

*"The stained glass ... window depicted ... a flying duck against a sun-burst".*

# MICK QUILLIGAN'S

*by Kevin Hannan*



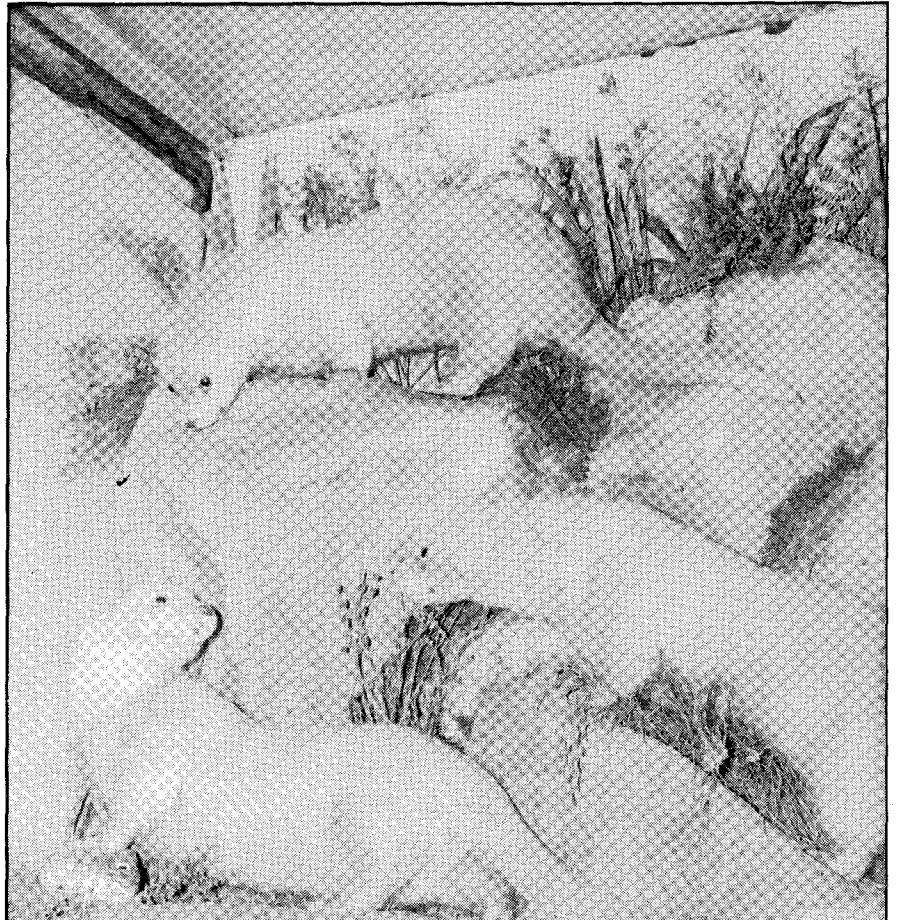
Entering Mick Quilligan's bar was just like stepping into a time-tunnel. To a stranger with a little imagination, it must have been a dramatic experience, but the 'regulars' took it for granted. They accepted the high, pitch-pine counter and the unscrubbed wooden floor as special features of their favourite groggery – not to mention the pot-bellied stove with its tiny firebox that contained only a mugful of coke, and produced a far greater number of BTUs than the tiny fuel content would suggest. When the stove was not in action they were proud of Mick's ingenuity in creating the illusion of a warm fire by inserting a piece of red fluorescent paper that looked just like glowing coke. This illusion had a certain reality that might be seen in the number of patrons that moved closer to the stove when the atmosphere was a little chilled.

One of Mick's many idiosyncrasies was his stringency. Though not ungenerous, he hated extravagance and waste and was totally averse to generating more heat and providing more light than was necessary. Thus the atmosphere savoured a kind of spartan flavour that was indescribably appealing.

Every aspect of the institution was a source of pride and satisfaction to Mick. The 'diddies' that were interspersed with the spirit bottles on the bar shelves were just as inert and long suffering as the 'Little Toy Dog': in all my time as a customer there I never saw them moved; and the brilliant tableau of young otters that looked so full of animation in their glass case appeared as if their playful antics were frozen in the lens of a high speed cam-

era. His pride and joy was the rural scene, thatched cottages, fields and trees, in their glass case at counter level in the bar. Mick was always well pleased to hear a customer's favourable remarks on this miniature coun-

tryside, and was ever ready with: "I made that in my spare time". No doubt this kept him in mind of his youthful excursions to the countryside around the city, particularly Corbally, before he became all but imprisoned in his public



*'... the brilliant tableau of young otters'.*



*Dark clouds gather over Quilligan's.*

house.

His paintings of Plassey and Corbally Mills and old Park Bridge are splendid momentoes of scenes that have passed, and his photograph of the Canal Harbour in its palmy days is a treasure beyond price.

All through the last century, and well into the present one, many of the city pubs dealt in groceries, and usually that part of the bar nearest the front door was partitioned off for this purpose. In Quilligan's, after the grocery business ceased, this section was adapted to serve as a more select part of the premises. This plan worked very well, so much so that after some time the section was exalted to the status of 'Officers' Quarters' – a name coined derisively by patrons of the public bar who regarded the 'officers' as bigots who were using the partition as a social cleavage between the two parts of the premises. I doubt if there was any truth in this assertion, although there were some 'officers' who would never drink in the bar.

The 'Officers' Quarters' were furnished with an upholstered bench seat, known as the 'West Clare' because of the similarity of the upholstery to that of the better class West Clare railway coaches – some said the seat was actually from a West Clare coach!

The tiny snug looked as if it were grudgingly allowed to conform to an age old convention. It was small – so small that only those who desired perfect privacy would endure the almost

totally cooped up and cramped conditions and the all too narrow bench seat.

Heating of the 'quarters' and the snug was provided by a small town gas heater – fixed high on the wall, as the partition effectively cut off any heat that might be otherwise perceptible so far from the pot-bellied stove.

Two gas-lamps, also connected with the town gas, hung from the ceiling in readiness for any disruption in the electricity supply. On such occasions, Mick was very proud of his foresight in maintaining lamps that were in position before he was born.

Mick kept a good house, and only those who were well behaved would be served. None of the well established disreputables, or anyone that looked like them, had the remotest hope of consideration. Although only of middle height, and suffering from varicose veins, Mick experienced little difficulty in ejecting the most noisome and pugnacious thugs. On these occasions he displayed great tact and diplomacy but never yielded to pressure. On one occasion a hefty wayfarer ambled in to the Officers' Quarters and settled himself down on the 'West Clare' for a snooze; Mick came quickly on the scene and, seeing that this was an occasion for immediate action, lifted the recumbent pilgrim on to the footpath outside before he realised he was being transferred from one element to another.

Mick was a man of great courage and self-control, although I have a notion

that the memory of his youthful prowess as an amateur boxer bolstered up his confidence to the last.

He was a confirmed bachelor and never seemed to take the slightest interest in women: he looked on them as Scotus does, from his corner of the five pound note. Yet, the wives and girlfriends of some of his regulars were accommodated on the rare occasions that they elected to share the rigours of a genuine old-world ale house with their menfolk; but their patronage was not acknowledged by a smile of favour or a word of encouragement from the proprietor, nor from the sight of the long unscrubbed floor and the smoke begrimed once-white ceiling – not to mention the want of a ladies' toilet, although the womenfolk of esteemed customers were allowed to use the private bathroom upstairs.

Mick never kept a debtor's ledger – a 'tick-book' – for he had no debtors. On very rare occasions he was known to oblige a steady customer who found himself temporarily short of the price of a drink, but he was no way free with his credit. On a Friday night, a few years ago, a casual customer – not so much a regular – called Mick aside and asked him for 5 pints 'until the morning', as four friends from Dublin had joined him unexpectedly and he hadn't enough money on him to pay for the round. Mick, noting that it was almost closing time, replied: "If you were Rockefeller himself, I wouldn't give you a drink at this hour of the night". The

fuming customer, left in his embarrassment, decided to come in on the following morning and teach the publican a lesson. He arrived in the Officers' Quarters at about mid-day and called for a pint of stout. Mick took little notice, as he was engaged in a conversation with a customer: he filled the pint, however, and at the same time kept up the conversation. The disgruntled customer placed a one hundred pound note on the counter to pay for the pint and waited for the bombshell – but there was none. While still keeping up his conversation, Mick took up the banknote as if it were a pound note and,

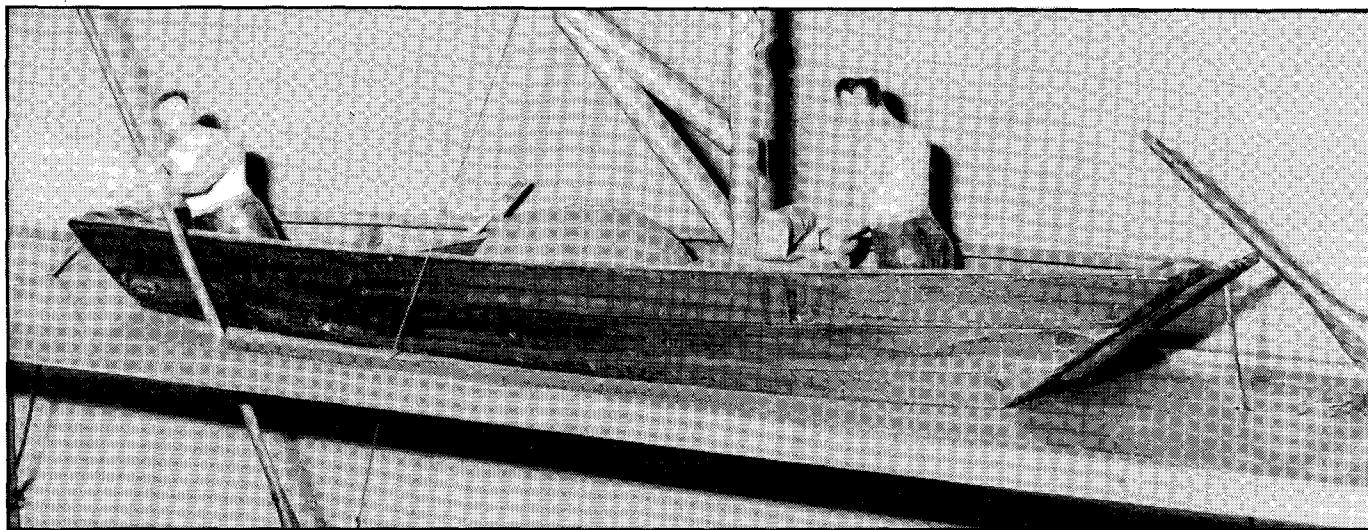
knocked down".

"Well", said Mick, without batting an eyelid, "leave me your name and address and I'll drop you a line a few days before I'm thrown out on the road. I'll tell the demolition gang to be careful not to damage the counter, or, better still, you could take it the day before the place is due to be knocked". "Oh, thank you very much, Mr. Quilligan, and I'll say a prayer for you", said the man from Sixmilebridge, at the same time writing his name and address on a scrap of paper.

Mick saw great humour in this incident and spoke about it for months

Street window was the work of a local artist and dated from the early 1920s; it was beautifully designed and depicted a flying wild duck against a sun-burst. It looked its best viewed from inside in the late evening of a clear day when the mallard might well be flying into the setting sun.

Curiously, no ashtrays were to be seen in any part of the bar. This situation resulted from the theft of an ashtray many years ago. Although these articles were available *gratis* from various firms, Mick never re-introduced their use, and suffered his floor to be continually littered with cigarette



*Bobby Duhig's model at Quilligan's of the sandmen at work.*

going to his cash-box under the counter, extracted ninety nine pounds and twenty three pence and placed the money on the counter before the customer, still maintaining his conversation. All through this incident he gave not the slightest impression that he was dealing with a customer who was trying to embarrass him. Most of the eight or nine 'officers' who witnessed this attempt to take Mick Quilligan down a peg were not surprised: they knew that a five hundred pound note would be changed on this occasion as quickly as a half-crown – and without question!

Another example of Mick's perfect self-control occurred in the 1970s, some time after he had been notified that his premises were likely to be demolished, as they were in the way of a projected road development in the area. A stranger from the Sixmile-bridge area entered the bar and, after calling for a half-pint, beckoned Mick aside and asked him if it was true that the pub was about to be demolished.

"How did you find that out"?, asked Mick, "I had a job finding that out myself".

– "Oh, I'm only interested in the counter", said the Clareman. "I heard about it being pitch-pine and I'm anxious to have it before the place is

afterwards. That counter was part of Mick Quilligan; indeed it could be said to be his most prized possession, his very life was so closely woven around it. He spent the greater part of his time inside it, and his family's fortune was scooped from its glass-smooth surface. It was a friendly, defensive barrier in times of altercations with troublesome characters; in short, it was an indispensable fortification and bulwark against poverty and aggression – and this man from Sixmilebridge wanted it for its pitch pine!

The sing-song on Sunday mornings was a very special feature of Quilligan's for many years. The contributors were mostly from the old school and excerpts from the operas and musical comedy were in great favour. The singing was usually interspersed with musical pieces by members of St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band.

Like his choice of music, Mick loved all old things and old methods. The transition from wooden barrels to metal almost killed him. He took special pride in what he regarded as his expertise in pulling pints from wooden casks. He despised the thought of acting as a mere robot manipulating a new fangled dispenser on a metal barrel.

Almost every aspect of the place related to the foundation of the pub. The stained glass screen in the Broad

butts and burnt-out matchsticks.

Television made it possible for Mick to indulge his favourite sport – rugby. During the Saturdays of the International campaign, when Ireland was engaged, Mick locked up his premises at 2 o'clock and retired to his sitting-room upstairs to enjoy the match alone. His customers had to scatter and go their own way. The bar re-opened at about 5 o'clock and his more than considerate patrons flocked back again, making charitable allowance for the proprietor's unusual behaviour.

Mick observed the law to the letter, and it was never known, in my experience, for a drink to be served a minute after the time. On Sunday nights, the premises were closed at 9 o'clock – an hour before all other pubs – and again his customers had to disperse to more accommodating premises around the Irishtown, but they were back again on the following night as if no inconvenience was suffered. This attitude suggests the special attraction that was Quilligan's, as it is most unlikely that customers treated in the same manner in other pubs would have re-acted in the same way.

With Mick's passing, a page in our local history was closed, and a link with the nineteenth century broken even before most of his customers realised it.