be given to the Corporation and City Fathers for their labours on behalf of the citizens and for the steady progress in housing, street cleaning and lighting, and for all the other contributions that have been made to preserving and improving the old city.