

A West Limerick Centenarian

by Batt Leahy-Harnett



Not many centenarians were privileged to enjoy the exceptional experiences of Ellen Reidy of Old Church Street, Abbeyfeale, who was born in the year 1793 and lived until 1907.

As a young girl she entered employment in the household of Daniel Leahy, The Square, Abbeyfeale, who built a residence in Abbeyfeale in the year 1813 and also owned a hotel and livery station. Ellen Reidy lighted the first fire in the new residence two years before Waterloo. She spent over eighty years with succeeding generations of the Leahy family. Living in three centuries, she had witnessed and heard of many incidents, local and national, political, military and social during those years, observing and yet unobserved. She had a fund of knowledge of all these events and she freely related them throughout the years.

Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, was a frequent visitor to the hotel and livery stable on his way to and from Derrynane Abbey, and Ellen was proud to serve the great man during his visits. On at least half a dozen occasions during the years 1835, '36, and '37 O'Connell changed horses at the livery stable and stayed overnight at the hotel on a few occasions. Naturally at these times there were discussions between her employer, the solicitor, and O'Connell and Ellen's ears were open for knowledge but her mouth was shut. She was a young child when the British military hanged and cut to pieces a young man at Goulbourne Bridge in 1798. The man, who was from Tullig, had joined the ranks of the insurgents under the leadership of a man named Tom or 'Buck' Grady from the Castleisland area. It was alleged that Grady had shot a British officer who had challenged him for a parole which he could not produce.

Ellen remembered clearly hearing in her youth of Robert Emmet's execution. She recalled her memories of the notorious 'Captain Rock' when he was on the run at Knocknaboul in the 1820s. Rock's real name was Walter Fitzmaurice, a blacksmith who had his forge at the foot of Barnagh Hill and had as his helper, one Patrick Dillane. The forge was the local assembly house where matters of local or national importance were hammered out on the anvil by the gathered group of men from around the area, from Abbeyfeale to Newcastle West. The new agent of the landlord, Hoskins, was frequently the subject of discussion at the forge and the accounts of evictions of tenants and his harsh treatment of them were often condemned. Private meetings of young able-bodied men were held, resolutions passed and soon put into action. Small and select parties were formed who, when night fell, sallied forth and made seizures of cattle, sheep, potatoes and other edible commodities which were taken over the surrounding hills and hidden in lonely, unfrequented places for early distribution among the poor and homeless left hungry and helpless on the roadside, evic-



The Fr. Casey monument, The Square, Abbeyfeale.

ted from their holdings by grabbing landlords.

Between 1820 and 1836 the British military were engaged in the Abbeyfeale area. Premises were commandeered for the quartering of officers and NCOs. In the year 1824 and part of 1825, a detachment of the 19th Regiment stationed in Abbeyfeale demanded, and had to be given quarters in Leahy's hotel.

Ellen Reidy, still quietly going around her business, related in later years an incident in which 'Sean Bana Roche', the strongest man in the district, was shot dead by the military. A similar fate was that of a young girl, Maire McCarthy, whose only crime was that she was the daughter of one of 'Captain Rock's' men.

Ellen was proud to recount the part taken in the 1848 movement by the men from Abbeyfeale. She personally knew the local leader, Daneen Dan Harnett who was born at Knockbrack, Abbeyfeale in 1814.

Incidents which took place in the vicinity of Abbeyfeale show that the Young Irelanders efforts at insurrection were not confined to Ballingarry, Tipperary, where William Smith O'Brien was arrested. It was decided that local action by small groups would be the most effective way forward as the military were searching the surrounding countryside for insurgents.

Daneen Dan had already spent time in prison with some of his comrades because of their part in preventing a landlord, Maurice Sandes, from going to Tralee to use his influence in favour of an opponent of Daniel O'Connell in a parliamentary election. Sandes had been held in custody in Abbeyfeale until the voting had concluded in Tralee and he was then freed, unharmed. He had an estate at Moyvane (Magh-Bhan) Co Kerry. He arranged to have the ancient Gaelic name changed to Newtownsandies in his own honour.

After 1848 Daneen Dan was on the run and on the occasion of his mother's death he had to watch the funeral on its way from Knockbrack to Abbeyfeale from a secluded spot overlooking the Allaughan river. As the police and military search closed in day after day Daneen Dan made his way by a circuitous route to Crecora near Limerick city where a friendly priest, Fr Synan, gave him a clerical suit and so he escaped to the United States.

Ellen, who was a native Irish speaker, had a song in the native tongue in praise of Daneen Dan and her accounts of his heroic deeds invariably concluded with her rendering of that song:

Mo bhron nach bhfuil mise
Is mo mhile gra
Ar bord loinge
Ag triall, go Meiricea.

During these exciting local events the Leahy family also had in mind the wider events of the nation and particularly those relating to their friend, Daniel O'Connell. He was often the subject of conversation and Ellen was in the midst of all this. There was real apprehension when, in 1843, O'Connell and five of his companions were arrested in Dublin on a trumped-up charge. They were tried in court but with a thoroughly packed jury the verdict could only be 'guilty'. The case was appealed to the House of Lords where O'Connell and his companions were acquitted, the Dublin trial being declared "a delusion, a mockery and a snare". There was rejoicing in Ireland, especially in the Leahy household at Abbeyfeale.

But the Famine of 1845 pierced O'Connell to the heart when he saw his old followers withering and dying before his eyes without his being able to rescue them from the pangs of hunger. His health began to fail very rapidly and he was advised to take a trip to the Continent. He had hoped to see Rome and the Vatican again but on the way

his health suddenly became worse and he died at Genoa on May 15th, 1847.

Ellen Reidy had seen many changes and wonderful improvements in the life-styles of the people after the famine years of the 1840s. When she first came to work in Leahy's there were only a few hovels clustered around the ruins of the historic Cistercian Abbey from which the village got its title, Mainister na Feile. She saw the first car with wheels, made by a carpenter from Rathcahill. She saw the opening of the first public-house by William Murphy. (To-day there are up to forty such premises in the town). She was amazed at the coming of the railway system to replace horses and coaches. She often remarked on the immense transformation that the making of new roads and the improvement and extension of existing ones had had on the lives of the people. New vistas had been opened up. She remembered when there was no road between Abbeyfeale and Athea and the only thoroughfare worthy of the name was the mail road between Limerick and Tralee, which passed through Abbeyfeale.

Towards the close of the 19th century Ellen was frightened and amazed to see a motor car, a horseless carriage, for the first time. She was surprised and yet charmed to hear music from a gramophone for the first time. Abbeyfeale had a Philharmonic Society since 1886 but now music was in the home with the gramophone!

Ellen Reidy had lived in three centuries and had been ministered to by seven parish priests in turn. When she came to the Leahy household Fr Thomas O'Neill was in charge. He died in 1813 and was replaced by Fr John Sheehy for a short period until he was translated to Parteen. Fr David Fitzgerald worked in the parish from 1814 to 1825 when he was translated to Cratloe, Co Clare. Fr Daniel Lyddy was the next Parish Priest. He built a new church in the parish when the opportunity came after Catholic Emancipation. During the Famine years he did excellent work to assist his people. In 1849 he was transferred to Ballingarry. Fr Thomas Carroll replaced him in Abbeyfeale, where he died in 1856. Dr. Michael Coughlan was the Parish Priest until he retired in 1880. During his time the Convent of Mercy was built, opening up greater opportunities for the education of the girls of Abbeyfeale and the surrounding areas. Fr. William Casey was appointed to the post in 1880, and his fame was so widespread that his monument graces the town square today. He died on 29th December, 1907.

Ellen Reidy died in the same year. In her last years her eyesight had completely failed and then she, who had tended and cared for successive generations of the Leahy family, was in turn lovingly and gratefully cared for by Miss Lizzie Leahy, the great-grand daughter of Ellen's first employer, the great grand-aunt of the writer of this article.



Leahy's Hotel, Abbeyfeale, circa 1900.