

A VISIT TO LIMERICK

~ 1952

PART ONE

by Constantine
FitzGibbon

My motive in visiting Limerick was primarily to find out what I could about my great-grandmother, Lady Louisa FitzGibbon, the last member of my family to own Mount Shannon House and, I gather, a remarkable woman in her own right. What I knew of her before my arrival in Limerick was slight: she was the daughter of the third and last Earl of Clare: her brother, Viscount FitzGibbon, was missing presumed killed in the notorious charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava: she therefore inherited Mount Shannon and her husband took her name, as is not uncommon in Ireland when property is involved: she spent a great deal of money, was forced to sell Mount Shannon, after her first husband's death married a Sicilian nobleman, and finally died and was buried in a convent on the Isle of Wight. She had left Ireland in 1887.

I arrived in Limerick by bus and went at once to what had been described to me as a charming, old-fashioned and comfortable hotel. My informant was well out of date. The charm and the comfort had been very thoroughly torn away, to be replaced by fake marble, neon strips and some sort of machinery in the walls, an air-conditioning unit perhaps, which hummed insidiously, a malignant irritant. These improvements had been carried out in order that

American visitors, held up overnight at Shannon airport, might feel thoroughly at home during their brief stay. The architect or decorator or whatever he is called must have cherished some curious ideas about American homes. The transients, standing about in hopeless knots or sitting in the ugly armchairs and gazing ahead of them with the blank and bovine expression which is common to all stranded travellers, certainly looked anything but happy among all this bleak and shoddy modernity. I moved my bags to the Royal George Hotel which has not been improved and where all is as it should be. I then set forth to explore Limerick.

The atmosphere of Limerick, on this warm evening, was surprisingly different from what I had expected. O'Connell Street, the main thoroughfare and shopping centre, was humming

with activity. There seemed to be a purposefulness, a determination, in the people I passed which contrasted strikingly with the apparent lethargy of Cork, a city I had left that morning. Such impressions are misleading, perhaps, but in this case I think they were correct. Limerick, Ireland's third city if you don't count Belfast, is growing fast. The airport and the big hydro-electric installation that they call the Shannon scheme have brought it considerable prosperity, and industrially it is also expanding. The Limerickman is proud of his city and wishes to make it into a great industrial and communications centre. There seems no reason why he should not do so, particularly if present political tendencies continue and the Atlantic community assumes greater reality, for Limerick is geographically well suited to be the hub of an air network linking the Old World to the New. A tremendous expansion in the next few decades seems not at all unlikely. There are fortunes to be made in Limerick and no doubt the Limerickmen will make them for they are, I am told, very hard-headed businessmen.

O'Connell Street, at its top end a dignified and Georgian sort of place, degenerates into a mass of untidy shops of the chain store variety before petering out near the bridge that leads to the old town, or English Town as it is called, though there is little English about it any more. Here the at-



O'Connell Street circa 1950.

sphere is very different, aged and
y and restful. King John's great cas-
with its satisfactory round towers,
rds four square on the left bank of
annon. Behind it is St. Mary's
hedral.

visited this fine cathedral in the
pany of the sexton, a cheery old
1 who took a pleasant and unosten-
ous pride in his church, as well he
ht. It was built in the twelfth cen-
and the extensive alterations at
r dates have done little to alter its
early medieval character. It is high
airy and without much stained
s. Some people, of whom I am one,
ot care for the dull glow of stained
s which cramps and darkens the in-
r of churches and does not permit
ic architecture to soar as it should.
tered about the church were flags
ish regiments, now disbanded,
h had fought in England's wars,

and on the walls were monuments to
various Protestant gentlemen and
ladies of the vicinity. For St. Mary's is a
Protestant church, as indeed are
almost all the old churches in this
country. Taken over by the established
Church of Ireland, they have never
been restored to their original owners.
(Indeed how could they be without a
tremendous row? The Church of
Ireland maintains that it is not that in
name only.) It is perhaps this fact
which gives the old Irish churches an
air of emptiness, almost of desiccation,
since there are far more Protestant
churches than are needed. The Catholic
ones, almost all built in the last hun-
dred and fifty years and in many cases
of a tawdry ugliness that recalls the
nonconformist temples of the Welsh,
are packed every Sunday, while the lit-
tle Protestant congregations seem lost
among the vastness of a church such

as St. Mary's here or St. Nicholas' in
Galway. When Gladstone disestablished
the Church of Ireland some eighty
years ago he saw to it that a handsome
compensation was paid and it is from
the remnants of this sum that the Irish
Church draws a large amount of its in-
come. It is a faith that is here moribund
in an alien climate, but it must be given
credit for the excellent care that it
devotes to the preservation of its old,
almost fossilized, buildings. The Roman
Catholics in Ireland seem less in-
terested in ancient beauty. As has been
frequently pointed out, there is a strong
degree of puritanism in Irish
Catholicism and beauty is not an
automatic virtue as it is about the
Mediterranean. A friend of mine
remarked to me that whereas in
England puritanism led to a schism
within the Protestant Church, in Ireland
it simply merged with the Catholic
Church and gave the Irishman that at-
titude towards his faith which is so
strikingly at variance with the
Catholicism of Italy or France or even
of Spain.

It is as well not to discuss such mat-
ters in Ireland, since one can easily find
oneself in deep, if not in hot, water.
Particularly is it wise to keep off the
subject of religion. In Limerick, it
seems, a discussion of dogma can
degenerate into a rumpus almost as
easily as in Belfast. Whether this is a
malicious slander or not I cannot say,
for I did not discuss such matters, but
certainly the Limerickman is a violent
sort of fellow, as was proved during the
Anglo-Irish war. And certainly that
violence still lingers on. I was told a
story of an Englishman who last year
was in conversation with an Irish ac-
quaintance in these parts. The
Englishman, it seems, was one of those
fatuous, red-faced, military men with
loud and braying voices and an acute
insensibility to the fact that they are
not invariably taken at their own valua-
tion when abroad. The Irishman was a
softly spoken gentleman who had
played a fairly conspicuous part in the
Irish Republican Army and whose
brother was shot by the British during
the troubles. The Englishman, slapping
his acquaintance on the shoulder, had
asked loudly and cheerfully:

'Do you get any decent rough
shooting up around Castleconnell?'

The Irishman replied with a smile:

'Well, thirty years ago, anyone who
looked like you in or about Castlecon-
nell was shot on sight'.

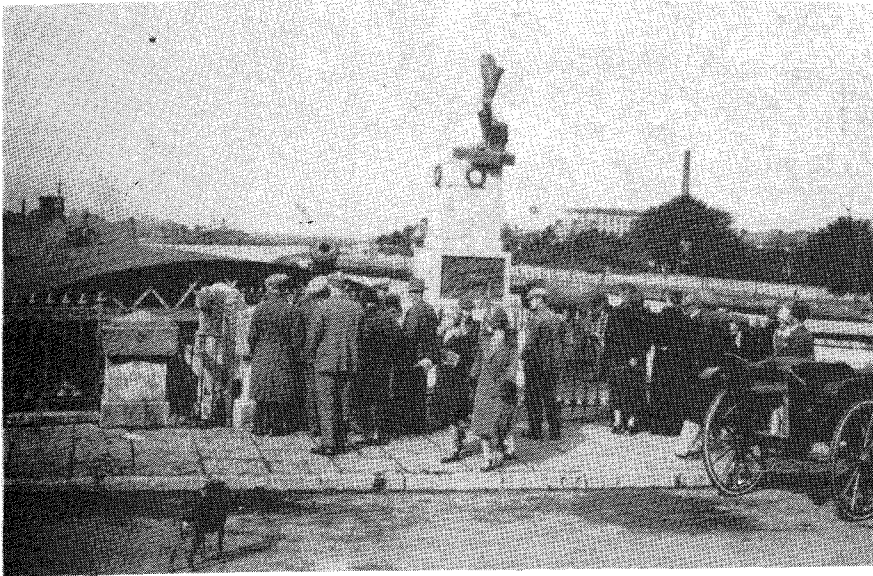
From St. Mary's I walked along the
bank of the Shannon past the fine and
delicate eighteenth-century customs
house to Sarsfield Bridge. Sarsfield is
the great name in Limerick, and rightly
so, for his defence of the city in 1691
was one of the few glorious exploits of
Irish arms in all those long and tragic
wars. It is a curious fact that the Irish
should, in general, have fought so



The statue of Viscount FitzGibbon.

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The remains of the statue of Viscount FitzGibbon, after the bomb blast at Sarsfield Bridge.

badly in Ireland. Tom Moore it was who remarked that the Irish can neither fight nor write in their own country and the constant jibes of cowardice levelled against the Irish soldiers, not only by their English enemies but also by their Spanish and French allies, seem to have had a certain basis; at least they showed a repeated tendency to panic. This is all the more curious when one recalls the extreme valour and military talent displayed by Irish troops in the French, Russian, Spanish and Austrian service during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in the British and American armies during the nineteenth and twentieth. Perhaps the explanation is to be found in the genius of the place, in the peasant's universal

tradition of gentleness until he is driven into furious acts of savage and therefore unmilitary rebellion. Or perhaps, which seems more likely, it is that the Irish armies which fought in the Elizabethan, Cromwellian and Williamite wars were almost always composed of troops who were at the best only half trained. It was the poet Spenser who remarked, during the Elizabethan war: 'I have heard some great warriors say that in all the services which they have seen abroad in foreign countries, they never saw a more comely man than the Irishman ... When he cometh to experience of service abroad, or is put to a piece or a pike, he maketh as worthy a soldier as any nation he meeteth with'. Certainly



MacDowall's statue of Viscount FitzGibbon.

Sarsfield's men who fought here in the last scene of this three-act tragedy were the Irish army that gave the finest account of itself; they had been in the field for some months and were, moreover, stiffened by a number of Irish troops who had been fully trained in the French service and commanded by officers who had learned their trade in the wars of Louis XIV.

Sarsfield himself was a dashing and attractive man and if the story of his remark at the time of surrender - 'Swap kings and we'll fight you again' - is apocryphal, it is well found. It is bitterly ironical that this honourable surrender on honourable terms should have led to one of the great betrayals. A few minutes' walk from Sarsfield Bridge is the stone on which the Treaty of Limerick was signed, a treaty which promised the Irish at least a measure of religious toleration and the right to retain their property. But no sooner had Sarsfield and Dillon and O'Brien sailed away to France with the fifteen thousand men who preferred service in the French army to defeat at home than the carpet-baggers moved in. The politicians dishonoured the treaty which the soldiers had signed - much to the annoyance, incidentally, of King William and his better advisers. The Penal Laws against Catholics were passed, every English adventurer who could pull a string began to steal Irish lands, and the possibility of a just settlement in Ireland was once again postponed for a hundred years. These embers are perhaps long cold. But it should not be a source of surprise to the English refugees from their own austerity to find that in Ireland, as in some other parts of the globe, an Englishman's word is not automatically accepted as being his bond.

On Sarsfield Bridge there is a rather gloomy statue commemorating the I.R.A., a schoolmasterly figure in bronze. He is flanked incongruously by two small Russian cannons captured in the Crimean War. For here stood MacDowall's fine statue of Viscount FitzGibbon. It was blown up in the troubles, a senseless act of vandalism. The young man seems to have been popular in the neighbourhood and certainly did no one any harm. It was no doubt intended as an act of petty revenge against his grandfather, the hated architect of the Union of whom I have more to say elsewhere. But it was Limerick's loss.

Of this young officer a curious tale is told, for the truth of which I cannot vouch. As I have said, he was missing believed killed in the charge of the Light Brigade. A quarter of a century later, during the Second Afghan War, his regiment, the 8th Hussars, was stationed in India, near the Northwest Frontier. One evening a bowed and tattered figure was brought to the sergeant of the guard into the officers'

ss. He spoke a halting, rusty English. officer knew him and yet, since he s apparently a gentleman of their n race in this distant place, he was ted to dine. Since he did not say o he was, no one asked him his ne - manners were better in those s - though he mentioned Siberia. was plainly at home and knew the ous regimental customs. After din- he thanked his hosts and disap- red into the night. An examination egimental records showed that the / ex-officer of the 8th Hussars who ld be the stranger's approximate , and whose whereabouts could not ounted for, was Lord FitzGibbon. ing based a short story on this nge anecdote, which he entitled **Man Who Was.**

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they struck me as strange farmers in that he was a man of wide culture and knowledge in fields far removed from food while she was a lady of striking beauty. Their house was a sort of gigantic cottage, fifty small rooms perhaps, of which a quarter, I reckon, were barely furnished. The place was candle-lit, and this accentuated the magnificent looks of the women present - most of whom, like their hostess, were the wives of farmers.

And here I must stop to comment on the beauty of the Limerick women. I have been in Arles, I have lived in Rome, I have frequently walked down Fifth Avenue, but never anywhere have I seen so many handsome girls as in or about Limerick. At this candle-lit party, and without benefit of John Jameson, half the female guests could easily have replaced Lady Lavery on the Irish banknotes. Indeed perhaps advantageously, for they quite lacked that famous beauty's slight inspidity of expression. Gorgeous, tall, slender, swan-like creatures they were, proud of carriage and with that easy, open smile which comes of assurance and the knowledge that their men both love and respect them. In the streets of Limerick, too, the girls were startlingly beautiful and seemed, if anything, more self-assured than the men. I think that the ideal rhythm of life for men and women is not quite the same, and that the rhythm which prevails in a devoutly Catholic community makes for feminine happiness. Certainly, in the vast majority of cases, promiscuity does not, and here there is none of that. To keep her boy-friend a Limerick girl does not have to go too far with him. Indeed she would get a tremendous wiggling from her father-confessor should she do so, as would the boy. Thus can they be beautiful, flirtatious, gay and honest without any fear that they may be misunderstood. And a community where the women are happy must be, by definition, a happy society. The few who cannot manage or do not like a life of chastity can always move, to Dublin or London. This accounts for the fact that Irish women in England have a reputation which is grotesque if applied to Irish women in Ireland. In this connection I heard an anecdote about some American politicians.

It seems that these gentlemen, returning to their native shore after one of their junkets about Europe, were stranded overnight at a hotel near Shannon airport. The local head of the air line did his best to make them comfortable with bottle and glass. After a while one of the politicians remarked that since this seemed to be an impromptu party it would be as well to invite some girls. Who ever heard of a party without girls? The air line official, slightly worried, said that he could invite some of the air hostesses from the

field. At this point another Irishman who happened to be present carefully pointed out that in Western Ireland the girls insisted on marriage as a **sine qua nihil** (though no doubt he said it in English). That party never took place.

One day, when I was talking to a shop-keeper at a village some miles from Limerick, I had occasion to comment on the beauty of the Limerick women.

'They're beautiful,' he agreed, 'and they can fight too'.

He knew how they had fought, side by side with their men, during the siege. So did I, for was not an ancestress of mine killed while helping repel a Williamite assault?

They were not fighting that night in this huge, candle-lit cottage, nor was anyone else. Indeed the only person who nearly did was myself, after a glass of poteen which some thoughtless person thrust upon me. I saw a gentleman wearing the tie of my old school and, being utterly befuddled by the home-made spirit, my dislike for the school became transformed into a dislike for the wearer of the tie. However I had sufficient self-control to avert my eyes from the object of my displeasure and then, in order to be entirely on the safe side, made my way down a long, dark, flagged corridor to the vast kitchen where I found a splendid gentleman seated in solitary grandeur with a glass of stout in his hand.

Tipsy though I was, I could easily see that he was tipsier still, if so flip-pant a word may be applied to his sombre melancholy. He informed me that he advised my host on the matter of pigs. He told me his name, a fine old Irish name, and that if he had his rights this house and all its land would belong to him, for had it not been stolen from his great-great-great-great-grandfather by some Cromwellian scallywag? Then, with a courtly phrase, he invited me to join him in a glass of our host's beer. I was delighted to accept.

In any case my stately friend and I had a long and interesting conversation, touching on the history of the house and thence sliding easily into metaphysical matters. We were well looked after by our host's servants and, though I have forgotten what ideas it was that we exchanged in the great, stony, half-lit kitchen, I do recall thinking how wise, how truly philosophical, my acquaintance must be to choose the dignity of this quiet room rather than the gaeity of the front part of the house. But I was tired. After a while I found it impossible to keep up my end of the conversation and I began to suspect that the gentleman was losing interest in me. In such circumstances there is only one course to take, slip away. It was now about half-past three and I found a couple, lacking in stamina, who were about to set off on the fifty-mile drive to their home. Their

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So far as I know, this unfortunate young man's only other appearance in literature are the following impolite lines by Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, who emigrated to America from which land he was brought back by popular subscription. No doubt his style appealed to the Limerick temperament:

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Cause his father was a cuckold and his mother was a whore.**

Effective but, I am glad to say, untrue. The real story is slightly less disreputable. The third Earl, when he was Mr. FitzGibbon and M.P. for Limerick, became enamoured of a Mrs. Moore, with whom he eloped and lived openly in sin, as they say. Mr. Crosbie Moore sued him in 1824, and a Dublin jury awarded the unfortunate husband the considerable sum of £6,000 damages. An Act of Parliament was necessary to obtain divorce, a lengthy business, with the result that when their first child, a son, was born, his name was Moore. Before their other children arrived Mrs. Moore had become Mrs. FitzGibbon. Thus the younger son was the legitimate heir, a confusing state of affairs. The elder became some sort of colonel and died a bachelor. An old gentleman I met told me he remembered seeing him in the streets of Limerick and described him as a melancholy sort of fellow. He might well have been.

That evening I was driven to a party in a large house some ten miles or so outside the city. My host and hostess were young people who had recently bought this property, which they were farming. Odd farmers, I thought, to give a party that started at midnight. But they assured me that theirs was the latest milk-round hereabouts and that there were many people who preferred to have the milk arrive at about ten rather than to be awakened by the clatter of pails at half-past six. Furthermore

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Black Jack FitzGibbon

route lay through Limerick and I asked for, and got, a lift.

When next I met my host I commented on the philosopher whom I had found in his kitchen. The veins on my host's neck thickened. This man - this scoundrel, he called him - was his pig man. During the night of the party my host's champion sow had been about to farrow, which accounted for the pig man's presence. But at four o'clock, when my host left his guest to have a look at the creature he found she had already farrowed unassisted and had, moreover, crushed two of her newly-born and valuable young. The pig man was sound asleep in the kitchen, unwakeable. The host, forced to neglect his guests, had remained with the sow until half-past eight. When he then went, in a temper that was understandably not of the best, to find the pig man once again, the latter had addressed him in drooling and impertinent words. My host had thereupon shaken his employee and attempted to slap him into some sort of sense. The pig man had walked out, swearing revenge. He was now threatening to take an action against his former employer.

No, farming is not easy in these parts. The land is lush and fertile, well-watered and astonishingly green. A Kerry

man, looking at his stony acres, told me that in Tipperary the grass grows with an almost miraculous speed. Throw a stick into a field at sunset, he said, and in the morning you won't be able to find it - the grass will have grown up over it. An exaggeration no doubt, but still this area could be cultivated as intensively as any in the world, if due allowance be made for the heavy rainfall and the land carefully drained. It is not. One ragged field of pasture succeeds another for mile after rich mile, and hedging and ditching are carried out in what seems a half-hearted manner to one who is accustomed to the trim fields of England. Even the raising of cattle, which is the easiest and laziest sort of agriculture that exists, is not particularly well done.

The indolence of the Munster peasantry has been the subject of comment for two centuries. The causes are not hard to find. In the old days the system of land tenure was such that a man who improved his holding almost automatically found his rent raised. A greater inducement to indolence could hardly be imagined, and low-level subsistence farming, the Paddy and his Pig of English legend, became to a certain extent the rule. Secondly, when working for another man, he was, for generation after generation, working

for the most oppressive, callous and stupid class of landlords that has ever blighted a fair countryside. (There were many honourable exceptions, of course, but the generalization is a true one.) He could hardly be expected to show loyalty to his employer or enthusiasm for his work.

That is all changed now. The men who farm the bigger farms are no longer alien exploiters, but country traditions still die hard ... And despite rather sporadic and half-hearted encouragement from the government, the drift from the land continues. As everywhere else it is the more ambitious and more useful young people who go to Cork and Limerick and Dublin. The land cannot spare them. But the government is keen on encouraging industrialization as well, and in a country the size of Ireland this is bound to lead to competition between the two branches of the nation's wealth.

Drive across Ireland in any direction and you see mile after mile of cow land, interspersed with the many small farms that produce little more than is needed by the farmer's family. Up on the hillsides, of course, there are sheep and there are also some thousands of acres of barley, almost all of which is transmogrified into Guinness, but in general it is cows all the way, and very handsome cattle they are too. They are pleasant, pacific beasts, if somewhat boring, as they wander vacantly along the roads or sit and chew in their damp meadows.

Thousands and thousands of cows, from the little black Kerries who, it is said, 'remember Sunday' because on Sundays they used to be bled to provide their owners with something to supplement the weekly starvation diet of cabbage and potatoes, to Herefords and Jerseys and Longhorns and Shorthorns and all the rest of the great cow family. They are the real wealth of Ireland, as they have been for a thousand years or more. But the transient visitor may wonder if this wealth is not too uniform, if too many Irish eggs are not in this one basket. There was something near panic when it was feared this year that the English epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease might spread across the Irish Sea. Yet sooner or later there is bound to be a bad outbreak. And when that happens will it be possible to localize it in a land where the farming, viewed superficially, seems to be of so vague and loose a nature, where the hedges are either narrow jungles or non-existent, and where the cows seem to enjoy an almost Indian freedom? The Irish, despite their reputation, can be as efficient as anyone else in the world when they see a necessity for being so. But a serious plague of foot-and-mouth could be almost as great a disaster as the potato blights of by-gone centuries.