

HOW GARRYOWEN GOT ITS NAME

Owen's Garden

FAMOUS LIMERICK GARDENS – 111

Most of us take the name of Garryowen very much for granted. We know that a famous military air, a senior rugby team, and a few other sporting groups have been called after it, that the 'Walls of Garryowen' were badly battered by shot and shell during the Williamite siege and not much more.

But how did the district, known as Garryowen for more than two-hundred years, originally get its name? Gerald Griffin, writing in 1828, gives this account in his book

The Collegians:

"Tradition has preserved the occasion of its celebrity, and the origin of its name, which appears to be compounded of two Irish words signifying Owen's garden. A person so called was the owner, about half a century since, of a cottage and plot of ground on this spot, which from its contiguity to the town, became a favourite resort with the young citizens of both sexes. Owen's garden was a general rendezvous for those who sought for simple amusement or for dissipation. The old people drank together under the shades of the trees, the young played at ball, goal, or other athletic exercises on the green; while a few lingering by the hedge-rows with their fair acquaintances, cheated the time with sounds less boisterous, indeed, but yet possessing their fascination also".

But the ordered life in the garden and in Garryowen itself was destined to be rudely disturbed by the unwelcome arrival of a gang with another kind of sport in mind. Gerald Griffin cast a mildly sardonic eye on these young men and their activities:

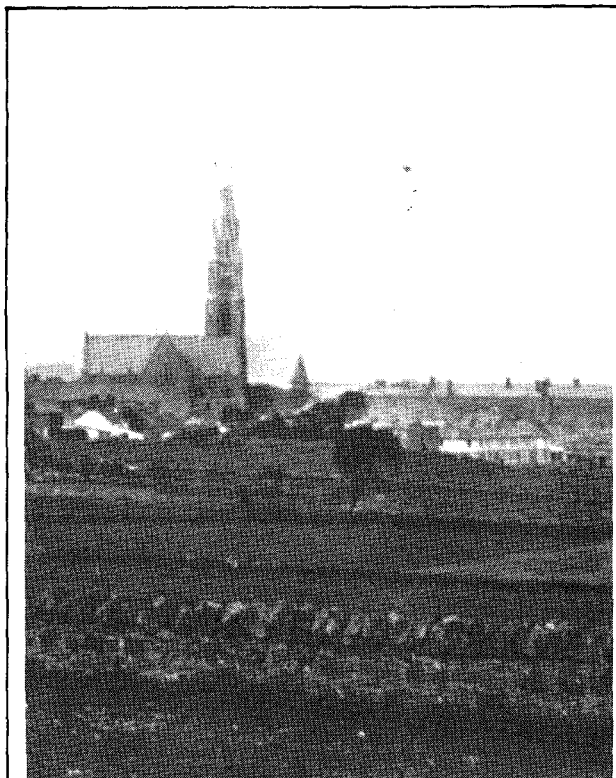
"These young gentlemen, being fond of wit, amused themselves by forming parties at night, to wring the necks off all the geese, and the knockers of all the hall-doors in the neighbourhood. They sometimes suffered their genius to soar as high as the breaking of a lamp, or even the demolition of a watchman ... annoying the peaceable inmates of the neighbouring houses with the long continued assaults on the front doors, terrifying the quiet passers-by with every species of insult and provocation, and indulging their practical propensities against all the geese in Garryowen".

Who were these disorderly young men? They were the sons of merchants and wholesale traders of the city. We know two of them by name: their leader Johnny Connell and another tearaway Harry O'Brien. The Connell family owned one of the two breweries in Garryowen, but young Johnny showed more interest in making mischief than in making porter.

The boys did not, by all accounts, confine themselves to Garryowen. Writing in the past century the Bard of Thomond, Michael Hogan, in his best poem **Drunken Thady**, tells how the gang made one of its rampages into St. Mary's parish and shattered the hushed midnight mood of Christmas Eve:

"The sweet-toned bells of St. Mary's tower,
Proclaimed the Saviour's natal hour!

By Jim Kemmy



Garryowen as it was before the new housing estate was built.

And many an eye with pleasure glistened!
And many an ear with rapture listened!
The gathered crowd of charmed people
Dispersed from gazing at the steeple;
The homeward thread of parting feet,
Died on the echoes of the street;
For Johnny Connell, the dreaded man,
With his wild-raking Garryowen clan,
Cleared the streets and smashed each lamp,
And made the watchmen all decamp!"

But the greatest celebration of Johnny Connell and his 'boys' is to be found in the song **Garryowen**. The unknown versifier who composed the words has ensured that the name of the old place will live forever.

The song starts off with a rallying call to 'each jovial blade' to 'come booze and sing', and not to reckon the cost:

"Let Baccus' sons be not dismayed,
But join with me each jovial blade;
Come booze and sing, and lend your aid
To help me with the chorus:-

Instead of spa we'll drink brown ale,
And pay the reckoning on the nail,

No man for debt shall go to jail
From Garryowen in glory!"

Street lamps were first erected in Limerick at the expense of Alderman Thomas Rose in 1696. The hissing, flickering gas-lamps made an easy target for the 'boys', as did the feeble old watchmen who vainly tried to protect them. The song declares:

"We are the boys who take delight in
Smashing the Limerick lamps when lighting,
Through the streets like sporters fighting
And tearing all before us.

We'll break windows, we'll break doors,
Then watch knock down by threes and fours,
Then let the doctors work their cures,
And tinker up our bruises."

Even the mayor, bailiffs and sheriffs held no terrors for the gang:

"We'll beat the bailiffs out of fun,
We'll make the mayor and sheriffs run;
We are the boys no man dares dun,
If he regards a whole skin."

And Johnny Connell could, in a series of throws, pitch any kind of bar the mile distance between Garryowen and Thomondgate:

"Johnny Connell's tall and straight;
And in his limbs he is complete;
He'll pitch a bar of any weight
From Garryowen to Thomondgate."

The Connell family became so alarmed at Johnny's behaviour that they packed him off, out of harm's way, to Cork. But despite his removal, the popularity of Garryowen's garden declined. After a final fling by Harry O'Brien, when he made his dramatic leap from the court and literally jumped into history, the district was never the same again:

"Garryowen is gone to wreck
Since Johnny Connell went to Cork;
Though Harry O'Brien leapt over the dock
In spite of judge and jury."

Gerald Griffin presents an unromantic and unflatter-

ing description of Garryowen, its buildings and the people who lived there at the time:

"A few roofs yet remain unshaken, under which some impoverished families endeavour to work out a wretched subsistence by maintaining a huxter trade, by cobbling old shoes and manufacturing ropes. A small rookery wears the ears of the inhabitants at one end of the outlet, and a rope-walk, which extends along the adjacent slop of Gallow's-green (so called for certain reasons) ... at the other end an alley of coffin-maker's shops, with a fever hospital on one side and a churchyard on the other. A person who was bent on a journey to another world could not desire a more expeditious outfit than Garryowen could now afford him, nor a more commodious choice of conveyances; from the machine on the slope above glanced at, to the pest-house at the farther end."

With the departure of its 'wild-raking' leader, the gang ceased its unruly activities. The 'boys' duly grew up and went on to take their ordained places, like their fathers before them, in Limerick's staid business community. On his return from his enforced exile to Cork, Johnny Connell settled down to lead a law-abiding life. Little is known about his subsequent career, though his gesture in donating to the Dominicans the site for their church at Baker Place is one of the few recorded details of his later years. There is no doubt, however, that he became a thoroughly reformed citizen.

Johnny Connell is buried in the ancient churchyard of Donoghmore, near Limerick. His name and his fame will endure in his native city while Garryowen itself survives. He has left us a legend which has lasted for more than two hundred years. So when next you hear the name "Garryowen" perhaps you might pause for a moment to recall that youthful hero of song and story and his escapades in Owen's garden long ago.

"Instead of spa we'll drink brown ale,
And pay the reckoning on the nail,
No man for debt shall go to jail,
From Garryowen in glory!"



An old Garryowen landmark: Gleeson's house, with its well-worn gable "stones" hidden from view.