

A forgotten Limerick battle of 100 years ago

The siege of Clampett's Bow

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Irishtown was, by all accounts, a rough and rowdy place. Some of the more disorderly people lived in a narrow laneway off John Street called Clampett's Bow. The Limerick press of the time contains many reports of riotous behaviour. A study of these newspapers shows that the busiest man in the Irishtown was Head Constable Phelan of the Clare Street Police Station.

In a report of a City Police Court case on June 19, 1880, the Limerick Chronicle complained that "the evidence adduced showed the fearfully demoralised state of the lower orders in the Irishtown". A street walker, who had been repeatedly convicted, was sent to gaol for a month as "a common prostitute, night walker and drunkard". A young girl, about sixteen years of age but who was described as "a hag in vice", charged with a similar offence, was meted out the same punishment.

On May 17, 1881, the Chronicle returned to its familiar theme:

It would appear that the Irishtown and Englishtown have relapsed into their former disorderly state, more particularly the former, for on Sunday evening and night it was the arena of a series of turbulent scenes enacted by the more depraved portion of the inhabitants there such as to defy description. Clare Street station remains still short of its full complement of constables owing to drafts having been sent on temporary duty elsewhere, and taking advantage of the paucity of the force in charge of this sub-district, the rowdies of the locality have matters all their own way, culminating in scenes of turbulence and rioting on Sunday night that would disgrace Indian savages. There being only three constables on duty, of course no arrests could be made - we have been informed that 20 policemen would have been required to restore peace and order - so the drunken rowdies of both sexes enjoyed their riotous carnival until the shades of midnight brought about a truce, while Barrington's Hospital came in for its usual supply of cut heads and lacerated physiognomies. Of course this state of things will continue 'till a constabulary be established in the vicinity of St. John's Square.

The biggest ruction of all in the Irishtown, during these two years (1879-81), took place on 'Chalk Sunday', March 2, 1879. (Chalk Sunday was so named because of the custom of children running about chalking on the backs of all bachelors who had not married by the first Sunday in Lent. The practice of chalking on this Sunday has long since died out in Limerick and throughout the country.) Two separate rows broke out within a short time and distance of each other on that evening. The first outbreak was shortlived and was quickly quelled by the police. In a report, on March 2, the Chronicle described how the trouble began:

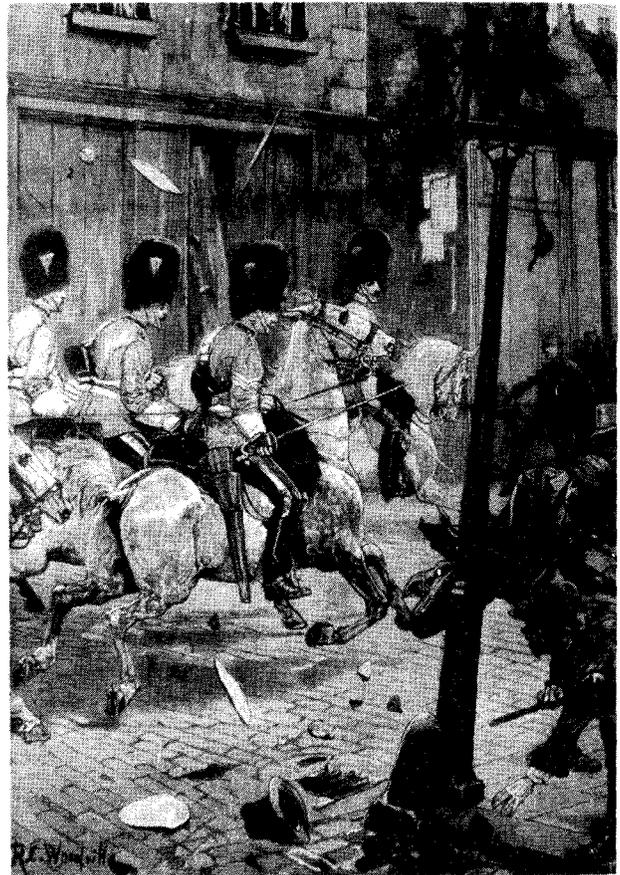
A row occurred on Sunday evening in Mungret Street at about seven o'clock. It being "Chalk" Sunday a number of young men and women were amusing themselves by besmearing with chalk everybody that passed them. One young man, having got indignant, struck one of the chalkers. A general melee then ensued, in which stones flew in every direction. One young woman named Mary Murphy, 19 years of age, received a contused wound on the forehead. She was treated at Barrington's Hospital. A boy, fourteen years of age, named Michael Dwyer, who was looking on at the row, was admitted to the hospital suffering from a stroke on the head which caused injury to the brain. He is in a precarious condition. The prisoners are in custody.

The chalkers, apparently, were not too particular about

Bow

by Jim Kemmy

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SCOTS GREYS "CHARGING THE MOB" AT LIMERICK.

whose backs they ornamented and were more intent on exploiting the occasion to the fullest rather than on the celebration of an old, time-honoured custom. But the second clash, on the same evening, was a much more violent affair and of far longer duration. This fracas was to become known as the "Siege of Clampett's Bow". The Chronicle, of March 4, 1879, takes up the story:

The neighbourhood of John Street was on Sunday night the scene of a dangerous row. It would appear that for some time past a spleen existed between four families resident in the Irishtown. This animosity was partially dying away as time wore on, but it was again stirred up owing to a young man named Connors, one of the combative parties, having been sentenced to two months imprisonment, with hard labour, for an assault committed on a member of a rival faction. Connors was discharged yesterday from the County Gaol and having as early as