Limerick labour, Fr. Bannon and . . .

A proposed brewery

Limerick city experienced a serious unemployment problem throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. The loss of several important industries, in particular in the brewing, linen and lace-making trades, further increased the numbers unemployed and created a big surplus of labour. The consequence of this industrial crisis, especially in the worst decades of the 1850s, 60s, 70s and 80s, was an annual decline in population due to the increase in the rate of emigration. The population had decreased from 53,448 in 1851 to 44,448 in 1861, to 39,353 in 1871 to 38,562 in 1881 and to 37,153 in 1891. With the general economic upturn of the 1890s this trend was, however, reversed between 1881 and 1891 when the population rose to 38,151 and remained on the next decade when it increased to 38,518 in 1911. (1)

The economic improvement of the 1890s was reflected in Limerick by the prosperity of the tanning and foundry industries, the Thomondgate distillery, the flour and saw mills and of the bacon trade, in which over 10,000 pigs were slaughtered weekly. (2) But if the new industrial prosperity had eased the unemployment crisis and reduced the emigration rate, thereby halting and reversing the population trend, it had by no means solved these problems. If an uninformed or unsuspecting reader had any doubts as to the real nature of Limerick industry, unemployment and emigration the Limerick Leader was quick to dispel them. The paper’s editorial of April 17, 1895, stated:

It is a regrettable fact that we have in our city but few industries capable of affording anything like adequate development for our artisan and labouring classes, and the fact that the population has been steadily in the decline is the best evidence in its way of the stagnation in trade which has existed for some time past in Limerick. Glowing speeches, no doubt, have been made by some of our public representatives from time to time, which would lead to the belief that, commercially speaking, Limerick is well to the forefront, as regards business enterprise in the present day, but there is no use in disguising the fact that if some effort of a strong and practical nature is not made to prevent the depletion of the population, the status of Limerick will fall to the level of that of a fifth rate or sixth rate city in the commercial reputation of the municipal towns in Ireland. The only way, to our mind, to prevent the realization of this state of things, is by the development and encouragement of local industries. (3)

The occasion for this concerned outburst was the announcement in its columns of a proposal by a London company to establish a new brewery in Limerick city. The proposed brewery caused the first significant clash between the local labour movement, which was rapidly growing in strength in the 1890s, and the Catholic Church. (The phrase “labour movement” is used as a collective term to mean the organized bodies representing the workers of Limerick, both labourers and tradesmen, in effect the Congregated Trades, the Trades’ and Labour Council - formed two years earlier in 1893 - and the Limerick Leader newspaper. The Catholic Church in Limerick is defined as, either individually or collectively, the bishop, the religious orders of priests and the secular priests)

After intermittent speculation in its columns from November 1893 the Leader enthusiastically welcomed the plans to build the brewery. An excellent site had been found at the Dock Road, suitable because of the number of inexhaustable springs there which the brewery would require. Limerick was only to be responsible for raising £12,500 towards establishing the brewery and the London investors in the company were to provide the remainder of the estimated cost of £50,000 (later increased to £75,000). The Leader buttressed its obvious enthusiasm for the project with two convincing economic arguments. (4)

Firstly, the brewery would provide a much needed source of employment both in actual construction and in its operation and would consequently, by halting emigration, prevent any further decline in population. The potential importance of the brewery in this respect was emphasised by Mr. Evans of Davis, Evans and Company, the London firm of solicitors which was given the responsibility of setting up the brewery company and marketing the shares, when in an interview with the Leader, he guaranteed that “all the work will be done in Limerick. The timber etc., will be purchased in Limerick and we intend to employ all the local labour possible”. (5)

The possibility of the same company establishing woollen and boot factories in the city if the venture prospered was another incentive to make the brewery a success. Secondly, when in production the brewery would help to restore the commercial status of Limerick by recyling locally the money which would normally go elsewhere. Advocating economic localism, the Leader argued that “the great bane of our social life is... that there is too much of a spirit of importation, too great a preference for foreign made goods to the detriment, if not to the entire exclusion of similar articles made or which could be made if a healthy local spirit existed at home”. (6) A local brewery could keep in circulation in Limerick the staggering total of £300,000 which, according to the Leader’s calculations, left the city annually to pay for imported alcohol. The benefits to the city’s industry and trade if this money could have been channelled back into its economy would, indeed, have been enormous. Furthermore, the company intended to develop an export business for the beer produced in Limerick, which would be crucial in reducing the city’s balance of trade deficit.

The Trades and Labour Council at a meeting on May 9 in the Mechanics’ Institute also enthusiastically welcomed the proposals and argued in their favour on the same grounds as the Limerick Leader. John Godsell of the Guild of Bakers, speaking about the employment the brewery would give, said that “the coopers trade would be one of the first of their guilds to benefit by the establishing of a brewery in Limerick. In its building the carpenters, masons and slaters would also be benefited. The bakers... should naturally benefit by it as without the baker those engaged in it could do nothing. (7) Despite the immediate laughter, the central point was appreciated. The establishment of a brewery would give employment not just to the trades involved in building it but would boost the general economic climate of the city and restore its one-time prosperity. “For present day
John Godsell continued, "as a place of trade and business was almost wiped off the map and as such outside its own vicinity it was scarcely known." (8)

John Kett of the Cooper's Society argued the same economic localism as the Limerick Leader, though his estimation of the amount spent on imported drink was lower. "A quarter of a million of money", he stated, "was annually going from Limerick and its immediate surroundings to Cork and Dublin. If that money was kept in Limerick it would be difficult to anticipate the value it would be to the city". (9)

The general opinion of the Trades' and Labour Council was that the gradual loss of the city's breweries has been paralleled by a general decline in Limerick's commercial prosperity.

A new element of support, largely an emotional one, consisting of injured pride, local jealousy and strong resentment of Guinness's high-handed treatment of Limerick, was introduced. William Creagh of the Guild of Carpenters explained bitterly that the Guinness firm gave between £25 to £30 a year to the different operative societies in Dublin but when asked to contribute to the Limerick trades' societies refused categorically and replied that "their porter was so good that the workingmen of Limerick wanted nothing but their porter". (10) Similar sentiments were also articulated by James Kett in a rationalization of the factors responsible for the decline of the Limerick breweries, when with all sincerity he declared:

Guinness porter had substance, but it had salt also, so that the more one drank of it the drier they would get for more. There was a secret in the making of Guinness porter. It had a smack unknown to brewers of other porter which had the advantage for the brewers of creating a craving for more of it by those who drank it. And from time to time brewery after brewery as a result had to give up business in Limerick. (11)

The Trades' and Labour Council was adamant in insisting that it was not backing the project as a means of increasing the availability of drink in the city. Since there was clearly no shortage of Guinness in the city this was never an issue. J. McNamara of the Guild of Carpenters emphasised this point when he said that "he was not from the point of drink going to support the project, but he would support it from the point of bringing trade and commerce to Limerick". (12)

That the support and arguments of the Limerick Leader and the Trades' and Labour Council were identical was not surprising. During this period the Limerick Leader could be regarded as the unofficial propagandist organ of the labour movement in Limerick. The paper backed the movement in every trade or labour dispute and generally advocated the trade union cause. It is difficult to determine whether, on a given issue, the formulation of the Limerick Leader's view was influenced by the labour movement, whether labour's opinion was influenced by that of the newspaper, or even whether there was a coincidence of independently formulated opinions, which then, naturally, reinforced one another. Though there are elements of the first two in this particular issue, the third is, perhaps, the predominant factor. Whatever the case, the Leader cannot but be regarded as an inseparable part of the labour movement in Limerick. It continuously gave labour a good press and greatly contributed to its increasing strength in these years.

The Trades' and Labour Council and its unofficial mouthpiece, the Limerick Leader, were, therefore, from the beginning strongly committed to the brewery proposal. The expected general harmony of interests in support of the project was, however, not fully realised. In a letter to the Munster News on Saturday, May 4, the author, "A Citizen", expressed his concern with the great injury the erection of a brewery at the Dock Road site would cause to the nearby religious houses. (13)

Specific clerical opposition to the site was introduced for the first time towards the end of the May 9 meeting of the Trades' and Labour Council when Michael Pendergast of the Guild of Bakers said that "he was sorry to find one serious drawback to the success of the brewery which he felt would operate against it, that was the site..."
hurt that the Redemptorist, who had been maintained by the working class, should now oppose a scheme which would benefit that same class. One of the Council's delegates, William Doyle, said that "the question was not a religious one, and he thought the opposition should not be raised by a religious community to a project which would be for the benefit of the working classes." (15)

This theme was again taken up as another delegate named Hennessy objected on the grounds that it was not a question of religion at all: "It is quite unnecessary to bring in the question of religion!" (16)

Thomas Gavin, the Trades Council's president, implied that if the objection had been voiced earlier then his reaction might have been different but now that the plans had been formulated he would not support the objection. "He did," he said, "as much respect for the Fathers as any man, but now was not the time to say they were not to do this thing. The workingmen of Limerick were not children or toys". (17) J. McNamara said that "he has as much reverence for the Fathers as anyone, but it was a wrong course to take to oppose what was meant for the benefit of the working classes. The working classes had brought the Fathers to Limerick and had supported them, and had given their labour for nought to build them a suitable place." (18) On a more practical level, the Council insisted that the possibility of the site being an offence to anyone had been considered and allowed for by raising the shaft from 90 feet to 120 feet to prevent pollution.

The directness and tone of the various replies of the delegates showed an articulate anti-clericalism - an anti-clericalism, of course, in the Irish context, the hostility to what was a popular project brought about this anti-clerical reaction in which the deference normally extended to clerical pronouncements on spiritual matters was replaced by a determined rejection and criticism of the attempted dictation in a secular matter. The labour movement, having learned its lesson from the nationalist politicians, most recently the Parnellites reaction to clerical opposition, was well educated in the distinction between the Church's authority in religion and its authority in temporal affairs. In this assertion of the autonomy of the secular as against the religious, it was an heir to the doctrine propagated by the Fenians, the Land League in its early days when clerical support was apathetic, and by the embittered Parnellites after the fall of the Chief. The Council, confident that it represented the united organized labour force of the city, was challenging the authority of the Church to dictate to it in matters beyond its jurisdiction. The message was simple: no sector of society, whether lay or clerical, was going to halt the advancement of the interests of the tradesmen and labourers of Limerick.

The members of the Trades' and Labour Council might have exposed themselves to accusations of over-reacting, as the Redemptorists' objection was only to the site and not to the project itself. It is clear, however, that the Council saw the objection as opposition to the whole scheme and not just to the site. Seen in the context of the local Catholic Church's attitude to drink there is sufficient evidence to substantiate the Council's belief that the Redemptorists' objection to the site was a calculated, careful means of voicing their opposition to the whole project. Ever since Fr. Matthew's temperance crusade in the 1830s and 1840s the advocacy of temperance had become an important part of Church teaching. The Catholic Church in Limerick, in particular Fr. Bannon C.S.S.R. and Bishop O'Dwyer, was especially vulnerable in expounding the evils of drink and the virtues of temperance. Drinker, publican and magistrate alike were all subject to Fr. Bannon's invective, delivered at the Men's Confraternity and in the Court House. (19)

Adept at appropriating the right to enforce abstention, Fr. Bannon included in his directives for the process on to
celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the Confraternity on Sunday 23 July, 1893, the prohibition that "No person in the procession is to enter a public house that day". (20) Bishop O'Dwyer, too, was deeply concerned with the evils of drink, a problem which, in his pastoral for 1894, he equated with the alleged moonlighting in the county. (21) He advocated total Sunday closing as the solution. He also singled out the city magistrates for special criticism, condemning them for giving the benefit of the doubt to publicans, even when there was insubstantial evidence to prove that they had sold drink during illegal hours. (22) The quality of mercy was indeed strained where drink was concerned.

It was this aggressive preoccupation on the part of the Catholic Church with the question of drink which persuaded the Trades' and Labour Council that the Redemptorists' hostility went beyond a mere objection to the site. They were confirmed in their suspicions by Fr. Bannon's extraordinary sermon to the Mens' Confraternity on May 14, 1895. Apologising for his departure from spiritual to temporal matters, he explained that his community was not opposed to the establishment of a brewery but only to the intended site. But in a well worked example of insinuation and equivocation he went on to undermine the whole project:

If we consider the brewery in itself then the members of the community here have nothing whatever to say to it. It is a secular matter. It may be, indeed, for the interest of the city, and it may not - we do not know whether it will be or not - for with regard to that we are not judges, and we have nothing to say against it. If it is for the prosperity of the city then we say very well, it is a good thing. If it would advance trade in the city and benefit the working men then we would be very glad of it. So far as the brewery is, therefore, concerned in itself there is no one in this community here of Mount Saint Alphonsus who is opposed to it, although we do not know whether it may succeed or not - that is another question altogether. If the establishment of a brewery amongst us were to increase drunkenness in the city, then I should say we would be opposed to it altogether, as far as human providence would allow us to be opposed to it, because there is one thing must be fought against and that is the increase of drink. Whether a new brewery here would increase drink in the city we do not know, it may or it may not. There is no reason to think that it would, although it might. We cannot say.

Returning again to whether it would or would not be an advantage to the city he continued "... so far as it would be an advantage then we would be glad to have it for the advantage it would be to the city, but we cannot tell whether it will be an advantage or not. There is only one thing I will tell you, that the brewery will not bring all the advantages that are claimed for it by those who advocate it." (23)

These were, to say the least, curious comments coming from someone allegedly unopposed to the brewery itself. The sermon unmistakably insinuated by the repetition of words and phrases implying doubt - "If", "it may be... and it may not" and "we do not know whether... or not" - that the brewery would not be of advantage to the industrial and commercial interests of the city, a view eventually admitted in the last sentence of the quoted extract, and that the establishment of a brewery would lead to an increase in drunkenness in the city. His conviction that the latter was inevitable made it imperative that he argue the former, though without any evidence and in contradiction of the convincing arguments of the Limerick Leader and the Trades' and Labour Council. Only after he had blatantly insinuated that the brewery would be responsible for an increase in drunkenness and that the people of Limerick were being mislead by the attractive picture painted by the promoters, did Fr. Bannon proceed to outline the Redemptorists' opposition to
the site of the brewery. He explained that his community was a missionary one, constantly away on missions for three to four weeks at a time, weeks spent “almost entirely in the church - small country churches, badly ventilated and full of people - all day long, in narrow, confined confessional offices, all the people breathing the air and exhausting the oxygen in the church...he then goes home to rest, and requires to breathe the fresh air of heaven. He goes out into the garden, and instead of having fresh air coming up the river Shannon, and fresh air coming up the sea, he has there a big chimney with black smoke rolling into and filling the garden and the bad air, the bad smells and the noise of the brewery incessantly going on”. (24)

Thus fresh air was deemed to be more important than employment. Furthermore, in a disingenuous consideration of the factors motivating parents in selecting one school rather than another for their children, Fr. Bannon made the novel but unlikely claim that the location of the brewery at the Dock Road would destroy the convent school run by the nuns of the Faithful Companions of Imagery and repetition, accompanied his exaggerated impression that the project under such circumstances would be an increase in drunkenness, and felt that the nuisance aspect of the site to the Redemptorists would be remedied by the raised chimney shaft. Like the Trades’ and Labour Council, the Limerick Leader was unmoved from its position of support by clerical opposition and maintained its direct opposite stance from the Redemptorists, and concluded:

“With the full knowledge of all the facts before us, and the conviction that the only thing which can keep up the commercial status of Limerick is the encouragement of local industries, and of the outlay of capital in that direction, we see no reason to change the views which we have entertained from the first on the particular subject. (28) The Limerick Leader can also be taken to represent the reaction of the Trades’ and Labour Council to Fr. Bannon’s sermon.

The emphatic opposition of the Trades’ and Labour Council to the Redemptorists’ toned down objection to the site only, delivered through the medium of the meeting of the Trades’ and Labour Council, and of the Limerick Leader to Fr. Bannon’s sermon must have come as a severe shock to the Redemptorist order. The reaction to the Trades’ and the Limerick Leader’s position, the author, “A Limerick Confraternity Man”, in reference to J. McNamara’s comments at the Trades’ and Labour Council meeting, wrote:

- He did not think that there could be found in Limerick a man who would dare stand up and set at nought the wishes of good and holy priests that had brought in religion pure and simple, into our ancient city. Or does he or the promoters imagine that the 5,000 members belonging to the Confraternity will tolerate anything which the Redemptorists object to. Let them not labour under the impression that the project under such circumstances will receive the support of the Limerick workmen. (29)

Such confusion of allegiances was generally uncommon to the labour movement, apart from mere rumours that, because of the Redemptorists’ opposition, many workers would refuse to work in building the brewery and would forcefully oppose its construction on the Dock Road. Such prognostications were, however, well wide of the mark. The sentiments of both letter and rumour were unrepresentative and untypical.

In the face of such determined and critical opposition the Redemptorists quickly, and perhaps unexpectedly, backed down and withdrew their hostility - their outward hostility at least - to the brewery. In his address to the Men’s Confraternity on May 22, Fr. Griffiths, rector of the community, speaking for the Redemptorists, called off all opposition to the proposition to build a brewery in the city. He described the whole issue as “much ado about nothing” and said that their opposition was based on a misconception, a belief that the brewery would be built near their residence, but now they had discovered it would be built at a considerable distance from the Dock Road. Such intimations were, however, well wide of the mark. The sentiments of both letter and rumour were unrepresentative and untypical.
We do not wish to place ourselves in opposition to the matter at all. We will leave it quite to itself. We will not say anything for it or against it... we withdraw all opposition from the proposition to build a brewery in the site at the Dock Road. I also wish to say that we express no opinion whatever on it or as to the place it is to be built.

Publicly the Redemptorists might have moved, however unwillingly, towards neutrality but their continued refusal to express support for the project must be taken to mean that privately the community was still opposed to the venture. Significant also was the fact that it was Fr. Griffiths, in an attempt to pacify the aroused hostility of the labour movement, who made the withdrawal and not Fr. Bannon, who had taken a keen interest in the city’s drink problem and who was responsible in the first place for voicing the Redemptorists’ opposition. Can this decision be taken to mean that Fr. Bannon was still very much opposed to the brewery and had, in fact, been over-ruled by his order?

Despite the continued refusal of the Redemptorists to give the proposed brewery their blessing and their continued, though now silent, hostility, there was no relaxation in the labour movement’s enthusiastic support for the project. This support, hitherto verbal, now became more active and vigorous as plans for the brewery developed. A meeting of the Congregated Trades was called on May 31 to arrange for the different trades’ guilds to buy shares in the brewery so as to demonstrate their practical support and interest and as an example to others to become alive to the interests of the city.

On July 19, the secretary of the company acknowledged the strong support in terms of shares purchased, given by the trade and labour bodies. The guilds of carpenters, cooperers, stonemasons and masons, the Typographical Society, the United Builders’ Labourers, the Pork Butchers’ Society, the Dock Labourers’ Society and, on the following week, the Guild of Bakers, had all become substantial shareholders in the proposed new brewery.

The most striking example of the trades’ and labour societies’ support for the brewery was a public demonstration, held on June 9, under the auspices of the trades’ and labour bodies. The demonstration was a great success in mobilising popular support behind the brewery. An estimated 10,000 people attended, mostly according to the Leader, from the working classes. No longer could the working classes be regarded as over-sensitive to clerical opinion on secular issues.

The demonstration began with a procession headed by the Number 1 Drum and Reed Band, followed by the members of the Dock Labourers’ Society, the strongest contingent in the parade, who were in turn followed by the Sarsfield Fife and Drum Band at the head of the Congregated Trades, which included the guilds of carpenters, cooperers, masons and plasterers, who were followed by the St. Mary’s Fife and Drum Band and the other societies, among which the Corporation workers and the builders’ labourers were particularly well represented. At the rear of the procession came a carriage in which were the Mayor, William Nolan, the High Sheriff, J.P. McNamara P.L.G. and Thomas Vernon, who represented the promoters. The procession marched to the Limerick Markets in Mulgrave Street where a public meeting was held, presided over by the Mayor, on the proposition of J. McKnight, President of the Congregated Trades.

In his address the Mayor reiterated the general sentiments of those who supported the project. In a possible reference to the Redemptorists’ opposition he said that the meeting had not been called to “promote the increase of intemperance or to increase drinking in the city, but if beer and stout have to be drunk in Limerick it is better that it should be Limerick beer and stout”. Speaking on the need for more industry he said that the undertaking of a brewery would give “a large amount of employment”, and would be “a source of benefit to the entire community.” The Mayor and the other speakers urged the people of Limerick to support the brewery and a resolution that “This public meeting, held under the auspices of the trades’ and labour organizations of the city of Limerick, hereby binds itself to forward and promote the interests of the proposed new brewery by every legitimate means in its power” was proposed and un-
The issue of the day was new but proved to be in vain, for the proposed brewery never would be to ignore its complexities. As a clash between labour and the Catholic Church don investors. Lack of support from Limerick was never why the brewery proposal failed, do not detract from the concern concerning the relationship between the labour move-

ment and the Catholic Church and the attitude of the one to the other can be drawn, but to regard the dispute simply as a clash between labour and the Catholic Church would be to ignore its complexities.

Though both parties held directly opposed viewpoints, the dispute was not a straightforward clash between the principles of labour and the principles of Catholicism. For the Redemptorists' part there was no evidence of any opposition to the advancement of the labour movement. They were not hostile to the Trades' and Labour Council as such. The Redemptorists' ostensible objection to the site was based on the obnoxious polluted air which would arise from the brewery, and its opposition to the project was based on its concern for a moralistic matter, an apprehension of the possibility of an increase in drunkenness. The proposal to build a brewery was just another occasion on which the Church could voice its already formed opinion and long standing preoccupation with the evils of drink and the promotion of temperance. The issue of the day was new but the cause was old. A speculative moral interpretation, which clashed with the interests and advancement of the labour movement, had placed the Church in an untenable position. But its main concern had been with the moral issue, not with any opposition to labour's doctrine. The withdrawal of their objections, though influenced by the determined hostility of the trades' movement, would still suggest a pragmatic sympathy with the labour cause, for they could have continued to openly oppose the project. Even while opposed to the brewery, the Redemptorists were at pains to point out, however unconvincing their arguments, that they had a genuine interest in the working class of the city. After the withdrawal of their opposition, the Limerick Leader wrote that the Redemptorists had "too deep and abiding a love for the workingmen of the city to oppose anything meant for their temporal welfare." (34)

The Trades and Labour Council and the Limerick Leader repeatedly emphasised their respect for the Redemptorists and their unquestioning acceptance of Church pronouncements on religious matters. The labour movement had been anti-clerical but never anti-religious. What the Council and the Leader were objecting to was the encroachment of the Church into secular issues, or more precisely — for there is a critical distinction — the encroachment of the Church into secular issues on which the Church's opinion differed from theirs. Deference in non-religious affairs, no longer a bond, was now a choice.

Faced with clerical hostility, the labour movement showed no deferential uneasiness but met the clerical position with its own determined and critical opposition. Yet it was not simply because it was the Church that was involved that spurred labour to such a vigorous reaction. It would have opposed and criticised any opposition, clerical or lay, to a project which, if successful, would have brought many benefits to the workers of the city. That it was the Church with whom it was in conflict determined the nature but not the intensity of its opposition or the severity of its criticism.

The specific defence of the project against clerical opposition became the occasion for the enunciation of an important principle — a principle not directly attacked but which the labour movement believed was involved. The workers of Limerick, the Trades and Labour Council felt, had played their part in the universal struggle to keep religion divorced from labour. At a meeting of the Council on May 11th, 1896, Mr. Tevenan, Secretary of the Association of Railway Servants of Ireland, acknowledged this achievement when he declared:

"They who belonged to the city of the Treaty Stone were able to show that they were as well qualified and as fully in touch with the labour movement as any other men throughout the cities and counties of Ireland. They had introduced an important change amongst the working classes of Ireland for some years past and that was that they objected to having the red herrings of politics and of religion brought into the labour movement, for by that means the workingmen of the North and South were kept asunder." (35)

SOURCES

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5. LIMERICK LEADER, April 13, 1895.
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32. LIMERICK LEADER, July 19, 1895.
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35. LIMERICK LEADER, May 11, 1895.