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Keeping an eye on the past

THE bridge over the old course of the Shannon between County Limerick's most northerly village, Montpellier, and its Clare twin, O'Brien's Bridge, is an architectural oddity—and a gem. It consists of two bridges which meet in the middle of the river.

The Clare half comprises symmetrical arches, and could have been designed for over the Seine in Paris or the Moldau in Prague. The Limerick side is a bit more Celtic-spontaneous, with a jumble of arches of various shapes, heights and widths.

"And yet," says archaeologist, Tom Cassidy, conservation officer with Limerick County Council, "I have stood on that bridge with really heavy traffic thundering by, and there wasn't the slightest hint of vibration."

What Tom Cassidy would like to do is to build a new bridge, discreetly, nearby, to take the traffic, and restore the old bridge as a feature to enjoy.

That's what the built environment is all about, it seems, because Tom Cassidy is one of only 12 full-time professional conservation

officers attached to counties in the country. A Dubliner with a Galway architectural degree, he specialised in mediaeval defence architecture, and designed the standard format for recording the features of forts of the period. He also helped plan the restoration of St Mary's Cathedral in Limerick.

And, by 1989, we find Tom Cassidy as director of Craggaunowen as part of Shannon Heritage. A decade later, with the development boom in full swing, there was great call for experienced archaeologists as consultants, and he succeeded at that until he saw the forthcoming challenge of the County Council job, and he has been in that position for just a year this week.

His job is twofold. Firstly to identify and protect the built culture of Limerick, and to preserve it in as much of its traditional surroundings as possible. Quite apart from the estate village of Adare, where there are about 30 relatively recently-built thatched cottages, County Limerick has a further

190 occupied and, in most cases, far more ancient thatched cottages—a figure surpassed only by Wexford.

Mr Cassidy's function is to advise and assist (with generous grants where necessary) in the preservation of these homes. "These are good vernacular architecture, and well worth preserving," he said.

Other buildings, from old property walls to natural-slate roofs, and from mills to streetscapes are also in his remit. And some of these properties can attract grants of up to £20,000 a year or up to 75 per cent of cost to maintain and refurbish.

And, for those people who would willingly destroy the listed built heritage, he can initiate prosecutions carrying maximum fines of £10m, and jail.

"There are people out there who were able to say that, if they destroyed a listed building, in contravention of the Act, that they could carry a fine of £1m from the profits of the resulting development. That is why the maximum fine is now £10m, to make them think again," he said.

The other part of his job is that of bringing to the awareness of people the fine built heritage we have here in Limerick, both insides as well as facades, and he tacitly criticised planners who have been happy to allow the inside decorations and fittings of old buildings to be ripped apart as long as the outside remained untouched.

For that purpose, a series of public talks is to be conducted in the heritage village of Adare, commencing soon, in which noted experts will share their knowledge and enthusiasm on various aspects of conservation and appreciation.

It all started, he said, with the 1963 Planning Act, which was the first attempt to regulate proper development. "Limerick was very early in moving when the 1967 Act came in, and singled out entire environments, not just individual buildings to seek to preserve. These included the monuments around Lough Gur, Kilmallock and Adare," he said.

By 1997, County Limerick had about 1,000 listed buildings.

"Some people say that having a listed building will hinder development and limit its value, but studies have shown the reverse to be the case, and you see adverts in the British papers proudly proclaiming buildings there as being grade 1 listed or grade 2 listed, as an incentive to potential purchasers".

He is delighted that the Planning Development Act of 1999 transferred almost the entire responsibility of maintaining a record of listed buildings has been given to councils—as a reserve function, which means that the councillors themselves have to approve such a move. The process of having a building listed involves a proposal being brought before the area committee of the County Council, and then a wide consultation, including the publication of public notices, begins.

Statutorily, he said, An Taisce, the Heritage Council and the Arts Council must be informed. Where appropriate, local historians and antiquarians are also invited for their opinions, as are, of course,

the owners and occupiers of the affected building and, as appropriate, their neighbours. When all those observations have been considered the full council, on the advice of its area committee will choose to list a given building, and that fact is then registered on the deeds to the property.

A recent phenomenon has been the number of people seeking to have their properties listed for fear that they may lie in the path of any of the many new highways to be constructed in the region. Limerick County Council, in seeking to preserve buildings also seeks to maintain the ambience of the place, wooded setting, old boundary walls, etc.

And there is no conflict between the go-ahead developmental attitude of other parts of officialdom and the conservation officer. He works closely, for example, with the hi-tech Roads Design Office at Mungret College, which now designs roads for most of Munster.

"Attitudes are definitely changing for the better, and it's my job to try to change them a bit more."

Unbiased account of turbulent time

By FRANK BOUCHIER-HAYES

MUCH has been written in broad terms about the 1913-1923 period in Irish history. T Ryle-Dwyer's latest offering, *Tans, Terror and Troubles: Kerry's Real Fighting Story, 1913-1923*, deals specifically with Kerry's role in the Irish Revolution.

The year 1913 is taken as the starting date as it was in this year that the Irish Volunteers were formed in the Rotunda, Dublin. They would by 1919 become known as the Irish Republican Army or IRA.

The year 1923 saw the ending of the Irish Civil War and, with it, the ending of the revolutionary violence that characterised the years before.

The author has already written several biographies of de Valera and Collins, but this is the first time that he has conducted a detailed study of the social upheaval and violent events that characterised a particular area throughout this period.

At almost 400 pages long, his study is a lengthy and valuable contribution to our knowledge of 20th century Irish history in a local context. As well as providing us with much information on Kerry, there are several interesting references to and connections with Limerick. Captain Robert Monteith, as well as being a founder member of the Irish Volunteers, was also

one of the organisation's first instructors. He was a veteran of the Boer War and, having been ordered out of Dublin by the British, moved to Limerick, where he spent 10 months as a Volunteer organiser. There is a detailed account of the lead-up to the Easter Rising, in which he figures prominently.

Although he was in Tralee on Easter Sunday, 1916, was entrusted by Lt Patrick Whelan of the Limerick City Volunteers to issue Monteith with Eoin Mac Neill's famous countermanding order. Monteith eventually returned to Limerick in clerical disguise following a failed attempt to stage a rebellion in Tralee.

Tom McInerney, a Limerickman who survived the Ballykissane pier tragedy, was afterwards placed in Ballymullen Barracks, Tralee. He was given an RIC sergeant's uniform to wear instead of his wet Monaghan and two others were drowned. Sheehan's Road in Newcastle West is named after him.

Those who are interested in a more detailed account of the tragedy which befell these four Volunteers on their journey to dismantle the wireless station at Caheriveen on Good Friday, 1916, should consult Dr Mainchin Seoghe's excellent article, *The Story of Limerick and Kerry in 1916*, in *The Capuchin*

Annual, 1966. Ernest Blythe, though mentioned chiefly in relation to his activities in the Dingle area, was also extremely active in West Limerick. He, together with Sean Mac Dermott, addressed the West Limerick Battalion of the Irish Volunteers in Newcastle West on St. Patrick's Day, 1916. He was also chief speaker at a large nationalist gathering in Carrickerry in August, 1917.

Details of these and other meetings can be found in the Weekly Observer, microfilm copies of which are housed in Newcastle West Library.

The most famous Limerickman to have participated in the Rising was, of course, Eamon de Valera from Brurea. Indeed, within a year he would become the last commandant of the Easter Rising. It should perhaps also be pointed out that prior to his being elected President of Sinn Féin in October, 1917, de Valera spoke at a large nationalist gathering in Newcastle West in September of that year.

Thomas Hurley, chairman of Newcastle West Board of Guardians, presented him with an illuminated address, welcoming him to the "Capital of West Limerick."

Pearas Beaslai, as well as being elected parliamentary representative for East Kerry in the 1918 general election, was also the son of a Newcastle

West woman. He was later responsible for the first Collins biography, which was published in 1924.

RIC constable Maurice Keogh, of Kilmallock, was accidentally shot and fatally wounded by another RIC constable in Killarney on Christmas Eve, 1919. RIC Det Sgt George Neazer was killed in the Hibernian Hotel in Rathkeale on March 10, 1920. Although he was originally from the Pallaskey area, he had been stationed in Tralee for several years and was on protective duty when the incident occurred.

David Neligan, the Spy in the Castle, and a native of Kilmallock, also features prominently in the book. When he infuriated Collins by resigning from the Dublin Metropolitan Police, he burned his own hay and produced fake threatening letters to get his job back.

He was later, Ryle Dwyer tells us, responsible for selecting the men who were murdered in Ballyseedy in 1923 in response to the murder of Free State soldiers at Knocknagoshel.

The author also refers to the almost ill-fated attack on Brosna Barracks in June, 1920, when members of the West Limerick column of the IRA, which were teamed up with Kerry No 2 Brigade, had to be saved by members of the Abbeyfeale column of the IRA.

In retaliation for the execution of Kevin Barry

on November 1, 1920, 16 policemen were shot and two were kidnapped in Kerry alone. Among the seven who died of their injuries was Constable William Madden from Newcastle West.

The author points out that the RIC were faced with the stark choice of supplying either the Tans / auxiliaries or the IRA with information. Among the many who chose to supply the IRA was special crime sergeant Michael Costello, a native of Glin. District Inspector Tobias O Sullivan, who led the successful defence of Kilmallock RIC Station when it was attacked in May, 1920, was shot dead on January 20, 1921, while holding his five-year-old son by the hand. Thomas O'Sullivan, an 80-year-old Kerryman, was shot as a suspected spy by the IRA on May 3, 1921. Among the eight constables killed was James Phelan, a native of County Limerick.

The Treaty negotiations, subsequent Dáil debates, and the tragic Civil War are given an admirably balanced treatment in the book. When Collins was due to speak in Tralee in April 23, 1922, only the special train from Dingle reached the town. All others, which included special train from Newcastle West, could not travel as the rail lines had been taken up.

When the Civil War broke out, the Kerry IRA

went to County Limerick to defend an area that became known as the Munster Republic, which stretched from Limerick to Waterford. Whereas in later life Sean Lemass said privately that when Fermoy fell to the Free State forces on August 11, 1922, he believed the Civil War was over for the republicans. Tom Mac Ellistrim believed that "the war was over when the (republicans) left Limerick (city)" in early July of that year.

T Ryle Dwyer offers us an unbiased account of this turbulent time in recent Irish history, and in so doing dispenses with the myth perpetuated by the IRA that they, unlike the British, were nothing less than honourable in their activities during the War of Independence.

There was also, as the author shows, much for both sides to be ashamed of in relation to the later civil war.

The book started out as an updated version of *Kerry's Fighting Story*, but ended up being totally rewritten. One can only hope that whoever decides to update Limerick's *Fighting Story* will be as meticulous in his research as T Ryle Dwyer has been.

Tans, Terror and Troubles: Kerry's Real Fighting Story, 1913-1923, by T Ryle Dwyer, constitutes an exciting and eminently readable account of events in Kerry during the Irish Revolution.