Faction Fighting in County Limerick

CAOIMHÍN Ó DANACHAIR, Member

The learned Sylvester O’Halloran is well known for his historical and antiquarian work, less so nowadays for his medical writings. These latter, however, were of importance in his own day, and brought him high repute among his fellow medical men, and not the least of them was his New Treatise on the Different Disorders arising from External Injuries to the Head (Dublin, 1793). In the introduction to this work Dr. O’Halloran, with becoming modesty, adverts to his own unworthiness to handle so great a theme, but states that he is encouraged to do so by the very extensive experience which he has had in the treatment of broken heads. No part of the world, he asserts, can have such abundant material for such a study as Ireland, and foremost in Ireland for frequency of head injuries is Munster. The valour and fiery spirit of the people, their resentment of anything slighting or insulting, their addiction to strong drink “... from these hitherto unrestrained causes, it is, that many of our fairs, patrons and hurling matches terminate in bloody conflicts,... I have had no less than four fractured skulls to trepan on a May morning, and frequently one or two.” He describes numerous cases of head injury and their treatment, and in many of them notes that they were caused by blows during “riots.” Dr. O’Halloran was born in 1728 and spent a great part of his life in the practice of medicine in and around the city of Limerick; his wide experience of heads injured in faction fighting comes, thus, from the neighbourhood of Limerick in the second half of the eighteenth century.

When and how faction fighting had its origin, and what was the course of its development, we cannot now even guess. But the late 18th and early 19th century found it an accepted part of the social life of both town and countryside. On such occasions as fairs, markets, patterns and other popular gatherings it was customary that pitched battles were fought between rival bands of contestants; there were recognised loyalties and well-known conventions governing the contest, and for the most part, there was no more hatred nor bad blood between the opposed factions than there was, say, between the rival teams in a parish football match. The usual weapon used was a stick of the dimensions of an ordinary walking stick, and many men were very skilled in the use of this, to the extent that a faction fight usually consisted of numerous single combats fought out by men well practised in the art of attack and defence with this weapon, and, moreover, with a good sense of what was fair play. Often, however, there was a general mêlée in which spectators and even women joined in, although such a rough and tumble is always regarded in tradition as a regrettable departure from the canons of good fighting; moreover it is held that the disorganised fight was much more productive of injury than the stick duels of the properly conducted contest. Normally, we are told, good manners demanded that only those who belonged to the factions actually engaged should join in, and tradition fully approves of the attitude of the polite young stranger who, when asked to which faction he belonged, replied “None of them, indeed, although I would like to have a bit of a puck around, if you have no objection.”

The following account of a faction fight in Limerick city about the year 1810, comes from the pen of an English clergymen, Rev. J. Hall, then on a tour of Ireland:

“Notwithstanding all their improvements, here still remain many vestiges of
barbarity. In Scotland, England, and Wales, as well as Ireland, in former times, it was customary for parish to rise against parish, county against county, and often for reasons the most insignificant, to engage in pitched battles. I chanced to be a spectator of a battle of this description in Limerick, which, in ferocity surpassed anything I had seen; and, which indicates that, at a distance from towns, civilization is making but little progress. The battle took place, in consequence of a misunderstanding, a few weeks before, between two men at a neighbouring fair.

"The two, having fought, but been separated, each went to his friends, and represented that he had been insulted. In consequence, hundreds on each side engaged to resent the quarrel, and that too the very first holiday. Having therefore, according to agreement, met to fight at Limerick, they began about half an hour after prayers, but were separated by the magistrates. In the evening, however, about five, the whole street again being full of people, I observed one fellow, surrounded by hundreds, without a coat, raise his arm, and grasping a thick blackthorn cudgel, about four feet long, swing it round his head, pronouncing aloud, (his companions having promised to support him,) 'Jesus be praised, Jesus be praised for ever; ' after which, an opening of the crowd being made, he ran down the street, with hundreds after him, armed with cudgels, to meet the opposite party. In a few minutes, hundreds of cudgels, in all directions, were employed; the women as busy as the men. I observed one woman put in a stone at the mouth of a glove, which she tied fast, to prevent the stone's coming out, and then knocked a man on the head, by which he came to the ground. Many of the women, having tied stones in the corners of their cloaks and pocket-hankerchiefs, were employed in the same way. To the disgrace of the inhabitants, many of them shouted and applauded those that were most active, calling them by name from their windows, 'Bravo! well done!' while they hissed those disposed to be quiet. In the evening, great numbers of boys, some of them not above twelve, in imitation of the men, were fighting in good earnest, with sticks, scarcely any preventing them; except the magistrates, who were going about, taking the sticks from them. It was ten at night before the streets could be cleared. In a public-house into which I had stepped, to see what was doing, a crowd being about the door, I found numbers of both sexes employed in clipping the hair, clotted with blood, from the heads of the combatants; and several shirts in the house red and still with blood. Man is, perhaps, the only animal that bleeds at the nose, though in health.

"In fairs, five or six hundred men often meet and fight. When any of the parties begin to retire, the other follows with sticks and stones; so that, if persons be killed, it is often very difficult to fix on the person who committed the deed. When a fight begins, he that intends to join any of the parties, if he has not a good stick, generally seizes the first he sees; the occasion often of a new fight.

"In a word, with great numbers in Ireland, fighting continues fashionable, and has grown into a habit."

Shorn of its pious platitudes this account is accurate, its various details borne out by tradition. The religious nature of the champion's cry need cause no surprise; it is fully in keeping with the mentality of a time when country people lived with their religion throughout the day, and is no more incongruous than the bishop's blessing of an army before engaging in battle. More usually the leader called out his faction's
war-cry, flourishing his stick on high, and this was answered in kind by some hero of the opposing band; this was known as “wheeling,” probably from the flourishing of the stick. “Up the Blacks and who’ll say bo to a Mulvihil?” “Carabhat mise, agus cá bhfuil fear mo theangabhála?” “Four Year Old! Who’ll stand against a Four Year Old?”—these were three of the most famous cries heard in County Limerick, where the leading factions were Three Year Olds against Four Year Olds generally in the county and in north County Cork, the Cuillins against the Black Mulvihills in west Limerick and north Kerry, and the Carabhats against the Shanavests in east Limerick in extension of their main area which was south Tipperary, east Cork and Waterford. There were other factions, smaller in range of territory and in numbers of adherents, often with no more than townland or family affiliations, and these, too, had their own “wheels.” It is possible that the account given above, by our reverend author, of the cause of the quarrel, may have come from his misunderstanding of the alleged origin of the rivalry between the Three Year Olds and Four Year Olds. This is usually given as having started with an argument between two farmers about the age of a beast being sold at a fair. Another version holds that the animals actually started to fight, but that their respective owners joined in, each in support of his own beast, and so the feud began. The incident is said to have occurred, in various versions, at the Fair of the Well (Ballyagran), the Fairs of Croom, Ardpatrick, Mainistir, Ballinvrea, or Cluggin, or at the patterns of Nantinan, Mo Lua, Patrick’s Well or Ballylanders, to mention only some of the claimants, a diversity of detail which in itself is an indication of the antiquity of the quarrel.

While traditions of the origin of faction fighting are vague in the extreme, the memories of the factions themselves were still vivid among old-people in County Limerick twenty or thirty years ago, many of these ancients having clear recollections of what was a general subject of conversation and discussion when they were children. The following account was taken down verbatim from Mr. Richard Denihan, Gortnagross, in 1950; he was then 85 years of age, having been born in 1865, and is recalling in his narrative the period of about 1875, when he heard the factions discussed by men who had actually taken part in them:

“As long as I can remember, one of the first things I ever heard spoken of around the fire was the faction and the fights that went on between the different factions. The last faction fight that took place in Athea was over at Knocknagorna crossroads. I remember it well though I was young at the time. I don’t know at all what started the factions the first day. I knew people who were of different factions yet they were very friendly to one another. They used have great preparations for the faction fights, selecting and dressing sticks. They used to fight with two sticks. The buailledn was about four feet long. Sometimes they used put lead in the top of this stick or the black-smith would put a band of iron around it. This made the end of the stick firm and heavy and a stroke from it would break a bone or split a skull. The other stick was a short one about a foot and a half long and ’twas very stout. The purpose of this stick was to stop the blow. Some people used prefer to fight with the buailledn alone. They used to practise with the sticks from their youth and some men became so skilled at it that two of them could fight and never touch each other. In each district there was a special faction or maybe the one faction might be spread over a great area. There was a faction called the “Three Year Olds” and another called the “Four Year Olds” and they were spread all over the county. I used hear that these two
factions came into being as a result of an argument that arose over the sale of a cow. One man said she was a three year old and the other said she was a four year old. More people began to take sides and a fight started, and in this way one of the biggest factions in the country came into being. In East Limerick and Tipperary 'twas mostly but 'twas elsewhere also. I remember to see a man below in Rathkeale one day and he drunk and "I'm a Four Year Old" he used say, waiting for anyone to say that he was a "Three Year Old." The faction that my father, God rest him, was in was the Cúilín faction. There was another faction called the Black Mulvihill. These two factions used often try their strength upon one another. 'Twas a law here around that if a man married a girl from the Black Mulvihill faction, he'd have to fight with the Black Mulvihills, and 'twould be the same if a Black Mulvihill man married a Cúilín woman. There were laws too about servant-boys, as to whom they'd be with. Because very often a Black Mulvihill servant boy would be working with a Cúilín farmer. There were many faction fights in Athea between the Cúilín and the Black Mulvihills and they used take place usually on the Pattern Day, the 24th of August. In 1874 there was a great fight outside the bridge of Athea. When the fight was in progress for some time the R.I.C. decided to take a part. Now it was seldom the R.I.C. ever took a part in a faction fight but on this occasion they did. Two of them closed in on a boy by the name of Scanlon and he began to go backwards from them. By chance, it occurred that there was an opening in the wall just behind him and, God save the mark, he set back through the hole and fell on his head on the flags, and was killed. Another man fell off the wall and got badly injured. There were pointed butts of twigs growing where he fell and they stuck up through him. Scollops had been cut here some time before and the sharp edges that remained where they had been cut it was that pierced him. There was a third death as a result of that day's fight. A policeman pressed hard upon a young man and actually struck the stick out of his hand and had his baton raised to give him a finishing blow. The young man seeing the danger, seized a stone, and hurled it at the peeler and met him on the side of the head with it. He died the next day from his wounds. The Archdeacon Goold forbade any more faction fights to be in his property. Furthermore he forbade any of his tenants to attend the pattern as he made out that it was only an occasion for violence. When I was a garslúinín, all the tents at the pattern were usually all gathered together just across the stream in the Harkness Estate. Father Martin Ryan finally suppressed the pattern on account of all the drinking and other abuses that followed it.

"I spoke already of the faction fight that took place in Knocknagorna. About sixty persons were engaged in it and thank God there was no one killed or injured. Further trouble came of it and the police interfered in one squabble and a number were taken to court. They were convicted of causing disturbance and injuring police in the course of their duty. One of the leaders got a year in Clonmel Gaol. He was charged before the Governor of the gaol with insubordination and he was flogged with a cat-of-nine-tails. He carried the marks of the cat with him to the grave. God rest him. I heard tell of other faction fights too that took place over at the Blessed Well. This was a favourite place for them up to the time that the pattern was put under foot. When the rounds to the well were over and the usual prayers said they used start to fight. The women and children used to encourage them. Of all the faction fights to take place in this side of the country the
biggest and most noticeable was the faction fight of Ballyea. This took place in the year 1854, at Ballyea, a strand in the parish of Ballybunion. The fight took place between the Black Mulvihills and the Cúilíní. My own father was there although he didn’t take any part in the fight. There were many more from Athea there and some of them taking part in the fight were injured. The Black Mulvihills crossed the Cashen in boats from the Ballyduff side. There were several hundred of them and they made a great rush up through the strand towards where the Cúilíní were drawn to meet them. With the force of the rush they made they put the Cúilíní up on the barratacide. There was one man, he was a champion of the Black Mulvihills—I don’t know his name—and he was doing a great execution till a woman of the Cúilíní threw a horse-shoe at him and hit him in the head. This blow laid him out. The Black Mulvihills began to lose courage at that and likewise the Cúilíní got their spirit and made a rush at them. They drove the Mulvihills down through the strand step by step, till finally they turned and ran into the boats and began to put the tide out for themselves. A number of the Cúilíní had saddle-horses and hadn’t up to this taken any part in the fray. So now they swam their horses out in the water and began to attack the boats. A number of the boats got capsized but mostly in shallow water. One boat, with nine men in it was attacked by five or six horsemen and sunk. The men were thrown into the water and began to sink and every time a head came up the horsemen gave it the buailleán. About two hours the fight lasted and there were twenty-two persons killed and six times as many injured.

"How many were in the fight? Oh, I used to hear ’em saying that there were several hundred at each side. ’Twas a noble fight and ’twas always said to be the last faction fight of any account in these parts. There was another great faction fight that took place about four miles outside Abbeyfeale. The main families that took part in it were the Curtins, the Lanes and the Leahys. The Lanes were a very numerous tribe outside there and Cahirlane is called after them. I often heard it said that this fight lasted from morning till night. One group followed the other for miles of country and it was over inside in Mount Collins graveyard it finished up. I was outside in Carraigin one day and an old man who was in the fight told me all about it and showed me where it started and finished up. There was a man by the name of Flynn living over in the Pound and he was a great man for the faction fights. It happened that he didn’t know of this fight between the Curtins and the Lanes, and when someone came in and told him that it was on he was in a terrible way that he had missed the start of it. So he got ready at once. He had a stick up in the loft seasoning for seven years and so great was his strength and also his desire to be in the fight that when he caught the stick in his hand he squeezed water out of it. The old people were very interested in the account of the faction fights and they used be proud of the wounds they received in them. The chief men whose names I heard in connection with the faction fights in this parish were, Aindriú Dalton, Michéal Duinnín, Doggie Moore, Tomás Dhomnaill Carroll, Stephen Dillane, Reamonn Roache, and Neanntanán Sheehy. This last man I mentioned was famed far and wide for his strength. There was only one person stronger than him and that was Seán Burns of Abbeyfeale. Neanntanán Sheehy was engaged in very many factions and he was never brought to his knees by any man, but he met his doom in the end and I’ll tell you how he did because I was witness to it. We were living below in
Athea at that time. Myself and my brother Tom were only garsins about seven or eight at the time. We were sent to bed early in the night and the window of our room looked out in the street. About eleven o’clock we heard some skirmish in the street and faith we jumped up to the window. Who should be in the street but Neanntanán Sheehy—we knew his voice well—and two other men. My mother, God rest her, came down to us. ‘Who are they, mother?’ says Tom. ‘Oh,’ says my mother, ‘that’s Neanntanán Sheehy and two men from over in Knockanare.’ With that the fight started and one of them must have hit Neanntanán and knocked him for we heard one of the men saying to the other ‘Hit him down on the head.’ My mother told us to leave the window and she went away. Next morning Neanntanán was over inside the wall and he covered with blood. He died later on in the day. My mother warned us on our life not to cough a word as to what we saw or heard. ‘For’, says she, ‘we didn’t see anyone, only heard them, and so we can’t be sure.’ And so we never said one word, nor indeed we weren’t asked any questions too. My mother the poor woman didn’t want to come into any trouble if she could avoid it. The harm was done and she didn’t want to bring the wrath of the others upon her. The place was full of police for a few days but they never took anyone for the murder, and it all passed away. I often wonder why the police didn’t try to suppress the faction fights but I suppose the law was different in those days to what it is now. At any rate the faction fights are over and I think that they’re no loss. I heard of an old man who went to the 29th June fair in Abbeyfeale. He hadn’t been there for nearly fifty years before that and he was more than surprised that there wasn’t a fight in progress. ‘Ochón,’ says he, ‘tis ten o’clock and not a blow struck yet.’ He was very disappointed at it.

“Ash sticks were always favoured for fighting. The black-thorn is a good heavy stick but it is liable to crack or break quicker than the ash. The toughest kind of ash is not the ash-plant as it is generally supposed but the sucker. The sucker is the branch that shoots up from the stump of the tree that has been cut. Sometimes they used to cut off this branch and bring a piece of the stump with it. They used to hollow out this bit of the stump and pour lead into it. A blow from that would smash a bone. In some houses around here the sticks belonging to their old people are yet. I suppose they like to keep them in memory of old people and of old times.”

The names and the almost legendary prowess of the heroes of the faction fights were remembered in tradition, and their deeds recounted, with appropriate embellishments. Seón Burns, said to have been the strongest man in County Limerick was the foremost figure in many a hard fight. Conor Cregan of Monagea broke his stick in combat at the fair of Newcastle West, and rearmed himself by pulling the shaft out of a side-car and breaking it to a suitable length across his knee. O’Regan of Gurraunroe, hard pressed at the fair of Croom, exerted such muscular force that the brass buttons burst from his gaiters and broke windows of nearby houses. Séamus Mór Hartnett, setting out for the fair of Abbeyfeale, squeezed water from an ashplant which had been seven years seasoning in the chimney. Robert Fitzgerald of Lackelly, a champion of the Three Year Olds, found alone one day by more than a dozen of the opposing faction and insulted by them, attacked and drove them single-handed from the town. Lynch of Killeedy once challenged a passing tramp and was defeated by him, whereupon he kept the tramp as his guest for many weeks until he had learned every trick
of that expert’s repertoire. Nor were the ladies without their fame; the most notable of these valiant women was Mairé Mór na Mainge from Caherlane, near Abbeyfeale who, when her menfolk were on the edge of rout at the fair of Brosna, joined in with such effect that she scattered the enemy and led her party to complete victory. The occasional participation of women in these fights is well attested; their favourite weapon being a stone in the toe of a stout woollen stocking; the writer of this paper remembers having seen, as a small boy, an elderly tinker lady thus armed felling two gentlemen of an opposing sept on the evening of a fair day in Rathkeale, and also recalls the words of an old lady who asserted that “it would be the hard-hearted woman that would not go to the help of her boy or her man, and he being bested in the fight.”

Injuries and fatalities caused in these fights were not looked upon by the country people in the same light as ordinary mayhem or murder; they were not to be followed up by private vengeance or by invoking the law, but rather to be avenged by the faction in fair fight. One tradition from west Limerick, however, tells of the funeral of a man killed in a faction fight making a circuit so as to pass by the house of the alleged killer, where the corpse was solemnly laid on the roadway in front of the house while the dead man’s window and orphans invoked a fearful curse upon the slayer.

Gradually, in the course of the nineteenth century, the factions fell into disrepute. Growing national sentiment, the efforts of Daniel O’Connell to unite the people, the pleas of the clergy both Catholic and Protestant, the organisation of the Land League and similar popular associations, the development of games and athletics and especially the fact that there was little real animosity between the members of the different factions, who lived in neighbourly harmony when not actually engaged in combat, all these played a part in the disappearance of the faction fight and of the heroic aura which surrounded the great faction fighters.

In conclusion we may give another glimpse of the factions of County Limerick in their heyday and in their eclipse, as seen by William Robert Le Fanu and described by him in *Seventy Years of Irish Life*; he was born in 1816 and taken to live in Abington at the age of ten when his father was appointed Church of Ireland rector of that parish:

“...When we went to the county of Limerick there were many factions there—the Shanavests and Caravats, the Coffeys and the Reaskawallahs, the Three Years Old and Four Years Old. All these are now extinct except the last named, who still have a smouldering existence, in the neighbourhood of Emly, which occasionally flares up into a little blaze; but the glorious fights of other days are gone.

“The factions nearest to us were the Coffeys and the Reaskawallahs, the latter so called from the name of a townland near Doon, where its chieftains had lived for generations. In our time its leader was John Ryan, generally called ‘Shawn Lucash’ (i.e. John, the son of Luke) a powerful man who had led his men in many a hard-fought fight; while one Coffey of Newport was chief of the Coffeys. The origin of their feud was, as in most other cases, lost in antiquity. The members of opposite factions, who happened to dwell near each other, lived peaceably together, except on the occasions when they met expressly for a fight. Fairs were the usual battlefields, though at times a special hour and place was fixed for a battle. I recollect one that was fought at Annagh Bog, near us, when the Coffeys were the victors; a few were killed and many on both sides dangerously
wounded. The old story, often told, that the row began by one man taking off his coat and trailing it behind him, saying 'Who will dare to tread on that?' is a myth. I have seen many a faction fight, every one of which began in the same way, which was thus: one man 'wheeled,' as they called it, for his party; that is, he marched up and down, flourishing his blackthorn, and shouting the battle-cry of his faction, 'Here is Coffey aboo against the Reaskawalla.' Here is Coffey aboo—who dar strike a Coffey? 'I dar,' shouted one of the other party; 'here's Reaskawalla aboo,' at the same instant making a whack with his shillelagh at his opponent's head. In an instant, hundreds of sticks were up, hundreds of heads were broken. In vain the parish priest and his curate ride through the crowd, striking right and left with their whips; in vain a few policemen try to quell the riot; on it goes till one or other of the factions is beaten and flies.

Just after one of these fights at the fair of Abington, which I witnessed from the opposite bank of the river, I saw an elderly man running after a young fellow of two or three and twenty, every time he got near striking him on the head with a heavy blackthorn, and at every blow setting the blood streaming from his head. At last the youth got beyond his reach. 'Why,' said I to a man standing near me, 'does that young fellow let the old man beat him in that savage way?' 'Ah, sure, your honour,' said he, 'that's only his father that is chastising him for fighting.'

The members of the Coffey faction were all men of that name, or their relatives and connections; the Reaskawalla were nearly all Ryans, which is the most common name in that part of the county; so common that to distinguish one from another nearly every Ryan had a nickname, generally a patronymic, as Shawn Lucas, already mentioned. Another of the same faction was Denis Ryan, of Cuppannake, always called 'Donagh Shawn Heige' (Denis, son of John Timothy), his father being 'Shawn Heige' (John the son of Timothy). There was also one Tom Ryan, whose son was Tom Tom, his son again Tommy Tom Tom, while Tommy Tom Tom's son was Tommy Tom Tom's Tomny. When not a patronymic the name had reference to some personal peculiarity, such as 'Shamus na Cusa' (Jim of the Leg), 'Shawn Lauder' (Strong John), or 'Leum a Rinka' (Bill of the dance).

In those days doctors and dispensaries were few and far between, so the wounded generally came for treatment to our coachman, an amateur surgeon, who had been an officer's servant in the Peninsula War. His method was simple, somewhat painful, and supposed by the sufferers to be highly efficacious. He clipped the hair from about the wound, poured in turpentine mixed with whisky—this, of course, caused a yell—stitched the cut if a severe one, plastered it slightly, and then sent his patient home, equally amazed at his skill and charmed with his kindness.

Though, as I have said, we may still from time to time hear of a small faction fight in the south of Ireland, few men can remember them in their palmy days, where at every fair and market opposing factions met and many a head was broken. In 1829, towards the close of the agitation for Catholic emancipation, all this was changed. O'Connell and the priests, constantly speaking and preaching against England's hated plan of governing Ireland by divide et impera, unceasingly from platform and from altar urging the necessity of union, at last succeeded in reconciling the contending factions. Monster meetings and monster
marchings, displays of physical forces, were organized. One of these great marchings which passed close to our house, I saw, and indeed took part in it; for a friendly peasant induced me (it was nothing to me) to march some way in the procession carrying a green bough in my hand. It was the marching of the Reaskawallahs from their head-quarters near Doon to the head-quarters of the Coffeys at Newport. They marched six deep, in military order, with music and banners, each man carrying, as an emblem of peace, a green bough; the procession was nearly two miles long. On its arrival at Newport the meeting was celebrated with much joy and whisky, and, in the presence of the priests, a treaty of perpetual peace was established, and never from that day did those factions meet again for battle. Similar reconciliations took place all over the country, and faction fighting practically ended. The peace established in other parts of Ireland did not, however, extend to the north, where the opposite parties were of a different sort—Orangemen v. Roman Catholics. They are now as ready for a fight as then, and are seldom long without one, and are expected to have a still livelier time if a Home Rule Bill should pass.”