Although Michael Hogan could hardly be regarded as Limerick's greatest poet, he wrote the city's most celebrated poem, 'Drunken Thady'. Born in 1832 in Thomondgate, on the north side of Limerick, he accorded himself the rather grandiose title, the Bard of Thomond. He earned his living as a mill labourer at the Lock Mills and the Newtown Pery Mills. He later worked for the Limerick Corporation, when he was employed as custodian of the bank of the Abbey River.

He wrote his best known work, "Drunken Thady", in his early twenties and it was published in 1867 in a collection of Hogan's verse, The Lays and Legends of Thomond. Almost all the other 160 poems in this book are now forgotten, but, after "Drunken Thady", "Garadh Earla and the Two Coopers" is well worthy of some study. The poem is a thoroughly Limerick work and is chockful of references to people, places, landmarks and historical happenings. The poem changes pace, mood and theme throughout its 445 lines of rhyming couplets. Although, unlike "Drunken Thady", there are a few ponderous passages in the work, it is a lively tale of natural humour and vitality.

Michael Hogan knew Lough Gur and its lore well. In his memoirs he wrote that while still a reluctant schoolboy he began "to haunt the pleasant banks of the Shannon where I fell in love with Nature while in her beauty. I found a higher and sweeter inspiration of song...the enchanting remembrance of the glorious summer mornings and fairy evenings I spent along by the bright, blue, beautiful Shannon still lingers round me, like weird music, for it was there I conceived and embodied the Lays and Legends of Thomond...I never tired of hunting up traditions. They possessed an overwhelming charm for me. I felt an especial fondness in visiting fairy forts, old ruined castles and abbeys, often sitting for hours among the weird shadows, bathing my imagination in the wildest poetic dreams". Later, Hogan found his regular Sunday rambles to the surrounding countryside a liberating contrast to the "interminable torture of the grinding of millstones" and the "impenetrable atmosphere of the mill" which he had to endure for six days a week for 16 long years.

In his youth the Bard was also a keen angler and fished many of the rivers and lakes of Limerick and Clare. His love of fishing is reflected in many of his poems. Indeed, in a footnote to the first poem in the Lays and Legends of Thomond, which he based on a legend of Cullane Lake in Co. Clare, he wrote: "I was nearly deprived of the luxury of telling anything about it, as I narrowly escaped being drowned there one fine morning while on a fishing excursion. Its depth is very immense".

"Garadh Earla and the Two Coopers"
For their day's labour, well prepared-
They carried fishing-nets, as strong
As a brig's topmast, and as long.
They bore a gaff whose strength of form
Might hold a gallery in a storm;
Taws like the anchor of the Ark,
Or some great Cyclops's hand-work,
Designed for gaffing whale and shark.
To kill the fish, Joe brought a whistle,
And Jim secured a tight corked bottle
Of Stein's pure malt, whose spirit mellow
Would make a Stoca a loving fellow.
Here the narrative is spiced with colour-
ful flashes such as the poet's description of the boat:
A well-built waterproof concern,
Close caulked and barred from stem to stern.

But the fishermen were out of luck and, after all their elaborate prepara-
tions, their trawling pike-baits failed to tempt even a single "bite". They decided to re-
tire to the shore for some sustenance, and to wait until sunset before resuming
Hogan's account of the lakeside picnic is worth recalling:
So they began to calculate-
After the day's expiring heat,
The luniy tribe, like human sinners,
Might feel a whim to eat their dinners.
And, with this truthful hope inspired,
They waited 'til the sun retired-
Spread their repast, and exercised it,
And with the "drop" of malt baptised it.
Next follows one of the most delightful and memorable passages in the poem, as
Hogan describes nightfall on the lake:
The sun went down with burning blushes;
The song-birds sought the sheltering bushes;
The corncake commenced his croun,
And up the blue east stole the moon.
Large pitch-black clouds, with inky fringe,
Gave the lone lake an ebon tinge;
The billows rolled with meanings deep,
Like suffering spirits in despair;
The gale blew with a sullen howl,
Shrill screamed with restless water crad;
Black grew the rayless eye of night.

As if the moon had lost her light.

The coopers resumed their fishing, by now well fortified with spiritual refresh-
ment. However, the luckless brothers were destined to land a far more
spectacular and unexpected catch than they had ever encountered in their
dreams. The vivid picture of Garadh Earlra and his glittering crown is one of the
highlights of this section of the poem:
Midnight upon the lake's dark breast,
The boat a moment seemed to rest,
As if some hidden thing of force,
Had stopped her in her drilling course,
The fisher leaned upon her side,
And looked into the deep, dark tide,
And saw an armed chieftain stand,
Beneath the waters, stern and grand:
His breast was clad with silver mail,
His limbs were sheathed in burnished steel.

And a gold helmet, on his head,
Such burning rays of glory shed,
That all the brightest polished gems
Of Europe's kingly diadems
Seemed in a burning roll
Around the ornamental gold.

After he sighted Garadh's helmet Jim declared:
If I can gaff it off his head,
Then, 'pon my oath! our fortune's made:
We'll be as rich as Jews or Quakers-
All Rothschild's fortune's in that hat-
More than we'd buy a million acres.

Landlords and all, and more than that
Here Michael Hogan gives expression to
the general belief in Ireland of the time
that Jews could make plenty of money
without having to engage in manual
labour, and that Quakers, because of
their fine shops and houses, could never
be poor.

In his attempt to snatch the helmet, Jim stuck his gaff in Garadh's ear. The
enraged earl bursts through the surface of
the water and again the Bard draws on
the full range of his poetic powers and
inventiveness, as he describes the helter-
skelter chase across the angry lake amid
a thunderstorm:
The frightened coopers seized each oar,
And pulled like madmen for the shore,
While in a whirl of tide and wind,
The angry Spectre stalked behind.
The lake against its banks rebelled
And o'er its sounding borders swallowed;
The lightning blazed - the thunder rolled,
The woods grew mad - the tempest heard-
The clouds around the sky were hurled,
Like smoke-breaths of a burning world;
Each red flash, like a fiery snake
Leaped on the storm's back round the lake,
Dancing the universal flyng.

Upon the tempest's mighty wing,
The rain-god dashed his cloud-gates wide,
And downward plunged the aerial tide;
Proclaiming, with its awful sound,
How thus the ancient world was drowned,
Dazzled with lightning - drenched with rain,
They tug the heavy oars in vain.

Eventually Garadh caught up with his quarry and, seizing the boat, hurled the
coopers from the centre of the lake to the shore:
Ahulhe, insensible as clay,
Amid the broken wreck they lay:
As last they 'rose, and started about,
"By Joe!", says Joe, "our work is done!"

The poem is a free-wheeling celebration
of the lake, its legends and pleasures,
and, of course, the coopers. The work is
not meant to be taken too seriously, as
Michael Hogan concedes in the last four
lines:
Now if this story's truth you'd know,
Go learn the tale from Jim and Joe;
But, if you seem to doubt one tittle,
They'll cleave your ear off, with a whistle!

It is ninety-four years since the Bard's
death, and his poem is now forgotten. He
was a minor poet and, as already
indicated, this work is not his best.
However, the Two Coopers at least
deserves a place in the annals of the
waterways of his native county.