

THE POET RYAN

WE MET one quiet afternoon in that hostelry in Limerick where I first learned why my grandmother was called Feathereye Bourke, or Feathery, as it is locally pronounced. I sat alone, my back to the leaded window panes, after a long journey. I had been away for several years. A gentleman in late middleage came in. He ordered his pint and sat, slightly bowed, in the far corner. We were the only customers in the place.

It was early summer and the clean light glanced off the gentleman's tousled grey hair, delineated his sculpted head, his lined features. His dress was respectable, even if it had seen better days. He made a strong presence.

After some silence he made a neighbourly comment on the fine weather and the summer's prospects. His voice was refined, resonant, rhythmical. Conversation caught until, stretching forward, he asked me if I might not be Desmond O'Grady. Surprised, I said I was, and straight away he joined me, saying that although we had not met till now he knew about me from mutual friends and introduced himself. While we sat there for an hour or so he told me more history of my own family than I had ever heard at home.

For the rest of the day, until late that night, we wandered together through the streets of Old Limerick talking of poetry and poets, local history, local characters, the dreams that are born and die in small provincial places. He made music with every phrase, humour with every turn in a story. From that day, we were inseparable companions and shared the innocent adventures of the provincial's imagination that rarely get recorded.

Devoted to the art of good conversation, story telling and high song, he spoke only of people and poetry, the human affair and those mad enough to try to record it through art. Every time hereafter I returned from my wanderings we would meander about Limerick swapping tales of the adventures that befell us in our separation.

In those days he lived with two bedridden old pensioners in one room of a small cottage in Chapel Lane. We called it the "poop of that scuttled Spanish galleon". At night the four of us would huddle there, telling stories that transformed the place. Later, after the two older men died, Gerard moved to what he grandly called "The Winter Palace" but which was known to the burghers of the town as "The Poor House". From here, he would sally forth daily and we would meet at The White House to start the day's wanderings. He would frequently begin a conversation with: "Desmond, let me tell you something for nothing" and launch into a Limerick story like *Shawn-a-Scoob* or the historical background to *Drunken Thady and the Bishop's Lady*, quoting liberally from Hogan the Bard of Thomond as he proceeded. He loved talk and, like the Gaelic poets of the past, he knew all the wild flowers and birdcalls, their good and evil associations and all manner of riddle. These monologues were his true poems but were never written down.

Poor in pocket, he was rich of heart and pure of tongue. I never heard him speak ill or angrily of anyone but I knew he loathed, and in silence could terribly curse, any manifestation of philistinism. His encouragment of the young who showed interest in good reading, art and nature never tired. He loved an occasion, like Limerick Races, for the life, the colour, the people. Every tinker and trickster at horsefair or *Fleadh Céoil* was his friend and he received postcards from foreign poets like Ezra Pound, Pablo Neruda, Yevtushenko and many others. He had the vision to see that Limerick was to him what Alex-

*A Memoir by
Desmond O'Grady*



Gerard Ryan. From a painting by Jack Donovan.

andria was for Cavafy, Buenos Aires for Borges, Leningrad for Achmatova. To be in Limerick and not see him was to be in Venice and not see Pound in Dublin, and not see Kavanagh.

Like the troubadours of the south of France, Gerard made his poems in praise of nature and the wild life of Clare and to honour those ladies who moved him as the physical presence of the Muse moves. He never thought of publication. He recited to those friends who knew him as The Poet Ryan.

Now that he has passed into the light that radiated from him in his last years, those who loved him have gathered together what poems he committed to paper for his memorial. He lived a full life. He left some record.

He was my friend and for me he was the last in spirit of the poets in the true Gaelic tradition. Kinsale marked the beginning of the end. Aughrim and Limerick finished it. Yet something of the spirit lingered on, no matter how thinly dispersed, even into our childhoods. For me Gerard was a living covenant of that tradition. Through his life, work, talk he passed it on to those fortunate to have known him. Our covenant with him is to do likewise.

plan for widening the docks which had been retrieved and sent back by a firm of Lancashire waste-paper merchants. Those classical fronts in O'Connell Street must hold many secrets for the antiquarian, for in out-of-the-way corners there, many documents are still safe and sound, papers that would have been burned to ashes if they had been stored in an orderly way in the Four Courts at Dublin.

I could have spent pleasant weeks, too, in the offices of the oldest newspaper of Ireland—the Limerick Chronicle. It has an almost unbroken collection of files, and I spent one happy afternoon turning over two that held some interest for me, and noting that in 1851 one could visit the 'Crystal Palace by a Cheap and Elegant mode of Travel'—by sea for fifteen shillings return. And one could spend five weeks at the Palace, if its charms held out that long.

Another day the owner of the very old printing office of the McKern brothers showed me their poster of 1809 in a frame. To printing and stationery they added the sale of the 'new festal matches., warranted to light a candle instantaneously'. It must have been truly festal to throw away the tinder-box, make paperweight of the flint, and flock to Bank Place to buy the miracle we take for granted today.

Then one day I was met on the doorstep with: "Are you the lady from England that wrote that book?"

It seemed a copy of a magazine for which I had written an article on my father's childhood in Limerick had been handed round the town, and that his worship, the judge, would like to see me.

His worship did even more. He invited me to sit in glory beside him on the Bench to watch the administration of justice. The atmosphere was serious, but there were some light moments; for instance when argument raged as to whether a human body was a soft substance.

'Some are. Some are not,' decided the judge.

'Was ye perfectly sober when ye started?' the defending counsel asked a witness. A list of drinks consumed, though alarming to me, then convinced even the prosecuting counsel that his sobriety must have been entirely beyond question. Anyway the accused was acquit-

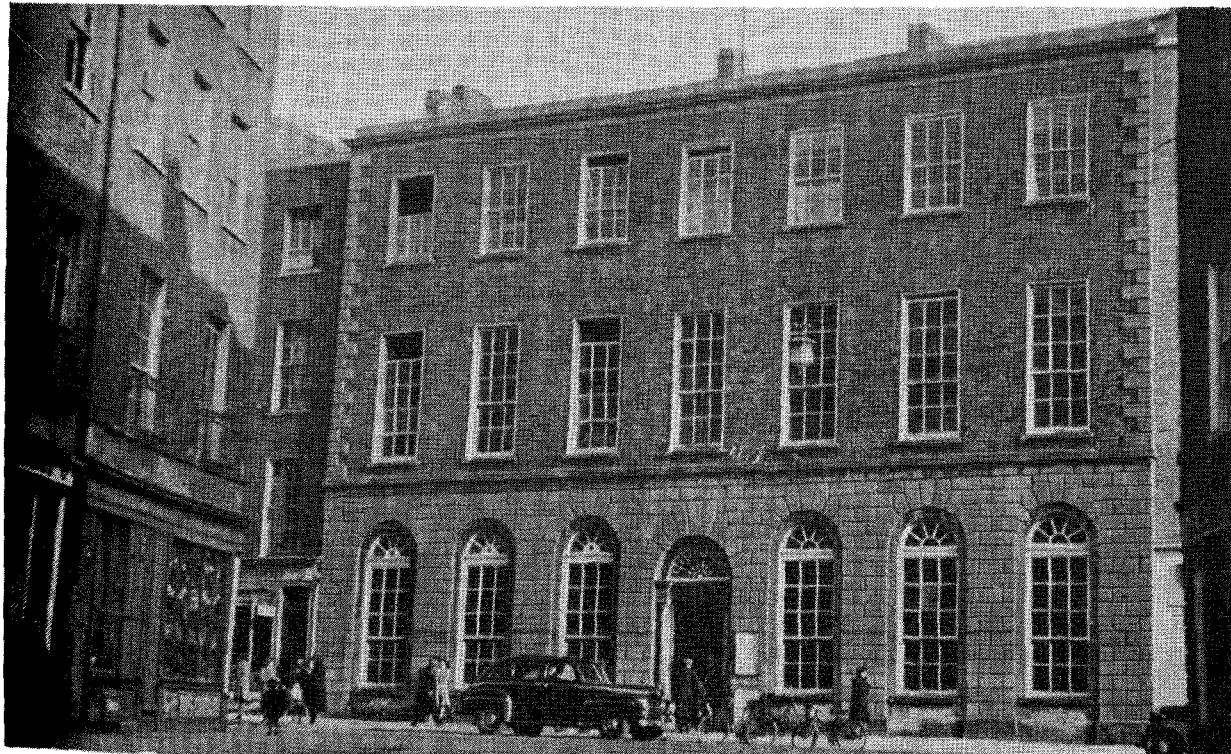
ted, leaving me assured that an Irish jury's strong suit is mercy.

I was sorry to have missed a case in another court, concerning a fight with brooms and pails on a tenement house staircase, in which the defendant clinched her argument with: 'I am a lover of harmony, your worship, me husband being a musicianneer!'

Fortune also took me to an hotel where my quest brought me many friends and never-failing entertainment. It used to be said that every Englishman met every other sooner or later under the clock at Charing Cross. That Irish hotel lounge holds a like position. Here travellers from all parts meet to while away an hour over a drink between trains, or to spend the night before crossing the great waterway to other parts. There was a clock, too, a curious clock, which had the merit for the reveller of making time turn back after he imagined midnight to be approaching.

And outside, another clock thoughtfully broke off its chimes for the night watches, to begin them an hour to the good next morning, an hour mysteriously replaced during the day! For these things alone it is worth going to Ireland, not to mention the amazing and sustaining conversation that flows on and on like the majestic Shannon while the clocks do their fancy turns! A mere listener at first, I found myself before long drawn into the magnetic circle, my d.^r.op of Irish blood expanding in the climate and leading me to heights of conversational prowess of which I had never dreamed. Men and women of every county and class met me there, turned my opinions inside out, invited me to their homes and their friends' homes, to share their drinks and their friends' drinks, looked up my ancestors, offered me cuttings for my garden, and horses for my non-existent stable, or any other odd thing that would please. We never had to make conversation. We simply could not exhaust all the engrossing topics lying around.

Another night it was a green rose I had been given which started brisk discussion in the lounge. One was for carrying it to England in damp moss, to strike ten days later. Another sat down to write to the head gardener at Powerscourt, who would know the best way to keep its



Georgian Limerick: The City Hall.