BYRNES ON TUESDAY

Majesty

IN 1900 the British Empire had a population of some 400 million people, comprised 11 million square miles, and covered a quarter of the land mass of the world. In fact, given that much of the rest was searing desert, impenetrable jungle or frozen tundra, the British Empire has an economic mastery unrivalled anywhere.

The empire was supposed to be self sufficient in everything, and so it was—but to the benefit of Britain or, more to the point, of England.

Many of the scattered territories were economically fairly useless, such as a lot of the African possessions, and they were not worth the cost of administering and defending them.

But some colonies were moneyspinners from the start. Canada was probably the most valuable, its mining, grain, meat and lumbering enterprises yielding large returns. These days it is strange to think that London actively discouraged free trade between Canada and the United States, preferring that the Canadians look to the mother country as its primary trading partner.

Of the 400 million inhabitants of the British Empire of 1900, most, of course, lived in India which then included today's Pakistan and Bangla Desh. It is fair to say that the land occupied by the then British Empire has a combined population today of at least three times that amount.

"The British Empire" continued as such until the "British Commonwealth of Nations" was recognised in 1931, the name having been first suggested by South Africa's Jan Smuts as early as 1917. But the Commonwealth was by no means all of the empire. Most territories didn't get a look in at Imperial Conferences. India, in particular, was ignored, despite having well over half of the entire population.

In 1867, Canada had become the first colony to be made a self-governing "dominion". Australia followed in 1900, New Zealand in 1907, South Africa in 1910 and (and this is where we come in) the Irish Free State in 1921.

We put ourselves outside the Commonwealth in 1948 by declaring ourselves a republic. When the dominion of India (1947) declared a republic in 1950, it was too big to be kicked out, and this set the precedent for Pakistan, Ghana and other new republics to take their places as well.

Sir Ivor Roberts was British ambassador here a few years ago and suggested in Limerick that we re-apply to join the Commonwealth. I'd personally be happier if the UK would see its way to adopting the euro, the metric system and a passport-free EU. We don't have much in common with Tonga and Sierra Leone, but we have a real interest in harmonising affairs with our nearest neighbour.

The lanes

I DIDN'T have much good weather during my few days off a week ago, so I found myself doing a bit of reading.

And, after a passage of ten years (and not having seen the film) I re-read Angela's Ashes.

I also re-read Seán Spellissy's 1989 easy-reading Limerick the Rich Land, a perfect introduction to both city and county.

And, on page 43 of the latter book, I found what, at first sight, seemed to link the two. McCourt paints a bitter-sweet picture of life in the city's lanes, and Spellissey lists the lane names of Irishtown.

Of course, McCourt didn't grow up in ancient Irishtown. Irishtown was that part of the fortified city which connected with Englishtown on King's Island via Baal's Bridge. Irishtown was a roughly hexagonal area, stretching from Baal's Bridge to the present St John's Square and along Mungret Street to the Milk Market. Fragments of the walls of Irishtown remain to this day. Mungret Street, leading to Mungret Gate, was so named because Mungret a couple of miles to the west, was once the site of one of the country's greatest and largest monastery settlements, said even to predate the coming of St Patrick, and which once boasted 1,500 monks and any number of scholars. It survived Viking raids in the ninth century, and lasted into the 1100s.

But the names of the long-disappeared Irishtown lanes are a mixture of the self-evident and the delightful. Some just indicated their proximity to structures, such as Ball Alley Lane, Town Wall Lane and Barrack Lane. Others were named for people or perhaps landowning families: Scott's Lane, Williams Lane, Monaghan Lane, Fr Quinn Lane, Sheehy Lane, Garvey's Lane, Jones' Lane, Moloney Lane, Curry Lane, Purcell's Lane, Joshua's Lane and Moore's Lane.

Others may have referred to trades and occupations, examples being White Wine Lane, Goats Lane, Hatters Lane and Pencils Alley. Forker's Lane may have referred to cutlery making or to piking hay for horses, but I suspect some poor fellow who was lumbered with the sobriquet of Forker was responsible.

I'd like to think that Scabby Lane was named for Olafr Cenncaireach, Olafr Scabby-head, a 10th century Viking king of Limerick—but I doubt it.

Sorting the post

THERE was no 7.15am train on Christmas Day.

On every other weekday throughout the year, Saturdays included, the early morning train from Limerick arrived at Newcastle West on the dot of 7.15 and there to meet it was a local postman to collect that morning's mail and bring the sacks, usually eight or so in number, to the post office at nearby Bishop Street, for sorting.

The mails were trundled from the station on an open handcart, but there was never a reported case of any mailbag being stolen by a robber or even being tampered with by some young blackguard. Such a thought would never cross anyone's mind.

The train brought mail to the main towns along its route and, after Newcastle West, would deliver to Abbeyfeale and Listowel, before progressing to its final destination, Tralee. Being a steam train, the Newcastle West postman had a slightly longer time available to make his collection at the station than had his colleagues elsewhere, because the engine required to be turned and re-linked to the train's other end, a procedure which took about 10 minutes, before the onward journey to Kerrys.

But there was no 7.15am train on Christmas Day.

Also in those days, before the Second World War, there was nothing about posting early for Christmas either. People posted cards and small parcels as late as Christmas Eve in the confident expectation that every piece of mail would reach its destination in the course of the great day itself.

The absence of the train on that one day of the year meant that the mail sacks came by road in a large truck. This caused a double delay. To begin with, the truck arrived in Newcastle West after 8am and this was compounded by the fact that the driver knew nothing about stacking his truck in such a way as to facilitate an orderly unloading, so the Newcastle West sacks in the pile had to be disentangled, one by one, from those destined for Abbeyfeale and Listowel. And secondly, there were usually about 60 or 70 sacks to be taken off, all of them stuffed to bursting point, an amount of mail which would represent that of a full week or more at any other time of the year.

At the post office, the first job was to separate the mail for delivery by hackney car to the village post offices roundabout.

The Newcastle West sorters, who were also the local postmen, then prepared for their own delivery runs, and the mail had to be placed in their satchels in the order of the homesteads to be visited. Many envelopes contained welcome dollars brought by Cunard and White Star liners to Cobh, gifts which made all the difference to many a family in the dismal 1930s.

There were no vans then, and the postmen merely had their bicycles. Usually it was well past midday before they were ready to set off on their respective four or five hour delivery routes. Daylight would be well gone before they would make it home to their families to enjoy what was left of Christmas for themselves.

Apart from the huge volume of post, the postman's Christmas Day was also hampered by the unfailing hospitality in the up to 200 houses to which each man would call that day. Christmas Day was the occasion when favours rendered during the year would be repaid. Those favours, especially in the countryside, usually involved the postman collecting pensions or prescriptions, even groceries and heavy wet-cell radio batteries.

Money was the most acceptable "Christmas box", and people were generous, but it was the grip on the arm and the pressed glass of whiskey which was the bane. If a postman had accepted such a drink at an earlier house, the whiff of booze would make it impossible to refuse at all further doors. And the satchel would gain weight rather than losing it, as bottles of stout, or of something stronger, were added to its contents.

Some postmen successfully resisted food and drink in the interests of getting their round over with before total darkness would fall. A dim acetylene lamp was of little use along country lanes and stony passageways, especially in the rain. Such men felt hunger, as they hadn't eaten since a hurried breakfast at 7am or earlier. A hardy few succumbed to well-meaning offers, however, and, despite hearty draughts, always managed to finish their rounds, however late in the night it might be.

Nobody seemed to worry about the spiritual well-being of postmen on Christmas Day. Church was not an option in the days before vigil Masses has been instituted. Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve was also out, because every postman needed a good night's sleep ahead of his long day to come. Even on an ordinary weekday, a postman began work at 7am or earlier, but the physical demand on Christmas Day was always something exceptional.

The nature of postal delivery has changed out of all recognition. As soon as war broke out in Europe in 1939, coal for steam trains became almost entirely unavailable. Trains were fewer and, on the return of peace in 1945, the number of trains never recovered to their previous frequency. From then on, there would be just one morning train from Tralee to Limerick and a return train in the evening; neither carried for the Post Office. From about then too, the provision of a postal delivery on Christmas Day fell away. Saturdays were to follow, and the second delivery in larger towns also stopped.

Last week, I came across a lovely reminiscence in an old magazine, written by postman, artist and gentleman, the late Michael J Healy, recounting his own early experiences as a young man in the postal service in Newcastle West in the years before the war. Reading it, I discovered that it is possible to become nostalgic even for an life which had lapsed decades before I was born.

—MARTIN BYRNES