Party machines turn gaze towards new constituents

BYRNES
AT THE WEEKEND

LOGICALLY, most of the brouhaha about the constituency boundary changes has focused on the fact that seven parishes in the west of the county will find themselves voting with people from Tralee and Listowel rather than with their neighbours in Newcastle West and Foynes whenever the next general election will be held.

Less serious, at least in public perception, is the fact that nearly a dozen parishes have been switched from Limerick East to help make up and sustain the new "Limerick" or rural three seat constituency.

That perception is justified on the premise that a person from Hospital in the former east constituency has more in common with a neighbour in nearby Bruff, in the former west, than either would have with residents of Corbally or Dooradoyle.

But all that is to miss one very basic point. From the moment of the release of the Constituency Commission report last week, things changed, and great swathes of Limerick will already have become either unrepresented or else are being catered for by people and organisations with which they are wholly unfamiliar.

Take what is to become "Limerick City", now to be a four-seat urban and suburban constituency. Assuming that the existing five TDs for Limerick East choose to contest here, along with the usual number of running mates and representatives of smaller parties and some independents, the absence of the roughly 7,000 rural votes will make all the difference.

Party machines have already moved to consolidate their positions within the tighter boundary and, whether consciously or not, there will be a temptation on the part of sitting and aspiring TDs to tilt their workload towards that part of Limerick East within which votes can be sought in 2012.

They will say, and may well believe, that the 7,000 rural people of Limerick East who will be unable to vote for them in four and a half years' time will receive just as much attention as would any others right up to the day of the next election, but the party backroomers will not see it that way.

So, what will happen to the 7,000?

The party machines in what is still Limerick West have already begun to mentally abandon the seven westernmost parishes and have started to think about the rural east. Again, individual deputies probably believe that their duties to those who elected them, including to voters in Abbeyfeale and Glin, are being fulfilled with equal diligence everywhere, but the realpolitik of the situation is that there will be votes to be had in Pallasgrean and Kilteely next time around and none beyond Newcastle West.

But not enough voters have been transferred to ensure that that rural part of Limerick East will elect a TD from within. On this May's figures it would seem that the parties' shares would just augment the status quo, but that does not take into account the imponderable and unquantifiable personality factor, such as Willie O'Dea's electoral magnetism, now to be just an urban phenomenon.

By the same token, it will be in the interests of the three sitting Kerry North TDs and whatever other candidates might be thinking of throwing a hat into the ring to begin wooing the voters of the west soon as possible and to establish a local profile for themselves.

This is because the figures from May's election suggest that it would be almost impossible for anyone from the transferred area of County Limerick to be elected, so a love offensive will allow the people of Ardagh and Athea to decide which of the available Kerry candidates they would most wish to have represent them.

It is further in the interests of the Kerry candidates to seek support in County Limerick because, in order to sustain Kerry South as a viable three-seater, the Castleisland area and some other districts out the Dingle Peninsula have had to be taken from the north to pad up the south. Limerick's votes will certainly determine the destination of the final seat, but seems unlikely to provide any face.

And then we have the councillors.

There never seemed to have been a problem with the county being divided as between east and west Dail constituencies. A few geographical incongruities developed over time, such as a third of Moyross being represented by the same councillors as is Adare and Croom, but these had nothing to do with Dail boundaries. But now it is different.

Three councillors are resident in, and draw most of their support from, the area now to become an annexe of Kerry North. John Sheehan from Glin and Abbeyfeale's Francis Foley and Liam Galvin will find themselves in a situation in which the Kerry political machines, representative of the individual interests of specific Kerry politicians, will seek to be seen as the best conduits through which to contact authority and to achieve results.

All three councillors, and possibly many other persons in the cut-off area, would be worthy Dail candidates, but their hopes, should they harbour them, have been dashed now and will stay dashed if Kerry has anything to do with it.

The constituency boundary within Limerick has been tweaked several times since the original unified constituency was first divided in 1948. The current TD and former minister and Fine Gael leader, Michael Noonan, a native of Loughill, might well have run for Limerick West but for the fact that the constituency redivision prior to the 1981 election put his home in suburban Gouldavoher into Limerick East and increased the number of TDs for the east from four to five. Prior to that, Limerick West had come in as far as the city boundary at Ballinacurra Creek.

The last election saw Bruff and a limited hinterland transfer from east to west and a vigorous campaign was targeted by all the west candidates to woo new support from there. Perhaps that experience will stand to the parties as a much larger area of potential support now presents itself.

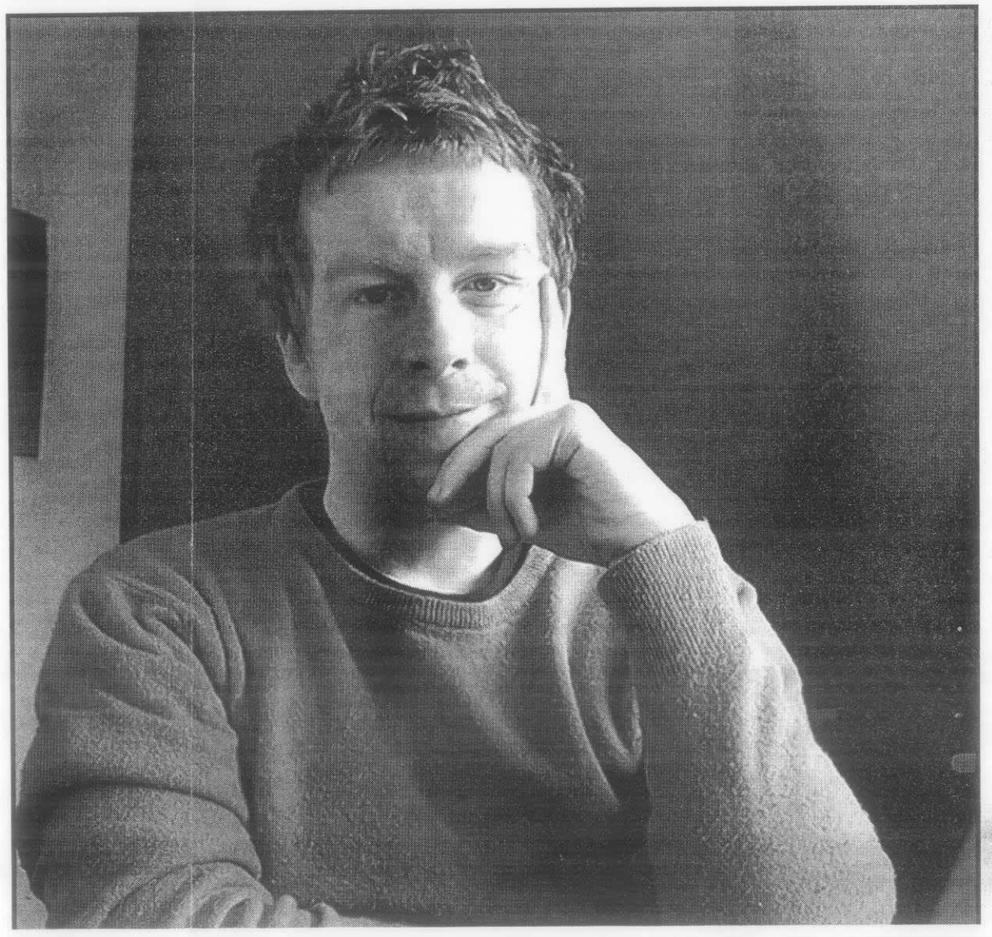
Political parties are good at accommodating change. However, there is such a thing as identity. The border between Limerick and Kerry has remained unchanged since the Synod of Rathbreasail defined most Irish dioceses in the year 1111. True, there was a suggestion, prior to 1900 when the county councils were being put in place, that the area of the "Glin union" might join Kerry rather than Limerick, but the major landowners, such as the Knight of Glin and Baron Monteagle, saw that proposal off.

But now, like it or not, that historic boundary is being breached, and the effects will be seen long before any future general election. Who would have thought that, driving the main N21 from Rathkeale to Newcastle West, one would have to enter and leave a Kerry constituency to do so?

The Leader Interview: Kevin Barry

Local author Kevin Barry claims to be the first person to drink a cappuccino in Limerick and the fastest drop-out of UL. The recipient of the €10,000 Rooney Prize for Literature, for his first collection of short stories, entitled There Are Little Kingdoms, he spoke to **ANNE SHERIDAN** about documenting the changes in Irish life

Barry has finger on pulse of forgotten



FEAR TUAITHE
BY TOM BROWNE

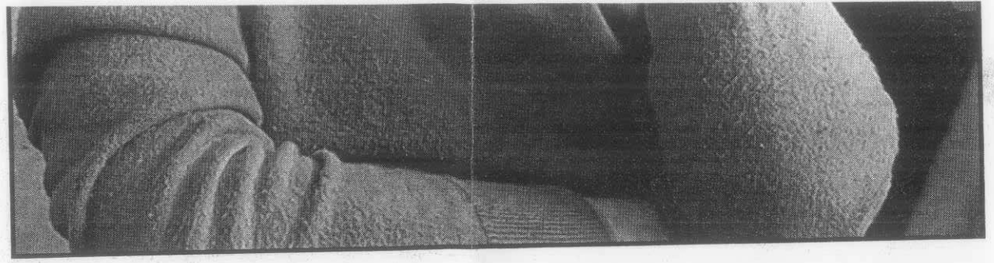
Pheasants watch out, the shooters are about

NOWADAYS, the pheasant is the rough shooter's main quarry and as the season opened this Thursday (November 1) the usual army of enthusiasts have been out since dawn searching the ditches, the crags, the tillage fields and the woodlands for this noble bird whose origins are in Japan and China.

This is a special day every season for rough shooters of whom there are several thousand in this region. Like many other field sports, there have been many changes both for the good and for the bad, particulary in the last half century. Nowadays, nearly all pheasants are incubator hatched and reared in the huge hatcheries. As poults these birds are sold to gun clubs and they are fed in the release pens before eventually taking to the wild. The gun clubs preserves, often whole parishes, are lands that farmers have obligingly given permission to the club members on which to shoot and develop for the improvement of the sport.

Most clubs are affiliated to the regional game councils one of whose strict rules is that both the lands and the members are covered by insurance, so that farmers are

pulse of forgotten country



Limerick author Kevin Barry has recently won the Rooney Prize For Literature, following in the footsteps of such luminaries as Anne Enright, Booker Prize Winner, and Neil Jordan

IT'S an all too familiar scene: a group of drinkers bearing the signs of adult weariness, sit in a country pub and listen to a news bulletin. Reports of murders, oil shortages and atrocities in Africa, flash before their eyes. Detached, but not quite cut off from it, the barman turns to the solemn drinkers and remarks on what "a sad, peculiar life it is".

It is a scene painted with both hilarity and sadness by the award-winning Limerick author Kevin Barry, in his first collection of short stories, 'There Are Little Kingdoms'.

Most recently, it received the Rooney Prize for Literature and was also been shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award.

Pubs are depicted as places where the "days are slow and the nights are only trotting after them"; where the publicans feel they're the "ones getting a clatter off the blunt end of the spade" and whose customers "are fine specimens of bile and fear and broken sleep".

It is a time, space and era outside of the Celtic Tiger, where "the world slows to a human pace," words leap off the page and each depiction of a slightly broken human character, determined to keep on going, will keep readers enthralled.

It is no wonder the poet Theo Dorgan thinks he's the "real thing" and believes the author presents "truths about ourselves and about the new Ireland".

Ripe with wry observations about the vicissitudes of Irish life, it contains dozens of reflections that deserve more than one reading, such as "the clock considered twelve and passed it by with a soft shudder, as though it had been a close call".

While Limerick is no longer his home, the Mid-West is no means overlooked in the book – a place which has any amount of "healthy girls with well-scrubbed faces" and he acknowledges that much of the dialogue is rooted in his home town - in the courts, city council meetings and journeys by bus and train from Colbert Station.

A distinguished travel writer, his accounts on destinations across the world have made it to The Guardian, The Irish Times, The Sydney Morning Herald and many other publications.

Instead of the Mid-West, the Spanish province of Valencia has become a home away from home and an oasis of calm, while he and his girlfriend renovate their new home (a former RIC barracks) in county Sligo.

"I'm nearly afraid to say it, in case it [Valencia] gets overrun. I always feel really at home when I arrive there, even though I don't speak the language. But it's a whole different atmosphere out there and a bit slower. A lot of people say Spain is a bit like Ireland in the 1980s, and it's probably tied in to the whole Catholic thing as well."

Born in 1969, he grew up in Ballinacurra Gardens, a place that he notes has been touched by Limerick's sprawling suburbanisation, since he left in 1993.

"It used to be a really conservative place and unwilling to put itself forward, but all that is changing. Now, if you go into an internet cafe on Wickham Street, you can hear 15 different nationalities; that's a wonderful thing," he delights.

Though his first ambition was to be a photographer, he admits, in a typical self-deprecating style, that he "was handy enough at English at school, so it was an obvious line to follow".

He began writing fiction earnestly in his 20s, and while he is now earning enough "to keep the wolves from the door," he laments the loneliness of the craft.

> 'I think people build lots of little worlds around themselves, to help them get through. When I was looking through all the titles of the stories, I thought that was a good one for the collection as a whole.'

In addition to writing another book, he writes two weekly columns - The Last Word each Saturday for the Irish Examiner and another for the Sunday Herald in Glasgow.

"It's not exactly journalism," he laughs, "it's more things I pick up from the top of my head."

Nor has the transition from freelance feature writer to a full-time author been an easy ride. At first, there was the temptation to constantly "go on the tear", which was followed by a spell of going cold turkey - not from weaning himself off alcohol, but computer games such as Sonic the Hedgehog.

"I miss journalism an awful lot; it gets you out of the house and gets you talking to people, whereas with fiction I go into a room in the morning and it's just me, the four walls and a blank screen."

After spending less than a week studying European Studies at Limerick's National Institute of Higher Education, now the University of Limerick, he joined the now defunct newspaper, Limerick Tribune, as a reporter.

This was followed by a three-year spell with the Limerick Post, where days spent covering the district and circuit courts, and city council meetings, provided plenty of fodder to embellish the rich dialogue of his short stories.

"In terms of writing fiction later on, all human life is in the Limerick courts and you learn all you need to know about dialogue there."

In one council meeting, he recalls the late Labour politician Jim Kemmy standing up saying, "Now lads, I was up in Galway at the weekend, and they're all sitting outside cafes.

"And there was uproar," marvels Barry. "They were all saying: 'Jim, for God's sake, but you expect us to be sitting outside freezing, in our overcoats. People like Kemmy and Frank Prendergast were constantly coming out with these great lines."

And so it follows that life has changed little – as developers and architects continue to opine about the creation of a more cosmopolitan Limerick and our so-called "riverside city". Barry himself has played a part in growing the popularity of cafe culture back, when he walked into Huckleberry's Cafe on Henry Street one dreary morning in the late 80s.

"Everybody was looking at this cappuccino machine with great fear in their eyes and I bravely went up and ordered a cappuccino," he says with mock bravado.

This is the world most keenly observed by Barry, a world that at its core remains the same, despite the obvious advancements.

Witness the opening lines of Breakfast Wine:

"They say it takes just three alcoholics to keep a small bar running in a country town and while myself and the cousin, Thomas, were doing what we could, we were a man shy, and these were difficult days for Mr Kelliher, licencee of The North Star, Pearse Street.

'The next thing an ESB bill will come lording in the door to me,' he said. 'That could tip me over the edge altogether. Or wait until you see, the fucker for the insurance will arrive in. Roaring.'"

Such comic reflections have earned him this year's Rooney Prize for Literature, which is awarded to the best first book by an Irish writer under 40. If its list of previous recipients - Anne Enright, Hugo Hamilton and Neil Jordan - are anything to go by, this will not be the last award pocketed by the Limerick author.

"Oh, I'm hugely ambitious," he jokes, "I won't be happy until I'm up there, receiving the Nobel Prize."

Currently, the book is being adapted by the Meridian Theatre Company in Cork, and the first on-stage production of the book is hoped to run next year in Cork, with a nationwide tour to follow.

The difficulty, he realises, is presenting the best of the books' characters and moulding them all together in a coherent context, that will remain true to the book.

The stories may be bleak, but Barry has also challenged himself to keep people laughing all the way through.

"They are comedies, ultimately. I read Breakfast Wine at a festival in Cork recently, and although it's a very dark story, people laughed all the way through, so I thought I did something right then."

Interestingly, the title of the book (which is taken from one of the short stories), links in with one of his favourite films, Paris Texas.

The 1984 film by the award-winning German director Wim Wenders focuses on a man, who wanders out of the desert not knowing who he is. Eventually, he makes contact with various people from his past.

Meanwhile, the central figure in 'There Are Little Kingdoms' walks around Dublin in a haze, bumping into characters he knew from his childhood but believed were dead.

The vagaries of modern life are noted: drab office workers in Dunnes Stores suits chomp baguettes near the Liffey; a man walks into a run-down greasy spoon where Larry Gogan's just-a-minute quiz crackles on the radio.

It concludes that "some of us [are] mad, some in love, some very tired and all of us, it seemed, resigned to our humdrum affairs".

As the book is now being printed for the third time, Barry could liken himself to that story's central character – a man with a song in his throat and a twinkle in his eye. "If I'd had a cane, I would have twirled it, unquestionably."

There Are Little Kingdoms by Kevin Barry, which is dedicated to his late aunt, Maura Meade, is available in good book stores for €12

PERSONAL FILE

Home: Originally from Ballinacurra Gardens, now living in Clontarf, Dublin
School: CBS Sexton Street
Family: Three sisters and one brother
Favourite book: White Noise by Don DeLillo
Favourite film: Paris, Texas and The Ice Storm
Favourite food: Risotto or fish
Favourite holiday: Valencia, Spain

the wild. The gun clubs preserves, often whole parishes, are lands that farmers have obligingly given permission to the club members on which to shoot and develop for the improvement of the sport.

Most clubs are affiliated to the regional game councils one of whose strict rules is that both the lands and the members are covered by insurance, so that farmers are compensated for any damage and should an accident happen, the farmers will be free of any claim.

In some places the man or the woman from the town has difficulty getting into a club as many of the rural clubs confine membership to the residents of the parish.

Although regional game councils have been asked over the years to help in getting clubs to open up membership to landless shooters, little progress has been made in straightening out this town/country problem.

The pheasant is often described as the landlord's bird. It was back in the days of the big estates that these birds were first introduced via England into this country. The black-necked old English pheasant was the first to arrive and since then the species has had quite a mixed mongrel development, including the white albino.

The estates reared their own birds in those pre-incubator days under a broody hen. The birds were then released for the big shoots when the landlords invited friends.

The gamekeepers were responsible for producing the pheasants and other game on the estate. As many pheasants escaped on the big day, there was nearly always a stock of wild birds that bred on their own.

After the demise of the big estates in the early to mid years of the last century, pheasants almost disappeared. The local shooting man has little interest in them, his main quarry being woodcock and rabbit.

For almost fifty years, the pheasant was a fairly rare bird in the Irish countryside but then in the 1960s with the growth of gun clubs it became a favourite quarry once again.

First introduced from Asia in the 16th century, the pheasant did not become popular here until the 1800s with the rise of the estates. During the latter period there was massive predator control of foxes, stoats, hawks and even the eagles were wiped out.

Originally there were two species, the green pheasant from Japan and the common game pheasant from which has sprung all the sub species popular today.

The new birds have been bred especially as fast flyers and are much hardier than the originals and better able to cope with the wilder conditions.

The older type of bird, a few of which are still around are heavier and not as willing to take to the wing. Like the farmyard hen, they are inclined to be more domesticated and some such birds still in one big estate locally graze like chickens beside busy traffic.

An elegant bird with a spectacularly attractive plumage, old cocks have a white ring around their necks. For the few still in the wild, the hen is not the best of mothers. She could lay up to 50 eggs although when she sits the clutch is no bigger than a dozen or 15.

The cock that survives in the wild for a year or two can become very clever and like a fox will attempt all sorts of games to escape its pursuers. It will seldom rise in the open and will often run along a hedge before taking to the air to escape the shot.

Again, very often like a woodcock, it will take shelter at one side of a tree or some other obstruction before taking to the wing to avoid its pursuer.