

Bunratty Remembers

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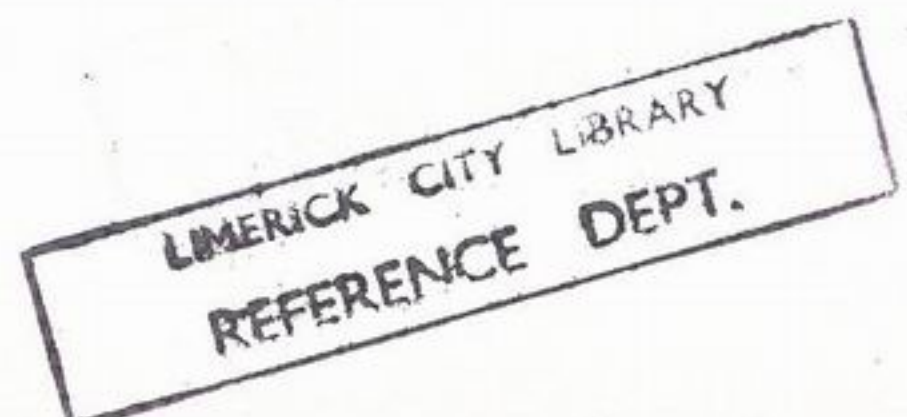
Bunratty gives access from the tideway to the richest land in Thomond—the limestone plain stretching from the Fergus to Lough Derg. From the Cratloe hills the valley extends northwards to the Connacht border. A thousand years before the Normans came to Thomond the Dal Cais had won their way to the same rich plain.

The Normans came by the tideway to Tradree but the Dalcassians climbed to their kingdom by an ancient land route. Crossing the shallows where Limerick now stands they followed the ridge that led them to the Cratloe Pass and the wide prospect of the land of heart's desire. Indeed their first centre of rule lay just above Bunratty, and the river that enters the Shannon by the castle is named from the Ui Cearnaig, the ruling sept of the Dal Cais before the rulers of Killaloe came into the picture.

That rich land of promise had even more sensational invaders than Norman or Gael four or five centuries before the Christian era. You have only to recollect the pre-historic thirty-acre enclosure at Moghane near Dromoland, and the story, strange as a fairy tale, of how the greatest hoard of gold ornaments known to Western Europe tumbled out of a cutting near Moghane when the railway line was being laid in 1854. The finds were of similar date to that Irish curiosity, the Late Bronze Age gorget. It may be more than coincidence that nearly every gorget find on record comes from the rich Thomond plain and its immediate surroundings.

For the Normans, Bunratty was meant to be a point of escape rather than advance. Out on the plain they fortified themselves at Clarecastle and Quin but the Dalcassians promptly stormed these castles. Bunratty's turn came on that May day in the year 1318 when the Norman venture in Thomond came to a sudden tragic end. The Irish saga of the seventy year struggle tells of stragglers from the battle bringing dread tidings from Dysart O'Dea. "For upon his wife's and household's receiving of the tidings that de Clare was killed, with one consent they betake them to their fast galleys and move off on Shannon, taking with them the choicest of the town's wealth and valuable effects, and having at all points set it on fire." Earlier that year there had been a parley at Limerick whence O'Brien and MacNamara withdrew over the Cratloe Pass, while according to the saga—the Triumphs of Turlough—de Clare took "opportunity of the sea to gain Bunratty." We might wonder why he did not advance along the Limerick Liberties between the Cratloe hills and the Shannon if we did not recall that before the modern embankments were raised the route of today's highway was in effect a tidal backwater with a few knolls emerging at intervals.

While the MacNamaras were erecting the present castle at Bunratty their O'Brien overlords were establishing a new colony across the Shannon in County Limerick, their new land being dominated by Carrigogunnell, as romantic a keep as any 'castled crag' of the Rhineland. A century later we find the worried merchant princes of Limerick complaining to their liege lord, Henry VIII, in 1541 about the tolls levied on their shipping by these native lords of the waterway along the Lower Shannon. There were O'Cahan at Kilrush and O'Connor Kerry at Carrigafoyle claiming their toll of wine, honey, oysters or herring on opposite sides of that great estuary which may one day be an emporium for the world's shipping. Further up



river the Earl of Desmond collected his shipping dues near Foynes as did O'Brien at Carrigogunnell.

Even if Bunratty does not figure in the grievance the MacNamaras were well in the picture. Their castle at Meelick a few miles away was a customs frontier where merchant caravans from the city lands would enter Thomond. Tadg and Finin MacNamara, the irate citizens recorded, set a tax upon cattle and wine and even upon the ornate headdress of each merchant wayfarer. There must have been gay feasting at the Shannonside castles when commerce came their way.

Three hundred years ago the Earls of Thomond left Bunratty for ever and the old castle dropped out of the march of history to dream of "old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago." Today, restored and redecked as in her heyday, Bunratty awakens to gaze on a changed world. Above her quiet battlements the airways of three continents meet and cross. May their ways remain ways of peace.

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