

# My Limerick



A weekly series  
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## An unwelcome visitor to Limerick

It was no mean achievement for James Marwood to rise from the obscurity of his cobbler's bench in his native Horncastle to become the most notorious character in Britain and Ireland.

If we are to judge by the meticulous and efficient manner in which he performed as Lord High Chief Executioner during the 1870s and 1880s, he was an excellent cobbler — one that should have certainly stuck to his last, at least for the benefit of those who brought along their shoe-repairs. Not that he made a bad fist of his adopted avocation; his mechanics were excellent, but his arrogance and cruel indifference to the awful plight of his victims, coupled with the complete absence of any outward show of emotion, set him aside as one to be feared and despised.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that he took the place of the ignorant, fumbling sadist, Calcraft, and brought an expertise to the trade that surely followed the theories of Professor Samuel Haughton of TCD. No doubt the unknown cobbler was obsessed with an ambition to make a name for himself as a hangman, as he had studied Professor Haughton's theo-

ry that the usual two or three foot drop was inhumane and only caused painful strangulation, and that a longer drop would result in the dislocation of the neck and quick death.

He was also assisted in the realisation of his ambition by the complaints received by the Government of the cruelty attendant on many of Calcraft's commissions, especially the hanging of the Manchester Martyrs.

Thus Marwood was a blessing in hideous disguise to those who had to pay the final penalty of the law, for he was regarded as so efficient at his job that he, on his own testimony, killed without causing as much pain as one would feel on touching that back of one's hand with a finger.

It has been pointed out by his deriders that he was the meek finisher of the law; a position that someone had to occupy, and that it would be impossible to come across a Jeckyl and Hyde character who could be expected to act with great concern and humanity, and then be so hardened as to launch his victims into eternity without the slightest qualms of conscience.

During his term of office as hangman for the Crown, a distinction of which he was so proud that he placed a notice in his shop window bearing the words: Crown Office — there were many occasions when he visited this country on official business. Perhaps his two most notable achievements were the hanging of the

Invincibles in 1883 and of the dreadful Maamtrasna murderers of the year before.

The latter case created more than a stir in the country, and beyond it.

For sheer merciless brutality, it has no parallel in the annals of crime in nineteenth century Ireland. A family of five were murdered, and some were mutilated as they lay in their beds.

The victims were John Joyce, his aged mother, his wife, his daughter (17) and son (12). A younger son survived the massacre. No motive for the crime was ever discovered and there was evidence that John Joyce, the head of the household, was a quiet and inoffensive man.

Ten persons, believed to be members of a secret society, were arrested and charged with the murders. Two of these turned Queen's Evidence to save their necks; the remaining eight were convicted and sentenced to death.

Shortly before the time appointed for the executions, the Lord Lieutenant exercised his prerogative of mercy in favour of five of the men, who, according to witnesses, had not entered the house of the murdered people.

The others, Myles Joyce, Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey were executed in the yard of Galway Gaol on December 15th 1882.

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