

The Market House

by Moira Jennings

The Market House is a large stone building which stands in Mungret Street. It forms part of the old corn market; the street that runs down the right hand wall of the market is called Corn Market Row. In former days, that part of the city was divided in two - The Irish Town and the English Town. Mungret Street was the entrance to the Irish Town. At the turn of the century this district was a big business centre, and there were few private dwelling houses there. The shop-keepers lived overhead their premises; the stall-holders had houses in other districts.

The Market House belonged to Peter McCormack, one of three brothers who went to America. He returned to marry and settle down in Mungret Street, and he had a bookshop and stationery, the only one of its kind in Limerick at the time. He was also a poet, and he spent most of his days going around the country buying up books. His nights he spent with Michael Hogan and other poets of the period and he would lend them books they could not afford to buy. He had very rare, old books such as **The Cabinet of Irish Literature** and **The History of the Irish Nation**.

The big grey house which still stands by the market belonged to P.J. Hurley. He was a wool, hay and straw merchant and was very wealthy, as those were the days of horse and traps and hansom cabs. This firm had two shops in Mungret Street. There was also a branch of O'Mara's Bacon Store there. The roads and streets were all cobble-stoned.

There was a vast contrast between these shops and small slum dwellings which ran behind Mungret Street almost to the fashionable John's Square. These little houses were kept as well as the poor people of the day could keep them but they would have provided material for Charles Dickens if he had seen them. This district was called Palmerstown after the Prime Minister of Britain at that time, Viscount Palmerston.

The Market House (which had several underground passages) and Feeney's house were the oldest buildings in the street; Feeney's house was on the opposite end of the market and was a big clothes shop. There were several underground passages in Feeney's house, which were said to have been used by Patrick Sarsfield during the sieges of 1690-'91. Gerald Griffin refers to those houses in his book **The Collegians**; and there are many legends in connection with them. Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, also refers to them in his poems **The Lays and Legends of Thomond**.

But it was another Limerick poet, John Francis O'Donnell who immortalised the market-place and the streets around it in one of his best poems, **Limerick Town**. O'Donnell, who was born and reared in this part of the city, vividly captured the colour and bustle of the market and the people who came there to buy and sell their wares:

**Here I've got you, Philip Desmond, standing in the market-place,
'Mid the farmers and the corn sacks, and the hay in either space,
Near the fruit stalls, and the women knitting socks and selling lace.**

**There is High Street up the hillside, twenty shops on either side,
Queer, old-fashioned, dusky High Street, here so narrow, there so wide,
Whips and harness, saddles, signboards, hanging out in quiet pride.**

Many a night from race and market down this street six brothers strode,



The Market House; from a drawing by Michael Healy.

**Finer, blighter, truer fellows never barred a country road.
Shouting, wheeling, fighting, scorning watchman's law
and borough code.**

**Rolled the wagons, swore than carters, outside in the crowded street,
Horses reared and cattle stumbled, dogs barked high
from loads of wheat;
But inside the room was pleasant, and the air with thyme
was sweet.**

The market itself in those days was a fascinating place. It had all gas lamps. The Christmas market would start at 4 a.m., and the fowl were not prepared: they were all sold live. There were old ladies who would sit and kill and pluck the fowl as they were bought. Business was carried on well into the late evening; then the lamp-lighter would come and put out the lights. There was also night watchmen who would call out the hours through the night.

There is such a lot more that one could say about this old Limerick district but it would need a longer article. I cannot leave Mungret Street without going down into the Irish Town and on to the Mall; here stood the "National Theatre". This was more of a Victorian music hall and was called "The Gaff". I do not remember it but I cut my teeth on stories and plays which were performed there. There was only one other theatre, the Theatre Royal in Henry Street; this catered for the opera lovers and gentry. I believe the latter would often visit "The Gaff" in disguise, because of the great quality of the plays performed there.

The Market House is one of the few houses still standing in the street. Feeney's was pulled down in 1940 to make way for the new housing estate which is built where Palmerstown was.