

THE PARK DANES

by PATSY HARROLD

INTRODUCTION

Limerick, like many coastal towns in Ireland, was founded by the Vikings. Sometime towards the end of the 9th century the invaders sailed up the Shannon Estuary in search of loot from the many monasteries on its banks and islands. After some years of bloody skirmishing with the native Irish, they ceased their war-like pursuits and settled peacefully on an island called Inis Sibhton, later to be called King's Island. They built a clay and wattle settlement and commenced trading with the local clans, and it was from this crude settlement that the city of Limerick originated. A long and sometimes violent procession of Norman, Cromwellian and Dutch invaders succeeded the Vikings, and each new group brought its own distinctive culture to the place.

In spite of three calamitous sieges and many rebellions, the city, because of its strategic importance and commercial potential, grew and prospered. During the Industrial Revolution, a further invasion - this time a peaceful one - of technicians and artisans occurred. This was mainly due to the resurgence of church building after Catholic Emancipation and to the setting up of several bacon factories the excellence of whose products made Limerick a byword throughout the country. The city's four military barracks were garrisoned by English, Scottish and Welsh regiments, whose culture was British and urban.

At the beginning of the 20th century the lifestyle of the average Limerick man and woman was not much different from that of his or her counterpart in Edinburgh or Bristol. Yet, within the municipal boundary of the city, there flourished a small community with a mode of life which had remained homogeneous and rural for centuries. There is a widely held tradition in Limerick that these unique people are descended from the original Viking invaders. The district inhabited by this riverside colony is named Park.



ORIGINS AND FOLKLORE

Park is a long, narrow tract of land on the north-east of Limerick. The area straddles the three townlands of Lower Park, Rhebogogue and Singland. Bounded by the river Shannon on the Clare side, and bisected by a short stretch of the canal which links the river with the city, the district is further divided by the Limerick to Sligo railway line. The topography of Park, therefore, resembles a hot-cross bun, with the canal running from east to west and the railway line from north to south.

Up to 1840 Park was outside the city boundary. In that year most of the district was incorporated into the city and the remaining part was included in 1950. The area is, thus, clearly defined on old and modern maps of Limerick. But something more than a line on a map is needed to capture the characteristics of its inhabitants. These characteristics embrace and draw together its entire people in one tightly-knit community. So Park could well be described as more a state of

mind and identity than a mere geographical location.

The land is divided into a patchwork of cultivated plots, most of them no bigger than market gardens. These fields are separated not by the usual ditch or fence, but by boulders known as bound stones. The same method of dividing land is used in Denmark. The industry, sobriety and phlegmatic temperament of the Park people would also support the claim to Scandinavian origins. Some of the oldest families have a folklore going back beyond the coming of the Danes to the early Christian period. Ancient Park family names are: Shanny, Hannan, Cunneen, McNamara, Cross, Cusack, Lawlor, Quilligan, Clancy, Cussen, Mullally, Troy, Woods, O'Halloran, Danagher, Kane, McMahon, Gallagher, Hynes, Ryan, Doyle, Kenny and Keehan.

The McNamaras arrived from Clare during the early part of the seventeenth century as refugees from the bitter fighting that took place there during the Cromwellian wars. The Shannys were members of the Abbey fishermen, a select group who fished the Shannon for salmon down through the centuries.

The Cunneens are considered to be the oldest clan, with traditions going back to the time of Saint Patrick.

Many Park traditions are linked with St. Patrick in a peculiar love-hate way. There is a well dedicated to the saint where an angel is reputed to have appeared to Patrick, giving the place the name of Saingéal Pádraig, or Singland. A stone statue of the saint, built at the well, presides impassively over the townland.

A boulder at the base of a wall close to the well is venerated as the place where Patrick is said to have knelt in prayer. It was claimed that two worn grooves in the stone were formed by the imprint of the saint's knees. The stone is polished like marble from the touchings of pious pilgrims through the centuries. An old tree stood beside the well festooned with the discarded crutches and rags of grateful supplicants.

The story is still told about how Patrick, on his journey from Cashel, made his way towards the Shannon to visit the stronghold of Dal Cais. Their chief was then at Singland holding the river fords while his men were con-

quering Thomond. Accordig to the **Life** of the saint, "Cairtheann, son of Blod, believed in the Lord and Patrick baptised him at Saingéal". The saint is also reputed to have converted the chjef of the Cunneens and to have baptised him at the well.

St. Patrick's cemetery marks the site of the ancient church that was built on the slope above the well. An iron bell from this church was saved after the demolition of the building and, after being kept for a time in the house of a Parkman, has survived in Limerick to the present time. The stump of a round tower was visible in the grounds of the churchyard up to the end of the eighteenth century.

A carved fifteenth century stone from the old church is set into a wall adjoining a house owned by the Lawlor family. Another fragment of a stone laid flat on the ground, bears a raised double-armed cross. These stones were regarded more as good luck objects than religious objects.

The 17th of March is celebrated as a major feastday and, up to recent times, an elaborate ritual of prayers and

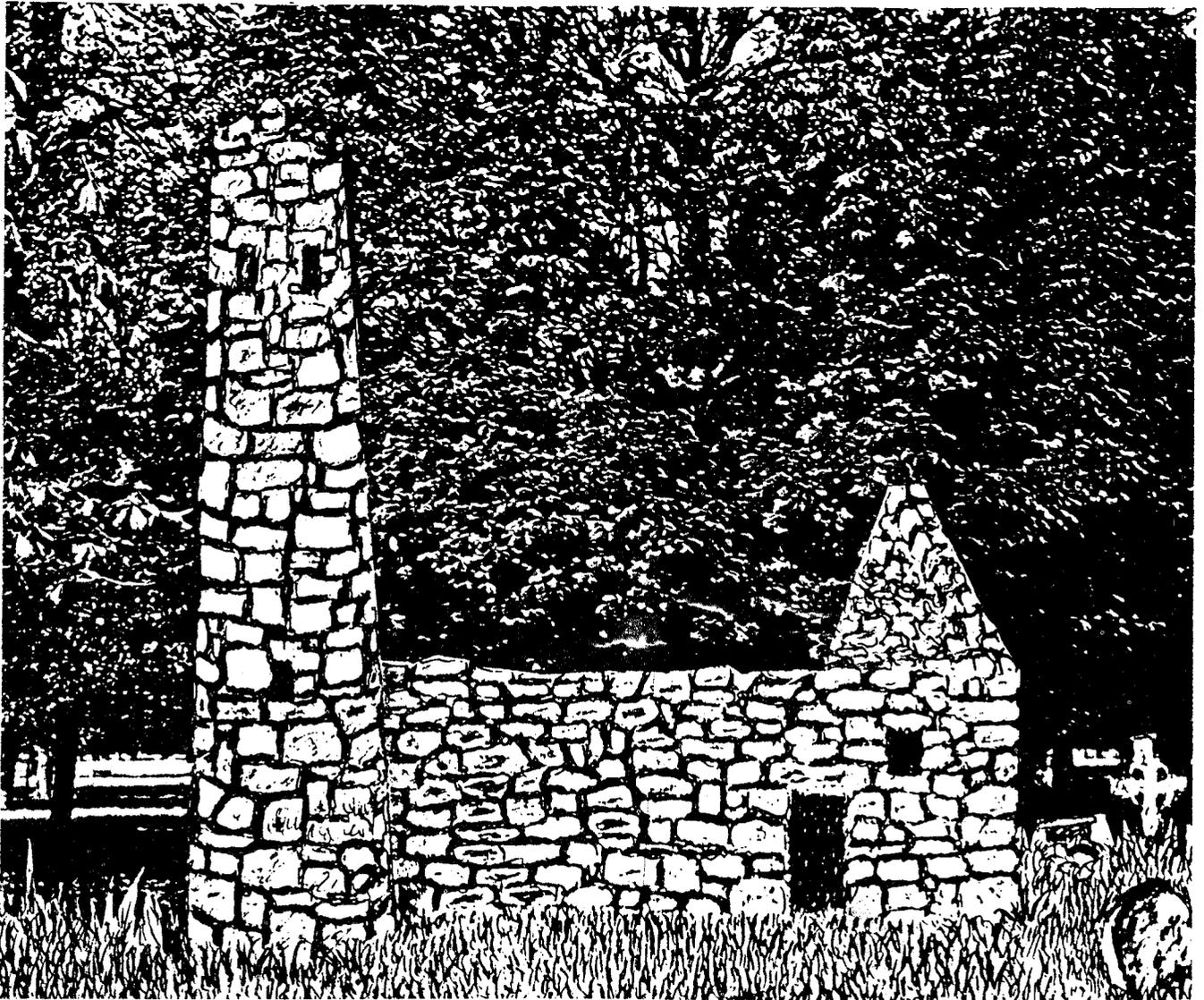
rounds was enacted at the well in the nine days preceding the holiday. The feast was also regarded as a "day out" for the Parkmen after the long winter. In the days when licensing laws were less liberal than they are today throats dry from praying were refreshed at Norrie Troy's shebeen on the Lower Park Road.

At the request of Reverend Michael Malone, the Fair Green Trustees enclosed the area around the well in 1853; fifty years later the present shrine was erected. In early Irish sources the hillocks near the well are called Cnocain Saingil. After the district fell forfeit under Cromwell, Petty's Civil Survey of 1654 states that the present Fair Green was known as the "Green Land of Fahanaghnockane" (Faithche na gCnocan).

But despite the fact that Patrick's feastday rivals that of Christmas in importance, his sojourn in the district appears to have been far from happy. His ass is said to have been relieved of its silver shoes by a Parkman. Another local man, when asked for a sop of hay for the hungry animal, flatly refused the

saint saying, "Sure, we are only draggin'. St. Patrick is then supposed to have laid his famous curse. "That ye may be always draggin', on the Park people. But the historical accuracy of this persistent piece of folklore is more than a little diminished by the fact that asses were not introduced into Ireland until late in the seventeenth century.

St. Martin was also venerated in Park as the patron saint of mills. A prophesy that a mill in the district would mill blood is supposed to have been fulfilled when a mill at Singland was used to convert blood from the Limerick bacon factories into fertiliser. Ever since this mill has been known as the "Bloodmill". St. Martin was regarded as being mischievous and cantankerous. It may have been in an attempt to placate the saint that the name Martin was given to many children in Park in the last century. St. Martin's Day occurs on October 30th and was marked by the practice of some superstitious beliefs. On the eve of the day a cock was killed in each home and the blood sprinkled at the four corners of the house and on the



Kevin Hannan's drawing, based on a contemporary sketch, of St. Patrick's Church, Singland.

two doorsteps. The surplus blood was kept in a jar to be used as a cure or talisman.

St. John the Baptist's Day was celebrated on June 24th and, on the night before the feastday, another Park custom was enacted. At midnight a member of each family would walk up and down the family's plot carrying a lighted torch. The torch was made from a sod of turf, steeped in paraffin, placed inside a sop of hay and on top of a broom handle. The practise of warding off evil spirits for the coming year was carried out up to about fifty years ago.

"Hansel Monday" was also celebrated on the first Monday of the New Year. On that morning a young boy in each house would be wished a happy New Year and given a half crown hansel by his mother. The woman would then usher her son out through the back door of the house. After closing this door, the mother would open the front one and welcome the

boy back into the kitchen. The son's wealth was short-lived, however, as the woman would quickly retrieve the hansel. Half-crowns were never too plentiful in Park.

The month of November was also a time when other customs were practised. Every night before the family went to bed two boiled potatoes and a glass of water would be left behind on the kitchen table to provide nocturnal sustenance for the "poor souls". A fire was kept burning through the night to provide heat for the same airy spirits.

Though a strong thread of superstition runs through the fabric of their religious orthodoxy, the people are noted for their piety and devotion to the Roman Catholic Church. A secluded road which connects Park with Corbally is known as Rosary Road. It was at this spot that the people gathered to pray during the Penal Days. Anybody walking through the district when the day's work was over would

hear the murmur of prayers coming from the open doors as each family knelt to recite the rosary. The Parkmen were all staunch members of the Redemptorist Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family, with their own special "sections", of which the Three Wise Kings, St. Benignus and St. Carthage were the best known. The men diligently attended their weekly meeting, travelling the three-mile journey to "The Fathers" by pony and cart, trap, float, side-car and on foot in all kinds of weather.

In the mid-nineteenth century many families were evicted, and one eyewitness of the last of these evictions, Tim Keehan, died in 1971. Many more people were forced to emigrate and this they did literally from their own doorsteps, walking the few steps from their houses to the canal boat. James Pope Hennessy, in his biography of Anthony Trollope, gives this poignant description of the plight of the poor



The broken stone bearing the double-armed cross.

emigrants:

During and after the Famine the little place (Shannon Harbour) took on a new and different significance. For it was from here that the sickly, starving emigrants to Canada and the United States would take the boat to Dublin, another to Liverpool and then herded into the coffin-ships - many of them former trade slavers - to endure a voyage across the Atlantic for seven endless - seeming weeks.

At Shannon Harbour at that time cakes or, rather lumps of heavy corn-and-oatmeal bread, as dry as hard tack, were made in special bakeries and sold to the refugees. On this, and on water chancily supplied in the Liverpool ships, the emigrant families were expected to live until they reached the coastal ports of the New World ...

For those who stayed at home the stark outline of a gallows dominated

their daily lives and presented a grim reminder of one of the horrors of the penal code. Up to the second half of the nineteenth century the execution of criminals was carried out in public at Gallows Green, a plateau on the southern end of Singland Hill, overlooking the city. A man could be hanged in those days for the trivial offence of poaching. The hangman, Patrick Ryan was reputed to have got his post as a reward for embracing the Protestant religion and was hated by the Park people. On retiring from his macabre profession, Ryan sought the shelter of the new County Gaol in Mulgrave Sreet. Here he spent his remaining days attending to the few flower beds that helped a little to brighten the many dark shadows that shrouded everything within the walls. He rarely ventured outside for fear of being attacked by relatives and friends of those he had hanged. He was reviled and shunned by everyone, and even inside the prison, where he was an unwilling

prisoner, he was treated as a leper.

When Ryan died, he was buried quietly in the old churchyard of St. Patrick, only a few hundred yards from the gallows on which he had hanged so many. The people of Park and the surrounding districts regarded the interment of the dead hangman as a gross insult to the many generations of their ancestors buried on the quiet hill. During the night the corpse was dug up and dragged around on a wicker pallet by a horse and then dumped into a ditch near the Spittal boreen. When the remains were collected and reinterred, a guard was mounted over the grave for a few weeks. Immediately this protection was withdrawn, the corpse was again dug up and the same grisly drama enacted. Finally, the authorities accepted the inevitable: what remained of the mutilated body was laid to rest for the last time inside the walls of the County Gaol, thus giving Patrick Ryan a refuge in death as in life.



A 1902 picture of St. Patrick's Well.