

LIMERICK CHRONICLE

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New film shines a light
on forgotten history

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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE



An illustration of the English executioner William Marwood - in his nine years as chief hangman Marwood hanged 176 men and women

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.

It we are to judge by the meticulous and efficient manner in which he performed as Lord High Chief Executioner during the 1870's and 1880's, 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 mech-

anics were excellent, but his arrogance and cruel indifference to the awful plight of his victims, coupled with the complete absence of any outward emotion set him aside as one to be despised and feared.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that he took the place of the ignorant, bumbling sadist, hangman William Calcraft, and brought an expertise to the trade that surely followed the theories of Professor Samuel Haughton of TCD.

No doubt that the unknown cobbler was obsessed with an ambition to make a name for himself as a hangman as he had studied Professor Haughton's theory that the usual two or three foot drop was in-

humane and only cause painful strangulation and that a longer drop would result in the dislocation of the neck and a 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 the back on one's neck with a finger.

It has been pointed out by his defenders that he was the meek finisher of the law - a position that someone had to occupy and it would be impossible to come across a Jekyll 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 qualm 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 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 mutilated as they lay in their beds.

The Joyce family, were massacred in their beds with one young son surviving. 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 executions, the Lord Lieutenant exercised his prerogative of mercy in favour of five of the men, who according to witnesses were not involved in the house murder. The others Myles Joyce, Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey were executed in the yard of Galway Gaol on December 15, 1882.

More next week...

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