

I was born towards the end of the 19th century in the small town of Birr in the centre of Ireland, with the Bog of Allen as its near neighbour, the blue Kinnity mountains in the offing and, about ten miles away, the lovely river Shannon. The town, well planned and laid out with its squares and the malls, had a weekly market day and frequent fairs and was the shopping centre for the farmers from the surrounding countryside. There were still some large landowners in their big houses in the neighbourhood and overlooking the town was Birr Castle, the residence of the Earl of Rosse. Birr Castle had been, in former days, the chief seat of the O'Carrolls, but in the reign of James I the castle and its appendages were assigned to Lawrence Parsons, brother of Sir William Parsons, Surveyor-General. Parsons is the Rosse family name. As children we were given right of entry to the castle grounds, the demesne with its fine trees, its gardens and the river and, best of all, the famous telescope.

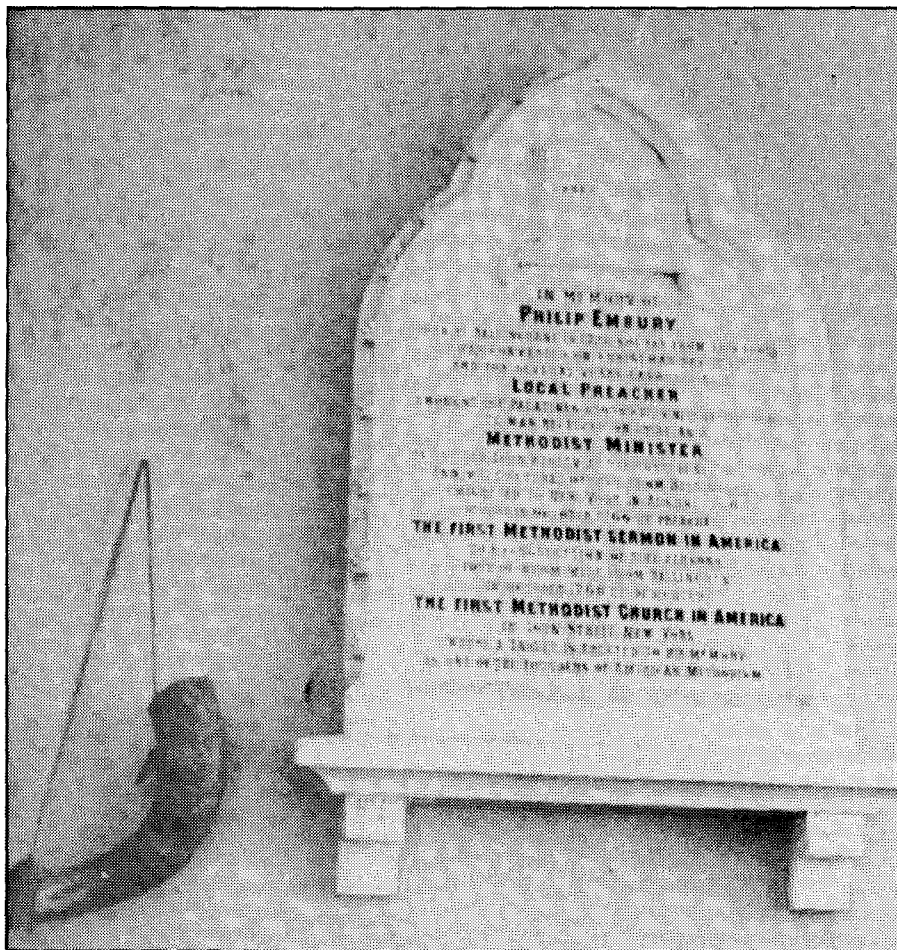
The telescope was erected in 1845 near the castle between two high walls by the 3rd Earl of Rosse. The 6-foot reflector had a focal length of 54 feet and the tube was 7 feet in diameter; five people could fit easily in this huge tube. The telescope contributed considerably to astronomical science, the 3rd Earl discovered the Spiral Nebulae, while the 4th Earl succeeded in measuring the heat of the moon. Nearby was a small observatory where the data was collected on the moon and various nebulae. On the death of the 4th Earl the telescope was dismantled, the reflector was removed and is now housed in the South Kensington Museum.

We were fortunate to have in our small town, one of the few 'Model' schools of Ireland, and, at the back, quite large playgrounds; the boys' playground was separate from the girls'; there was complete segregation of the sexes. At the time when we were at the school, the headmistress was a stalwart woman from Limerick City, very decided in her views, a strict disciplinarian, a very good teacher except in her method of teaching scripture. She would sit on a desk, with her feet on the seat, facing at least thirty of the older children seated at their desks. She commanded the pupils to read, verse about, from a chosen chapter in the Bible. There was no attempt on her part to give an explanation of the text and the hesitant reading of the pupils did not convey to us anything of the beauty and strength of the old scriptures. It was strange that she fell down on this subject, for she was very good on English literature and she gave us an early introduction to all the well-known English authors.

She had a temper and it was not surprising that she lost it when she was confronted with what to her was some particular stupidity. She could be

# A PALATINE CHILDHOOD

BY F.S. HINCHY



*Memorial to Philip Embury at Ballingrane Methodist Church.*

merciless to some of the poor children who were a bit slow in the uptake, it was really not their fault that they could not understand what she was talking about. Today, these children would be streamed and left to learn nothing in a group by themselves. Our teacher would have none of that, it was her job to teach and teach she would, even if it meant a few sharp raps of the cane and the subsequent tears. I never liked this practice of hers of slapping children and I told her so in unmistakable terms when she slapped my sister and I said I would tell my father. Considering that I was under 12 years of age, this was rather a nerve on my part, and I often wondered in later years why she did not turn me out of the school.

I remember well, one day I walked out of the school myself after I had been

told I must stay in as a punishment over some matter of wrong sums. I was never much good at multiplying and adding up farthings and quarters of ounces and such like quantities used in those ghastly sums where one goes shopping and has to buy goods in small quantities. I could not get the wretched sum right and hence my punishment; but I had had enough of school and I just opened the front door and went out and home to my mother. I often think what a wise woman she was, she took no notice of my escapades, there was no frantic visit to the headmistress for her; she simply ignored the whole business and back I was sent to school next day - as far as I remember the headmistress took no notice either. There were no ill feelings on either side, and when I visited her after my transference to another school



*The Square, Adare, at the turn of the century.*

later on, she expressed pleasure at my improvement in speech and manner - the little hooligan was being tamed at last.

From quite an early age we were allowed to travel on our own, or rather in the charge of the railway guard as we made the journey from our home to our relatives in County Limerick for the long summer holiday. My sister Violet, my brothers Victor and Sandy, and myself made up our party, and although we were sad at leaving mother for four to six weeks, we looked forward to the freedom of living on a farm without elder brothers and sisters to restrict our movements and with only a kindly uncle and aunt to look after us. Limerick Station seemed huge to us, so many platforms, but we found our local train and then there was the excitement of the drive behind a high stepping horse to the farm. Uncle was waiting for us in the station yard and off we went on the last stage of our journey. It was to my mother's brother's farm that we went year after year and well I remember when we were introduced to the many friends and relatives we were usually introduced as Kate's children and that seemed to be sufficient title for us.

In our own county we had no relatives, but in County Limerick we were in the midst of quite a large gathering of cousins, first, second and third cousins, all ages, and a nice selection of aunts and uncles. They had a variety of surnames, definitely not Irish, although as children we were not aware of this. There were the Shiers (my

mother's people), the Barkmans, the Smythes, Bovenizers, Switzers, Hecks, Heaveners, Millers, Sparlings and Teskeys. They were mainly farmers, and their comfortable farmhouses, neat, tidy and well furnished, were surrounded with flower and vegetable gardens and well stocked orchards. The farm buildings were kept in good repair, each farm had its dairy where the pans of milk were laid out on long tables for the cream to rise. It was one of our treats as children, to watch the thick yellow cream being skimmed off the great pans of milk for the churns, which were shaped like wooden barrels and mounted on stands, and which were turned by hand until the delicious butter came.

All these relatives of ours were great churchgoers, some went to the Church of Ireland churches, and others to the various Methodist chapels. They also held services in their homes, and in my mother's old home there was one bedroom called 'The Preachers' Room, for that was set aside for the preachers who travelled about from village to village in County Limerick. They all loved music and singing, they were and are great folks for entertaining each other and their parties at each other's houses in the winter and their picnics in the summer were no half-hearted affairs. There was food in great variety and plenty, all home-cooked, each family with its own particular speciality, fruit cakes, apple cakes, special meats, but no alcoholic drinks, tea in plenty and soft drinks only. We accepted all this

hospitality as our right; it did not occur to us that we were living in what might almost be called a closed community or order with its own particular rites and ceremonies. It was not until years later that we learned that our group of relations were the descendants of religious refugees from the Palatinate in Southern Germany, who were given asylum by the British government, in Southern Ireland.

The stories about these ancestors intrigued me, and I was determined to find out more about their history by visiting their place of origin in the Palatinate. I had to wait until after the second World War when conditions were suitable for travel in South Germany. I made my way to the small town of Neustadt in the Palatinate and from there I set out to visit nearby towns and villages to see if I could find any trace of the families who had to leave their homes for far-away England. Yes, there were a few familiar surnames over shop fronts in the town of Speyer, and in the cemetery at Bad Durkheim I found on a grave filled with flowers a wooden cross bearing the name Barbara Heck, 1885, and another wooden cross with the names Martin and Charles Heck, the same names and even Christian names that we knew in County Limerick.

My school German was just enough to get me about, but not enough to allow me to enter into long conversation, so that I did not make any extensive enquiries from the folks in the towns. I decided to adopt the plan suggested to

me by Professor Ian Richmond of Oxford, the well-known archaeologist, to go to the University at Heidelberg and see what written records I could find there. I was admitted to the library at Heidelberg and given a place in the large reading room, where students were all busy at work. I had explained to the librarian what I was looking for and hoped to find some records of the refugees who came from the Palatinate to England early in the 18th century. Presently, one of the library staff came along with some large tomes in his arms, records written in English and printed in America. I studied them carefully and found very useful information.

From the notes which I made from these books and from research made in histories and journals in the colleges in Ireland by my brother Victor, I was able to put together a short account of the flight of these Palatines, the long slow journey up the Rhine to the coast, where ships sent by Queen Anne of England brought them safely to the English coast.

In the year 1709, seven thousand Protestant Lutherans were driven from their homes in the Palatinate by the French, under Louis XIV. About half the number went to North America, a few families stayed in England and the rest came to Ireland. They were settled on the Southwell property, near Rathkeale, in Co. Limerick (Lord Southwell was secretary to William III while he was in Ireland). Each man, woman and child allowed eight acres of land, which was to be paid for at the rate of 5s. an acre, yearly for ever. The government agreed to pay their rent for twenty years in order to encourage the Protestant interest in Ireland and make them all freeholders. Every man was supplied with a musket (called a Queen Anne piece) to protect himself and his family. Some of the families, including the Shiers, my mother's family, were settled on the Adare property, about 1777. This is the farm on which as children we spent our summer holidays. The farm was bought out under the Wyndham Act by the Shiers; the land is the same but the house has been rebuilt three times since 1777.

The strong sense of kinship has not died out in the present day descendants of the Palatines, although outwardly there is little distinction between them and their neighbours in the county, there is still a strong feeling of belonging to a separate clan, who had passed through sorrowful times and whose release to the comparative freedom of Southern Ireland is still commemorated every first Tuesday in June, when the surviving members of the clan, from far and wide, meet in Lord Dunraven's Demesne at Adare for a religious meeting, which is followed by a social gathering at which news is exchanged and the separate families are linked up again.

In March, 1966, some members of the American group of Palatines returned to Limerick to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of American

Methodism in 1766 by Limerick-born Barbara Heck and Philip Embury. A service was held in Ballingrane Methodist Church, within a mile of where the two founders were born. Later at a reception in the Limerick Methodist Church, Commander J.W. Frost, representing the Taoiseach, Mr. Sean Lemass, read a letter in which Mr. Lemass stated that it gave him great pleasure to send greetings to commemorate the founding of the American Methodist Church. The Rev. Dr. Albea Godbold, North Carolina, Executive Secretary of the American Association of the Methodist Historical Society, representing the fourteen million American Methodists, said they were deeply indebted to Ireland. The American Ambassador, Mr. Raymond Guest, conveyed the best wishes of President Johnson for the occasion.

We used to attend services at the Ballingrane Methodist Church when we visited another aunt and uncle in that district. My aunt was a stickler for churchgoing, done in the proper style, so that dressed in our best "Sunday clothes" we were driven to the Church of Ireland church in the next parish for morning service and in the afternoon we walked the short distance to the Methodist Church.

As a family, we all hated leaving home and our parents for any length of time; we wept copious tears, and when it came to going away to boarding school it was absolute agony. It was settled by my parents that I should go as a weekly boarder to a small private school in the next town when I was 13. For two years, every Monday morning during term time was a perfect nightmare to me. On Sunday night, I used to feel the sickness coming on, homesickness it was called, and it had no apparent cure and, by Monday morning, I was worked up to such a state that I could neither eat nor sleep. The quantities of goodies which I took from home to school did not seem to help. When I had passed 15, I seemed to get better control over myself and was able to concentrate my mind on enjoying the company I had in school without pining for home.

The school was run by three sisters known as Miss Hughes, Miss Harriet and Miss Annie. Miss Hughes, tall and stately, did languages, French for all the pupils and German or Latin, whichever was preferred by the pupils - we had to have two languages for the Intermediate School Examinations. Miss Harriet did mathematics - arithmetic, algebra, geometry and English. She was very good at English carrying on the tradition which we had benefited from at the Model School. One addition to this lesson was the reading of special articles from *The Daily News*, so that we were kept aware of important affairs outside the small world of Ireland, and familiar with famous people and heads of government in other countries. Miss Harriet made us work ourselves during her classes, reading or writing set pieces

and, while we were busy doing this, she carried on her own writing in an exercise book on her knee - she wrote short stories for a popular women's weekly, and great was our glee when we managed to come across a copy of the paper and could read the story. She sure had some imagination and she could write such love stories.

Miss Annie taught music and needlework and she also was the housekeeper for the school. I did not think much of music lessons, in particular, my piano lesson, and when it came to my turn I was often lost in the garden amongst the raspberry canes, and the time it took to find me meant less time for the lesson. One follow-up from the music lesson was the torture of Musical Evenings held at intervals during the term, when the pupils had to perform in the large drawingroom before an audience of parents and friends. We had to recite poems, they always seemed to me so difficult to say - "Soft soft winds from out the sweet south sailing, etc.," took some practice in reading, let alone remembering what came next, but the real torture was the piano piece. My left hand always lagged behind my right hand and, as I played mainly by ear, I was completely lost when I forgot the next bit and could not read where I had got to on the music stuck up on the piano before me. There was one good thing about these musical evenings, the special meals before the concert when special cakes were served and little dishes of chocolates were distributed down the long tables. They were generous, those three old ladies, and the fees were very low even for those days.

The school year ended with the examinations for the Intermediate Board of Education. The grades - junior, middle and senior - were covered in the school, so that we all had something definite to work for during the year. There was no frantic rush towards the end of the school year with a final cramming of possible information to suit set questions. For the last week before the examinations, we were taken off the usual school work and encouraged to relax and read other than set school books. I remember how I devoured Conan Doyle during these times. Another treat at examination times was the drive to the monastery several miles from our school, where the examinations took place in the school premises attached to the monastery. The monks were friendly to us and they supplied us with such good meals, for we had to have our lunch there every day of the examination week. We never seemed to doubt that we would pass our examinations, and we collected our certificates in due course as our right. How lucky we were in our schooling, no large classes, no streaming, the minimum of school apparatus, but the undivided attention of born teachers.

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