

THE SUMMER SNOWFLAKE



n a May day, some years ago, I went for a walk along the Salmon Weir Bank, a stony pathway which runs from the millstream in Corbally to the jetty opposite the Ark Tavern. The bank follows the course of the Shannon and turns, at a right-angled bend, along the side of the Abbey River, a short diversion of the main river.

Until the path reaches the clumps of sallies that fringe the Abbey River, there are few trees and little vegetation to adorn the bank. On this day, however, the muddy edge where the river laps the bank was white with some of the loveliest flowers I have ever seen. Each bloom was a snowwhite globe, tipped with pale green, and borne on a long, elegant stem. The plant looked like an aristocratic white relation of the bluebell, and, as I mused on my discovery, I thought that the flower must surely have escaped from some garden on Corbally's Mill Road.

I had never seen such a plant and did not know its name or anything else about it. However, on my return home, I consulted Webb's *An Irish Flora* and found that the flower was called the summer snowflake, or *Leucojum aestivum*, and that it grew wild and was native to Limerick and its environs. During the next few weeks, I returned a few times to further study the flower.

The summer snowflake had faded from the river bank and all but from my mind until one day, browsing through the Journals of the Limerick Field Club, for the period 1905-1908, I came across an article, illustrated with a photograph, on the plant. I was delighted to learn that the author, R.D. O'Brien, had discovered the flower, more than eighty years before, exactly in the same place as I had found it. In the third volume, in "Notes on some Bulbs from the Alluvial of the Shannon Estuary", he wrote:

"The Shannon ran low in May and June last year, 1904, so that I was able thoroughly to search the marshy banks for *Leucojum aestivum*, which I had failed to find further down stream than Whitehall creek. The sweep of the tide and the lash of the

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water in the open reaches does not suit the plant. I found only a few specimens, yet I was able to establish

its presence below the railway bridge on the Clare shore, and very sparingly up from thence to Whitehall



The summer snowflake on the Salmon Weir Bank, May 1986.

creek. Since 1897 I have seen it every Spring in the meadows and sallies of Parteen as far as the Lax Weir, and up Whitehall creek as far as the tide goes ... I found the plant, two or three flowers only, on the Limerick shore above the railway bridge. In the reach below the bridge I could not find it, as I had hoped to do, but cattle were on the land."

In my own searches I found the summer snowflake growing in abundance, beside the Abbey River, almost as far as O'Dwyer's Bridge. The lowering of the Shannon and Abbey rivers, after the building of the Ardnacrusha Power Station, appears to have helped the spread of the plant. The flower thrives on the alluvial soil of the river bed, and, though salmon fishing and other aquatic activities suffered badly because of the effects of the Shannon Scheme on the river, it should also be said that at least one aspect of nature benefited, even if only a humble wildflower.

In R.D. O'Brien's time an argument developed among naturalists as to whether the summer snowflake was a native plant or introduced. Limerick botanists asserted that the flower was native and unique, but Robert Lloyd Praeger, the famous Irish botanist, writing in the *Irish Naturalist*, concluded that it was probably introduced. R.D. O'Brien took issue with him:

"Mr. Praeger discusses the status of *Leucojum* in the *Irish Naturalist*,

December 1900, page 286, and concludes that it was 'probably introduced.' I must dissent from this view – we have now five distinct localities for the bulb, all of a highly specialised character, for it seems almost a necessity of its existence as a wild plant that it should come within the wash of Spring tides, while, as may be gathered from its appearance, it is ill able to resist heavy streams and lapping waters. Its habitat is round among the quiet bushy creeks and lagoons at the verges of the tidal marshes – refuges that have been almost abolished by the embankment riverain lands and by ploughing the corcass for corn. Is Mr. Praeger justified in saying that 'none of the stations mentioned are free from suspicion?' ... Let us hope we may do something this season to establish *Leucojum* as a native bulb."

Thus the debate continued on the origins of the summer snowflake. But the pages of the *Journal* of the Limerick Field Club were not confined to a consideration of just one flower and carried much information on the whole range of flora to be found in the city and its environs. Among these plants was another botanical rarity, the triangular clubrush, *Scirpus triquetus*, discovered growing between King's Island and Cratloe Creek by R.D. O'Brien.

In the same issue of the *Journal*, a visiting botanist, R.A. Phillips, gives a

lively account of some of his rambles. He describes his visits to various parts of the city and county and concentrates particularly on the banks of the Shannon. He also pays tribute to the work of R.D. O'Brien and the members of the Field Club:

"Being located in Limerick during the Summer of 1904, I had in the course of a few afternoon and evening rambles, opportunities of botanizing in a district quite new to me, the flora of which, from the fact that it includes both the tidal and higher waters of the river Shannon and its limestone basin, presents a collection of aquatic and calcicole plants unsurpassed for interest in any other part of Ireland. During these rambles the river had most attractions, and I seldom strayed far from its banks, which I was able to explore fairly well both above and below the city, and also in the neighbourhood of Castleconnell and Doonass. The district has been well worked by members of the Limerick Field Club and others during recent years, and I was pleased to meet with many of the rarer plants already recorded in *Irish Topographical Botany* and elsewhere, as well as several species and varieties not yet recorded ... One of the most interesting areas in the whole district is that comprised within a radius of about two miles from the centre of the city, and there may be found a large

number of the most characteristic Limerick plants. Of these I can here notice only a few of the more remarkable, chief among these being the Triangular Clubrush, *Scirpus triquet*, discovered by Mr. R.D. O'Brien in 1900, but found nowhere else in Ireland ... it grows for miles along the Shannon from King's Island to Cratloe Creek, forming the outer fringe of vegetation along the muddy-banks."

R.A. Phillips goes on to list some of the other rare plants to be found in and around the city and its waterways and gives pride of place to R.D. O'Brien's discovery of the summer snowflake. He also praises the photograph of the flower, taken by another local botanist, Dr. George Fogerty:

"In similar situations, though higher up, the typical form of the English Scurry-grass, *Cochlearia anglica*, as well as its variety *C. Hortii*, whitens with its flowers the river edges, and with it grows the Creeping Yellow Water-cress, *Nasturtium sylvestre*, elsewhere found only sparingly on the banks of a few rivers in south-east Ireland. The Great River Sedge, *Carex riparia* is, I believe, nowhere else in Ireland so abundant as along the Shannon marshes, where its sea-green foliage and brown flower-heads form quite a feature on the landscape. Another plant more plentiful here than elsewhere, is the Crow Garlic, *Allium vineale*, which in other places usually occurs very sparingly, but about Limerick both north and south of the city covers many acres of the meadow land on both sides of the river, quite taking the place of grass during the first three months of the year. But the loveliest denizen of our tidal marshes is the Summer Snowflake, *Leucojum aestivum*, another of Mr. O'Brien's discoveries, which is frequent and sometimes abundant by the banks and in the creeks and estuaries along the Shannon and some of its tributaries, its green-tipped snow-white flowers showing to perfection during the month of May as illustrated by the beautiful photograph taken by Dr. George Fogerty near the mouth of the Ballinacurra creek. The Flowering Rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, is another very beautiful tenant of watery places, its umbels of rose-red blossoms springing from ditches and drains, particularly in the neighbourhood of King's Island and Corbally."

He continues his explorations along the river bank as far as Plassey. The Park canal, linking the Shannon and Abbey rivers, and the ditches beside the canal proved to be a rich source of wild plants. And the lush water-meadows of the Shannon Fields yielded a plentiful growth of meadow barley and some rare hybrid grass:

"Everywhere along the river sides the handsome Yellow Loose-strife,

Lysimachia vulgaris is to be seen in July, and higher up, towards Plassey, the Broad-leafed Water Parsnip, *Sium latifolium*, so rare elsewhere in Ireland, occurs occasionally. Among other plants, less conspicuous though not less interesting to be found in the city district, may be mentioned – in the river the Pondweeds, *Potamogeton densus*, *P. lucens*, *P. heterophyllus*, and *P. perfoliatus*, and in the canal, which, with the ditches near it, possesses quite a distinct group of its own, the Water Crowfoots, *Ranunculus circinatus*, and *R. trichophyllus*; the Arrowhead, *Sagittaria Sagittifolia*; the Least Spike-rush, *Eleocharus acicularis*;

of the city a few words must be said about its alien flora which in certain spots is exceedingly rich and consists of species some of which, like the Wallflower that in May brightens our old walls and ruins, are well established and likely to remain permanent members of the flora; while others are merely casuals, such being the numerous annuals, apparently from all ends of the earth, that appear for a season or two in disused quarries and waste ground where the city rubbish and ballast are deposited, making these places look more like gay botanic gardens than the dumping ground for refuse that they are. Among the most interesting of



The window of R.D. O'Brien's estate agent's office, 74 O'Connell Street, Limerick.

Tolypella glomerata and the four Duckweed, *Lemna minor*, *L. trisulca*, *L. polyrrhiza* and *L. gibbra*, the last two being very rare in Ireland. In the Shannon fields just beyond the canal the rare hybrid grass, *Festuca loliacea*, grows with its parents *F. pratensis* and *Lolium perenne*, and the Meadow Barley, *Hordeum secalinum* is plentiful. On the river bank to the north of the city two rare plants hitherto found only in the north of Ireland may be seen, they are *Polygonum mite* and *Carex aquatilis var virescens*."

He also visited some unusual places in the city in search of further discoveries. He describes a trip to a quarry in Carey's Road and the floral wonders he found growing in abundance there. But let R.A. Phillips tell his own story of the teeming plant life he found on old walls, ruins, rubbish dumps and a quarry in the heart of the city:

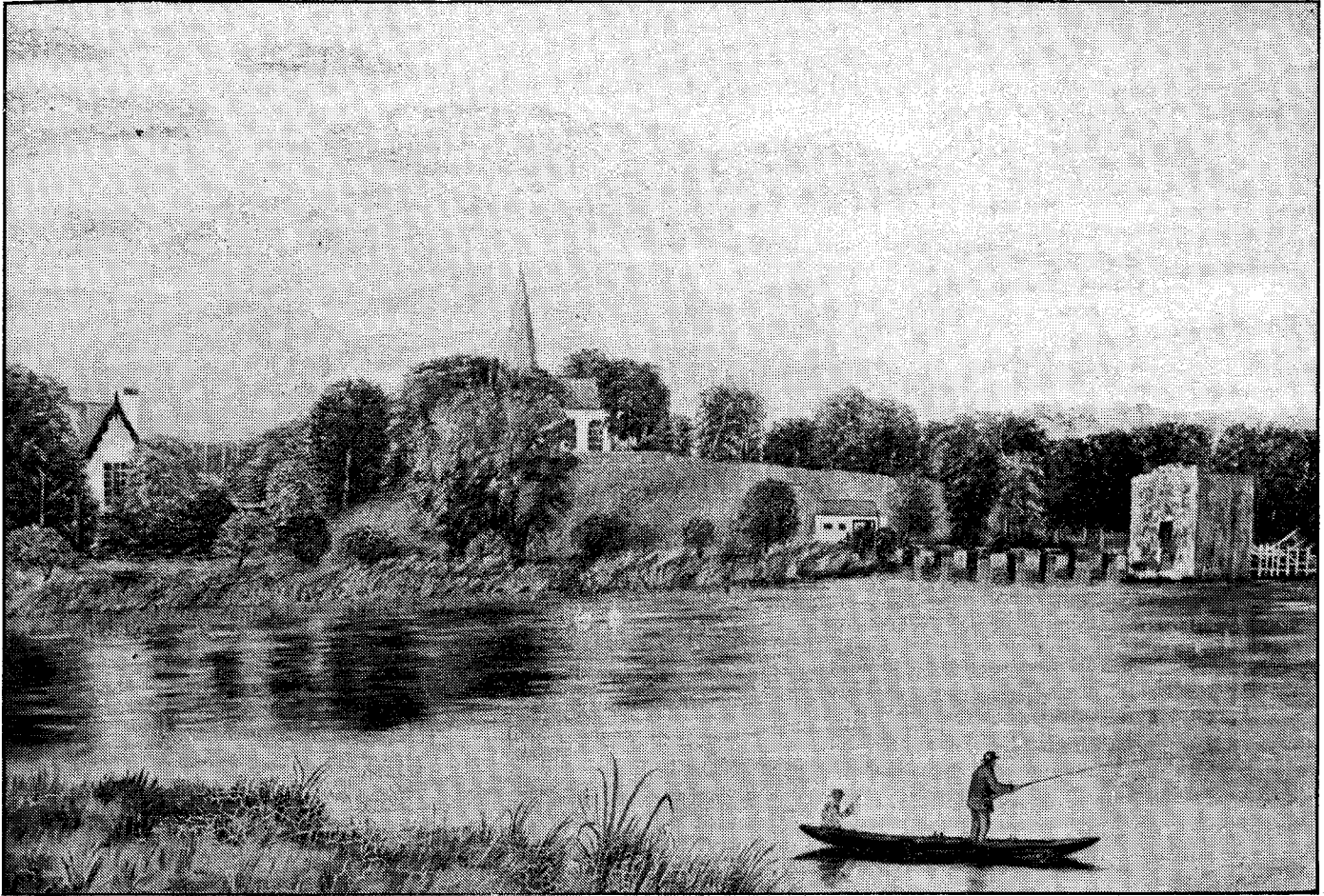
"Before leaving the neighbourhood

these aliens may be mentioned *Lepidium latifolium*, found elsewhere only in Co. Cork, and an *Aster* whose identity I have not yet been able to discover which is well established in some places by the river near Lansdowne. The following casuals in addition to those recorded by other botanists were found by me in the Carey's Road quarry – *Clarkia concinna* and *Silia capitata*, natives of California; *Bromus unioloides* from South America; *Matricaria occidentalis* from North America: the Chick Pea, *Cicer arietinum* of South Europe and Egypt; *Malcolmia africana*, *Silene conica*, *Medicago apiculata*, *Carmelina sativa*, *Sisymbrium orientale*, *S. panonicum*, *Bromus secalinus*, *Anthemis arvensis*, *Carum carvi*, *Cynosurus echinatus*, and others that I have, so far, been unable to get named. Space will not permit me to enumerate all the plants to be found in the suburb-

ban districts of Limerick, and the foregoing notes refer to species more or less uncommon mostly of special interest to the botanist only, but even the most casual observer cannot fail to be struck by the beauty, variety and abundance of bloom which appears, particularly along the river embankments, in monthly succession from early spring to autumn."

flora which continue to enrich the city and its environs. The combination of the damp climatic conditions, the limestone bedrock, the alluvial soil of the tidal river and the likelihood that foreign ships may have brought some 'outside' seeds to the city through its port has given Limerick a rich crop of wild flowers. And we owe a debt of gratitude to the Field Club for docu-

wildflower. The descriptions of their explorations, for all their Victorian idiosyncrasies and quaint turns of phrase, have an essential quality which is seldom found in modern scientific writing – a burning love of the natural order of things, and an awareness of beauty, without which the simple appreciation of life can often be lost in a welter of cold and clinical lan-



A painting of Parteen-a-Lax by Geraldine O'Brien.

R.A. Phillips rounds off his article by listing all the plants he found on his trips to Castleconnell, Doonass, Glensal, Adare and Rinekirk, at the mouth of the River Maigue. He was accompanied on the latter journey by R.D. O'Brien.

And what of the summer snowflake today? The old argument of eighty years ago still continues. Most flower-books state that the plant is native, yet when I recently sent a photograph of the flower to Dr. Charles Nelson – one of the country's foremost authorities on flora – at the Botanical Gardens, Glasnevin, he informed me that it was a garden escapee. But whether or not the flower is a native or was introduced is not too relevant. What is important is that the little plant is thriving, even though it now keeps company with plastic bags, coke-cans and other debris, washed across the river from the Longpavement Dump.

But the summer snowflake is only one example of the many species of

menting the full range of this selection. Reading the old Journals, one discovers that not only did the club publish a regular series of botanical articles but that it also had its own herbarium.

It was the end of the era of great Victorian collectors and enthusiasts, and a time when R.D. O'Brien, George Fogerty, R.A. Phillips, Miss S.C. Bennis, Helen Laird, Eleonora Armitage and many more members of the Limerick Field Club went on regular rambles about the city and county in search of unusual flora. Fortunately for us, the results of their explorations are fully recorded in the pages of their '*Journal*'.

What sort of people were these amateur botanists and what stirred them to spend their spare time rooting about in disused quarries, rubbish dumps, muddy ditches and quiet backwaters? They were gentle, romantic adventurers, who were driven on in their searches by the magical excitement of discovering a new species of

guage. In short, they never lost their sense of wonder and were not inhibited in expressing this wonderment in their writings.

Though we have become more conscious of the need to preserve our environment, we all too often take our wild flowers for granted. But it is not too late to renew our interest in this neglected area of botanical studies.

In many respects, little has changed in this timeless, hidden world and Limerick has much to offer to the botanist in the attractions of its wild flowers: wallflowers still decorate our medieval ruins; valerian grows in profusion on Georgian walls, and, no sooner is a building demolished, than the whole derelict area is clothed in the sweet-smelling flowers of the butterfly bush, *Buddleia davidii*.

The Limerick Field Club, through the explorations and writings of its members, has left us a rich heritage. It is a heritage to explore and enjoy.