

SOME LIMERICK CHARACTERS

by Thomas Ryan

Looking back on one's childhood is a pleasant, though possibly useless exercise in nostalgia. There is little instruction in it, for oneself or for others. To be pleasant it has to be effortless, and my memories of Limerick's streets and people are so sharp in my mind's eye that the people and events seem clearer in tone and outline than the larger scenes of later life. The few vignettes presented here of people notable for some peculiarity of dress and behaviour may appear extravagant to a citizenry inured to the daily callousness of vandals, winos and thugs, but for many they may have an odd beam of a quieter, bygone time.

THE BAAL'S BRIDGE LAVATORY

I was painting a picture of St. Mary's Cathedral and Matthew Bridge from the quay wall near the neo-Georgian red brick lavatory when a man came up behind me for a look at the unusual sight.

He said: "Very good, isn't it - did you do that yourself, sir?" This I took to be a conventional phrase of approbation rather than a disturbing question. It turned out that he was a most interesting person with a peculiar sense of humour. In his earlier life he had worked for a snuff manufacturing firm and described the preparation of the powder from the tobacco twigs and the blending - I remember he told me of having to stand on the heap and crush with his bare feet like in vine-crushing.

I commented on the useful proximity of the nearby lavatory: he agreed and told me that there had been an earlier erection near Baal's Bridge, opposite Quilligan's public house. It had been a cast-iron structure without a roof and was much used by men who frequented the numerous pubs in the Irishtown.

Mr. Quilligan did not approve of the location of this convenience for family reasons - his daughters could not avoid seeing the goings-on inside from the windows of their home overhead the pub which overlooked the lavatory. He warned the Corporation that if it did not remove the structure he would. The Corporation ignored him. One night Quilligan enraged at the comings and goings across the road, "came out with a sledgehammer and battered the whole thing down and fur it into the Ab-



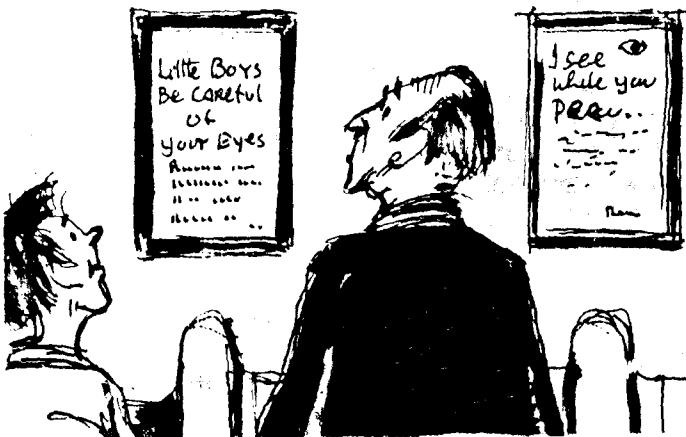
"A water-trough beside the gable wall was an added attraction".

bey river'. Some bits of it are probably there still.

'DAN THE MONKEY'S'

While on the subject of departed conveniences mention should be made of another. Up to about ten years' ago there was an impressive public lavatory at the top of Upper William Street - it was removed on the claim that it constituted a traffic hazard.

It was also a much used and appreciated convenience, especially by farmers who came to the nearby markets and fairs and who did their shopping in the street. A water-trough beside the gable wall of the lavatory was an extra attraction. The site of these conveniences has now been made into a mid-street car park.



'Dan the Monkey's'

The lavatory was unusual of its kind because of the poetic injunctions to holy purity it displayed at eye level, framed under glass, directly above the urinals. The work of a local joiner, Jack Reddan, the rhyming couplets were briefly to the point, as befits a transient, but compulsorily immobile, readership. One verse began, "Little boys be careful of your eyes".

The place was known as 'Dan the Monkey's', the unflattering sobriquet of its custodian. In his younger days 'Dan' had been a conscientious and hard-working caretaker of the lavatory. Indeed, the building was something of a model and was one of the best-kept public conveniences in Limerick. 'Dan' took a personal pride in keeping the place spic-and-span and clean-smelling, with its copper and brass fittings glittering.

But he became enfeebled and finally crippled with old age and was forced into reluctant retirement away from his beloved lavatory. The Corporation no longer provided a full-time caretaker and the vandals had a field-day. The inside became run-down and dirty and, inexplicably, the Corporation took off the roof. The neglected, roofless structure became a sorry sight, and the Corporation eventually shed its responsibility by demolishing the building.

Up to its very end the lavatory was most useful socially, not only for its relieving function, but because it allowed hard-pressed mourners marching behind the funeral hearse to fall out with grace; they then waited until the procession had moved on its way to Mount St. Laurence's cemetery.

Alas, poor Mr. Reddan, for all his rhyming reverence, was referred to, inelegantly but not surprisingly, as 'the lavatory poet'.

FATHER TAHENY

Father Taheny was a Dominican priest attached to the

priory in Glentworth St. He was known, not only for any eccentricity of behaviour but for his unusual appearance. He had no neck!

Some form of nervous disorder to which he was prone had directed that he carry his head inclined downwards and at an angle to the right. He looked as though he might play the fiddle any minute.....



Father Taheny.

The opening of the white cape and cowl, worn in the priory and church, was wide enough to allow him to do this in comfort, though it looked odd. But the restrictions of the black walking-out suit, with its stiff white collar, was another matter. Fr. Taheny got over this difficulty by wearing his collar just below his mouth.

The poor man was obliged to look under his eyes to see where he was going and this mannerism gave him a suspicious appearance - which was unfair, as he was affable, though somewhat nervous.

Fr. Taheny was reputed to be an historian of distinction. He once told me that if the Reformation had not happened when it did it would have had to be contrived.

'MAJOR' ROCHE-KELLY

'Major' Roche-Kelly was a quiet man of gentlemanly aspect who wore a moustache and a belted raincoat. He was never a 'rise' and looked so sadly distinguished that our gibes were silenced and he went his way in peace. It was popularly said that he had been educated in Oxford and had a brother a Protestant bishop. He took morning coffee at the Savoy where, despite his unwashed appearance and the glances of customers, he was well looked after by May Birmingham.

The 'Major' had a well-informed and lively mind and entered into collaboration with another well-known citizen, Gerard 'The Poet' Ryan, to extract prizemoney

from quizmaster, Eamon Andrews, during his early "Question Time" appearances at the Savoy. But that is another story and it has already been well told by Joe Malone in the December 1979 edition of *The Old Limerick Journal*.



'Major' Roche-Kelly.

MARY ANN WALSH

Mary Ann Walsh was in a different category. She was what is now called an alcoholic; but we only knew her as a drunkard. She was famous for her uninhibited behaviour in public, letting fly in all directions - in every sense of that term.

Apparently, she came of a respectable background and had a grown-up family: drink was her undoing.

She could be violent when drunk, broke windows and had a fierce tongue. The local district justices, J.M. Flood and Dermot Gleeson, kept a benevolent eye on her and sentenced her to periods of incarceration in inclement weather. But as often as not they left her off scot-free.

On one such occasion, on the eve of a Munster senior rugby cup final, the delighted Mary stood up in the dock of the court and, having thanked the justice for releasing her, concluded her remarks to him with the celebrated phrase: "Up Guinness and back Garryowen tomorrow!"

Mary Ann always wore a hat and coat, not a shawl, in attestation of superior social status, though the impressiveness of the ensemble was considerably modified by her face of flaming addiction.

'PENNY BUN'

'Penny Bun' was a quiet person. A tall, well-built country woman, more than 6 feet in height, with a soft sad face, she was soberly dressed in a heavy overcoat, and had her hair piled on her head in an Edwardian bun.

She bothered no-one, paid her way and was well regarded for her independence and fortitude in the face of a "come-down" in the world. She always carried a laden bag in either hand and lived in a little shack inclined against a wall on the "Long Avenue".

'JACK'

"Damn de Valera that got me out of my fine house in Mungret" was the raucous cry of an elderly man called 'Jack'. He had a tongue and (to our delight) used it to the full. It was said that the Redemptorist Fathers gave him his dinner every day.

'Jack' was a dependable 'rise'. We would shout "Up Dev!" to start him off. He never failed to respond to the well-tried bait.

'JOHNNY RAW'

Garryowen seemed to have a disproportionate quota of eccentrics; no doubt the proximity of the Mulgrave Street Asylum supplied a large number of these.

Many inmates, harmless people, were allowed out for walks, and to buy a twist of tobacco. One such was 'Johnny Raw', a tall, burly man who walked with both hands held stiffly in his overcoat pockets. It gave him the look of a farmer-gangster. We used to call out: "Take the guns out of your pockets, Johnny".



Mary Ann Walsh.

RYAN 'BULLEEN'

A much more formidable person was Ryan 'Bulleen' who owned lands in Garryowen and Singland. A man with strong proprietorial instincts, he strenuously resisted any trespass on his hands and hotly pursued - often on horseback — marauding boys: sometimes he caught them and physically punished them, occasionally inflicting damages that required medical attention.

He was a powerful, patriarchal figure and greatly feared.



'The Little Red Hen'.

'ALICE DUCK-EGG'

Another famous 'rise' was 'Alice Duck-Egg'. She was a fiery little woman who lived in the Garryowen district and rarely moved outside that area.

She terrified all the small children attending St. John's Convent School.

'MICK THE GHOST'

Mick Moore was a Parkman who lived near the Dublin Road, beside the Groody river. He was a hardy fellow whose peculiarity was that of swimming all the year round.

Mick was undisturbed by social conventions. He was never known to wear swimming togs or to use a towel for covering or drying himself. He dived daily, and vigorously into the Groody and walked along its banks to dry himself.

He was nocturnal in his habits, and the early morning appearance of the naked Parkman emerging from the mist-enshrouded river and sauntering through the low-

lying meadows was, once seen, a vision never to be forgotten.

The habit earned for Moore the posthumous-sounding nickname, 'Mick the Ghost'.

'MAD MARY'

'Mad Mary' walked up and down O'Connell Street all day. She was a tall, very thin person, with a long neck and a small, pinched head on top of it.

She wore the same gabardene all year round, a little too short at the knees for the time. 'Mary' always carried a handbag held tightly under her arm.

Judging from her loud mutterings some Guard had let her down. She often recited rhymes, many of a religious nature, such as this one:

**Holy Moses and the rod
Holy Trinity, one God.**

'Mary' stopped every few yards, said something loudly - and then moved on.

COUGH-NO-MORE

'Cough-No-More' operated in churches. This fellow was irritated by coughing, particularly during sermons.

His method of silencing an offender was to leave his own place and move to that part of the isle nearest the cougher and stare at him. It usually worked.

'THE LITTLE RED HEN'

A minor celebrity was 'The Little Red Hen'. One of three sisters, she lived in a little lane off our street. She was a tiny person with big eyes like a marmoset. She wore a draped shawl from which thin twig-like legs, encased in dirty stockings, emerged.

'The Little Red Hen' drank a colourless liquid from a



'Johnny Raw'.

bottle concealed under her shawl. Judging from her torrid complexion, it was unlikely to have been holy water!

'THUMBS UP'

An odd sight was presented by 'Thumbs Up' and his wife. He was a small man, an ex-jockey. His wife was a large woman with a florid face.

Unbelievable as it may now seem, they lived much of their middle age in a tomb. After a day in town the pair retired, drunk, to their churchyard chamber. In his "Memoirs of a Savoy Pageboy" article Joe Malone has given a vivid picture of this pair and their doings.



'Mad Mary'

'JOSIE'

'Josie' was a woman and is not to be confused with her better-known male counterpart of the same name. (See Old Limerick Journal, June issue).

She carried a stick and used it if she got a chance. The trick was to shout 'Mad Josie' and run, 'Josie' in hot pursuit.



'Jack'

The tormentors always formed themselves into a gang, whose members ran off in different directions. Thus 'Josie's' target was diffused and escape made easy.

'MARCONI - THE IRON MAN'

A spectacular eccentric was "Wires" or "China Dong". Many readers will remember him. He was known in different parts of the city, by various other names, including "The Iron Man" and "Marconi".

Two descriptions of his extraordinary aspect were given in the March edition of The Old Limerick Journal, but hundreds of other people could give their own memories of perhaps the most exotic character in the Limerick of his day.

