

THE AUTHOR, KEVIN DINNEEN, IS AGED 89 YEARS. HE WAS TEN YEARS OLD AT THE TIME OF THE TERRIBLE FLU EPIDEMIC WHICH KILLED HIS PARENTS. HERE HE RECALLS THAT DREADFUL TIME.

November, 1918

To get the full picture of the misery and sorrow the Spanish Flu brought to Limerick in October, November and December, 1918, the living conditions of the poor have to be examined. Five months earlier - the first major Irish May Day - the famous Jim Larkin was in Limerick for the festival, and on the morning of the march he was escorted throughout the slums of the city. He was thunderstruck. He said the Limerick slums were as bad as Dublin - and those of Dublin were said to be the worst in Europe.

In Limerick each city parish had its slum area. The lane-dwellers considered themselves lucky if they had a water-tap at the end of the lane - one water-tap - the only water supply for two or three hundred people!

Unemployment was rife and working conditions (when work was available) were bad. Undernourishment was the prevailing condition of the poor. Bread and tea was the staple diet. Bread cost four pence ha'penny for a two pound loaf.

The port was busy and employed about a hundred dockers. Wages were paid at the rate of fifteen shillings a day and the dockers were lucky to get two or three days' work per week. The men worked in all weathers, and in very wet weather the only protection was a jute-bag, draped from the head like a monastic cowl. Soon there was just one mass of water - the man, his clothes and the wretched jute-bag, as he walked the narrow plank. No wonder the flu took its toll.

There were many great heroes of the period; some of the workers' leaders went among the people and tried to help, only to take the disease and die. Then there were the priests, the doctors, the nurses and tradesmen who worked long hours without pay. The coffin-makers worked late into the night to meet the demand.

The Redemptorists (the Fathers) in their long soutanes and birettas hurrying through O'Connell Street on their way to the slums to aid the sick was a common sight. People walked, walked, walked everywhere. No cars, no lifts!

The undertakers of that time are rarely mentioned in history. The Griffins, the Thompsons, the Crosses, the Fitzpatricks and the McDonaghs - they all made many sacrifices and must have buried a great number without charge. Times were indeed hard.

William Street and Mulgrave Street were the stages on which, each day, the tragedies were to be seen. On several days as many as five different funerals within

by Kevin Dinneen

minutes - all walking - could be counted on their way to Mount St Laurence cemetery. In those days there was no individual funeral Mass and the morning Mass in the church was offered for those in the mortuary. Over four days, one old man counted 15 coffins waiting for burial in St Michael's Church, Denmark Street.

In the commercial part of the city things were quiet. Workers hurried home from work and there was no standing around in groups for a chat. In the residential parts, the old "stands" (places where men gathered in tens or more for an evening chat) were deserted.

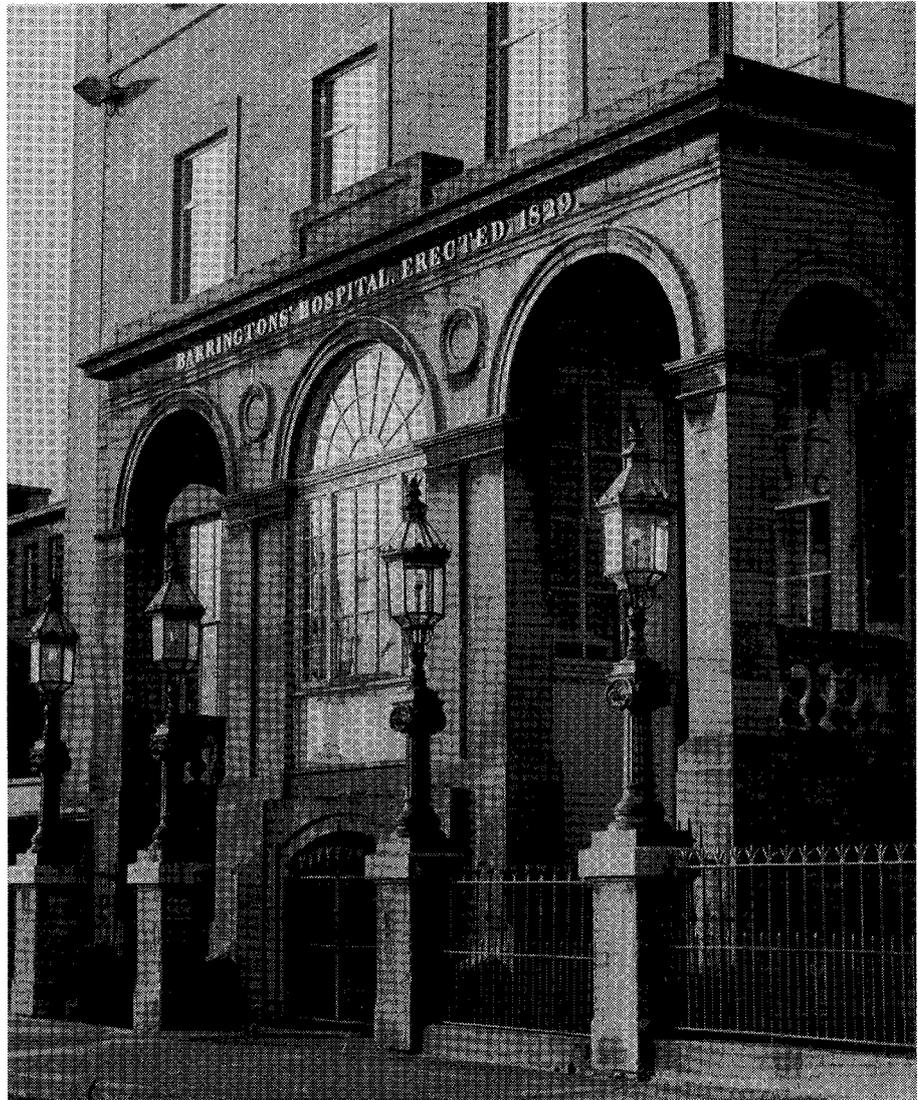
This was the most innocent of past-times when men talked for hours and

hardly a smoke between them; money spent, after they handed over their wages at home, they wouldn't have a penny in their pockets. Money was so scarce that the wife would have to supply the single penny on a Sunday morning for the Mass plate!

There were no markets or fairs during the flu. For the most part the farmers carefully avoided the city, unless they had very urgent business there.

In the early evenings and nights Limerick City was a sad place - the streets were empty. Even the garrison did not escape the long arm of the flu and many soldiers died. The King's Island cemetery, with its row of tombstones for young Welsh fusiliers, bears sad testimony to this terrible time.

November was a dry, cold month and it took its deadly toll.



The main entrance to Barrington's Hospital.