

# Throwing the Dart

ANNE YEOMAN

WHEN KING JAMES I granted a Charter to Limerick on 3 March 1609 it conferred exclusive admiralty jurisdiction, both criminal and civil, over that part of the river Shannon from Limerick to the mouth of the sea, with the mayor holding the title of Admiral. This jurisdiction gave power to hold court and take fines, to keep peace on the Shannon and to receive amercements. The position of Admiral of the Shannon was not a nominal one; it entailed many duties and carried many privileges.

In 1684 Mayor William Gribble went to Scatterry Island to exercise his jurisdiction and to collect taxes, which were 1000 herrings and 1000 oysters from each boat fishing there. This was a sizeable tax in those days so the mayor reduced it to 500 apiece!

The Admiral's power was symbolised intermittently by the ceremony of 'throwing of the dart' when the mayor cast a silver dart into the waters around Scatterry Island to show the limit of his jurisdiction. The 'throwing of the dart' usually took place after the ceremony of the 'beating of the bounds' in the city itself. In 1732 Mayor Philip Rawson had a grand civic procession for the occasion, accompanied by the entire Corporation in robes and several trade guilds with banners held aloft.<sup>1</sup>

Lenihan tells us a little about the ceremony undertaken by Mayor Thomas



Admiral Russell Throwing the **Dac**, flanked by **Mace** Bearers and Sword Bearer

Smith on Tuesday 10 September 1765 when, dressed in full robes with blue cockades in their hats,

the mayor, sheriffs and the entire Corporation went down the river in the king's yachts, in order to assert and make good his right of being Admiral of the Shannon. A Court of Admiralty was held on the island of Scatterry by the mayor, who then sailed to the mouth of the Shannon where, between the Heads, he threw a dart into the sea to point out the limits of his jurisdiction. At the same time it happened that a sloop of war entered the river, whom the mayor compelled to lower her colours and her foretop sail in acknowledgement of his power of admiralty in said river Shannon.<sup>2</sup>

In July 1854 when Mayor Henry Watson went down the river he had a bad experience when his boat became grounded for a while. The dart throwing ceremony was also performed by Mayor Peter Tait with all the colourful pageantry of his predecessors on 10 July, 1867. An immense crowd cheered at Limerick Docks as the *Elwy* which was owned by Tait set off. Bands played lively airs on board and more loud cheering greeted the party in Kilrush. Taking on board the High Sheriff for Limerick and other guests the *Elwy* then steamed a little way beyond Scatterry where the mayor fired three arrows from a bow into the river. Each arrow was inscribed with the words, 'The arrow shot by the Right Worshipful Peter Tait, Mayor of Limerick, on the Shannon, as Admiral of that River, from his steamer the *Elwy* Wednesday July 10 1867'. Business concluded, a magnificent dinner was then served by Mrs. Lynch of the Royal George



Corvette *Cliona*

Hotel.<sup>3</sup> In 1911 Mayor Timothy Ryan held court at a short ceremony at Cappa Pier, having sailed down the Shannon in a yacht owned by Sir Thomas Cleeve, but some accounts say that the only thing he threw was a party of eating and drinking.

Mayor Ted Russell decided to re-enact the ancient ceremony during the week of Féile Pádraig, a forerunner of Civic Week, in 1956. On Friday 16 March, wearing the cocked plume hat of an admiral and accompanied by his council-



Fearless mariners take to the water



Admiral's arrival at Scatterry Island

lors, the mayor set off down the Shannon in the Irish Navy's corvette, *Cliona*. The colourful robes of the mayor and his party helped to lift the greyness of that March day for those brave enough to venture forth, and reading through the mostly hand-written replies to the mayor's invitation, it is curious that so many declined on grounds of suffering from colds and chills. There must have been a flu epidemic that spring. Attended by four mace bearers, one of whom carried the Great Sword of State presented by Queen Elizabeth I to Limerick, the mayoral party crossed to Scattery Island. Mr. Sinon McMahon, the oldest resident on the island and its official spokesman bade the mayor welcome and when the mayor proclaimed that he had come to exercise his traditional rights as Admiral of the Shannon from Limerick to the sea Mr. McMahon acknowledged this claim. The Admiral told the islanders that he was entitled to a tribute of 1000 herrings and 1000 oysters per boat but by virtue of his authority he commuted this toll to some product of the island. Mr. McMahon then offered the mayor a flat stone from St. Senan's bed. The Admiral accepted the offering and told the assembled gathering that he was ready to hold court. He asked for those who had committed civil or criminal offences to be brought before him and Mr. McMahon again stepped forward and, offering a pair of white gloves resting on a cushion told the mayor that the Estuary of the Shannon was free of criminal acts.

The court session duly ended, the party became seaborne once again returning to the *Cliona* by launch. The Admiral was piped aboard and with little loss of time the silver dart was cast into the cold waters of the Shannon. The dart, about 18 inches long, was manufactured at Silvermines in Tipperary. The corvette then returned to Limerick and the party, with piped bands and full ceremony, proceeded to the Town Hall, Rutland Street where the event, which had attracted huge publicity, was concluded.<sup>4</sup>

Other mayors have thrown the dart since then but none with the full ceremonial managed by Mayor Russell. Some have thrown the dart from Sarsfield Bridge and one of the 'darts' was actually a silvered broom-handle which bobbed to the surface a few times after hitting the water and then stayed on top resolutely refusing to sink.<sup>5</sup>