MARRIAGE AND DEATH

or the young man
digging in the fields
the sight of a girl
swaying past, with
a pail of milk balanced
on her head,
must have been a
pleasant one. But
living at subsistence level, as they did,
the Parkmen could ill-afford the luxury
of romance, even if they had the oppor-
tunity. Marriages were contracted
strictly on an economic basis. Matches
were made between the different
families so that the little farms could be
held and enlarged where possible. A
taciturn Parkman, giving the reason for
his intermarriage, summed it up by
saying: "Only the Park people know
their business". This meant that the
system of intensive cultivation was
developed so intricately over the cen-
turies and was so dependent for its
success on both parties in the marriage
that partnership with an outsider could
result in economic disaster.

It was common practice for sets of
siblings to marry the sons and
daughters of neighbouring families. Dr.
George Butler, the Roman Catholic
Bishop of Limerick from 1864 to 1886,
fought a long but unsuccessful battle
against the intermarriage of the Park
people. He eventually gave up the
struggle and is reported to have con-
cluded in exasperation: "Build a wall
around Park and marry them all inside
it!"

The inbreeding resulted in some
congenital oddities and abnormalities
amongst the community and gave the
Park people a reputation for ecce-
tricity and strangeness. A transgression
of the laws of consanguinity resulted in
an embarrassing experience for at least
one couple about to get married. A
Parkman told this story of his wedding
to his cousin:

"I was to be married in St. Patrick's
Church on the morning of the first day
the 'New Time' came into effect.
Because of this confusion I arrived at
the church well over an hour before
the wedding Mass was due to start.
The parish priest was already in the
church preparing the altar and, as I
came near the church door, I was met
by one of my neighbours who said,
"He'll kill you," meaning that the priest
was about to attack me. As I ap-
proached the altar, the priest turned
on me and angrily shouted: 'I can't
marry you; you'll have to see the
Bishop!' I set off in the horse and cart
for the Bishop's Palace in Corbally. I
passed my future wife on the way to
the church and waved to her across
Clare Street. At the Palace the butler
opened the door to me and he told
my story to Bishop O'Dwyer. The
Bishop remained inside but called out
to me: 'Tell him to marry you. All Park
people have a special dispensation
from the Pope to marry their cousins'.
I rushed back to the church, told the
priest, and got married."

Limerick people have often won-
dered about the special privilege of in-
termarriage conferred on the Park
community. Did the Catholic Church
wish to protect this loyal and pious en-
clave from being infiltrated by less
devout 'outsiders'? Or perhaps there is
a simpler reason for the Church's at-
titude. It seems likely that having failed
to discourage the intermarriage, it
quietly decided to turn a blind eye to
the practice.

There was little time or money for
recreation but a wedding was a cause for a grand celebration. The Park people dressed up in their Sunday best and set off for the gala occasion. After the customary feasting at the bride’s home, a fleet of jery car were hired and the whole party drove through the city to the good-humoured amusement of the populace. The celebration went on right through the day. The guests crowded into the bride’s house, the women taking their places in the kitchen and the men being confined to an outhouse. The men refreshed themselves from a barrel of porter and the more adventurous of the women sipped ‘a drop’ of sherry. When a place became vacant in the kitchen the men would leave the outhouse to join the women.

But not all Park wedding ceremonies were harmonious. The old rigid rule about marrying within the community was strictly enforced up to recent times. For a young person to defy this convention by going outside the fold for a partner, the consequences could be drastic. The few feckless spirits who followed the lure of love outside the Park boundaries were invariably ostracised. Over fifty years ago, an Athlunkard Street boy got a grandstand view of the explosive tribal tensions generated by such a wedding. As the guests began to leave St. Mary’s Church after the ceremony, the storm broke. This was to be a marriage celebration with a difference. The lad watched spellbound as the rival families clashed in a wild melee, with fists and boots working overtime. Later the bewildered boy’s father explained to him that the ructions were caused by the Park girl ‘marrying out’.

When death occurred, a wake lasting two days would be held. During the funeral the men walked behind the cortege, with each man wearing his ribbon and medal of the Confraternity. Strict rules were laid down governing the itinerary of the cortege. All funerals, starting off north of a long, narrow, winding boreen, known as the ‘Funeral Road’, which runs down to the Shannon through the water meadows of Lannarone, had to proceed to St. Patrick’s Church via Rosary Road, Corbally, Athlunkard Street and Clare Street.

The Funeral Road is still in use. In winter it is muddy and almost impassable, but a warm summer reveals a cobbled thoroughfare which once provided a vital link between Park and the river. All funerals setting off from the south of the road went to the church by the shorter route across the canal and through Pennywell Lane. Both customs were fervently preserved, much to the chagrin of the undertakers.

The people clung to an old-fashioned style of dress long after it had been discarded elsewhere. The women wore black shawls over long black dresses and aprons. The voluminous skirts, beloved of Queen Victoria, continued to be worn by Park women when their fellow townswomen had changed to the ankle-revealing tailored skirts which had become fashionable at the time of the Suffragette movement. The long dresses were edged with a black velvet band and were romantic to view but totally unsuited to work in a vegetable garden or a cow-stall. The velvet edging quickly became mutilated as a result of trailing around through damp fields and muddy roads.