

ST. MICHAEL'S

by Kevin Hannan

The respect for burial places, ancient and modern, is held sacred by peoples of every race, even backward tribes in remote corners of the earth, but alas, not in Ireland. Many of our churchyards are used only for their dread and melancholy purpose and then forgotten. When these places have finally claimed the last members of the families that for centuries found their last resting places there, nature comes into her own, and soon the tangle of luxuriant vegetation takes over the funeral paths and covers the pitiful grave markers, and the place is abandoned and forgotten.

Such was the fate of St. Michael's graveyard, just outside the Water Gate of Limerick's Irishtown. Here the remains of many of the sons and daughters of the old city lie amid the filth and neglect of more than a century. In all that time the citizens of Limerick, including the clergy and City Fathers, have pretended that the place did not exist. Even when the slums that surrounded and overlooked it on all sides were cleared away, leaving its forlorn and unkempt mass in isolation, there was no move to repair the broken boundary wall or preserve the few monuments that had survived, to some extent, a century of vandalism. The only bright spot in the sad picture is the lone sycamore tree which has been recycling its greenery over the graves for more than a lifetime.

There is little there to relieve the feelings one is wont to experience in a graveyard, no modern memorials or other signs of recent death to disturb the sober severity of our reflections, nothing but a few barely decipherable inscriptions on broken and half sunken stones to tell of the passing of people through another age.

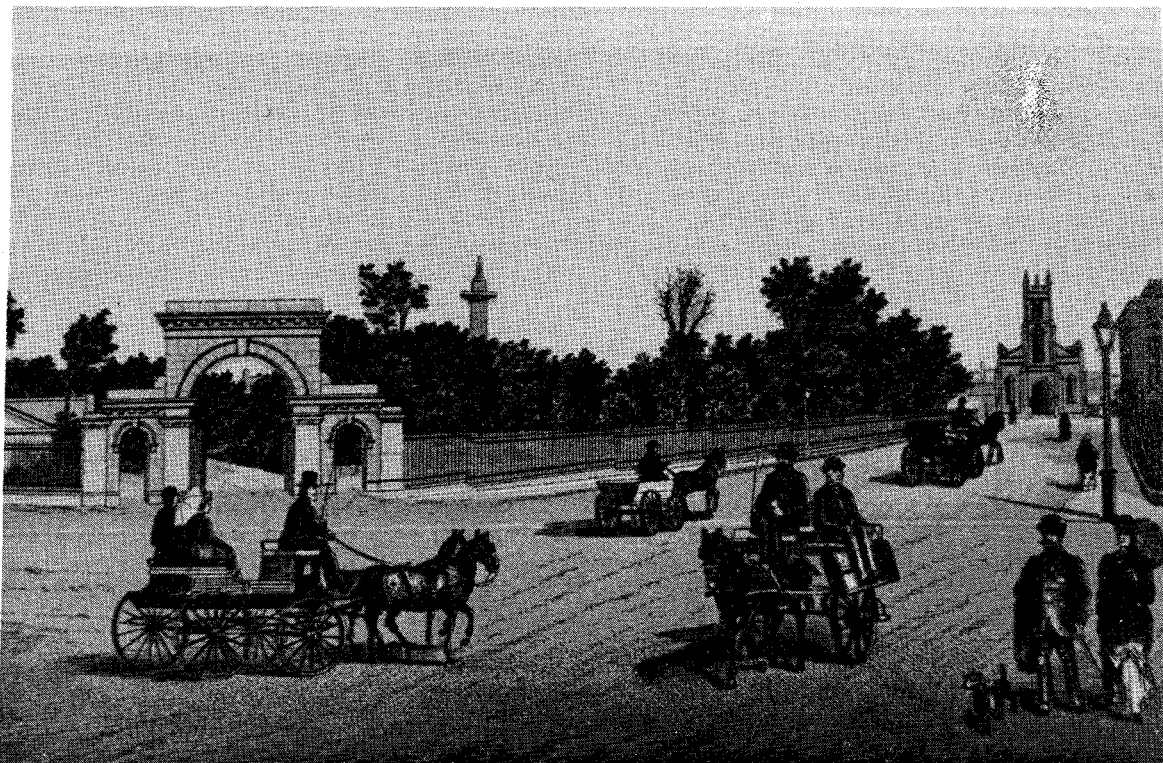
No trace remains today to remind us of the old church; Henry Ireton saw to that in 1651, though there are those who believe that the building - already in ruin since the

early seventeenth century - was dismantled by the citizens immediately before the Cromwellian siege so that the enemy could not use it as a shield when attacking the Water Gate defences. If any part of the church survived the Cromwellian campaign there is no mention of it in the Civil Survey of 1654. The reference here to the parish of St. Michael paints only a picture of a desolate area containing "... a partly ruined castle and mill seat at Beall na Corrie (Ballinacurra); a few thatched cabins; the Prior's mill near the churchyard, and a few gardens belonging to the vicar and archdeacon and some city gentlemen".

We do not know the date of the establishment of St. Michael's Church. It may have been a Danish foundation, but it is more likely to have been established by the Normans, as St. Michael was a great favourite with them.

Of interest, too, is the fact that the early church was built on an island in accordance with the tradition of dedicating churches to St. Michael which are built on islands and high places. Notable examples are to be found in Skellig Michael, Mont San Michele and St. Michael's Mount. The island outside the west Water Gate was formed by a division of the Abbey river immediately downstream of Baal's Bridge and running outside of the city wall, making a great moat, and meeting with another inlet of the river which covered the area now marked by part of Michael Street.

This area is clearly set out in a number of early maps, one of which shows a drawing of the church with a square, battlemented tower and side isle. The only



St. Michael's Church and the People's Park c. 1880.

feature shown on the island is the Prior's mill, the sills of which were discovered a few years ago when repairs were being carried out to the river wall. This was one of three tide mills in the city and was situated on the left bank of the Abbey river about two hundred yards above Mathew Bridge. Nicholas Arthur's mill was sited a little further upstream on the opposite side of the river, while Fisher's mill occupied the most picturesque and spectacular position of any mill of its kind in the country - in the centre of the Shannon, below Curragour Falls.

From early times St. Michael's was a poor and, consequently, an unimportant parish. We find a record of 1302 showing that the rector received £1 annually, "... being taxed two shillings in the list of traditions". Though the remains of the church had disappeared by the 1650s, the parish was administered from that time and all through the seventeenth century from the sexton's house at the churchyard, where vestry meetings were held during this period. The **Limerick Chronicle** of July 1838 published a report of a meeting "... held in St. Michael's graveyard ... Rev. H. Willis presiding, when William S. Fraser and Ralph Wilson were elected Churchwardens, and William Henry Hall, James Morris and John Owens, officers of health for next year. Mr. John Hickey said the vestry was illegal, not being summoned by bell. But there is no bell, no belfry or parish church to support it. Why is it so, the dissentient knows as well as any Protestant or Roman Catholic in St. Michael's, and his remark comes with bad grace". John Hickey, may have been a disappointed aspirant for one of the above offices, or, even a defeated candidate. The name, however, suggests that he was a Roman Catholic trying to rub salt into the wounds of his poor Protestant brethren, as Catholics were permitted to attend vestry meetings.

Whatever the reason for the establishment of a church in this desolate and disagreeable slobland, the allegiance of its few parishioners remained staunch. These were mostly inside the city wall, for it must be remembered that part of the parish was enclosed in the city after the Irishtown was fortified in the fifteenth century.

Early in the 1760s, the speaker of the House of Commons, Edward Sexton Pery, pushed forward the building of the new Limerick into St. Michael's parish. Soon the gentry and the well-to-do merchants were moving out of the once fashionable districts of Mungret Street, St. John's Square and Quay Lane to the more congenial and salubrious atmosphere of the high ground above the river.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century saw every building worker from the city and a wide area around it in full employment, and the opening years of the new century saw little slackening off. This exodus came about mainly through a desire on the part of the merchant and professional classes to put themselves outside the jurisdiction of the corrupt Corporation, and otherwise to get away from the cooped-up and uncongenial confines of the old city.

Though the population of the parish had increased enormously, there was no real move to replace the old Water Gate church, which had, before it fell into ruin, been used exclusively by the Protestant parishioners.

Around 1770 an attempt was made to build a church at the corner of what is now O'Connell Street and Bedford Row, but for some unknown reason it was never finished. Some few years afterwards the unfinished building was dismantled and the materials used to build St. George's Chapel further up the street, on the site of the present Provincial Bank of Ireland. This was a small building and could hardly be regarded as an edifice that enhanced the prestige of the ascendancy religion or reflected the religious fervour of its members. Furthermore, the church was a private one, and not a parish church in any sense. Archdeacon Maunsell looked after

the spiritual welfare of an ever growing flock for many years without a parish church.

A way was found, however, to relieve the congestion, to some extent, by the erection of a trustee church - a church connected to a charitable institution. This was to be an asylum for blind females. The church, dedicated to the Blessed Trinity, bolstered up on each side by a magnificent house - one the blind asylum and the other the home of the clergyman - was completed in 1831 at a total cost of £5273. The money was largely collected by the Rev. Edward Newenham Hoare, curate of St. John's, who made several trips to England in his fund-raising campaign. The work was ably assisted by the Bishop, Right Rev. Dr. Knox.

Like many Protestant churches, Trinity outlived its noble purpose. Completely re-designed internally, and with a brush-up of its splendid facade, it serves more people than ever before, and in many different ways, as the headquarters of the Mid-Western Health Board, at the top of Catherine Street.

It was not until 1832 that a site for a parish church - the first in more than two hundred years - was provided in Vize's Field by the Earl of Limerick. Great difficulties would seem to have been encountered in getting the worthy project off the ground, for the new St. Michael's was not finished till 1844.

Through some extraordinary miscalculation, this church was built in the centre of a street that was intended to run parallel to O'Connell Street, right out to Ballinacurra. This amusing circumstance was a most fortunate error, for it left us with Pery Square, our most beautiful thoroughfare, and a noble monument to the man who helped so much to give us the new Limerick.

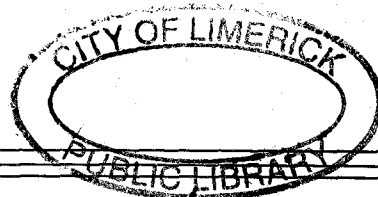
Of the Water Gate foundation only the churchyard remains to-day, the centre piece of a more or less deserted car park, unknown to most people, and regarded by others as an ungainly heap of earth and stones that spoils an otherwise magnificent building site. Our planners, however, to their credit, had it incorporated in the grand new municipal building plan for Charlotte Quay. If this grandiose scheme had not been postponed for the all too familiar reason - lack of money - the churchyard would now have been cleaned up and given a new respectability beside the grand new City Hall.

As far back as 1887, the churchyard was also a source of embarrassment to the powers that be. The Local Health Authority decided that "... representations be made to the Local Government Board for the closing of St. Michael's burial ground in the City of Limerick for the protection of public health and the maintenance of public decency, and to prevent a violation of the respect due to the remains of the deceased". Subsequent to this proposal, the following report was made by Dr. Holmes, the City M.O.H.: "I hereby report to you as requested by Mr. Corbett, and also on the report of the sub officers, I inspected St. Michael's burial ground. I found two large breaches in the walls at the Watergate side, whereby the public can have free access to the burial ground. The place is a commonage for domestic fowl.

"The people of the locality use it as a drying place for their clothes. I consider it quite unsuitable for a burial ground and I recommend that it be immediately closed against any further interments and that the walls be properly repaired".

Shortly afterwards the churchyard was officially closed, though one other interment took place there as recently as 1945. This was an old parishioner who had died in the United States and had expressed a fervent wish to be buried with his ancestors in St. Michael's.

The large breaches in the wall on the Watergate side, noted by Dr. Holmes in 1887, have since closed on each other, forming one very large breach. His cry for



assistance is still reverberating in the wilderness.

The place contained many family vaults and altar tombs but these were destroyed many years ago. Ellen Arthur's tomb has long since disappeared but Ellen Street remains as a more permanent and fitting monument to that family. The memorial to the builder of the granary overlooking the graveyard, Philip Roche, has also disappeared.

What of the Catholic church in the parish? It is certain that its parishioners were in the doldrums from the mid-sixteenth century until the first post-Reformation church was built. In the interim period of uncertainty and oppression they had carried on under great difficulties assisting at mass and receiving the sacraments in the murky cellars of the Irishtown. There were no parish divisions and the "mass houses" were shared by all.

The first Catholic church in the Irishtown since the Reformation was set up - one cannot say it was built - outside John's Gate by Fr. O'Connor. This was simply a mass house, made up by merging two or three small cabins. This little building was known in history as "Fr. O'Connor's Chapel". It stood close to the city wall outside John's Gate, in or about the present site of the present Cathedral Villas.

The parishioners worshipped there until 1753 when Fr. John Leahy finished his new chapel a little further to the west and close up to the city wall. The site of this building is clearly marked behind the mission cross in St. John's Cathedral yard. Fr. Leahy was the last parish priest of St. John's.

The parishioners of St. Michael's used this church until their own was built outside the walls between Water Gate and Mungret Gate, on a site donated by the great developer of the time, Patrick Arthur, who also contributed largely to the cost of the building. Improvements were carried out to this building from time to time as circumstances permitted, and a considerable enlargement was carried out in 1805.

After serving the parish for just a hundred years, the old church was replaced by the present fine edifice. The new church site was also donated by the Arthur family, who had kept it vacant for a century. During excavation work in connection with this development large quantities of human bones were unearthed. It was presumed at the time that these were the remains of those who died during the assault on the fortifications at this point during the siege of 1690. By order of the administrator the remains were carefully collected and buried under the church's altar.

It is sad to learn that the fine memorial slab that covered the grave of Patrick Arthur in the nave of the old church was "removed to the New Town Meat Market" close by. The beautiful inscription on this stone was well worthy of preservation.

**D.O.M.
IN MEMORY OF
MR. PATRICK ARTHUR
WHO CLOSED HIS LIFE SPENT IN THE
DISCHARGE OF ALL SOCIAL
AND CHRISTIAN DUTIES ON THE
16th OF DECEMBER 1799
IN THE 78th YEAR OF HIS AGE
IN HIM THE POOR HAVE LOST
A LIBERAL BENEFACTOR, THE
AFFLICTED AN EXAMPLE OF
RESIGNATION AND HIS FAMILY
A TENDER PARENT.
R I P**

Near this grave was buried Fr. Patrick Hogan, an able and popular parish priest who died in 1837. A strong local tradition recalls that this priest, while a young stu-



St. Michael's Churchyard.

dent at the Irish College in Paris during the terror of the French Revolution, was rescued by a kinsman of Patrick Arthur when the college was besieged by a mob.

This man was Robert Arthur, a colourful revolutionary who was born in Paris of a Limerick father, a watchmaker and member of the famous Arthur family of Limerick. Robert was a successful paper manufacturer and a rich man. His involvement in the revolution seems to have sprung from idealism rather than from any other cause. However, he suffered death by the guillotine in July 1794, two days after his great friend Robespierre had suffered the same fate.

Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, afterwards Bishop of Limerick, was curate of St. Michael's at the time of the opening of the present parish church in 1881, and was an outspoken critic of the dismantling of the old church. According to a manuscript in the church archives, Dr. O'Dwyer, when addressing an audience at the temperance hall, said: "Some people blame me for removing the old chapel; I had nothing to do with it. I would not allow it if I had power. Dr. Butler is to blame for its removal".

This is surely an extraordinary attack on a bishop by a junior priest, but, as events later proved, this was no ordinary priest.

The story of St. Michael's is interspersed here and there with incidents of high drama and studded with star performers. These are its palmy days - days of peace when the church and its history are taken for granted. But a look back through the ages to the little church on the lonely slobland island outside Water Gate of old Limerick tells us much about the city and its people.