

MICK QUILLIGAN'S PUB

CITY OF LIMERICK

by Finbarr Crowe



When I first heard that Mick Quilligan was dead I felt dejected. It was not that I could have claimed him as a friend, for Mick Quilligan kept his professional distance from all his customers. Nor was it that his bountifulness at Christmas or at other occasions would be sadly missed. That was not his way. But I knew that a little part of the old world was now gone. His pleasant pub, with its unique character, would now be no more. I would not experience the likes of it again.

There are those who would argue that a pub is just a pub, and that the building and fittings would pass into other hands (which they did). His customers, they said, would still be served, so why all the fuss? But that is to miss the point. Mick Quilligan was the pub. His spirit animated the premises and his idiosyncratic ways gave rise to the many stories, true and apocryphal, that made him a legend. Who could replace all that?

Mick Quilligan's pub stood at the corner of Lock Quay and Broad Street and was one of the twin temptations (Clohessey's across the road was the other) that confronted the weary workers as they made their way home through the Irishtown after a tiring day. Their homes across the Abbey River in the 'Parish' may not have been far away but that journey over the hump of Baal's Bridge could best be taken with a refreshing pint from Quilligan's or Clohessey's under the belt. And their humour at the tea-table would have been all the better for that.

And Mick Quilligan's pub was certainly unique. At a time when Limerick's vintners were falling over one another in pandering to their customers with plush carpets and upholstered seats, Mick stood firm. It was not in his nature to compete for custom. And, besides, the sheer homeliness of his old world hostelry, along with his competitive drink prices would always ensure for him a plentiful quota of clients. The Vintner's Federation, on a few occasions, tried to get Mick to fall into line but their ambassadors were always given the same abrupt message: the Federation might run the city but Mick Quilligan ran *his* pub. And his customers loved him for it. Wooden seats and bare floorboards are more than acceptable when the pint is a few pence cheaper.

But the attraction of Quilligan's went far beyond that. A great wooden counter, that ran almost the whole length of the pub, divided the premises



The side entrance of Quilligan's, Lock Quay.

into agreeable proportions. A huge mirror, which dominated the wall behind the counter, pleasantly exaggerated the size of the bar. The bare wooden seats that fringed the wall were comfortable, if not luxurious, and the tables that consisted of wooden tops on Singer sewing-machine stands were cleverly contrived. A glass case that consisted of three stuffed otters contrasted sharply with another case that contained a model of an old Irish cottage. Bric-a-brac littered the shelves behind the bar and added to the quaint

ambience of the premises. But it was the gas-lights that, in my view, really set Quilligan's apart. Like a remnant of the Victorian past, they hung obtrusively from a high ceiling and, though they were only used in emergencies, they typified the old world atmosphere of the pub.

The interior of the premises was divided by a wooden partition and the smaller and less popular area (at the Broad Street end of the pub) became known as the 'Officers' Quarters'. This end of the bar was frequented mainly

by those who had business of a confidential nature to discuss or in some cases by those who preferred anonymity in their bibulous pursuits. A regular customer would sometimes avail of this inner sanctum, as a sort of refuge when depleted financial circumstances made the meeting with other regulars an embarrassing affair. In the quietness of this recess pints could be 'nursed' at a pace that was consistent with the unhealthy state of ones pocket. However, should his presence have been discovered, he would be ragged for getting above himself and for having notions beyond his station. He would pay dearly indeed for his visit to the 'Officers' Quarters'.

A great cast iron stove, whose origins were lost in the mists of antiquity, dominated the popular end of the pub. Its modest appetite was fed by coal and coke and Mick never stinted in this regard. On cold winter nights its warm glow spread over the whole bar and added immeasurably to the cosiness that permeated the premises. It was easy on these occasions to pin-point the novice drinkers. They invariably sat too near the stove, congratulating themselves for having secured a warm berth on a cold night. However, the 'old dogs' knew only too well of the soporific effects of a heat-and-porter cocktail. The drinker's apprenticeship is a long and arduous one!

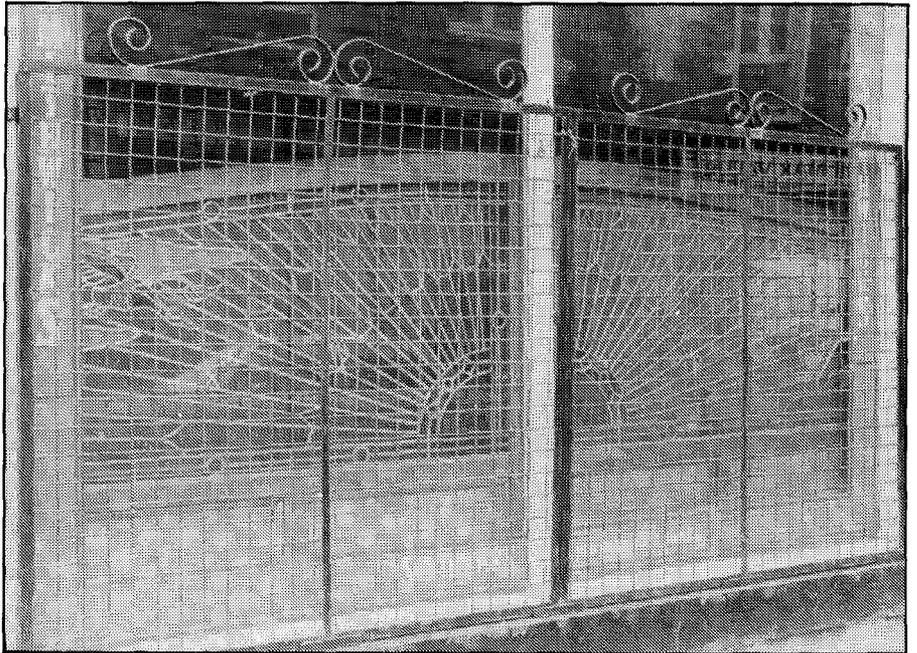
On the 1st of May, irrespective of the weather, the stove, in a manner of speaking, was put out to grass, Mick closed off all the dampers and the front of it was stuffed with red bill-posters to give the appearance of least of heat. It wouldn't be lit again until the 1st of October.

This same stove proved to be the downfall of one of Mick's clients. It happened one night that Mick left the bar for a few minutes to attend to some business upstairs. One of his customers availed of Mick's absence to amuse his fellow drinkers by setting fire to the papers in the stove. Unfortunately, for him the dampers, as I have previously explained, were all closed and soon a thick smoke billowed through the packed bar. Choking customers, desperately clutching their drinking glasses, quickly spilled out on to Lock Quay and Broad Street, causing quite a stir in the locality. They were soon joined by a distraught Mick Quilligan who thought that his bar was on fire. However, he was soon made aware of the real cause of the commotion. Doors, windows and dampers were hastily opened and soon order was restored to the now well-ventilated pub. The culprit made little effort to hide his guilt, explaining to the proprietor that it had all been a harmless prank. But Mick Quilligan was never one to mix frivolities and business. "You're barred!" he roared in a rare outburst of anger, while promptly adding "for life!".

Many people would remember Quilligan's for the music. I do not mean to imply that it was a singing pub – though Mick had condescend to allow singing on a Saturday night – but the proprietor was able to pipe music from his living quarters upstairs down into the bar and it was obvious that he had gauged the musical tastes of his customers very well. Or perhaps that is putting the cart before the horse, for Mick Quilligan played music like the purring cat to please himself. It would probably be more correct to say that the music was partially responsible for

song. "Oh, that was the Count himself", he would answer, grinning like the cook-house cat, "Didn't you recognise him?" The Pope may very well have honoured McCormack with a title but Mick Quilligan, in a manner of speaking, canonised him.

On Saturday nights, as I have said, Mick allowed singing in his bar and I suppose his own presence did impose a certain conservatism on the proceedings. The songs were generally of a semi-classical form and nothing of a bawdy nature was allowed. One could not have imagined Mick Quilligan



Stained glass window at Quilligan's, Broad Street.

attracting the type of customer that frequented the bar. I can still recall those cold winter nights when the icy waters of the Abbey River roared, as if in agony, under the great arch of Baal's Bridge. A bitter wind, blowing down Lock Quay, snapped at the very heels of those intrepid drinkers who hurried to seek refuge in Mick's pub. But, once inside, it was easy to forget the harshness of a winter's night. In the warming glow that radiated through the bar, the cares and troubles of the outside world seemed to evaporate as the mind relaxed in the mellow atmosphere. In this porter-induced tranquility, it was easy to enter into the world of Mick Quilligan's music; to march with Peter Dawson 'On the Road to Mandalay' or to spend a few happy moments by 'Bendemeer's Stream' with the American baritone, John Charles Thomas. Gigli, Caruso, Bjorling, Tibbett, Crooks, Nash, and even Bing Crosby were other singers I remember from those days. But Mick had a special spot in his heart for John McCormack. His records were heard on a regular basis in the bar and Mick liked nothing better than to be asked who had sung such-and-such a

tolerating the raucousness of music hall entertainment. His musical preferences were far too refined for that.

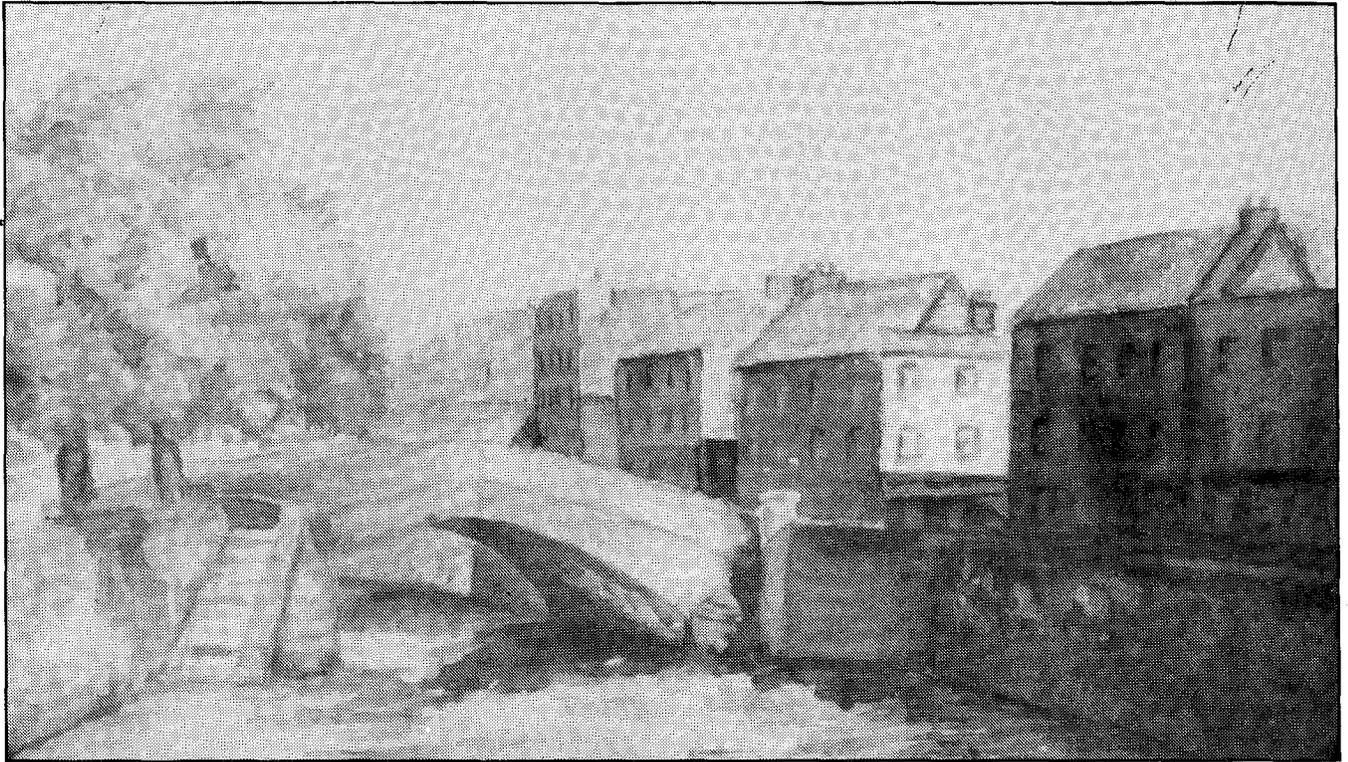
I recall an old gentleman of rather dishevelled appearance who used to come into the pub now and again. He would sing, appropriately enough, some of the songs of 'The Street Singer', Arthur Tracey. Then he would take off his cap and collect from the customers. Some would look apprehensively at the proprietor fearing that at any minute he might eject the poor fellow. They need not have worried. Mick knew him as a decent sort of fellow who had fallen on hard times, "and if he can make a few bob good luck to him".

Mick may have been lenient enough to allow singing on some occasions but he was like the stern school-master when it came to 'time'. He applied the 11 o'clock closing very rigidly and if he had served a drink five minutes before closing 'twould have astounded his patrons. Even during the summer, when closing was extended to 11.30 p.m. Mick applied his own interpretation of the rules. This extra 30 minutes of drinking time was gradually phased

in and it would be late summer before his customers received the full benefit of the extension. Indeed, I can clearly recall one occasion during the first week of the summer closing time when Mick refused one of his customers a drink at five minutes past eleven, telling him that he had "left his call a little late".

tant to leave the premises as Mick called 'time'. More perplexingly, Mick did not seem to be unduly perturbed. When all except these customers had departed, the premises were locked and the lights put out. Some of those who had departed earlier were greatly mystified by these unprecedented happenings and they waited on Baal's

for Mason's (now the Tivoli bar) which was affectionately known as 'The Lodge'. Here Tom O'Mahony took charge of the sing-song and the 'exiles' were treated to a feast of entertainment. Artistes such as Michael ('Mull') Moloney, with his superb rendition of 'Buddy Can You Spare A Dime', contributed to the very high standard of



Baal's Bridge, Abbey River and Quilligan's Pub, from a watercolour by Dorothy Stewart.

When it comes to encouraging customers off the premises publicans have their own individual styles. Some shout, some open windows and doors, some hit glasses off the table and I even heard of one who used to bang a sweeping brush on the counter. Mick Quilligan, of course, was not to be outdone. He would stand by his door scraping a set of large keys along a pane of frosted glass, punctuating the odd house with bursts of verbal encouragements. This grinding cacophony grated on the musical ears of the customers and all thoughts of drinks were quickly dispatched and the departure of the customers looked more like a hurried evacuation than an orderly leaving. I never heard of Mick Quilligan being caught by the Guards.

It was obvious to all, then, that the Irishtown publican was not one to overdo the opening hours and, when it came to Good Friday, there was absolutely no hope of his customers being facilitated on the premises. Indeed, there were many who held that Mick was stretching a point by opening on Holy Thursday, let alone on Good Friday. However, he did open, and, on one Holy Thursday night it was noticed that a group of his customers seemed reluc-

Bridge to satisfy their curiosity. Eventually Mick's hall door was opened, eyes glanced furtively up and down Lock Quay and out came the five customers with a box-cart which they seemed intent on guarding with their lives. They shielded it from view as they quickly made their way over Baal's Bridge before disappearing from sight somewhere along the Mall. Then the speculation started. Some said that the cart contained a colleague of theirs who had passed out from drink. Others said that they might have kidnapped Mick Quilligan (he was reputed to be very wealthy). There were even those who said that they were members of the IRA and that Mick had been storing guns for them! The truth, though a little less exciting, was far more intoxicating. The group, who had purchased a barrel of porter from Mick, had plans to set up their own shebeen in a house at the back of the Mall on Good Friday. There are obviously some Limerick people who have their own version of the Stations of the Cross!

On Sunday nights, Quilligan's was closed at an early hour. Mick took a break from the business and his patrons had to seek refuge in the other hostelrys in Broad Street. Most settled

music-hall festivity. It was certainly adequate compensation for those victims of the Great Sunday Night Lock-Out. And the grand finale nearly always brought the house down. The master of ceremonies, Tom O'Mahony, adopting a military bearing, strutted up and down the bar with a walking stick held like a rifle. To the delight of his audience, he would burst into that martial air, 'Goodbye Dolly Gray', with the whole bar joining in the chorus. It was always sung with great fervour and rekindled for some of the older drinkers memories of the Great War. The 'Munsters', once more, were alive and well and revelling in Mason's! For the rest of the week it was back to Quilligan's, to the more sedate world of John McCormack.

The public house in Ireland has always been a great forum for discussion and many a publican has had to intervene in a debate to restore order in a dangerously overheated situation. It is a place where the bombast can indulge himself, while yet the man in the street can have his say. The humble pub is truly the poor man's parliament. Quilligan's, of course, was no exception. Whether the subject was politics,

religion or sport, the intensity of debate on some occasions was sure to bring the ever watchful proprietor on the scene with a timely scowl that quickly restored harmony. During the winter months, rugby was the sporting topic dearest to the hearts of most of his patrons and one had to be superbly fit in rugby lore to match strides with those two Garryowen stalwarts, 'Mull' Moloney and the late Billy Reeves. There were others there, of course, equally versed in the intricacies of the game, and, after an international match, one was sure to get a detailed analysis of the play, a critical assessment of the refereeing, and a pub-selection for the next international that included, at least, half-a-dozen Limerick players.

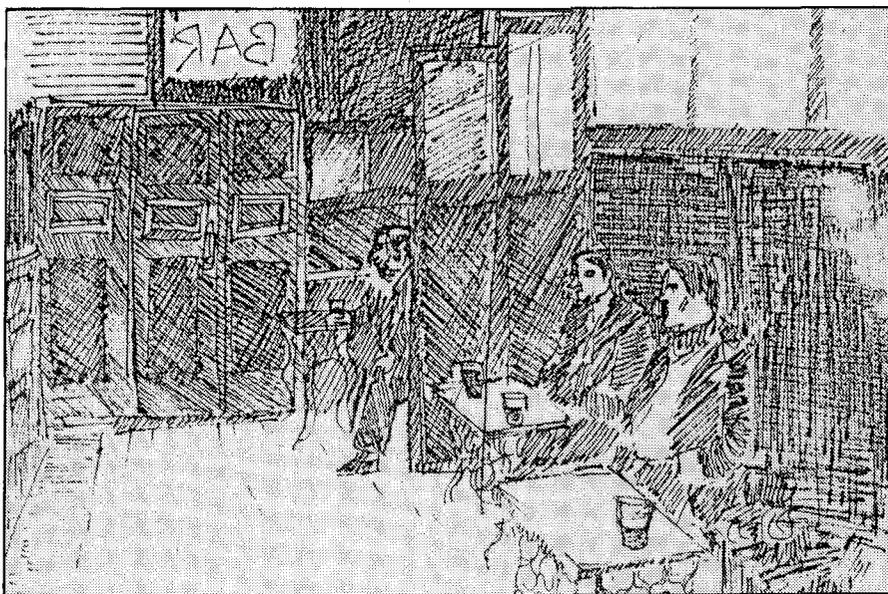
In the local scene, the rivalry between Garryowen and Shannon found expression in Quilligan's pub, as most of his patrons identified with one or other of their teams. The physical exchanges between these teams on a Saturday afternoon in Thomond Park often faded into insignificance compared with the verbal exchanges that took place between their supporters in Quilligan's on a Friday night. It was all good-humoured and sportsmanlike, of course, for Mick Quilligan would not have had it otherwise. The customers knew only too well that Mick was not slow to give marching orders to anyone who transgressed his rules. Nevertheless, within the established code, crooked passes were thrown about, awkward balls were fielded and certain scores were often upset by judicious verbal tackles. One Friday night, on the eve of a Garryowen-Shannon cup-tie, the usual banter was going on in the pub between the rival supporters. The Garryowen clients accused Shannon of fielding a team of eight forwards and seven apprentices, while the Shannon patrons argued that Garryowen was now a team of 'blow-in' bank clerks. As the 'hostilities' intensified, a Shannon supporter excused himself and said that he had to go away. His Garryowen adversary was quick to pounce on the opportunity offered. He accused the Shannon man of being cowardly and of running away from the fray. "And where would you be going anyway", he added "at 9 o'clock on a Friday night!" A partial hush descended as all eyes turned on the Shannon man. "I'm going to the railway station", he replied calmly, "to welcome the Garryowen team to Limerick!" However, the Garryowen man had the last laugh, for his team won the tie on the following day.

In the 1950s, many of Mick Quilligan's customers were forced, like thousands of others, to take the emigrants' boat to England. As they toiled in that country, their thoughts must constantly have turned to the comradeship they had known in the homely atmosphere of the Irishtown pub. There were 'Irish pubs' of course in England but it

was not the same. There was only one place to get a proper pint of Guinness and that, they felt, was in Quilligan's. The pint of Mackeson and the glass of bitter only heightened their sense of alienation: they were exiles and these insipid drinks merely confirmed that fact. When they did return at Christmas they visited their old haunt, delighting in renewing past acquaintances and recalling with relish the old days. It was like a recharging of their batteries and it gave them memories to sustain them in some of their darker moments across the channel.

'whip' for the rest of the week but on Friday night he has the freedom of the floor. And that sense of freedom enhanced his self-respect. With money in his pocket and a glass in his hand, he could challenge the world. Porter flowed, glasses clinked, and plumes of tobacco smoke rose, like incense, in the air. Quilligan's was the centre of the world.

But the day came when the centre could not hold and that world fell apart. The untimely death of Mick Quilligan was received with dismay by all his regulars. The pub was locked and his cus-



A drawing by Kate Hennessy of the interior of Quilligan's, with the 'Officers' Quarters in the background.

I recall a story of one such emigrant whose memories now of the pub must surely be somewhat mixed. He had been a staunch customer of Quilligan's along with his brother, before fortune forced him to seek his living in England. He worked long and hard in that country and it was 20 years before he returned home. On his first night in Limerick, he went with his brother to visit the pub of his memories. The night started well for them: Quilligan's porter was up to its usual high standard, and a few half-ones 'from the wood' put them in excellent form. As usual on such occasions, they indulged in reminiscing about the past. As Mick passed down the bar the brother beckoned to him. "Paddy was just telling me here", he said nostalgically, "that 'tis all of 20 years since he set foot inside your pub". The barman stared impassively, "Of course", he replied, rather dryly, "you know we don't send for anyone". I never heard afterwards if they came back on the second night.

Friday night was always a lively night in Quilligan's. The 'parliament' was in session and the most disparate of subjects got an airing. The burden of a week's work was soon forgotten in the cut and thrust of animated debate. A customer might be under the boss's

tomers dispersed to seek new habitats in the adjoining locality. Many, however, found it difficult to adjust to the wave of modernisation that had submerged the individuality of most other pubs. Pool tables and pub-grub were anathema to them. Television they could not abide. They longed for another Quilligan's, for the music, the conversation, the camaraderie. They may as well have searched for the Holy Grail for Quilligan's was unique. There was no other.

The premises was subsequently bought by Jack Hassett who, with his wife Peggy, did much to preserve the former spirit of the pub. It then passed onto the hands of John Costelloe who, I am told, has worked very hard to develop the business and now caters for a large clientele. In a recent visit to the premises, I was surprised to see how little the old place had changed. The stove is gone, it is true, but it has been replaced by a great open fire which is a distinct asset to any pub. In a sop to the egalitarian forces of modern society, the 'Officers' Quarters', too, have disappeared. Prominent in the corner, however, a great colour T.V. set spewed out its daily diet of bland entertainment. Mick Quilligan, I mused, is truly dead.