

A Victorian Visitor's View of Limerick

by Liam Hogan

Alexander Innes Shand (1832-1907) toured the West of Ireland in 1884 and his account was first published as a serialised travelogue in the *London Times*. Shand's eighteen articles were then compiled and published in an 1885 monograph entitled *Letters from the West of Ireland*. Shand hailed from Scotland and he was a lawyer and novelist. His travel writing is highly detailed and his visit to Limerick covers the industry, economy, culture, landscapes, and history of the city, while not forgetting, of course, its people. His description of Limerick in 1884 is remarkably vivid and is an important addition to our understanding of what life was like in the city at this time.

Limerick, September 13, 1884¹

After passing through decaying or poverty-stricken towns, where the streets are either mean and bare, or where rather dilapidated houses seem to have been flung about anyhow, it is a pleasure making a cheerful entry into Limerick. Not that Limerick has not its miserable quarters, where rags, dirt, and vice are conspicuously displayed between the den-like dwellings and the filthy gutters, but the main street which touches on the Shannon at the eastern end, is among the best-built provincial thoroughfares in the kingdom; while the Shannon itself is a noble stream, bordered on the southern bank by broad wharves and spanned by sundry handsome bridges. At the 'West end' are other fairly good streets, with a prettily laid-out public garden.

The 'Royal Hotel' is tolerably comfortable, with a civil, intelligent, and bustling landlord, who, having lately taken it, will probably improve the attendance, — and it has several competitors of promising

appearance. From the front windows of the 'Royal' there is a delightful view up the river, shut in to the north-eastward by the round green hills of Clare. At the northern end of the bridge, which breaks the prospect, supported on a pedestal, is the rough block of stone on which the memorable 'Treaty of Limerick' was signed *al fresco*.

Close to that bridge are the Cathedral and the Castle. Thackeray in his 'Sketch Book' abuses the former and admires the latter. With all deference to the great novelist's impressions, I can only say that the square grey cathedral tower is a most picturesque object from many points of the city, while the look-out from the garden and graveyard in the precincts opens a fine panorama down the course of the Shannon. As for the body of the cathedral, it is so blocked up by trees and houses that you can only criticise it from immediately beneath the windows, so that it counts for little in the general effects; while the grey circular towers of the castle, rent and mended again with red new bricks, show like the roughly patched seat of an Irish gossoon's ragged breeches, and embrace the hideous mass of the modern barracks, like a tattered baldric of the olden time buckled round the cast tunic of a linesman.

What is more striking to the stranger, perhaps, than this imposing leading thoroughfare, are the exceedingly handsome shops therein. So far as these shops are concerned, capital must have been liberally laid out. For example, just over the way from the hotel is the great upholstery and haberdashery magazine of Cannock & Co., with its many-storeyed facade, with its liveried attendant in waiting at the doors, with cars and open vehicles pulling up continually, and with its own gaily varnished covered carts to carry the parcels about among its customers. That is only one great shop among many: frontages being cheap, there is ample elbow-room, and the fitting up

and the furnishing would often do credit to Regent Street.

There are a couple of chemists, next door to each other, with sumptuous establishments that might apparently physic the whole of Munster; and there are at least two or three enormous groceries and Italian warehouses, which, I am told, do an immense wholesale business among small shopkeepers in the province. In fact Limerick, like Clare, is a distributing centre for the surrounding districts, though on a much more extensive scale. But Limerick does something more than distribute, and has steady-going flourishing industries of its own. As at Galway, the most conspicuous of the public buildings are the enormous meal mills. One is rather a striking object in the neighbourhood of the castle and cathedral; three others stand side by side, in great walled enclosures, facing the wharves and the docks; and they have sticcursales standing in the suburbs or on the upper course of the Shannon.

But while Galway millers have been gradually going to the wall, those of Limerick still manage to hold their own against American and Australian flour importers. The secret is that they have energy as well as capital. Small mill-owners who cling to their primitive appliances must close their doors sooner or later. But the Limerick men have taken to grinding by steam-power, — and some of them, like the Messrs Ballantyne,² have just been introducing the latest improvements in machinery; so that grain is still shipped to the Shannon, and there is little importation of foreign flour. The Spights, who do not grind, are said to be the largest of the consignees; but the business of the Messrs Russell is perhaps the most noteworthy, for they not only grind the flour, but make it into bread. They stick to a quiet, old-fashioned home-trade, they distribute bread to Limerick and the neighbourhood, and they have agents in many of the towns of the west



View of a ship unloading at Bannatyne's Mill. (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

who have subsidiary bakeries attached to their flour-stores.

Next in importance to the grinding and baking comes the curing of hams and bacon. The houses of the Mathesons,³ the Shaws, and the Dennys offer a ready market for pigs from the country, and nearly 7,000 animals are slaughtered weekly. These houses carry on a large Irish trade, and the surplus hams or sides of bacon are consigned to London or Liverpool.

It was at Limerick that Sir Peter Tait started his army clothing establishment, which in his time employed 600 workpeople. The undertaking, after changing hands more than once, is still carried on, though on a less extensive scale. As for the Limerick lace, it is now made in a very small way by a few hand-workers; but the Limerick gloves, that once had a great reputation, are as much things of the past as mailed gauntlets.

The wharves are spacious enough, and there is a dock of considerable size; but there are few signs of life or of business to be seen on the river-banks, except when the workmen are pouring out of the steam-mills. The Shannon is accessible to ships of heavy burden at high tides, when there are from 18 feet to 20 feet of water; at spring-tides there are 22 feet. But the approach through winding channels would appear to be difficult and decidedly dangerous. At least yesterday I saw, only a quarter of a mile below the dock, a great full-rigged grain ship of something like 1800 tons, driven up high and dry on the right bank. She had swung round and run aground while being towed up the day

before; they said it was a Limerick pilot who was in fault, but there she will lie till the spring-tide floats her.

And the ferryman who pulled me across the stream pointed to the boilers of a large steamer which had been wrecked a few months ago about fourteen miles further down the river. That was probably in the vicinity of the Cock Rock, an obstruction which it has been repeatedly proposed to remove, though I am informed that the rock is not so much dangerous in itself as on account of the mud banks which silt up behind it. The Shannon folk do not appear to care for a sea-faring life, and Limerick seems to have no vessels of its own.


There is a weekly line of steamers to Glasgow, and a fortnightly line to Liverpool; but they carry no passengers, because no travellers care to go by them. Emigration from Limerick and Tipperary counties is directed overland to Kingstown and other ports to the eastward. As usual, the Scotch steamers bring coal, sugars, groceries, cottons, and woollens; and, as usual, they must often go back in ballast. The whole of the grain is brought here in foreign bottoms. Strolling down the quays and round the docks, I saw ships from California, New England, and Nova Scotia, but none hailing from Irish ports, except one or two small coasting hookers. But if the middle classes here are thriving, and though there are many considerable employers of labour at good wages, it is evident that there is a great deal of destitution. I have spoken of the sad sights to be seen in what is called the Irish quarter, and I was much struck by the number of deplorable objects to be met with in the

main streets. In the great English cities rags and wretchedness generally slink away into the lanes and back slums; here they have no hesitation in exposing their sores in the sunshine. There are no great numbers of professional beggars, — in fact regular mendicancy with the professional whine is the exception everywhere now, and is almost monopolised by a few old women in extreme decrepitude verging on idiocy.

But in Limerick you come across old men and women and sickly weaklings at every comer, who can hardly hold body and soul together, and whose tatters are disgraceful if not indecent. Possibly these deplorable objects are the more remarked here, that the town in which they starve is exceptionally gay and handsome. And the town finds good and profitable customers in the farmers and peasants, who are generally prosperous, as they ought to be.

Indeed the district around Limerick is one of the richest in Ireland. Coming southward from Ennis, the stones gradually disappear till they are seemingly no more than sufficient to build the fences. Driving out to-day to the charming suburban village of Corbally, situated about a mile away on the Upper Shannon, nothing could be finer than the belated hay-crops. Overloaded hay-carts blocked the narrow road that ran between the double walls of a succession of well-timbered and beautifully kept gentlemen's grounds. There were enormous hay-ricks in each neat little homesteading; and in the fields, where the grass had been left for pasture; it was growing rank in the hedgerows, where the cattle had spared it.

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As in the country round Ennis, the chief occupation is dairy farming and fattening; but here the dairy-farming is decidedly in the ascendant. The people have taken to selling the milk to companies which make a business of preserving and consolidating it. That pays them better; it saves trouble, and avoids the hazards from sudden fluctuations in prices, as the buyer's contract for definite periods. What would only fetch £3 in the shape of a firkin of butter, sells for £1 to these large contractors. No doubt the butter firkin should command a higher price; but here, as near Ennis, the system of butter making is bad. All that is produced is bought up by local Limerick dealers.

The farmers' holdings average sixty acres; and these sixty acres will carry sixteen milk cows, besides a score or so of sheep. And here the "winter age", to which I alluded in my last letter, is a regular source of profit to farmers favoured in situation. Their neighbours who have neither good shelter nor a sufficiency of winter fodder, board out the beasts for the four or five winter months. I said that near Ennis the times had been somewhat unfavourable for the last five years. Here, until the year before this, the seasons had been tolerably good and prices excellent and the farmers had been saving money. Within the last twelve months, however, the prices of cattle have fallen considerably.

The fall has been partly owing to causes operating generally, partly to local reaction from fancy prices. The land agitation a few years ago had depleted the grazings. Farmers who were persuaded to 'hold the rents' had sold the herds that might be seized, or saw them sold

up by the sheriff. The time came when they must re-stock the lands, and they all rushed into the markets. Landlords with boycotted farms, to be likewise replenished, were bidding against them, and prices rose extravagantly. Since then, with Government restrictions hampering the cattle trade, there has been a positive glut; and at present, men who are forced to sell must submit to sacrifices. Besides, recalcitrant tenants have had their arrears to pay up, and to liquidate law expenses into the bargain.

This autumn they have what they describe as a short but healthy harvest, and much depends on the coming winter. Should the winter be open and mild, their short stocks of fodder may see them through; should the winter unhappily be severe, they must either buy fodder or sacrifice their beasts. At this moment many of them are feeding at a loss, and all the men who can afford it are holding back in hope of better prices. Were there a forced stampede to sell, the consequences would be very serious.

The district being generally prosperous - according to the theory which I have been satisfactorily working out, alike by inquiry and observation - there have been few or no disturbances. The reductions of rent, which have averaged about twenty per cent, have no doubt given substantial relief. The only part where there were serious troubles was on a property of Lord Cloncurry, where about thirty tenants were evicted a few years ago, and only two or three restored to their holdings.

But I am assured that his lordship was hardly to be blamed, since his rents were

no higher than those of his neighbours; and his tenants, who were badly advised, refused to meet his liberal advances. Land being so highly rented, there are no very great estates; and the condition of things is very different from that in Galway, since no property of any importance has changed hands for many years.

Naturally, on coming to Limerick, one's curiosity is excited as to the salmon-fisheries, and I am indebted to Mr Alton, of the Shannon Fisheries Company, for much interesting information. The Shannon Fisheries Company owns five miles of the water, from Corbally, above the town, down to Cratloekeil below it. These fishings belong to the Limerick Corporation, which let them twenty-five years ago on a ninety-nine years' lease to a Mr Pool Gabbit. Mr Gabbit sold his interest to Mr Malcolmson of Waterford, and subsequently it was re-sold in the bankruptcy court to the present proprietors for £1,000.

Though the sum sounds a small one, they did not make a very good bargain. The original owners had claimed the Shannon fisheries down to the mouth; but subsequently, and after much litigation, their rights have been limited as I have stated. The value of the Shannon fisheries generally has been greatly increased by protection, &c; but, on the other hand, obstructions and indiscriminate fishing lower down have much diminished the takes of the upper proprietors. Below Cratloekeil there are now no less than forty-four stake-nets, belonging to various riparian landowners, and the drift nets are much used in the estuary by fishermen.

The drift-net is both cheap and very deadly. It costs only from £3 to £5 - £3 more must be paid for a licence - and it is some 200 yards long by 12 feet deep. One end is attached to the boat, the other drifts with the tide. The net is weighted below, and buoyed with corks above. When a catch is made a cork is seen bobbing; the fishermen row up and take out the salmon. Some years ago, before these drift-nets came into common use, the Shannon Company sometimes took 1,500 salmon in a day. One of the most interesting objects on the river is the Lax weir, which is the upper limit of their water at Corbally. Lax is the Scandinavian for salmon, as gourmards may know who are familiar with the smoked red flakes sent over in tins from Norway; and it was the Danes who built that venerable weir across the Shannon which is still

overlooked by the ruins of its guardian castle, dating from the twelfth century.

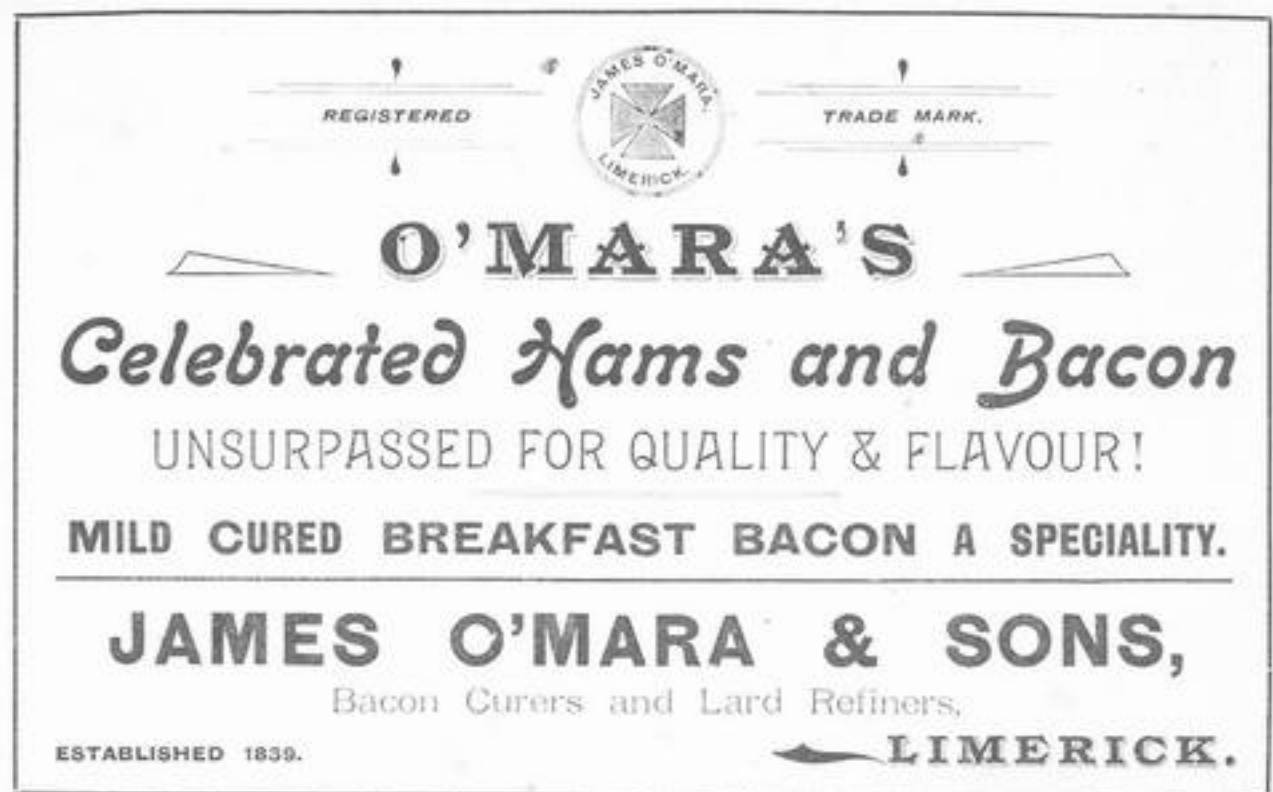
The Shannon Company send all their fish to London, to be disposed of by a salesman on commission. That is also the practice of some of the lower proprietors. But others of them, and all the small fishermen with the drift-nets, sell the fish as they land them to local buyers, who act as middlemen, forwarding their purchases to England, and having supplies of ice and boxes in readiness for packing. The great local salmon mart is the village of Glin, known in England as giving a title to the knight "of that ilk". Where the rod-fishing is good it is extremely valuable — so valuable that nothing worth trying is available to strangers. All is let at long prices — as much as £300 to £350 being given for 50 to 100 yards, where fish are to be taken in favourite pools through the season.

This year the season, owing to the unusually dry weather, has not been a very successful one. Yet I am told by Captain Vansittart, a famous fisherman, that on his water at Castle Connell, seven miles above Limerick, he had killed this spring, in seventy-six days, 104 salmon, of one ton weight.⁴

O'Shaughnessy, the once-renowned Limerick fly-maker, died many years ago, though a son-in-law carries on the business. But they tell me that O'Shaughnessy's wares were greatly overrated; that his hooks might do for former days, when a fish weighing 20 lb. was a rarity, but that they would never have held the 40-pounds which are frequently gaffed at present. All the hooks come now from the needle-makers in England, though they are dressed on the shores of the Shannon, and many of the gentlemen are in the habit of tying their own. The flies used in the spring are large and gaudy, tied with top-knots of the golden pheasant and such gorgeous colours in summer, when the peel are coming up, the flies are somewhat quieter and smaller.

What shows, by-the-by, that after all the range of the best rod-water cannot be very great, is that there are only about sixteen boatmen in the service of the rod-fishers.

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No one fortunate enough to have fine weather when at Limerick should neglect the excursion to Killaloe. The bright little town lies seventeen miles up the Shannon, and half a mile above it the Shannon flows out of Lough Derg. For myself, I had been favoured with one of those sudden changes of climate which seem peculiar to this country of contrasts and sharp transitions. I had left Connemara in cold and downpour. In Galway the dripping wet had been so warm as to be unpleasantly enervating. At Ennis the skies had cleared as by enchantment; and there and at Limerick the heavens were cloudless, while the transparent

atmosphere was so dry, though balmy, that the contents of my portmanteau began to feel more comfortable to the touch. Nothing could be more beautiful than the deep bright blue of the river, as I had seen it at Corbally under the noonday sun, and the thick shade of the trees in the Corbally Gardens was agreeable rather than otherwise.

Endnotes

1. Excerpt from *Letters from the West of Ireland* by Alexander Innes Shand which appeared in the *London Times* in 1884.
2. Ballantyne is a misspelling of Bannatyne.
3. Mathesons is a misspelling of Matterson's.
4. Captain Spencer Vansittart lived at Coolbawn House, Castleconnell.