A visit to Limerick 1952

PART TWO

by Constantine FitzGibbon

The road to Mount Shannon, by which I mean the house that had once belonged to my family and not the village of that name some twenty miles away on Lough Derg, starts badly, for Clare Street in Limerick is an unattractive thoroughfare flanked by ugly, seedy buildings. When it was being built the Earl of Clare, driving in from Mount Shannon, stopped his carriage and had a word with the man in charge. He inquired what the new street would be called, and the man in charge, who presumably had no idea, replied promptly if somewhat sycophantically: 'Clare Street, in honour of your lordship'. No doubt this story was not known to the authorities who changed Wellesley Bridge to Sarsfield Bridge and George Street to O'Connell Street a generation or two ago. Certainly they would not willingly have left any public monument, even as insignificant as a street name, to a man who was the object of such historic hatred. Perhaps they thought the street had some connection with the County Clare which starts on the far side of the Shannon. No doubt it did not occur to them that it runs, in fact, in the opposite direction. But then even mayors and aldermen are occasionally capable of error or oversight. At least the name of this street, like all others in Limerick, is written in Gaelic characters which would no doubt have been as incomprehensible to Lord Clare as they are to most of Limerick's citizens today.

The demesne walls stretch for miles and miles, though here and there a gap has been cut that a farm track might be driven through, and almost everywhere they are crumbling away from the top. Those walls, seven or eight foot high, which enclose so many of the larger Irish estates, are a depressing feature, shutting off the view to the pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist alike, though a man on a horse can see over many of them. Some were built from a public-spirited point of view, to give employment during the hard times, but most, I fear, were put up with the simple, selfish motive of preventing those outside seeing what went on within. They sometimes fulfilled a less satisfactory purpose in preventing those from within from noticing what was happening without. There were periods in Irish history when the rich were as ignorant as they were uninterested in the condition of the country from which they derived their wealth.

This is rolling, quite hilly country, with the river out of sight down below and a half circle of distant mountains in Clare, Tipperary, and Limerick closing the inland horizon. Between the road and the river, behind the demesne walls, are a number of large or largish estates. Almost all were burned during the troubles, in theory lest the British military move in, in practice because here the struggle was in many cases a class struggle too. These burnings were systematically and, on the whole, not unkindly carried out. Many of the houses were empty at the time, but where they were occupied the owner was notified of what was to happen and, unless he was particularly unpopular, was usually given time to remove at least his more valuable possessions. And then, when the troubles were over, he was quite handsomely compensated for the damage done to his property. In at least one case of which I know, the compensation was sufficient to enable the owner to build a more comfortable and commodious house than the one which had been burned.

Some of the houses, then, were rebuilt and the estates are still well-wooded. Others stand, gaunt shells in their parks where all the timber has been sold. Mount Shannon is one of these. What was once a front drive is now not even a cow path and the approach to the house is from the back, past the ruined stables, past the ruined bakery, the laundry, the place where in the old days they made their own gas, the servants' quarters, past the ruined coach houses, and out onto the front lawn to come suddenly upon the gaping facade of the ruined house. It is almost a small village that was here destroyed, and only one house still stands intact, the former steward's house in which there now lives the farmer who owns and farms this part of the estate.

I found him outside this house, a pleasant man in early middle age, and he most obligingly walked around to the front with me, but he had not much to tell me about the place or about my family. He had only been a boy when the house was burned and even then the family had been gone from here for forty years. Yet somehow, obscurely, I felt that perhaps he resented my appearance. Resented is not quite the right word and his manner towards me was civil in the extreme, but for centuries there was a firm Irish belief that land does not really belong to the people who took it or even who bought it: the land, it was felt, really belongs to the heirs of those to whom it used to belong. A soldier or a financier might rename his house Castlesmith or Jones House; for many people it remained the O'Gorman Castle or the O'Shaughnessy place. That, of course, was many years ago, but still FitzGibbons had lived on and about this land for a very long time and had built the ruin through which the farmer and I now picked our way. He knew, of course, that the ruin was his as was the land on which it stood. The roofless library into which we walked while the cows moved away into the Earl of Clare's roofless study, was his by every law. I had no claim to it whatever, not even the remotest, emotional shadow of a claim. I had never even been there before and, who knows? perhaps I shall never go there again. He pointed out a hole in the ground, the way to the wine cellar, choked with dockweed. Last week a calf had fallen into the wine cellar and they had had the devil of a time getting the beast out again. My presence made him slightly uncomfortable. I offered him a cigarette, that pathetic gesture of goodwill, and we walked together through the rusty framework of the conservatory. He showed me the stumps of what had once been a double avenue of beeches. They must have been large trees. No, he knew nothing about Lady Louisa, nothing at all except that she had spent a great deal of money. But, he said, as he accompanied me back to my car, there was an old man who was always talking about the old days at Mount Shannon. I might be able to find him in a pub at O'Briensbridge, and he might have something to tell me. On the other hand he might not. He had worked there as a boy, but he was very old now. It might be worth my while to see if I could find him, though there was no telling where he might be. He had a nomadic job, catching rabbits on the banks of the canal built in connection with the Shannon scheme. They might know his whereabouts in O'Briensbridge. Or they might not. I thanked the farmer and got into my car. As I drove off past the ruined

O'Connell Street in the 'fifties.

buildings I glanced back. He was standing looking after me.

It was a hot evening when I returned to Limerick and,since I was a little early for my appointment, I strolled down towards the hotel at which I had originally registered to see if there were any letters. The streets were full of people, the good-looking girls now in their summer dresses, the busy men. But my progress was soon barred by a crowd from behind which I could hear a raucous, shouting voice. I edged my way through the silent, impassive, watching people until I was able to see the cause of the disturbance. It was one man, a poor labourer of about sixty by the look of him, who was obviously very drunk - he was, I may say, the only drunken man I ever saw on an Irish street during these months. He was making an unsteady progress, which he frequently interrupted to turn back and shout, with obvious hatred, at the silent crowd: 'UP DEV!' Then he would snatch his cap from his head, punch it, look quickly around in the expectation or hope or a contradiction and a fight, and shout: 'UP THE REPUBLIC!' There were three or four policemen, or civic guards, as they are called, standing nearby and this curious, quiet crowd that watched and waited.

It was a strange performance altogether, the last fag-end of revolution perhaps; this poor, befuddled man yelling slogans which thirty or even twenty years ago would have produced some sort of positive reaction but which were now so banal, so utterly accepted as to be quite futile. He might as well have shouted numbers or the names of nineteentth-century American presidents. And yet the crowd, that insatiably curious Irish crowd, watched and waited. Something after all might happen. I watched too while this unfortunate man made a pitiful exhibition of himself. The guards watched. 'UP THE REBELS!' he shouted, punching his cap and brandishing his fists, 'UP DEV!' A youth standing beside me snickered. I turned up a side street and entered a small bar.

'Who is he?' I asked the proprietor.

'Conn Ryan', replied the landlord. 'He was in America and got a bang on the head. About once a month he gets drunk and then he shouts like this'.

Why, I asked, did the guards not take him home? It could only be an act of kindness to stop a poor half-demented man from making such a fool of himself. Besides, he was clearly being a nuisance, or rather the crowd was being a nuisance, blocking up the street so that the traffic was accumulating behind it, honking and hooting.

The landlord spat. The guards! They wouldn't dare to touch him when he was drunk like this. He'd be sure to strike them. And could they arrest a man, in front of so large a crowd, for shouting such eminently acceptable slogans on O'Connell Street in broad daylight?

This seemed to me a fair enough explanation and one which showed both intelligence and humility on the part of the police. I said so.

The man spat again. Then, leaning his elbows on his bar, he said:

'That may be. But what they do is this. They'll wait till tomorrow when he's sober. Sober he's as quiet as a lamb. Then they'll go to his house and arrest him'.

No doubt this was a malicious slan-

der on a fine and courageous body of men. But nevertheless the police are not universally popular in Ireland. Why should they be? Here, as everywhere else, their primary purpose - the protection of property and the apprehension of criminals - has become secondary to their major activity, which is to stop perfectly law-abiding people from doing what they may wish to do, such as singing, dancing, drinking when thirsty, taking their clothes off for a swim in the river, kissing their sweethearts or expressing unconventional political views. If such activities are repulsive to what is euphemistically called public opinion, then public opinion should put a stop to them. It certainly has the means. Public opinion visibly did not object to Conn Ryan. Nor was it he who was holding up the honking motorists. Why should the poor man, who I understood was a decent sort of fellow, be arrested while suffering from an excruciating hangover because he had given utterance to thoroughly respectable sentiments?

As I set off for my hotel I thought in a depressed sort of way about these policemen, Robert Peel's beastly invention which has come to such a foul fruition in Germany and Russia and other places. In Ireland public opinion still counts for a great deal. A village there can still refuse to accept a postmaster for whom it does not care and can insist, in the teeth of the government, on getting the mistress of its choice. In great countries such as England and America and France the people have largely abdicated their right to make a fuss. In England, if a man should do something so harmless as stand on his head in Oxford Street or so pleasant as to play a barrel-organ in Piccadilly or so useful as to make a delicious cheese on his farm and sell it to his neighbours, some uneducated ex-soldier in an ugly uniform will surely arrest him, **and nobody will complain.** They do not even complain that while these ex-soldiers are making a nuisance of themselves to honest, harmless citizens, gangs of burglars and hooligans are roaming the cities with quite remarkable ease, breaking into houses at night and hitting elderly tobacconists over the head with lengths of lead piping. If to be against the police is to be a rebel, Conn Ryan had something: 'UP THE REBELS!' By the time I arrived back at my hotel I was in a thoroughly good mood again.

The gentleman whom I was to meet was the son of, I think, a solicitor. In any case his father had had a certain amount to do with my great-grandmother's finances or lack of them. He was a fine figure, tall and thin and very erect of carriage, in his early seventies, I imagine. It was good of him to waste his time answering a lot of questions concerning people in whom he can really have had very little interest. Perhaps, briefly, I should explain who these people were.

The first Earl of Clare died in 1802, leaving two young sons, who became in succession second and third Earls. The second had been a close boyhood friend of Lord Byron's - they were at Harrow together. He died childless. The third and last was the one who eloped with Mrs. Moore. His daughter was Lady Louisa and his son the young man who died in the Crimea.

We sat in the airy bar parlour of the hotel and every now and then, alternately, one or other of us would go to the bar to get a drink from Joan, or Jawn as she was commonly called, the pretty and pleasant barmaid. The bar was at the back of the hotel with big windows opening onto the sunlit garden of the next-door house. In this garden two or three small children were playing some military game and every now and then our conversation would be interrupted by a bloodthirsty yell or a shrill word of command. At first we had the bar to ourselves, but even so I found it not too easy to follow what the gentleman with whom I was talking had to say. Irish voices are soft, astonishingly and delightfully soft after those of England. I have often walked past Davy Byrne's bar in Dublin, where Mr. Bloom spent such an enormous amount of time wrapped up in his engrossing thoughts, at the hour when it is packed and everyone inside talking at once: the sound in the street of all this conversation is an intensive humming, as from a swarm of bees. The Limerick voice is said, by other Irishmen, to be harsh, and Mr. Frank O'Connor in his entertaining book **Leinster, Munster and Connaught** says some unkind things about the Limerick snarl, but to my ear, though perhaps less agreeable than the accent of Mr. O'Connor's native Cork, it is still suprisingly soft. The gentleman with whom I was talking had the softest voice of all, just one stage above a whisper. Furthermore Irishmen have a habit, self-deprecatory perhaps but certainly witty, of dropping their voice when reaching the point of a story: not for them the shouted climax and the burst of self-applauding laughter. Now as it happened the climaxes of my companion's stories tended to correspond with other, noisier climaxes in the garden next door. Nor was this the only trouble. After some twenty minutes the bar became half-filled with a flying club, six or seven middle-aged Englishmen who had flown their aeroplanes from, I guessed, Liverpool. They had clearly landed some hours before, clearly were in no state to fly at this moment and clearly had no inhibitions about letting all the world share their conversation - which was principally about where they should eat and what they should drink and whose turn it was. They were obviously as popular with Jawn as she was with them. I was, of course, pursuing ghosts. Nor am I sure that they came alive enough for me to be able to make them live on paper. Norman Douglas, who married the daughter of Lady Louisa's son Augustus, used to urge me to write about the old lady. 'All I've heard of her is fragments', he used to say. 'Find out about her before the story is altogether lost. She was an original'. But I was, I fear, thirty years too late. The gentleman with whom I was talking knew little and what little he did know seemed to me not very interesting. Her claim to immortality appears to have been, simply extravagance, though her extraordinary attitude towards money was perhaps in a way superb. She seems to have been quite incapable of understanding that there were not unlimited funds at her disposal. Her lawyer would go to see her, would attempt to explain that she was broke, she would listen patiently, and at the end would make it plain that she had understood nothing by asking for ten thousand pounds for some pet building project, or for the purchase of a house in the south of France, or to pay for a couple of balls she intended to give in London that summer. Now this, frankly, struck me as almost half-witted on the lady's part. But, as my friend pointed out between the roars of laughter from the aeronauts, that was another age, one in which rich people, in Ireland at least, did not go bankrupt and in which ladies were not expected to have any understanding of finance. Still, I said, it seemed to me rather simple-minded to let things reach the point at which your most personal effects were sold at public auction in exchange for the joys of feeding and wining great crowds of friends and acquaintances. However he explained to me that so long as she remained in Limerick she was all right. She owed a great deal of money there, but even at the end, when everyone knew the crash could not be long postponed, her sons would order anything they wanted from the Limerick tradesmen and the jewellery or broadcloth or carriages would be delivered without hesitation. 'Put it down on Lady Louisa's account!' and down it would go, another item in the big ledger, though that account might not have been paid for a couple of decades. In Ireland the relationship between debtor and creditor has always been a peculiar and often a permanent one. A farmer will only finally settle his account with a shopkeeper if he considers the shopkeeper to have treated him badly and he therefore wishes to take his custom elsewhere. To pay your debt in full is to sever your relationship; it is a snub. If the relationship remains amicable the debt may well run for generations.

No, in Limerick she was all right, and

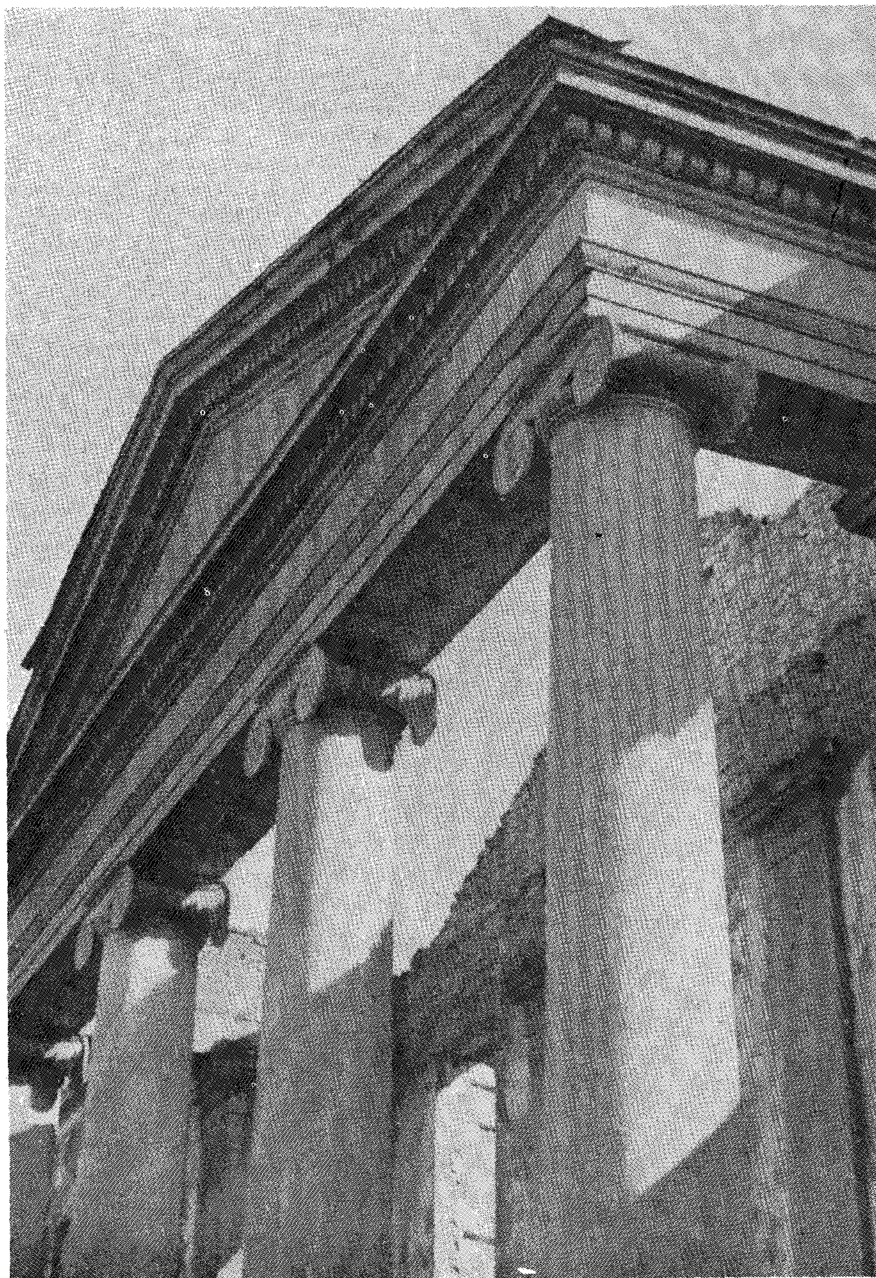
no doubt I should be living there at this minute and perhaps even putting things down in Lady Louisa's account, had she not wanted cash. And since she could not get the odd ten thousand from her lawyer, she turned to the London money-lenders, the Jews as my friend called them, using a phrase which recalled Lady Louisa's period with startling clarity. And the Jews, not being, as they knew they would not be, repaid, foreclosed and the contents of Mount Shannon were sold at auction, as fast as possible, with no reserve prices. This was the first of the great Irish auctions. Friends of the Jews, London dealers, formed a ring, did not bid against one another and bought the stuff up quick, which they then re-sold at leisure for five or six times what they had given. Lady Louisa had always been popular in Limerick. Now she became for a while a sort of people's heroine, for was she not being, in a way, evicted? And evictions were much in the public mind at that time.

But what was she like, I wanted to know. He smiled.

'She had no understanding of money at all. When she gave her last ball the bailiffs were already in the house. She could not make out who these strange men were, sitting about in her chairs. At last someone persuaded them to go upstairs until the ball was over'.

And that was all, or almost all, that I could discover about her. It seems that when her first husband, Dillon, was alive, she was a more or less senible lady - also she was much engaged in child-bearing at the time. He, too, appears to have been an intelligent human being, interested in field sports and devoting a certain amount of his time to the affairs of the country, a responsible sort of individual but one who, as a foreigner, made little impression hereabouts. In London no doubt she was his wife: here he was regarded as her consort. Presumably he regarded himself as such, since he agreed to take her name.

It was after his death that the extravagance set in, aggravated, I have heard, by gambling, that national vice of the Irish of all classes. Among the rich it was a relic of the previous century, in which Lady Louisa should have lived, when a large part of the Protestant ascendancy lived on land that their grandfathers had stolen - easy come, easy go - and had very little contact with and responsibility for their tenantry, so that an estate meant no more than money and was betted and lost as easily as a banknote. I do not think Lady Louisa's father would have adopted such an attitude and I am sure her grandfather would not, but no doubt she got into what they call bad company. After all, as another man remarked to me, was she not just a poor weak woman underneath? In any



A mid-1940s picture of Mount Shannon House.

event, during her widowhood - so different from that even more spectacular widowhood which was then being carried on with maximum self-pity across the sea at Windsor - down went the capital and up went the mortgages. Her affairs were in very poor shape by the time she met a wealthy Sicilian nobleman, the Marquis della Rochella, and her father's library had already come under the hammer at Sotheby's.

But the Sicilian was clearly the solution, and she married him. He was delighted. He had been a frequent visitor to Mount Shannon, had noted the bakery, the plant for making gas, the army of gardeners, the tremendous hospitality, the obvious great opulence of his bride. For, though he owned extensive property far away in Sicily, it was, alas! utterly encumbered. FitzGibbon money would be just the thing with which to pay off all those mortgages held by the rascally Neopolitans. It seems that they never discussed their respective financial states. But the discovery was not long delayed. She wanted, as usual, cash, and her husband gave her a cheque. It bounced. The truth, both truths, were out. I am told that the row between them was stupendous, and well it might have been. It was as neat a trick as any writer of a French farce ever evolved for his second act.

By the time the old gentleman left me alone with the aeroplane enthusiasts I think we were both feeling very sorry for Lady Louisa.

That evening I dined with friends and after dinner the talk turned on politics which made, I felt, a welcome relief from Lady Louisa's debts. This was not the lugubrious internal politics of contemporary Ireland, which is almost entirely a matter of per-

sonalities with Mr. de Valera's permanently in the centre of the stage. Nor was Ireland's relationship with England discussed. (A friend of mine, a barrister, once remarked that Ireland's attitude to England resembles that of a recently divorced woman towards her ex-husband: she's got rid of him at last but she can't stop talking about him). No, we discussed larger matters on that warm evening as the light faded and the blackbirds sang their watery evening song. Now in case any of the bemedalled and self-appointed defenders of our western way of life should be listening, I would say that the ideas I am reporting were those I heard, that they were not all heard at this dinner party, and that they are by no means the only point of view which was advanced to me on these matters in Ireland. Indeed they are no doubt those of a small minority, but since they were in general expressed by the most intelligent young people I met over there I think that they are perhaps worth recording, if only as a change from Lady Louisa and the Sicilian.

In the struggle between America and Russia, or between Western Democracy and People's Democracy, Ireland is politically neutral. It is not emotionally neutral, but is swinging that way. The reason for Ireland's political neutrality is allegedly the partition. So long as the Irish government believes that one-fifth of its territory and a higher proportion of its wealth is being forcibly retained by another power it cannot enter into political engagements which even faintly imply that it accepts this state of affairs as legal and permanent. Were partition abolished - and many people believe it may well fade away in the next few years - Ireland might join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or whatever corporate body takes its place. But not necessarily.

Irish neutrality has been frequently described as pig-headedness, and certainly Communism makes very little appeal in that country where Christianity is taken most seriously and is even believed. But the American alternative does not necessarily hold a much greater appeal. A country can only know what it sees of another country and what the Irish have seen of America is odd and one-sided. Of course almost every Irish family, particularly among the poorer classes of society, has relations living across the Atlantic and most of them preserve some link, often the very solid one of sending dollars home. But at one time, for the people who went as for many of those who remained, the question arose quite baldly; to go abroad or to stay in Ireland. For the last two generations it has been usually economic incentive rather than economic compulsion which has sent the emigrants to the United States. And those who remain are in many ways a different type of person from their relatives abroad. Indeed anyone who attempted to anticipate the Irish in Ireland from a knowledge of the Irish in America would be extraordinarly unwise. He would find that he was frequently dead wrong in his expectations.

Now in the psychological climate of America success, financial success, counts, and many of the Irish who have gone to America, being more ambitious people than their stick-at-home brothers, have been very successful. In Ireland that sort of success does not count, at least not so much and not for everybody. Mr. O'Sullivan in his dilapidated cottage may be a much more important man to himself and his neighbours than Mr. Murphy in his brand new bungalow. Not always, but sometimes. So that when the Irish emigrant, flushed with success after his years of struggle in the New World, returns to Ireland, he often finds that he has lost touch with his people, that his values are no longer theirs. If it was his father who went, the gulf is wide indeed, if his grandfather then he is an American entirely and an Irishman only by a vague sentimentality concerning Blarney Stones and Killarney lakes and a few inherited prejudices about the British. A similar thing happens, though I think to a lesser degree, to those Americans who revisit their ancestral homes in Italy and even in Scandinavia.

There is nothing so annoying as a distorting mirror. The Irish do not care for what they regard as the distortion of their own character visible in the 'Americans' who come back. To put it in a much overused phrase but one which I fear I cannot avoid, they do not like American materialism. A devoutly Catholic Irish lady of my acquaintance told me that she did not really care for American priests - and any number of them visit Ireland, and she entertains the clergy a great deal: many of them, somehow, did not seem to her like priests, they were too interested in the things of this world.

That is the first personal contact that the Irish have with the American way of life. The second, far less significant, is the American army. During and immediately after the war a great many American soldiers visited Eire and some are still to be seen wandering about the streets of Dublin. An army is always the worst possible advertisement for the nation it represents, for it is only the bad soldiers that are noticed. A number of American soldiers tended, and tend, to wander vacantly about the streets, their blouses undone, their hands in their pockets, chewing like so many cows. Others have been boastful, throwing their money about in bars, attempting to seduce chambermaids, and generally behaving as though they had some right to be in Ireland.

Many, undoubtedly most, are well behaved and don't walk down Grafton Street with their buttons undone. Unfortunately, perhaps, they attract less attention. Besides, the Irish have a long tradition of disliking the foreign soldiery. They don't want a foreign army in their midst and they are quite shrewd enough to see through the euphemism of 'air bases'. The government may want the money but the people just don't want the soldiers, and what they have seen of them has given them little reason to change their minds.

A considerably more important aspect of the matter is the impact of American culture on Ireland. They go, of course, to the movies. It is not often realized by Americans how much the United States is judged in terms of these ridiculous productions, with their grossly false and smarmy morality, their undertones or overtones of violence, their sickly and insistent attitude towards sex and their barrel-organ patriotism. Made by businessmen for morons they are of course utterly unrepresentative of the major part of America. They are, however, accepted throughout Europe by a great portion of the population as representing American culture. Indeed, how could it be otherwise, since they see so little else that emanates from across the ocean? Dance tunes tell the same story, and so do most of the magazines that get across the Atlantic in any numbers. So, unfortunately, does a large part of the literature which arrives here heralded as American best-sellers, dreary tales of degeneracy and brutality that delight almost no educated person save the most jaded Frenchman. No, American culture, in Ireland at least, has made very few converts to the belief that the American way of life is automaticaly desirable, though I am told that some of the fourteen-year-olds in Dublin do go in for be-bop or whatever has now taken its place ...

This has been a long digression. It was a long dinner. When I got back to my hotel there were still one or two people, including a lady in a very ornate hat, standing up in the half-lit corridor next to the bar, enjoying a nightcap and a little bit of chat. The proprietor civilly suggested that I join them, but I was tired and went to bed.

The next day was a Sunday, but my Limerick friend told me that despite the fact of the pubs being closed we might yet find the old man who had worked for my great-grandmother in one or other of them. So we drove out in his car to O'Briensbridge. The bridge itself is handsome but odd, being constructed of two different sorts of stone on two different types of arch, being in fact two bridges which meet in mid-Shannon. I assumed that half of it had been blown up in some 'troubles' or

other and rebuilt later without regard for the original style. But I was wrong. The Shannon here divides the counties Clare and Limerick and the two county authorities had found it impossible to agree on the type of bridge wanted. Tempers had risen and finally each county had built its half of the bridge as it saw fit. The effect is curious, like those harlequinade trousers with one red leg and one black. But since, like almost all the Irish bridges, the design of both halves is graceful, the end result is rather pleasing in its odd way. Around one end of the bridge there clusters the village, which is really just a single steep street with about four pubs and two shops, though the line between pub and shop is a difficult one to draw in Ireland since so many shops have a bar at the back while a great many pubs sell other commodities beside drink. Having motored several miles, we were bona fide travellers, and as boner feeds we were not breaking the law in asking for a glass. We went to the largest of the pubs and rang the bell.

There were two or three gentlemen already seated on the benches around the square room, no doubt also genuine travellers, and my friend and I joined them. Immediately above my head there hung a mass of black boots, all tied together and suspended from a hook like a weird bunch of grapes. I commented on the prettiness of O'Briensbridge, but was told, at once, that it was a dying place. Since the building of the canal in connection with the Shannon scheme it was no longer on a main road. The Shannon scheme was the curse of the place. It was indeed, I was informed, the curse of that part of Ireland. The scheme is in fact not popular among the simpler people hereabouts. (Its name is another example of that Irish tendency to understatement which turns bloody civil wars into troubles and tuberculosis into a delicacy: one of the largest hydro-electrical installations in Europe, which has been working now for several years, would in scarcely any other country be still referred to as a scheme). The reason for its unpopularity, I am told, is disappointment. The Irish talk about money a great deal, but in a vague and imaginative sort of way usually involving large sums. When the scheme still was a scheme there was a great deal of fevered speculation concerning the vast amount that would be paid the workers and the huge compensation that the farmers would get if they were fortunate enough to have the canal cut across their land. Thousands of pounds, thousands and thousands of pounds. Since the authority was only reasonable in its expenditure the people felt they had been badly treated. The only persons to be really handsomely paid were the foreign technicians, mostly Germans ... who were imported to supervise the building. This did not make the local Irish any happier. No, the scheme is not popular hereabouts, but the dislike felt for it in O'Briensbridge is understandable. The place is dying.

The Second Earl of Clare.

After a while I asked if they were expecting the old man to put in an appearance that afternoon. They were not. Might he, I asked, perhaps be in some other bar in O'Briensbridge? No, he was not in O'Briensbridge, they were certain of that. They were too polite to ask me the direct question, but they clearly found it odd that a stranger with an English accent should be looking for this old man. I felt it only fair that I satisfy their curiosity and I told them why I wanted to see him. Yes, they had frequently heard the old man talking about Mount Shannon in bygone days, but they had not listened carefully since, as one man frankly said, they were not interested. Mount Shannon was six or seven miles away. Castleconnell was the place to talk about Mount Shannon, not O'Briensbridge. Was I staying in Castleconnell? I told them I had come from Limerick. Their disapproval was instantaneous and overwhelming. Limerick, it seems, was the very last place in which to find out anything about Mount Shannon. The Limerick people, I gathered, not only knew nothing whatever about Mount Shannon but precious little about anything else either. (Irish patriotism is solidly based on local pride The rivalry between next-door villages is also often very acute).

By this time the gentlemen in the public house were keenly interested in my quest for the old man and were racking their brains in an effort to be helpful. He would certainly not be in Castleconnell. He might, though it was unlikely, be in Clonlara. Finally they agreed among themselves that the most probable place to find him on this particular afternoon was in a village some five miles away. With many thanks my friend and I got into his car and drove off.

We soon found the pub, and indeed even if it had had no sign we should have recognized it for what it was, since it was crammed with men, women and children, and the hum of conversation, the occasional laughter and the chink of glasses were clearly audible a hundred yards or so away. No doubt all these people were as boner feed as ourselves, but they certainly knew each other very well and at once, with a quite conscious courtesy, set out to make the strangers feel at home, to entertain us. The bar, as I say, was crammed and so was the bar parlour and the yard out the back. The publican and his lady were fully occupied pouring stout and a Mr. McGinney had more or less taken charge of the

customers. He was a powerfully built man in his fifties, wearing a green shirt with purple braces, a natural leader of men as he sat on his hard chair, his knees far apart, in the centre of the crowded room. He had one of those brick-coloured faces which are rightly said to be like the map of Ireland. I asked him if he knew the old man. He said that he did and that he would be in directly. Meanwhile, he went on, how about a song? Did we care for songs? We did. In that case Timmy should sing. Two men were dispatched to find Timmy.

And Timmy sang. He sang with extreme and unself-conscious concentration, assuming those grimaces which for many singers seem to be inseperable from the practice of their art. He had a very fine, light tenor voice and he sang beautifully. Another man had produced a flute from his pocket and on this he accompanied Timmy in those haunting, elegant songs of dear Tom Moore. The whole pub had, of course, fallen silent. There were no choruses, no bawling and banging of pots, though at the end of each song they would clap and applaud. They enjoyed listening to Timmy as much as he enjoyed singing, and he put his whole heart into it. After perhaps five or six songs he was done. The sweat was pouring down his cheeks and he could sing no more.

'I can't sing any more, Mr. McGinney. I'm dry as a bone'.

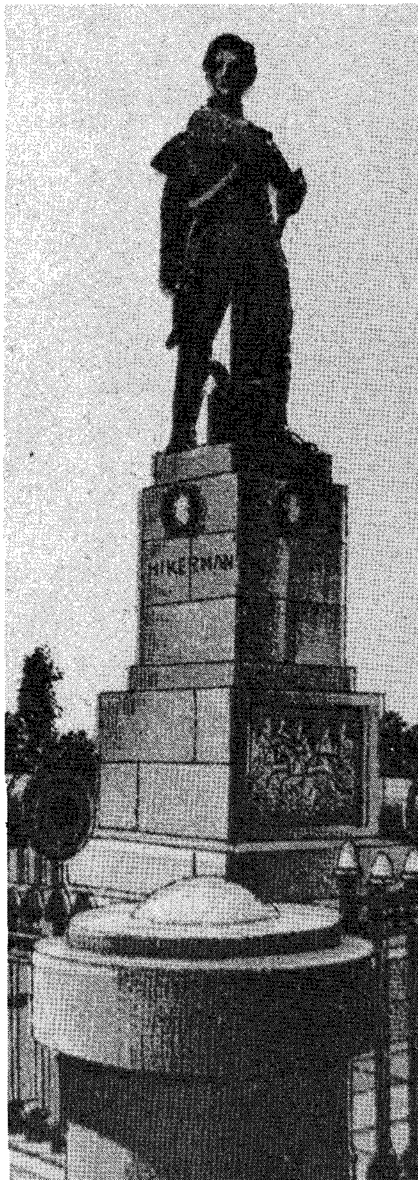
It was a sort of apology as he leaned over and picked up his jar of stout.

'Thank you, Timmy', said Mr. McGinney, 'you sang very nicely. And now I'll call on Mrs. Ryan for a song'.

Poor Mrs. Ryan! There was considerable giggling and flustering in the corner where the ladies were mostly grouped and then, without getting to her feet, Mrs. Ryan began her song. It was a dull and sickly sentimental dance tune of 1946 and the emphasis with which Mrs. Ryan sang the poor thin little melody and the idiotic words only served to underline the dullness of her choice. The man had put his flute away and she sang unaccompanied. She did as best as she could, but her high notes broke and squawked. It was a pathetic performance. Yet when she had finished she received as much applause as had Timmy. Was this gallant courtesy, or was it that the audience had absolutely no taste whatsoever? I like to think that it was the former.

And so they sang on, under Mr. McGinney's supervision, none quite as bad as Mrs. Ryan but none ever approaching Timmy's virtuosity. They were still singing when Mr. McGinney, leaning across, whispered to me that the old man I was looking for had just entered the pub. He pointed to a tall figure in black standing by the door.

I went up to him and, introducing myself, asked if I might offer him a



The FitzGibbon statue.

drink. He was very tall and thin, shabbily dressed in his shiny black clothes, his face lined and burned dark by the sun so that the blueness of his eyes seemed all the brighter in comparison. He said he would like a pint, and while I was getting him his stout the singing began again, and we could not talk. I suggested softly that we go into the other part of the pub, but this idea did not apparently please him for he merely gazed blankly at me. I felt rather foolish standing beside this old man and even when I had got him into the other bar and we were seated side by side I made no progress. I realized after a while that he was extremely deaf as well as very old, and that he was simply resigned to my presence beside him, that I might be there or not, it made no difference to him. Had I not paid for his stout he would have bought it himself. I was not even sure that he realized who I was, nor was I prepared to shout since I was aware that many people were watching us curiously. I did raise my voice a little to ask him to tell me something about the FitzGibbons. He gazed at me:

'Dead! All dead and gone these many years. All dead.'

Then he relapsed again into silence, staring ahead of him, his old hands on his bony knees. Was he remembering scenes of seventy years ago or was his mind simply a blank? There was clearly no future in this. I was about to rejoin my friend, whom I had left in the parlour, when the old man got creakily to his feet and made his way towards the door. After a moment's hesitation I followed him and soon caught up with him in the dusty road beneath what was now the evening sun. Shouting this time, I told him who I was. He stopped at once and turned towards me, and now his eyes were no longer blank. Slowly he crossed himself as he examined my face.

'I see it,' he said. 'I see it in your face'. He crossed himself again and then, not to me: 'Oh God! They're back!'

I was momentarily disconcerted, but he soon put me at my ease, or more nearly at my ease, than I had been before:

'God bless your honour for coming to see an old man like me before I die! God bless you, sir! This is a happy day for me'.

We walked on slowly and he asked me How I was related to the family. I told him and he remembered my grandfather as a boy, a man who had died ten years before my birth. He understood now why I had come to find him. Oh, he could tell me stories about the family in the old days, the grandest people in all southern Ireland, for hadn't his father been gamekeeper there and his grandfather before him? But not now. He would have to think. Now he was tired and he must try to remember before he talked to me. He would be coming into Limerick tomorrow and would look for me at my hotel at half-past five.

'God bless you, sir, and thank you. Thank you for making an old man happy'.

He clearly wanted to be alone, so I left him and turned back towards the inn. It is an odd sensation to realize that one is oneself a ghost, a **revenant.**

When he arrived at my hotel the following afternoon he was in a state of suppressed excitement. Also he had left his false teeth at home and was therefore even harder to understand than he had been on the previous day - I seemed to be having back luck on this score in Limerick. But he had remembered a few stories. One, which he told me later on and with a certain reluctance, seems to me worth repeating. I had heard another reference to it in Limerick, but nowhere else.