

SHAWN~A~SCOOB

When a child I associated my maternal grandfather, whom I never knew, with a story my uncle Feathereye told me of a Limerickman by the name of Shawn-a-Scoob. This was an old story also celebrated in verse by the Limerick poet Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond. The story has foundation in fact and the characters really lived and breathed the local fresh air, but after it got into the Bard's hands and he had done with it, his version became the one generally accepted by local storytellers.

It appears the city of Limerick was in crisis. The City Fathers had failed to elect a new Mayor. Session after session resulted in a deadlock. The Fathers could not settle on any one of themselves and no citizen would take on the responsibilities of so badgerable an office.

The crisis bulged as the deadlock held. Finally one worthy Father came up with a suggestion: the first man to cross Thomond Bridge — which led out of town to the county Clare and the western seaboard — at dawn on the following Saturday morning, whether he liked it or not, wanted, willed or wished it; would be appointed Mayor of the city. Everybody agreed that this was an astonishingly simple and acceptable solution and for the first time in a long time the weighty and wide-waisted City Fathers were of one mind.

There lived in those far off days a man who went by the nickname of Shawn-a-Scoob to all who knew or saluted him. He lived with his good wife in a wattle hut out in Cratloe Woods. His profession, if humble, was an honest one. He was a maker of brooms and brushes. All week long he toiled at cutting twigs and gathering heather, gorse and bushes which he bound to long and short wooden shafts — depending on whether he was making a broom or a brush. Early every Saturday morning — lark and linnet high in the sky, early curlew, rooking crow — he would carry strapped to his back, the week's brooms to the marketplace in Limerick city where he stood over them, his fists in his pockets, and he sold them for an honest price. This is why he was called Shawn-a-Scoob, or John of the Brooms, for *scoob* means broom or brush in the Gaelic.

And so it was Shawn was the first man to cross the river Shannon by way of Thomond Bridge that Saturday morning when the City Fathers were waiting on the alert.

Shawn was hardly the length of his big toe across the Bridge, innocently dreaming his way to market and thinking his early morning thoughts when he was accosted by the entire Council of City Fathers.

This was no small surprise for Shawn.

Before he could draw breath and give voice to his amazement — for he knew them well enough by the rich robes of office they wore — they informed him there and then, on that infamous but historical spot, that he was the first male human to cross Thomond Bridge that morning, and as such was therefore, as of this most solemn moment, Mayor of the city. All that remained was the official ceremony of swearing in the taking office. And this, they assured him, would be put into effect, carried out and dispatched forthwith and without further delay.

They transported him immediately, voiceless and bewildered, to their great, neoclassical granite Town Hall with its towering columns, formal facade, and carriage arcade. Once there, crowded into the regality of the robing room they vested him in the official robes of scarlet and ermine, hung the historic gold chain about his rough neck and shoved the symbolic silver mace into the palm of his country paw.

That night, in his befuddled honour, they held celebrations all over the town with lights and coloured bulbs, luminosities and brightly foreign fireworks. Meanwhile, in the offices the lesser clerical cast made arrangements for Shawn's Mayoral Parade through the streets of his city on the following morning, the Sabbath, before the entire population.

by Desmond O'Grady

Back in Cratloe Woods, in his husbandman's wattle hut, Shawn's healthy and honourable wife began to wonder what in the world had happened to Shawn that he had not shown his face home the Saturday night. She came to the crestfallen conclusion that he must have fallen foul of drinking company in the town and that they had got him so boneless drunk he could not make the road home. Or maybe he met a young thing, flighty and easy, who had turned his head and led him heedlessly astray against his awareness. He might well, even at this very mortal moment, be lying prone and punctured in pride and pocket in a common gutter of the town or somewhere in the ditch by the side of the open road under the indifferent moon.

So, Sunday morning, when Shawn didn't show, she threw her long black shawl about her shoulders and started down the road for Limerick.

When she reached and crossed Thomond Bridge, she found the entire populace abroad in the streets in festive mood and the town's entirety decorated like a dandy for a great parade.

And then the parade swung into sight.

There were marching soldiers and soldiers on jogging horseback all spit and polish, buckles, buttons and brass. There was a brass band with whirling drumsticks and stomping band major with moustaches. There was the easy stride of the high ecclesiastical orders about the plain purpose of their own purple and gold-embroidered authority, and in the middle of all, the centre and cause of attraction, rolled the delicately sprung, open, Mayoral coach, drawn by snow white prancing horses with the Mayor himself, no less, seated within, smiling benignly and waving graciously to the cheering, flag waving people of his city.

The poor woman could hardly believe the two eyes in her head. There, regally enthroned in the upholstered amplitude of the Mayoral carriage, a dazzling smile of surprised success and well-being as broad as a shark's on his porkchop, country-face, benignly waving, almost Papally blessing the delirious throng, rigged out in scarlet silk and ermine fur, with gold chain entangle and weighty mace in the crook of his arm, sat her one and only, larger than life, honest husband — Shawn-a-Scoob.

Certainly the sight gave her pause. But not for long. When reality reasserted itself, she moved. She rushed forward and out. Blind and senseless to all else about her, eyes wide and fixed on the image of himself before her, as in a trance or ecstatic transportation, she broke through the cheering throng calling "Shawn!, Shawn!"

Then she was at his side. One hand grasped at the french-polished carriagework, the other stretched forward in supplication.

"Shawn", she cried. "Don't you know me? Don't you know me at all?"

His attention caught by her shrill voice, his head turned a moment away from the applauding populace, his celebrating people. He looked down at her from his Mayoral height. He looked deeply into her pleading eyes. His own eyes smoked. His brows arched. He raised his Mayoral hand as if in benediction and the scarlet stuff of his robe fell silkily back from his rough wrist. His features set gravely. His gaze had the penetration of some powerful prince of the Church.

"Shawn. Shawn. Don't you know me at all?" she cried again in her desperation.

"Get away home out of that woman", said Shawn grandly in one breath. "Can't you see I don't even know myself!"