
The Civil War in Limerick

Social life by the Shannon

by P.J. Ryan

The commercial and social life of Limerick depended in part on the river Shannon. There was always a half-dozen steamers at berth in the docks, as well as Galway hookers and other sailing craft bringing turf, livestock, and other goods from small ports on the west coast. Also anchored in the river were many cabin cruisers and yachts belonging to city merchants and to some of the landed gentry.

For the sum of three shillings the ordinary citizen could enjoy a day's excursion on the river, travelling as far as Kilrush on the 200 tons paddle steamer, S.S. Shannon.

This boat was eventually sold and taken to Greece in 1920, her place on the river being taken by another paddle steamer the S.S. Mermaid of 150 tons. This latter boat figured in the Civil War. At various times there were other paddle boats on the river; they always left and returned with the tide in their favour.

The strong membership of the four rowing clubs came from every social class in the city. Many of the working class had rowing boats for their simple pleasures. Five groups of fishermen fished limited stretches of the river from Plassey falls to Coonagh and had almost one hundred boats between them. Everyone with a rod and line could fish from Thomond Bridge or from Sarsfield Bridge without fee or license, but dare not play the fish to the river bank to land a catch, as a bailiff always waited nearby.

The annual City Regatta brought competing crews from several boat clubs all over the country. While the competitors displayed their skill on the water, the upper social strata displayed their gents' straw boaters, flannels and binoculars. The ladies displayed their long-tailed finery, snubbing their inferiors but bowing with graceful

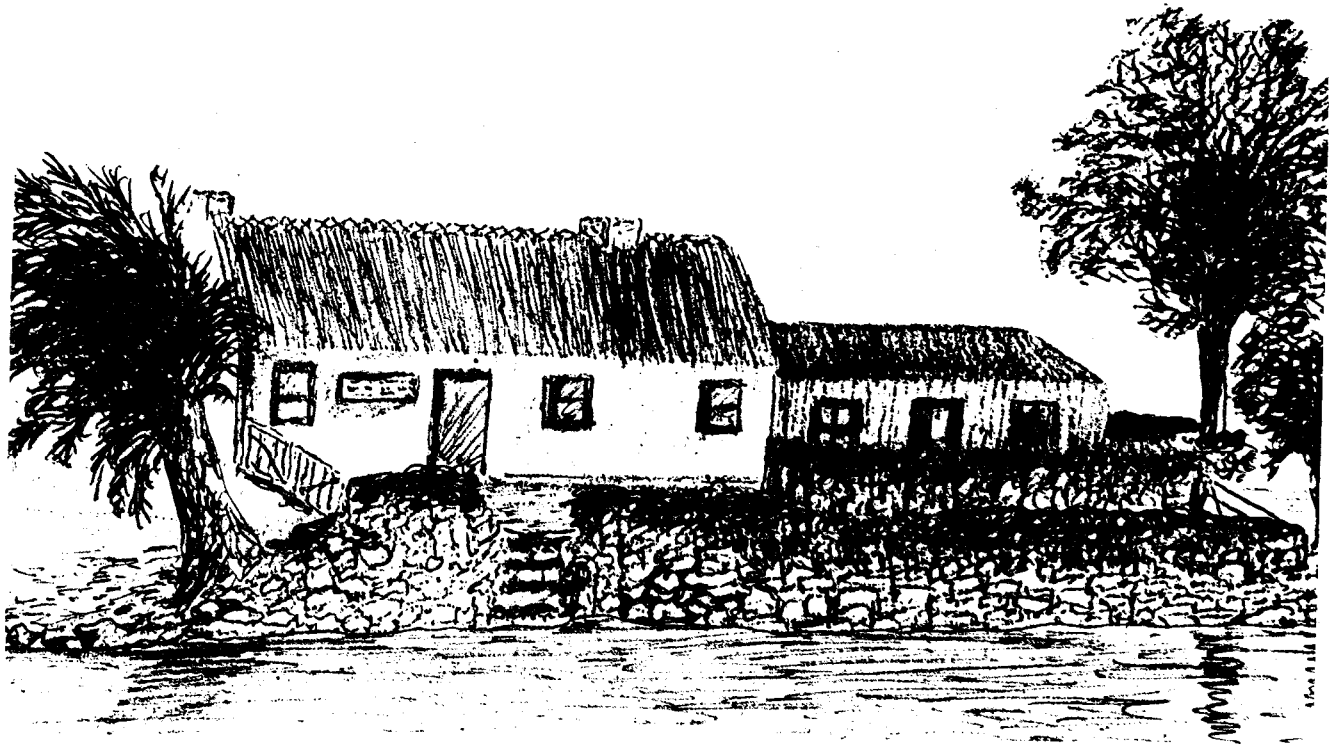
charm to their social equals. The biggest thing on their minds was their hats.

A plebian but far superior and more enjoyable social event was the annual Abbey Regatta, held on a Sunday in August, when the tide was suitable. There were boating and swimming events, as well as duck races, dog races and many other comic aquatic novelties. The banks of the river were crowded with spectators, whose voluntary contributions helped to make this regatta the most colourful event on the river.

An annual regatta was also held at Plassey and the distance from the city brought a more active and agile attendance. As this regatta was on the upper Shannon, it was independent of the tides and was held on a Sunday in August. It could never surpass the Abbey in diversity of interest, as the swift flowing river could be dangerous for aquatic sport, but being two miles from the city it had the attraction of country air and scenery and was held on a wider stretch of river. It was attended by family parties who started out around ten in the morning with ample stocks of food and cooking implements. They made a picnic day of the event. The roaring torrents of water rushing through the broken sluices and tailrace of the ruined Plassey mill gave the place a memorable air of



Limerick Regatta, 1903. Photograph by Tom Bernard.



Shanny's Pub, Plassey, "a house of refuge". Drawing by Kevin Hannan.

romance and danger. In the afternoon while the children sported or slept in the sun, some parents thirsty for adventure would cross the narrow black bridge to the Clare side of the river. They needed no mariner's compass to swing to the right by the river's bank. Two hundred yards from the bridge and fifty feet from the river, set in green fields, was a small low thatched house of refuge - Shanny's Pub.

Some drank their pints in the pub or outside on benches. Others filled three-quart tin cans with the flowing gold and drank at leisure amidst the greenery. The ladies of that day could lower a pint or a tot of rum as good as any modern Bingo belle. By ten at night the banks of the river would be almost deserted except for the few poetic strollers enjoying the moonlight reflected on the water.

Plassey mill was built about 1844 and closed down around 1912. The stone from the city Watergate had been built into the arch over the tailrace or watergate of the mill. The stone measured about 30" x 24". A two-inch border enclosed a sunken panel on which was inscribed in free flowing copperplate script WATERGATE; beneath this was the inscription: "This stone was removed from above the arch of the Watergate when the city walls were demolished".

When Plassey mills were demolished by gelignite in 1954 the stone was safe amongst the rubble and was raised for removal and preservation. Two nights after the demolition, the stone disappeared and has not been seen since then. It is an historic item; it belongs to the city and should be the property of the Corporation.

The Shannon played another important role in the lives of the people. A city prospers or perishes by its sanitary services. From the refuse dump of the earliest known age to today's more elaborate systems, they help to reveal the living conditions of the age. In the newer part of the city, Newtown Pery, the sewers were built before a house or block was built; they were eight feet high, over five feet wide and arch roofed. The walls were two feet thick and built of bricks made in the many brickworks on the perimeter of the city. From the sewers two arches led to the basement area of the houses, laid out when a block of houses was built. The gorgeously periwigged and berib-

boned staffs of the houses entered those with the sanitation buckets and emptied them through openings into the sewer. A heavy shower of rain would cause a foot high flood of water to rush through the sewers and clean them; on this account the Corporation workers examining the sewers could walk the length and breadth of the city in safety and purity of thought without coming above ground.

The Grand Master of this development was Edmond Sexten Pery.

The sewers followed the plan of the streets and were named after the streets above them. The principal street of the city, George Street was called after George IV and the sewer underneath was named King George. Queen Street was called after Queen Victoria; Her Majesty's generous donation of five pounds towards Famine relief in 1848 was thus gratefully remembered. The sewer beneath was called Queen Victoria as a further gesture of the esteem of the Famine Queen. Cornwallis Street was named after Lord Cornwallis; the sewers below also commemorated the Viceroy.

The names of the streets were later changed to those of other honoured people but the sewer names were not changed; and so, though they are dead and gone, the names of those Imperial British personalities are immortalised in the sewers of Limerick city. Each day the citizens, with long drawn sighs, shed their tears and donate their tributes to the memory of those long departed but not forgotten regal rulers.

A map of the numbered plots of land and the streets is in the office of a city solicitor and another in the National Museum, Dublin.

Having staked out the ground of the proposed new city, Sexten Pery offered the various plots of land to developers, who were assured of an income from the tenants and owners of the houses after they were built. The owners and tenants of those houses ate three square meals each day. They lived, they died and their existence merely polluted the environment; few of them were notable in any way in the history of the city; most of them merely provided the conventional human background against which the history of the city was enacted.