The Fairy Lawn Fete in 1916

by George Lee

The social and political setting for the centenary celebrations of the Christian Brothers in Limerick in 1916 was a reflection of the schizophrenic atmosphere that existed in a country coming to terms with being two years into the First World War and a state battling with its own need for self-determination. The First World War was a conflict that was to have been over by Christmas 1914 in the minds of most, and it was an event in which many hundreds of Limerick men (CBS boys included) gave their lives on battlefields across Europe. This international conflict co-existed in Ireland with a rising flame of nationalism whose flickering flames were fanned in Dublin in Easter 1916, but which, it is fair to say took some time to take hold in other regions of Ireland, Limerick included.

The Irish MPs at the outbreak of the war felt that the best that could be achieved for Ireland was Home Rule and indeed John Redmond, the perceived political leader in the country openly supported Irish recruitment for the British war effort on the promise that Ireland would achieve that goal at wars end.

So, set against this backdrop it is not hard to see how a diversion of the kind that a four day festival in the heart of the city would provide with flags and bunting, bands and stalls and all manner of entertainment bringing light relief to a population more accustomed to long hours of work and poor living conditions.

The newspapers of Easter 1916, albeit written for and mostly unsympathetic to anything other than the ruling classes were less than appreciative of the efforts of the ‘Rebel Leaders’. The Limerick Chronicle of Saturday 6 May 1916 reported the lists of those sentenced to terms of imprisonment and death (mostly commuted). That day they reported that John Mc Bride was executed, this following on from the executions two days earlier of Joseph Mary Plunkett, Edward Daly, Michael O’Hanrahan and Willie Pearse (Padraic Pearse, Thomas Clarke and Thomas McDonagh had been executed on the previous Wednesday morning). The reportage of the ‘The Insurrection’ was very matter of fact and it appeared next to war reports of the destruction of a Zeppelin in Germany and news of a German gain on the Western Front.

That the general population of Limerick were ambivalent towards the Rising and its leaders was wholly understandable in some respects. The names of Pearse, Clarke, McDonagh, McDermott as well as those of McSwiney, Mellow, McCurtain and Clancy were already known to many Limerick people. This was because they had paraded through the city during Easter Week in 1915 and received a less than rapportuous reception from some quarters. Indeed it was noted that in Irishtown they sought and were given the protection of the RIC when they were stoned and booted by people who saw them as being supporters of Germany and the Kaiser, while their sons fought and died on the Western Front and Gallipoli. It is interesting that their most hostile reception was in the poorer parts of the city where many of the men folk were at that very time preparing to land on ‘V’ Beach in Gallipoli in one of the most ill-fated campaigns of the First World War. Their case was not helped when they actually saluted the Kaiser at the railway station before leaving. The hostile reception that they received at the time was best summed up by the comment of Thomas Clarke to John Daly when he said of his trip to Limerick “I always wondered why King William couldn’t take Limerick, now I know why.”

The Mayor of Limerick elected in January 1916, Stephen Quin, of the famous Quin wine retailing family, was a wholesome supporter of John Redmond and the Home Rule party and was perceived as being sympathetic to Unionism, having previously (in 1897 as High Sheriff) received a medal from Queen Victoria for organising the Limerick celebrations of the 60th anniversary of her accession to the throne. Limerick people thought, on the whole were prepared to overlook these leanings as Mayor Quin was seen as being close to Lord Wimborne the Lord Lieutenant and, it was hoped, that he might, as a result of that friendship, be able to bring much needed employment to the city through the establishment of munitions factories for the supply of arms to the Western Front.

The split feelings of the people of Limerick towards Nationalism and Unionism, British and Irish, Catholic and Protestant and ultimately rich and poor were reflected in the fact that conservatively it is reckoned that over 4,000 men from Limerick served in the First World War. The conflict saw over 1,000 of these lose their lives. Most of these men served in the Munster Fusiliers but they were in every regiment and every branch of the Army, Air Force and Navy. Areas like Coonagh were decimated of their young men (it is reckoned that no other village in all of Europe suffered greater losses per head of population than Coonagh during the Great War). In addition to this loss of life Limerick had been a garrison city for many decades before, and had many direct and indirect connections to the British Army through marriage, commerce and even agriculture, (horses particularly) and while the British occupation would not have been seen as benign it certainly was tolerated in an uneasy co-existence with many connections to the war fronts. It is often forgotten in the maestros of the maelstrom that followed 1916 that much of the cultural and sporting aspects of the city were first introduced by the occupying British forces (The first soccer game was played
in Limerick in 1891 between the Black Watch and Lancashire Fusiliers in the Markets Field).

The Rising in Dublin and the subsequent executions were to change everything, but to say that the illumination of the nationalistic flame was a slow burn was an understatement. Following the Rising, and to universal acclaim in the council chamber and elsewhere, Quin as Mayor, appealed for calm and then organised the disarming of the Irish Volunteers in Limerick acting as a ‘go between’ between those holding the arms and Sir Anthony Weldon, the head of the Limerick Garrison. This intervention by the office of Mayor no doubt saved much bloodshed particularly after the confusion brought about by the capture of arms in Banna Strand and the issuing of Eoin McNeill’s countermanding order that stood down the Irish Volunteers in Limerick during the Rising.

While this appeared to steady the popular and provide a short respite for normality, it was not long before another crisis arose. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick at that time, Edward Thomas O’Dwyer, a past pupil of CBS Sexton Street, who, up to that point, would have been seen as a Redmondite and Home Rule supporter published a strong rebuke of General Maxwell the commander of British Forces in Ireland that had executed the 1916 leaders. This outspoken letter once again fanned the flames of nationalism in Limerick and nationally. After its publication and with a rising tide of nationalism sweeping the city the Corporation of Limerick voted to grant the Bishop the Freedom of the City. The only vote against the resolution came from Mayor Quin. The actual conferring ceremony on 14 September 1916 must have been a tense affair with the Mayor presiding.

Public opinion inexorably turned against Quin and Home Rule. This was mainly due to his inability to deliver the much-needed munitions factories to Limerick, and it was coupled with his perceived uncertainty around whether he was Unionist or Nationalist. The final nail in his political coffin was when King George V knighted him while still in office in the New Year’s honours list in 1918. An interesting footnote is that after 1921 Sir Stephen Quin went to live in Ascot, near Windsor where he died in 1944. His family name is still prominent in the city with Quin Street and Quin’s Cottages named after him.

The foregoing account is by way of understanding why the light relief of four day garden fetes in the summer of 1916 was such a diversion for the people of the city. The purpose of the commemorative events marking the centenary of the arrival of the Christian Brothers to Limerick was twofold. Primarily it was felt that their contribution needed to be recognised and secondly in the words of the organisers “they wanted to provide increased accommodation”. In fact these goals are not entirely dissimilar to the goals of the bicentenary committee.

Bishop O’Dwyer was approached at the start of 1916 by the Brothers to obtain his permission to hold a celebration. He thought it was ‘wholly appropriate’ for the celebration to happen and would not either attend or sit on a committee owing to a disagreement that he previously had with the Brothers around their school in Bruff.

While the ‘Fairy Lawn Fete’ as it was advertised was the primary focus of the celebrations, many other events took place throughout the summer including the final of the O’Mara Cup hurling tournament (sponsored by the O’Mara Bacon Company) on Sunday 23 July at the Markets Field, a celebrity hurling match on Sunday 30 July a two or three day excursion to Dublin over the August Bank Holiday weekend and a rowing event at Shannon Rowing Club on 17 August. To understand fully the novelty of the events one just has to consider that scarcely two months before the country had been in the grip of Martial Law with people out after curfew liable to be shot on sight. That the event was a success at all is a tribute to the people when, as is recorded only 3,000 people attended the All-Ireland Football final that year in Dublin.

A cursory look at the papers of the time show daily lists of officers and men being recorded as lost on the battlefield of Europe and beyond. One can only speculate that the economic fortunes of the city were depressed at that time with so many of the breadwinners away at war and the inevitable economic woes that being two years into a war brought.

However, the people of Limerick were no strangers to garden fetes as they were big events at the time and history records a number of them. The most famous other one was the ‘Colleen Bawn Fete’ held in the grounds of St John’s Hospital over five days in 1903. The advertisement for that event still adorns the reception area of the hospital.

There is much crossover evident between the two events both with the organisers and promoters and with the type of events held at these fetes. Whether the link between the two fetes was ever made at the time is a fact that has been lost in the mists of time. A far more subtle connection also existed and revolved around the naming of the two events. The ‘Fairy Lawn’ that the fete was named after, was linked to Gerald Griffin the Christian Brother’s most famous recruit after Edmond Rice. Though born in Limerick city and a writer of some note by the time he joined the Christian Brothers, Griffins most treasured and happy memories came during his formative young years in Loughill, in west Limerick. Here, for a short period before his parents emigrated leaving some of the family behind, he lived an idyllic life with his family in a house and gardens overlooking the River Shannon. The house was named ‘Fairy Lawn’ and it became a defining part of the life of Limerick’s most famous Christian Brother. It was where Gerald Griffin, as an impressionable teenager, followed the events surrounding the murder of Ellen Hanley and the subsequent trial and execution of her middle class husband John Scanlan, who was convicted of the crime. While Scanlan was living in Croom when he was arrested, he had previously lived at Highball House in Loughill, across a field from Fairy Lawn. Griffin wrote his breakthrough play The Collegians based on the case that became known in public circles as the ‘Colleen Bawn’. Whether the link between the two fetes was ever made at the time is a fact that may never be known.

The Christian Brothers Centenary committee set out their intention to hold ‘Centenary Celebrations in aid of Centenary Funds’. The main focus of the events was to happen during a week in May that reflected the actual coming of the Brothers to Limerick. Owing to the state of Martial Law being in place and the fact that all the entrances to the
city were manned by armed soldiers the celebrations were postponed. Fortunately for the event the month of July was chosen and that summer turned out to be one of the finest on record. Eventually the fete happened in the week from 15 to 23 July 1916.

The planning of the event was a matter of much civic importance with the Mayor chairing the organising committee that included the High Sheriff, the Trades Councils and the City Aldermen. An executive committee was established and work began. While the main event was to revolve around the week’s festivities in July a whole series of other events were to be organised to raise funds and awareness for the committee. Paul Bernard of Rutland Street was the main organiser of the entertainment at these events. He was the owner of the Tivoli Theatre in the city and his father Thomas Bernard was the leader of the orchestra in the Theatre Royal and also one of the first professional photographers in the city. It is interesting in these days of traffic gridlock to note that the only assistance that Paul Bernard requested from the council, in order to organise these events was that the cars of the senior council members be made available to convey the artists to far flung places like Dromkeen and Killonan.

Eventually the running order for the week of celebrations in July was agreed upon and advertised as follows: Saturday 15 July was a ‘flag, flower and gift’ day which essentially was a day for non-perishable goods and produce to be brought to St Michael’s Place ahead of the fete and for the decoration of the tents and accommodation to be completed. It was also the day that the centenary flag was raised and it marked the official beginning of the week, though little else began before the religious ceremony that took place the following day.

Sunday 16 July was another beautiful day in what was an exceptionally good summer and thousands of people turned out to witness a procession through the streets of the city to St John’s Cathedral where High Mass and Benediction were celebrated. The procession commenced at 11 O’clock at Bank Place near the Custom House and the route came through Rutland Street, Patrick Street, William Street and Cathedral Place before arriving at the cathedral for 12 noon Mass. The size of the procession was evident from the report in the Limerick Chronicle on the following Tuesday evening which stated: ‘There were members of the Arch Confraternity, the pupils past and present …The Fire Brigade wore their uniforms and brass helmets and three city bands, St John’s, Sarsfield and Bohenburry along with the band of St Joseph’s Industrial School played religious hymns on route’.

The Mayor, High Sheriff, Aldermen and Councillors along with many citizens of the city were in attendance. High Mass was celebrated by Rev. Father Connolly who was a curate in St. John’s. The sermon was given by an Augustinian preacher, rather than the Bishop who still had not relented, but notwithstanding this a telegram of congratulation was read from Cardinal Gasparri. At its conclusion the official party travelled to Sexton Street where an official meeting was held where the Mayor expressed his satisfaction at being in the chair at this great time for the Brothers in the city and he announced that the Corporation scholarship had been won by a CBS student Edward Healy. The rest of the formalities revolved around addresses by William Nunan, the Town Clerk on behalf of the Corporation, past and present pupils, the Limerick Trades Council, Limerick Pork Butcher’s Society and a response from Rev Brother Stapleton, Superior of CBS in Limerick. The Mayor drew proceedings to a close by thanking all concerned for making the centenary celebrations such a success. In keeping with religious tradition of the time no other events occurred on that Sunday.

The ‘Fairy Lawn Fete’ began in earnest on the following Wednesday 19 July and continued each day in the school grounds until Saturday 22 July. The gates opened each day at 3 pm and an admission fee of 6d was charged (Children were half price each day between 3 pm and 7 pm). A season ticket for all days and a multiple entrance ticket was also available for 1 shilling and 6 pence. The interest was so great that excursion trains ran from
neighbouring counties on all of the days of the fete.

The breadth of entertainment available was massive even by today's standards. For many, a major source of interest was the fact that the grounds were 'lighted by electricity' which was of itself a major feat considering that the construction of the first power station in the country at Ardnacrusha was some thirteen years away. A great attraction of the fete was what was known as a Café Chantant. It was originally devised as an outdoor café where small groups of performers performed popular music for the public. The music was generally light-hearted, but, as opposed to the cabaret tradition, not particularly political or confrontational. This was a very popular addition and one can only imagine how nice it must have been on balmy summer evenings. The café was overseen by Mrs J P Hartigan who was the wife of the owner of Hartigan's Horse Repository (signage for this business is still in place in Cecil Street). The Hartigan family had been a major supplier of horses to the British Army both during the Boer War and in the First World War and were one of the merchant families of the city. Paul Bernard (referred to earlier) oversaw the musical element of the café.

One of the outstanding successes of the event was the ‘Ballroom’ which was overseen by Mrs Nolan and Mrs O'Connor. Contemporary accounts report that it was full to capacity across all the nights of the fete with an excellent floor, music and ‘tasteful decoration’. It was so successful that for the last two nights an additional tent needed to be erected to cater for the patrons.

In these health conscious days it is hard to believe that one of the advertised attractions was the 'Cigarette Stall'. It is easier to understand when one considers that Limerick at the time had Clune's and Spillane's tobacco factories both in the city and 'Garryowen Flag' was also a popular brand. Other tents sold sweets and minerals, birc a brac and country produce and there was even a book stall named after Gerald Griffin. In what was probably regarded as something risqué at the time there was palmistry and fortune telling available as well as ventriloquism and sleight of hand. Children were well catered for with an act called 'Saucy Joe' described as 'the delight of the children'. They also had a chance to try their hands at 'Twirlette', 'Clock Golf', 'Hoopla' and 'Hook It'.

By far and away the biggest attraction in the entertainment sphere was a conjurer called 'Presto the Modern Magician' who was advertised as being from Dublin and had filled music halls all over England with his 'extensive repertoire of unique illusory effects'.

One of the most intriguing reports of the week was an account given of the Bridge tournament held on the Thursday afternoon of the fete. It was hailed as a major success with first prize being won by Mrs Yates. Her prize which she generously re-donated to the prisoner of war fund was a 'fat sheep' presented by Mr D Hartnett of Lemonfield, Crecora. Second prize of £2 was won by Mrs Townsend and it was presented by Mrs Cleeve (whose family produced sweets, toffees and condensed milk). Lady Shaw (from the family associated with Shaw's bacon factory) won third prize of a box of chocolates. This demonstrates the degree to which the merchant classes of the city had supported the fundraising efforts of the school and the obvious high regard in which they held the Christian Brothers and their brand of education.

The proceeds of the fete came to £398-19.5, and the whole event was a major success. It made a lasting impression on the people of Limerick and its effect can still be felt through events like Milford Hospice Harvest Fair attracting big crowds and major funds each year.
The festivities continued throughout the summer and (as alluded to earlier) a major hurling tournament was held in the Markets Field on the Sunday following the fete. The day featured two hurling games, the 'curtain raiser' was a challenge game between Cloughan (County Champions) and Young Irelands and the main match was the final of the O'Mara Cup. The match was billed as a final between Cork and Tipperary, Cork were represented by club team 'Redmonds' while Toomevara represented Tipperary. This final was the culmination of a four county 'Mini Munster Championship' with opening games between Limerick and Tipperary and Clare and Cork. Tipperary, led by the legendary 'Wedger Maher', were victorious. Once again special trains ran from neighbouring counties for the games and the Garryowen venue was a complete sell-out for the matches. It is interesting that the GAA found it necessary to point out that the games were being held under GAA rules, an obvious reference to the fact that a major split had seen the establishment of the NAGAC breakaway from the association around that time. A split that was to see an 'Alternative All Ireland Hurling Final' played and won by Limerick against Wexford at the Markets Field a year later.

An excursion to Dublin was held over the August Bank Holiday weekend, which must have startled some of those that went on it. Dublin was a city in ruins at that time after the Easter Rising and it must have been a surreal experience to have witnessed the aftermath at first hand. Limerick Choral Society held two concerts in the Athenaeum in Cecil Street, with the renowned Limerick tenor Joseph O’Mara performing in his native city. In August Shannon Rowing Club hosted an event called 'At Home' and Athlunkard Boat Club also held a regatta in aid of the fund, thus drawing a very full summers activities to a close.

So as the bi-centenary year is commemorated and we reflect on our own unique celebrations, we do so in the shadows of those that went before us. Our city has changed a lot in the hundred years since 1916, but CBS in Sexton Street still exists. So too does the will to celebrate the Order that has educated young men since the first Brothers came to Limerick in 1816 and set up in Sexton Street in 1828. We look to the past relating the accounts of the celebrations of a hundred years ago and remembering those whose efforts brightened up those war-torn and troubled days. However, in doing so, we also look to the future and create a record of our memories and happenings in days that may not be wholly dissimilar in local, national or international terms.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Tom Tooney for his assistance on the split between the GAA and the NAGAC.

References


Limerick Chronicle April, May and July 1916

Limerick Leader 23 May 1915, Tadgh Moloney, The Day Patrick Pearse and his Allies were stoned in Limerick


Sinead McCool, Easter Widows. (Dublin, 2014)

George Lee, who was born in Mulgrave Street, Limerick is a recreational writer and broadcaster. A past pupil of CBS Limerick and LIT, he is passionate about his unique city, its people and history. He is now living in Dromanna, County Limerick and has contributed to many publications, most notably CBS200, published early in 2016.