

My Limerick



A weekly series by
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"Limerick - Historical Reflections"

George Turner

WHERE George Turner first appeared on the streets of Limerick he gave little cause for undue notice, except, perhaps, for the occasional envious glance from some secret admirer of his immaculate 'plus-four' suit and elegant shining brogues. His impeccable appearance evoked memories of the "Yank" in Glenanaar, who was "arrayed in all kinds of sartorial splendour". With all this and an Oxford accent there was no mistaking the man for 'across the water'.

While he was refined and even over mannerly in his approach — indeed one could find no trace of asperity in his whole demeanour, he was strangely reserved, and rarely sought the assistance of the man-in-the-street on any matter of guidance or other information.

During the first few months after his arrival in Limerick he was known as the 'gentleman', a soubriquet of males. As time moved on it became evident that this was a person of peculiarly eccentric habits.

At the Crescent Hotel, where he first set up some house, it was noticed after some time that he was paying less and less attention to his general appearance, which appeared to be his proudest acquisition some little time before. Furthermore, it was reported by those in closer contact that his entire wardrobe was on his back.

His one preoccupation appeared to be a passionate interest in radio and electrical fittings, and small car engine parts, such as broken valve springs, which he got in abundance in local garages, all of whom were eager to satisfy his strange mania. He also kept a stock of waste engine oil.

As if to give the impression that he was engaged in some important engineering project he carried much of these oddments with him on his trips here and there through the city.

Even his once elegant tweed cap was brought into requisition as a repository for a number of coils of wire, with which, according

to some local wags, he expected to make contact with outer space. The cap was so mis-shapen and distended from this unusual service that the fastener on the peak could not be used to maintain the intended shape.

His bicycle, the tyres of which he never bothered to inflate, was a feature that belonged to him even more than the shape of his cap. From an early state in his local pilgrimage it was never used for its intended purpose, rather was it a means of transport for the bulk of his strange impedimenta which could not be accommodated on his already overburdened person.

Thus, he trundled his fantastic budget through the city streets, all the time becoming immersed in his important mania (and no small amount of black oil or grease).

He looked more wretched every day, and as if to accelerate the gradual accumulation of filth and grime, he applied liberal quantities

of burnt engine oil on his hands and legs, now exposed almost to the knees, and not a little on his face. Soon the whites of his eyes stood out like saucers on an ebony table.

The expensive 'plus-four' suit that once embellished his dignified bearing became a sorry sight. The bellows pockets of the jacket bulged and sagged under the weight of his most prized possessions. The trousers, which he had fashioned into a kind of skirt by ripping the inside leg seams, and which was soaked in the rancid substance that blackened every part of his anatomy that could be seen, flapped against the calves of his legs at every step, making a noise like that of a wet dish cloth being slapped against the side of a kitchen sink.

One observer was convinced that Turner, by this time widely known as 'Marconi' and sometimes 'Wires' (his real name was not known until after his death), washed his face regularly, for the purpose of

shaving — he was always clean shaven — and immediately afterwards applied soot and waste oil as one would apply aftershave lotion.

Street urchins, whose jibes and cat-calls usually make life a little more difficult for such as he, had a strange reverence for this immovable character. While he excited the sympathy and curiosity of most people, especially those who had witnessed his transition from grandeur to wretchedness, he was never the butt of the practical joker. He went his daily rounds as if on a desert island, never displaying the slightest interest in those around him.

If his contribution to local lore cannot be measured he at least filled the void created by the passing of 'Jack Tar' and 'Steve Mack', two of the most famous 'characters' who lent colour and interest to the streets of twentieth century Limerick.

Though he lived in a so called Christian community he died in a burrow which

he had excavated for himself at the rear of the old Munster and Connaught College in Hartstonge St. He left no debts, and the £60 which was found on his person was more than enough to pay for his coffin and the two-horse hearse that transported it to the old churchyard of Punchbowl in the Clare Hills, where he was buried without the benefit of mourners or clergy.

The strange and lonely funeral aroused the curiosity of two wildfowlers, including the writer, who happened to be in the vicinity, and on learning of the identity of the principal, assisted in the last sad exercises.

Though George Turner's life in Limerick was spent in the realms of fantasy, his agonising last few days may have shocked him into a realisation of his dreadful plight.

Whatever his mental state he endured the rigours of his dreadful last illness — gangrene of the feet, without the comfort of a bed to lie on or the voice of a solitary friend.