

P.J. ('Cushy') Ryan



hen P.J. Ryan died at the City Home Hospital, aged over 70 years, in June 1974, few people heard about the event or attended his funeral. His death was in keeping with his entry to the world and with the conditions of his life. He left no known relatives behind him.

Ryan never knew his parents and was reared at the old Christian Brothers Orphanage at Sexton Street. Little is known about his early years or about this period after he left the Orphanage. He joined the Free State Army during the Civil War and took part in some of the fighting. He was strongly anti-Republican at this time and regarded most of the people who opposed the Treaty of 1921 as misguided. He blamed much of the country's troubles on de Valera and regarded him as a cunning, Machiavellian politician.

Other republicans particularly disliked by Ryan included Patrick Pearse, the two Erskine Childers and Liam Mellows. His experiences during the Civil War form the basis of his unpublished manuscript, "The Fourth Siege of Limerick". After his stint in the army, Ryan worked as a handyman and spent most of his life working at that occupation.

Ryan continued his opposition to the de Valera's policies. When Fianna Fáil had become the government in 1932, Ryan joined the I.R.A. in the late thirties. He was apprehended by the police outside Annacotty in May 1940 and was found to be in possession of arms. He received a long prison sentence for the transfer of his allegiance from the official army of the State to the unofficial one. Brendan Behan was one of his fellow-prisoners.

After his release from prison following the end of the second World War, Ryan went back to his work as a handyman and does not seem to have involved himself in any further I.R.A. activities. He became an expert in beekeeping and gardening, gaining a vast knowledge of shrubs and flora.

Kevin Hannan, who remembers Ryan's activities in those days, has recorded:

"My first recollections of "Cushy" Ryan go back to the early thirties, as he practised his clarinet in the old band room of St. John's, at Barrack Lane, off Gerald Griffin Street. Even at that time he was regarded as a "character". Though I have forgotten most of his companions I distinctly remember his witty remarks, and his remarkable self-confidence. He appeared to be well read and had a fine clear speaking voice, and was a most pleasing conversationalist.

"After the war years he made friends and found a host of admirers as he performed wonderful feats on the roller skates at the Ice Rink, Henry Street, where

by Jim Kenney

he excelled all others in the more graceful and dangerous exhibitions.

"Always a lover of nature, his dearest wish was fulfilled when he was appointed as handyman at Mungret College, with his dream cottage thrown in.

"During his years in this salubrious situation he became a skilled beekeeper and his services were in demand even in far away corners of the country".

Ryan was also an enthusiastic cyclist and was a familiar sight in earlier days as he went about on a bicycle with high handle bars with members of the Clare Street and St. John's Square clubs.

Apart from his stay at Mungret College, he lived in many other places around the city, including Cussen's at the level crossing gates at Park, Hartnett's lodging-house at John's Street and at Clare Street.



Cumann na nGaedheal election leaflet, late 1920s - early 1930s. (Limerick Museum)

His last years were spent with his dog and books living in his specially rigged, burglar-proof rooms, overhead Quin's Provision Stores at Parnell Street.

A lasting image of "Cushy" is of a sturdy man, wearing a cap with the uptilted peak, the resonant speaking voice and jaunty air.

The Manuscript

"Cushy" Ryan tried as best he knew to get his manuscript published in the last three years of his life but without success. He never lost confidence that the book would be published some time and that it would be read and acknowledged in Limerick.

The story set forth in the manuscript contains little sentimentality and gives an unheroic and unbuttoned account of the

Civil War in Limerick. His historical notes are written in a spare, colloquial style, though he largely ignores the history of the nineteenth century.

In setting the scene for the Civil War he gives a hitherto unexplored view of Georgian Limerick from the depths of the city's sewers. His description of bewigged and buckled servants elegantly tipping brimming chamberpots into the mouths of sewers named Cornwallis, Victoria and George every morning is vivid and colourful.

Ryan's lively account of the harrowing social conditions prevailing at the turn of the century is a valuable contribution to local social history. He shows compassion for the poor while at the same time poking fun at the pomposity of the middle classes. The disgusting and obscene voyeurism at the City Home, which he depicts, exposes the hidden punishment suffered by unmarried mothers at this time.

Epigrams and ironic understatements abound and some of these, such as, "From the incident it is clear that patriots can create a lot of misfortune for themselves and others" are effective and original.

One of the best passages in the manuscript is the account of the stoning of Pearse and his followers on their visit to Limerick on Whit Sunday 1915. The formal and slightly pompous style used here is highly effective in depicting the Ruritania posturings of Pearse, de Valera and company at a time when many Limerickmen were away fighting in the first World War.

His idiosyncratic description of the local Volunteers famous march to Killonan on Good Friday 1916 presents this bungled venture in its true light for the first time in Limerick's one-sided history, or "published verbosity", as Ryan called it.

Readers with a military turn of mind will find his account of the strategy of both sides in the Civil War interesting. Other people should find it hilarious, especially the engagement - and disengagements. The description of the firing of the cannon gun from Arthur's Quay at the Stand Barracks is a skilled piece of comic writing. His accounts of robberies at banks and at the Railway Station is Irish republican history with a difference. In dealing with Northern Ireland Ryan shows an unusual insight into the question when he states that the Northern Protestants had "the will and the means" not to be forced into a united Ireland.

Ryan's manuscript, "The Fourth Siege of Limerick" serves as a useful and humorous antidote to the conventional and nationalistic histories dealing with the Civil War in the city. Sadly, "Cushy" did not live to see any part of it in print.

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