

## Editorial

# The Pleasures of Plassey

**T**he name Plassey has a romantic origin, being derived from the Palas tree or "flame of the forest" which, in turn, gave its name to a village in India, about eighty miles north of Calcutta. But, for all the sylvan attractions of the surrounding countryside, Limerick's Plassey owes its title to a combination of other factors, military and political.

In 1760, at the age of thirty-four, Robert Clive returned from India to England. Through the intercession of the Duke of Newcastle, he procured a scattered Irish estate, in Limerick and Clare. Included was the purchase of lands and a manor house from Thomas McMahon at Ballykilty, on the banks of the river Shannon, just outside Limerick. Thus Clive became Baron of Plassey, and the district was renamed after its new owner. It is doubtful, however, if Clive lived in the house for a long period.

Through the centuries Plassey has been a Mecca for fishermen, boatmen, artists, nature-lovers, picnickers and riverside strollers. And a variety of writers, some of whom lived in neighbouring townlands, have described the spot in prose and poetry.

Moira Verschoyle, in her book *So Long to Wait*, published in London in 1960, has given a delightful account of her childhood days in Castletroy and of the lush landscape:

*The countryside had a grey-green beauty and a great stillness - flat grazing fields bordering the great river and in the distance the lavender outline of the Keeper mountain, the only hill of any size in that part of the Golden Vale district. In winter the river rose and flooded most of the fields surrounding the house and at those times it was cut off from the outside world - tremendously romantic for me as a child.*

She goes on to tell of the local rector of Kilmurry Church, Canon Richard Ross-Lewin. He wrote some gentle verse about Plassey and its neighbouring places in his book, *Poems of a Clare West Briton*, published in 1907. He is best remembered for one work "The Men of Park". The simple language of the poem is used effectively to evoke the quiet mood and sense of timelessness in that hidden part of Limerick, tucked away between Plassey and Pennywell. The poem also contains some haunting images of the sturdy Parkmen labouring away beneath the gently sloping hills, with the neo-Gothic spire of St. John's Cathedral looming up in the distance.

*Shadows of evening softly fall  
On tower and spire, cathedral wall.  
Sons of the earth, of toil and moil,  
Delving and digging the deep rich soil,  
Patiently working from dawn till dark,  
Such are the lives of the men of Park.*

Richard Sadlier Ross-Lewin died in 1922 and is buried in Kilmurry graveyard.

The Limerick poet, Gerard Ryan, loved Plassey. One of his favourite pastimes was to walk along the banks of the Shannon to savour the delights of the riverside scenery. He also liked to sample a few pints of porter at Walsh's pub. He wrote some gentle pastoral verse about Plassey. Here is one of his poems "Plassey - A Vignette":

*We cross the bridge at Plassey Mill,  
When swans float down the days last beams*

*Below the singing waters;  
Then through a chancel of green boughs  
Into a small lock garden -  
The lock-gates spurting showers,  
With courting linnets playing  
In dance of light and shadows  
Around a white-crowned guelder rose;  
The scent of night flowers clinging  
To the twilight's loosened tresses:  
And through the wide spaced willows  
A haze of gold and amethyst  
Mantles the brow of Keeper.*

Another Limerick writer retained warm memories of Plassey. Michael McNamara was born in 1940 and lived for many years in Lower Park, before emigrating to America in 1958. In his first novel, *The Vision of Thady Quinlan*, published in New York in 1974, he describes the magical appeal of the old familiar spot, particularly the lure of Jack Walsh's Pub.

*We decided to take the Anacotty road to Plassey ... of course, in the other direction there was always the delicious reward for the trouble, as one staggered torn and hot, into the pub, there to sit under the cool trees and sip shandies, brought foaming by Jack to your table ... Plassey, like a magic crystal, brought to itself a new image by reason of every route taken to its core of sand islands and ruined castles ... The road turned beyond the small village into lanes of thick briar and furze bushes. At a sharp corner in the boreen, the hedgerow separated to reveal a tiny stretch of scoured field where bicycles could be parked or cars set under heavy chestnut foliage, safe from the sun ... We made our way through the first woods, finding the paths marked and worn. Small bridges had been built across the various streams. There were new cabins here and there ... We were approaching the light again in a matter of minutes. I could hear the sounds of the main river. The rush of water over stones and against leafy islands ... Instantly we were in a world stolen away by the necessity of separation but always bright and glistening in the mind's eye. It was as though the years, despite the constant reviewing of each detail, had dulled and numbed the vision ever so slightly. And now the trees, the rushes, the falls, and the white sand burst into my consciousness, brighter than they had ever been before, each thing in itself a vital part of that mosaic clutched by me in the throng of all the dissuasions. There was no other place like this.*

A host of other writers have been similarly inspired by the beauty and tranquillity of the place. Let us hope that Plassey will continue to inspire writers, artists and students for many a long day.

Since the publication of the last edition of the Journal, two distinguished citizens have died. Tom Morris, long-time managing director of Limerick's oldest printing firm, McKern's, and editor of the Limerick Weekly Echo, made an outstanding contribution to the life of his native city. Ned Long, from Janesboro, was one of our best known and well-loved citizens. He greatly valued the work of this Journal and was proud of its record in preserving Limerick's written heritage. The city is the poorer for the passing of these two men.