

TOM BULL *by Kevin Hannan*

Only in the baptismal registry files was he known as Thomas McNamara; in all other places he was "Tom Bull", or simply "The Bull", especially on the canal bank. He lived in a small iron-roofed cabin on the bank, a short distance from the railway bridge. This part of the old canal still bears his name. Indeed, the famous spot was the Sandycove and Pollock Holes for many generations of Limerick swimmers. Even today with the once limpid waterway choked up with a wild profusion of aquatic vegetation, and fringed on both sides by a jungle of alder trees, the clear, sandy pool is still a popular swimming place.

Tom Bull was an Abbey fisherman who knew the bed of the river as well as he knew the earthen floor of his own cabin. When fishing during the dark summer nights he reacted to the almost imperceptible breaks of rocks and snags as if his brecaun was equipped with radar. He was regarded by his colleagues as an expert netman, but his expertise never went to his head. He was wont to head into town with spoils of a successful day's fishing, ostensibly to replenish his larder, but only to get drunk, and, consequently, to disappoint the other members of his crew, who had to waste valuable time searching for a substitute. But to Tom there was nothing of any consequence beyond living from day to day. He always found it difficult, if not impossible, to face a day on the river with a few pounds in his pocket, being unhappy in the knowledge that he couldn't spend his sporadic earnings between Barnaluinge and Giree.

The results of his philosophy of life, his meagre, uncertain income and his partiality for the pint were reflected in the wretched condition of his hovel, which was devoid of even the elementary comforts. In latter years the roof became leaky, and the story is told of the publican Christy Clohessy and his wife taking shelter inside the doorway during a heavy summer shower. Hearing the plashing of a big leak on the earthen floor, Christy remarked: "'Tis a wonder, Tom, you wouldn't fix that leak on a day like this," The droll Bull retorted: "Sure no one could fix the hole on such a wet day." "But why not have it done on a fine day; I will pay for the cost," persisted Christy. "Ah", said Tom, "what use would that be - sure it never leaks on a fine day!"

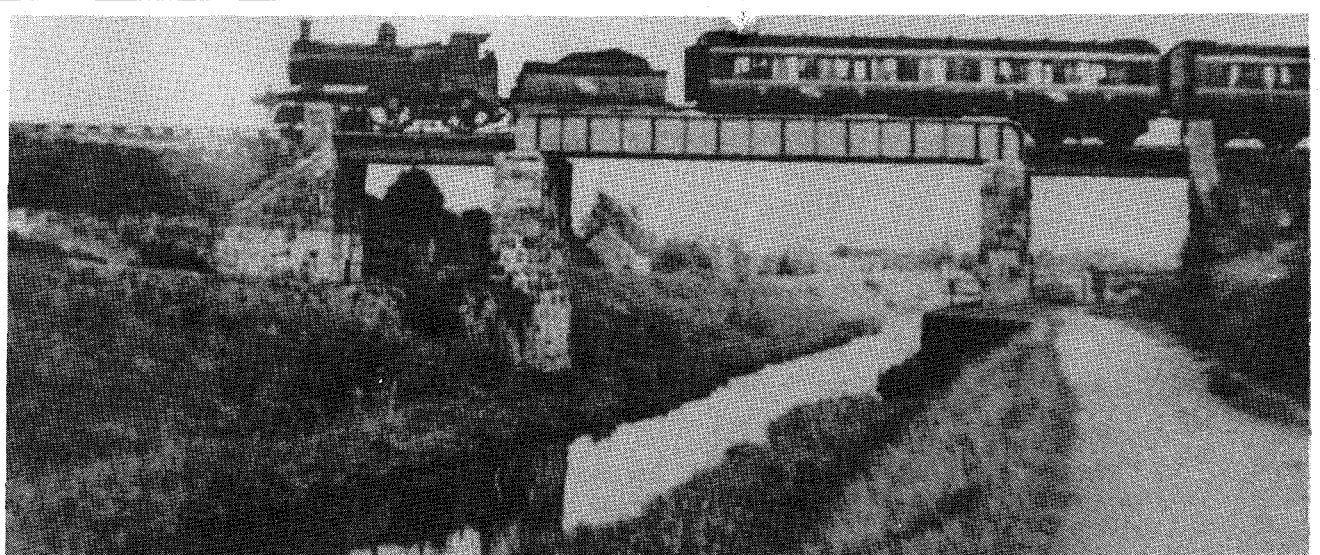
Bull's most important weekly exercise was the prepar-

ing and cooking of his dinner, or dinners, for enough food for several ploughman's meals was cooked in the one pot at the same time. This duty was religiously performed on Sundays, and for many an early morning angler on his way to Plassey a familiar sight was the crouched figure on the canal's edge, scrubbing a pile of potatoes and parsnips to a dazzling whiteness. The vegetables were placed in the large three-legged pot, with a Swede turnip, and perhaps, a carrot or two for a little colour and a few heads of cabbage. The principal ingredient was a half-pig's head or a few backbones or other such offals. The pot was placed on the open fire and allowed to simmer away while the merry cook hied himself off to the comfort of a Broad Street tavern.

Returning in the late evening (Sunday drinking hours in those were from 2 o'clock to 5 and from 7 to 9 p.m.) with a keen appetite, sharpened by the mile-long walk in the fresh air, Tom made inroads into the contents of the ample pot. The pot was left on the floor until further helpings were partaken of during the course of the following week.

A number of hefty rats had taken up residence in the cabin and, having grown emboldened by the proprietor's indifference, and even tolerance, also showed a lively interest in the contents of the pot; so much so that they frequently nosed off the cover and gorged themselves to satisfaction. Tom regarded the rats as "poor earth-born companions and fellow mortals". With their squeals and scamperings they often broke the lonesome stillness of many a long winter night. The rodents were fortunate in their choice of landlord, for Tom Bull was a gentle soul and never showed the slightest inclination to cause unnecessary suffering, even to the despised rat.

For many years, following the death of his mother, he had returned at nightfall, after a long day in the garden, or on the river, to his cheerless home. There was no loving wife or laughing children to greet him, no merrily dancing fire reflected on sparkling crockery, set on a clean table - only a guttering candle stub was all he had to light his way to the wretched pallet, with the gloom and emptiness being broken only by the rustlings of the rats. Yet, for all that, he was kind and humorous and a great favourite with the people around him. His name will endure in Limerick for as long as children swim and water flows through the old canal.



The Canal Bridge, with Tom Bull's house in the background.