

Limerick's Placenames and Language

By Frank Prendergast, M.A.

The widespread public interest in local placenames and language forms was very evident from the overflowing attendance last week at the latest Public Lecture Series in the City Library.

The talk "Limerick's Placenames and Language" was given by former Mayor Frank Prendergast who is also a member of An Coimisiún Logainmneacha, the Irish Placenames Commission. He stressed the antiquity of some of our local placenames and cited the finding of a 16' boat and one human skull nearly four years ago by the Discovery team of archaeologists from The Office of Public Works in the mud flats of the Shannon River at Carrigadoarty below Clarina. The Carbon 14 system of measurement has estimated their age as being 6,800 years, i.e. thirty centuries before the Pyramids were built in Egypt and about four thousand years before the arrival of the Celts here. The "Rai" element of the nearby Caonraí tribe at Pallaskenry suggest that they were an aitheachtuath or vassal people according to Professor Donncha O'Corráin of U.C.C. who gives other instances of this in Osraí (Ossory); Ciarraí (Kerry); Bantry; and Partry in Co. Mayo. One of their words which has survived down to the present in modern Irish is believed to be madra (dog). In 150 A.D., the Greek geographer Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria drew a map of Ireland in which he identified towns and tribes including the Uaithni whose name survives in the Barony of Ossory and Arra in Tipperary and Owneybeg in Limerick across the Mulcair River. "If they were synonymous with that place shortly after the time of Our Lord on earth, how long before that were they settled there?" asked Mr. Prendergast. He ventured that they could be part of the pre-celtic population of the region and yet their tribal name has survived for two thousand years.

More than a thousand years later, Prince John in 1185 conferred the lands between Athlunkard, the mouth of the Groody River, Curragh Birín and Killalee, on the Dean and Chapter of St. Mary's Cathedral fifteen years before they were formally instituted there. In 1213 he conferred 40 ploughlands (seisreacha) on the people of Limerick. Sixteen of these to the north of the Shannon include such placenames as Kiltrush (at Barrington's Pier), Farranshone, Clonmacken, Knock (opposite the Greenhills Hotel), Caherdavin, Shanabooley, Ballygrennan, Clonconnane, Clondrinagh, Coonagh, Ballynanty Beg and Ballynanty More, Moylish and Farrenykillly (Killeely). There were twenty-four ploughlands to the south of the Shannon including Corbally, Park, Rhebogue, Courtbrack, Rosbrien, Rathuard, Ballysheedy and Rathbane. Singland belonged to St. Mary's Parish. Knockalisheen, Ballycannon, Cappantymore, Glenagross and Cratloe were outside the Northern Liberties of the city and were broadly co-extensive with the ancient parishes of Killeely and St. Munchin. A Limerick Corporation Inquisition of 1615 states that, "they were in the possession of Richard de Clare (of Bunratty) from the Kings of England as tenants of the Mayor and Corporation"

Gearóid Mac Spealáin, M.A. one of Limerick's greatest historians reminds us that the great Jesuit scholar, Fr. Edmund Hogan S.J., formerly of the Sacred Heart

Community at the Crescent, states in his epic work, "Onomasticon Goedelicum" that the old name for the falls on the Shannon at the Church Fields was Ath Coille – the ford of the wood. The O'Briens who built the bridge there in 1071 changed that name to Ath Longphuirt – Athlunkard- around 1300 A.D. after their longphort at Cluain na n-Áirne. The medieval scribe apparently did not know where Cluain na n-Áirne – the meadow of the blackthorn- was located, but Bishop Conor O'Dea who left us his famed crozier and mitre and who was related to the Scottish Royal Dynasty, revealed it in his writings in 1418 as, "Cluainanarny alias Kilquane". A few hundred yards downstream from the present ancient church and cemetery at Kilquane the Discovery team, already mentioned, have discovered a Viking harbour on the bank opposite Thomas' Island, thereby confirming the reliability of our ancient placenames as sources of information on ancient people and their lifestyles. Other local examples of older names which have survived the passage of centuries are Curry lane – the outline of which is still visible to the East of Broad Street – mentioned in the Civil Survey by Sir William Petty in 1654 and Tobar na Seisrighe – Tubbernasheshry – on the Ballysimon Road about 500 yards from "The Thatch" public house. Fish Lane and the Lax-Weir are other ancient survivals. Newtown Pery inspired such names as Mallow Street, Glentworth Street and Pery Square after the civil and religious titles of the Pery Family.

The older city saw a vast improvement in the system of street-names under Sir Christopher Knight who was Mayor in 1786, when he introduced flagged footways and wooden street signs at each corner. The older city names date from this period and include William Street (1789); Crosbie Row (1791); Cornwallis (Gerald Griffin) Street (1799); George's (O'Connell) Street and Denmark Street (1770); Ellen Street (1805); Francis Street and Patrick Street all commemorate the city's most illustrious family, the Arthurs. Nelson (Parnell) Street was built in 1804, Bedford Row (no date) and Sexton Street (1797) also derive from that era. The 15th century Irishtown included such native Irish placenames as Pouleen (Mona Tce. now) and Sukan Lane near St.Patrick's Church.

Mr. Prendergast denounced in trenchant terms the modern trend of some builders and developers to change such very old street names as the Cabbage Market and Chapel Lane to Chapel Street. This can only be attributed to snobbery and ignorance of the cultural and historic value of these names in sharp contrast to the practice all over the cities of Europe where such names were deemed to be more important than some of the civic buildings. "Sadly," he said "it was a matter of regret that some other centuries old beautiful placenames such as Thomondgate, Glounagross, Bán Mór and Gouldavoher were being corrupted in pronunciation to Thoemondgate, Glenagross, Bawnmore and Gooldavoher by people from outside Limerick who had no knowledge of their meaning or significance". In sharp contrast was the wonderful legacy of their incomparable treasure of the Abbey Fishermen who presented intact the beautiful, mellifluous and wonderfully accurate placenames on the Shannon as it flowed through Limerick. "Scholars and historians" Mr. Prendergast said "would be forever in the debt of Jackie "Diddles" Clancy, the scholarly Secretary of the St. Francis Abbey Guild of Fishermen, who recorded the names for posterity; Mr William "Nay" Lysaght who described them in his book, "The Abbey Fishermen" and the celebrated historian, the late Kevin Hannan who preserved them in his illustrated map of the Shannon as it flows through the city". He hoped that common sense would prevail here and praised such local builders as John Whelan Ltd. who had adopted his (Mr. Prendergast's) suggestion that the lovely estate on

the Dublin Road at the University Roundabout should be named after ^{its} local ancient name – Curragh Birín. He was gratified to note that this had now been included in the recent Ordnance Survey Map of Limerick thus extending and preserving an ancient placename for posterity. Mr. Prendergast thanked the distinguished local firm of Messrs. Murray O Laoire for their choice of Coolraine Heights for their development on the Old Cratloe Road. He stated that these wonderful examples were in accord with the action of recent Ministers for the Environment who had introduced a policy obliging all developers to name their projects in accordance with the history, heritage and tradition of the areas being developed.

Limerick Corporation was a model for all other Local Authorities in Ireland with the wonderful bi-lingual system of street names introduced by Jim Barrett as City Engineer and Jack Higgins, City Manager. This was in keeping with the city's policy for nearly a century since it became the first city in Ireland to introduce street-names in Irish and English.

Turning to aspects of English as we speak it in Limerick, Mr. Prendergast reminded the audience that this had been the language of the English Establishment in Ireland for centuries. He wondered how many people these days realised that words such as politics, economics, radio, theatre, athletics, orchestra, mathematics, photograph et cetera were all Greek in origin and that every time we used such words as advance, abide, abdicate, abuse, arena, auction, agriculture, floral, fountain, forum etc. we were speaking borrowed Latin words and expressions. Similarly with Irish, he had collected over the last forty years, he said, almost three hundred Irish words which were used, very often unknowingly, in everyday spoken English by the older generation of Limerick people when he grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in St. John's and St. Patrick's Parishes. Most of these were still spoken today and greatly enriched the descriptive type of English spoken here, a fact which was recognised readily by such English scholars and writers as Peter Westland in his standard text book, "Public Speaking", and the late Kenneth Tynan, the noted English theatre critic who said in an article for "The Observer" newspaper that "English playwrights were often miserly in their use of language but that the Irish used words as prodigally as a drunken sailor in port". Words such as "tizzicky" to describe a bad chest condition; drooth (drought); childer (children); flure (floor); goold (gold) commonly spoken here forty years ago were survivals from Old English terms. Similarly the biblical sounding "ye" for you, plural, "what ails you?" and "I would as lief" (I would as soon) are survivals of archaic English, now mostly obsolete. Two other words "fong" (a leather shoe-lace) and "scaub" (scrape) common in Limerick speech even yet have been described as proper to Yola, the old Chaucerian English spoken in the Baronies of Bargy and Forth in Wexford by the distinguished Gaelic scholar from that county, Dr. Diarmuid O Muirthe of T.C.D.

The general encroachment of English following the introduction of The National Primary Schools System in 1831 was inevitable although the Census of 1891 recorded 1,317 Irish speakers in the city. Their speech was coloured with powerfully descriptive words and phrases especially when they were agitated or disturbed, could not use the newer English words and went back to their cradle language – Irish – to give vent to their feelings. Examples of this were outlined by Mr. Prendergast, as shleeveen; gombeen; noody-nawdy; eye-fiddle; mee-aw; omadawn; ownshuck; pilgarlick. He believed that the

latter word was unique to Limerick with other words such as “haboo”; “ah-hady” and “doll-dydee”, the origins of which were obscure but from their construction and pronunciation would appear to be undoubtedly Irish. The older city communities of Thomondgate, Kileely, St. Mary’s Park, the Abbey area, Park, Irishtown, Killalee and Garryowen were the true repositories of the centuries old Limerick accent and speech patterns which were a joy to hear. The great Limerick scholar P. W. Joyce of Glenosheen in his pioneering work in this field “English as we speak it in Ireland” refers to the usage of the rich Limerick and Cork idiom in his youth in the County of the 1830s and 1840s.

“I hope,” Mr. Prendergast concluded “that Limerick will long continue to preserve its unique heritage of rich, colourful, expressive language.”

its