

Fanfares of the Vanities

DAVID LEE

In this article we look at some of the traditional customs and ceremonies associated with the Limerick Mayoralty.

IN G. K. CHESTERTON'S futuristic novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* published in 1904 one of the central characters, Auberon Quin, is an ordinary citizen who is chosen at random to become King of Britain. Auberon, a romantic with a mischievous sense of humour, uses his new found power to promote the revival of medieval customs and practices in London's late twentieth century municipal boroughs.

Auberon empowers each borough by royal charter to build city walls around its boundaries, with the gates to be closed between sunset and sunrise. Each borough is to have a city militia armed to the teeth with antique weapons such as swords, halberds and poniards. Corporation officials have to wear ornate, colourful medieval costumes complete with feathers, plumes and flourishes, and each municipality is ruled by a Lord High Provost whose office is dignified with extravagant displays of pomp and ceremony. When the Provost wishes to post a postcard he is escorted to the letter box by five heralds, who announce, with formal cries and blasts of a trumpet, that the Lord High Provost desires to catch the post.

In a speech to a London historical society King Auberon declared that his intention was to bring about 'a keener sense of local patriotism in the various municipalities of London. How few of them knew the legends of their own boroughs! 'How many there were who had never heard of the true origin of the Wink of Wandsworth!' And what's more! the men of Pimlico were no longer pumping their pimlies!

Whatever about the winking worthies of Wandsworth or the pimly pumpers of Pimlico, it is an indisputable fact that Limerick itself has a number of ancient historical traditions and ceremonies which have either been lost to popular memory or are nowadays only infrequently performed. How many of our younger readers can recall with puffed up civic pride that the Mayor of Limerick may also be addressed as 'Admiral of the Shannon'? - an historic honour dating back to 1609 when King James I granted the Mayor, Sheriffs and Citizens of Limerick exclusive admiralty jurisdiction over the River Shannon. A jurisdiction extending from the mouth of the estuary to a point on the river three miles north east of the city (just about where the University boat slip now is), and including 'all the singular creeks, sea shores and rivulets belonging to the same within the same limits'.¹

One of the duties of the mayor was to preside over a weekly Admiralty Court

that dealt with maritime cases, both criminal and civil. His judicial powers were quite extensive as can be judged from an incident cited in a Commission of Inquiry into Limerick Corporation published in 1835:

The Mayor, as, in a late instance, exercised jurisdiction as admiral with advantage, by seizing a vessel bound to the Gold Coast, which was brought into the Shannon by sailors in a state of mutiny.²

The Admiral's emblem of office is a silver dart and according to custom the mayor, in order to assert his authority over the Shannon, has to sail down-river to Scatterry Island, hold an Admiralty Court there, and then cast a dart into the river near the estuary mouth. Although observance of this ancient rite may be infrequent, and decades may pass between one casting and another, there have been a number of occasions in the past of Limerick mayors reclaiming the city's watery inheritance.

One such re-enactment took place on 10 September, 1764, when Mayor Thomas Smyth, his sheriffs and the rest of the Corporation sailed down-river, 'in the King's yachts'.³ A British naval vessel happened to be passing by at the moment the Admiral threw his dart into the sea, and the mayor, flushed with his own self-importance, ordered a gun to be fired commanding the warship to lower her sails and flags in deference to his authority. His signal disregarded, the vexed mayor ordered another shot fired - this time succeeding in bringing the wilful warship to heel. Soon after, the mayor boarded the vessel and the captain, upon hearing the mayor's mission, immediately ordered the crew to compliment His Worship with three cheers.⁴ Returning to Limerick the following day the mayor and his fellow argonauts were received with the ringing of church bells and public acclamations. Doubtless, during the voyage, the mayor, aldermen and burgesses poured liberal libations of port wine, brandy and claret down their throats to placate the wrath of the river-gods and ensure a safe return.

When Mayor Henry Watson sailed the Shannon blue on a similar mission in the paddle steamer *Garryowen* on Monday July 31 1854, the passengers were also well plied with drink. The *Limerick Chronicle* in its report of the event described it as a most splendid and sparkling affair and was fulsome in its praise of the mayor's performance as host that day; it was of course pure coincidence that the newspaper just happened to be owned by the mayor himself. That morning before the voyage, the *Garryowen* was to be seen moored at the city quayside gaily decorated from stem to stern with the flags of various nations and the banners of the city's trades guilds. On board a brass band played merry tunes as a procession of dignitaries including the mayor, mace bearers, military officers, aldermen and burgesses dressed in their scarlet robes, clergy, magistrates, merchants and assorted guildsmen arrived at the quayside to embark.

As the steamship left her moorings loud cheers arose from the crowds lining the quays, the band played 'Garryowen' and batteries of artillery drawn up on the quays gave a window rattling salute. As the aquatic pageant steamed sedately down-stream it was greeted at various points along the river bank with salutes

of gunfire and displays of affection for the mayor. At Bushy Park, the residence of Dr. Peppard, flags were hoisted and seven guns fired, while at Beigh Castle, the revenue station, all hands turned out, the Union Jack and Royal Ensign were lowered, cannon discharged, 'and hearty cheers given by the officers and peasantry.'⁵ the *Chronicle* reported.

The climax of the ritual took place near Scatterry Island when the mayor fired an arrow into the river, penetrating the soft, yielding, submissive, waters with the forceful manly thrust of power and lordship. The symbolic marriage rite between city and river now completed, the guests were invited to tuck into a feast of the choicest morsels - tarts, jellies and pies - all washed down with wines of the very best vintage. As the ship's saloon was too small to accommodate the many guests they had to eat in three relays - members of the Corporation, clergy and magistrates being fed first; and, appropriate to their station in life, the tradesmen last - and proper order too.⁶

Riding the Bounds

The tradition of port Admiral is not unique to Limerick, for other coastal towns in Ireland have also been honoured with the privilege. In 1626, for instance, the dignity of 'Admiral of the Harbour' was conferred on the Mayor of Waterford by Charles I. His symbol of office is also a silver dart and, according to tradition, at midsummer the mayor should travel down river, cast his dart into the sea and drive Neptune out with the incantation, 'According to the Charter, as Mayor of Waterford and Admiral of the Port, I claim these waters'.⁷

This druidistic custom of casting long, sharp, stiff things into water was also incorporated into a medieval Dublin ritual known as 'Riding the Fringes' during which a spear was thrown ceremoniously into the sea. 'Riding the Fringes' was an annual event in Dublin involving the mayor, corporation and members of the city's trades guilds travelling in procession around the fringes, or franchise, to mark the city's limits. In Limerick this ritual was also observed and city annalist and Catholic priest Father James White has left us with an eye-witness account of just such a ritual as performed in September 1764 during the Mayoralty of Thomas Smyth.

Servants, bailiffs, and mayor's sergeants proceeded on horseback with blue cockades in their hats, the bands of music belonging to the army, the sword-bearer and water-bailiff with their proper ensigns, the two sheriffs with their rods, the mayor richly dressed, with the rod in his hand, rode; after them followed the rest of the corporation, John Quinn, Esq., carrying the blue corporation standard; and then followed numbers of other gentlemen well mounted, all having blue cockades in their hats. Then fourteen of the trades or corporations rode after them, each trade according to the antiquity of their charters, and each was headed by their respective masters and wardens. Each trade had a standard according to the colour of their trade, with the arms of the trade in the centre, and cockades peculiar to the trade, and

after their masters and wardens followed the principal of each trade well-dressed, well mounted, and accompanied with drums and music.

On Thursday they rode from the King's Island through the city and visited the south-east of the Liberties of the city. On Friday in like manner visited the south-west Liberties, returned through the city and visited the north Liberties but never broke down any walls or regulated any encroachments.

On Saturday the corporation and the aforesaid trades with their standards and cockades in their hats walked with the mayor from the square behind St. John's Church to St. Mary's Church, and returned with him in the same order to the said square, where he treated them with wine and had the masters and wardens of each trade to dine with him that day.⁸

The Bells of Saint Mary's

In days of old when illiteracy was widespread and communications poor, important news was conveyed to the populace by public proclamations and processions. When peace between England and Holland was proclaimed in Limerick in March 1674 the new set of six bells that had recently been installed in St. Mary's Cathedral were rung for the very first time. As the joyous peals rang through the city streets Mayor William York, 'and the Corporation in their robes, rode thro' the City, the Militia also marched under arms, and great rejoicings were made thereupon.'⁹

Some thirty years later when war was declared in Limerick against France and Spain on 15 May 1703 Mayor William Davis, 'together with all the Corporation were in their gowns a horseback, with the Sword naked before them'.¹⁰ The 'Sword' in question being the ceremonial sword presented by Elizabeth I in 1575 to her well beloved and trusty citizens of Limerick in recognition of their loyalty to the Crown. On the morning of 25 October 1760 one of Elizabeth's successors to the English throne, George II, was sitting quite happily on the toilet, minding his own business, when he was suddenly struck down by a violent disorder and died shortly afterwards. That same day the Prince of Wales, grandson of the late Sovereign, was proclaimed King George III by the Privy Council.

News travelled at a rather sedate pace in those days and it was not until 3 November, nine days later, that the Prince was proclaimed King in Limerick. To mark the occasion the mayor, accompanied by members of the Corporation in their scarlet robes, and the city's guildsmen with their flags and banners, marched in state-ly procession through Limerick along the entire length of High Street from Thomondgate to John's Gate. They were accompanied by a company of British grenadiers who, 'fired three rounds at every time the Proclamation was read'.¹¹ The route along which Mayor Arthur Roche and his entourage passed was lined with three regiments of infantry and when the parade was over, 'the said three regiments fired three volleys',¹² in celebration of the happy occasion.

Visits to Limerick by high officers of state provided an additional touch of pageantry and glamour to an otherwise drab provincial town. When the Duke of Ormond made an official visit to Limerick in his capacity as Lord Lieutenant

of Ireland in 1712 a most impressive reception awaited him. Upon the arrival of Ormond's retinue and cavalry escort outside John's Gate (near present-day St. John's Hospital) the military governor of the city stepped forward and, with all due ceremony, halted Ormond's coach and demanded to know if he were indeed the Lord Lieutenant. The governor then presented the Duke with the keys of the city's gates; Mayor William Butler surrendered the Swords and Maces of the city and the Bishop presented the Duke with the keys of St. Mary's Cathedral. By these symbolic gestures the military, civil and religious leaders of Limerick pledged their loyalty and devotion to the Crown.

Accompanied by mounted musicians playing fanfares with trumpets and thundering kettle drums, Ormond and his cavalcade passed through John's Gate. As he did so all the cannons of the garrison burst forth with a general salute and church bells rang out - St. John's, St. Mary's, St. Munchin's and St. Michael's. The streets were lined by the army and when Ormond reached his lodgings in the Bishop's Palace close by King John's Castle the infantry of the garrison fired a *feu de joie* of three volleys with their muskets, a display sufficient to make all aware, including the quick, the sick and the dead, that a person of some importance had arrived in town.

Corpus Christi

One of the oldest and most hallowed traditions in Limerick was that no woman should be mayor of the city, a tradition not to be broken until 1962 with the election of Frances Condell. For, in a patriarchal society how could women, who were considered to be intellectually inferior, hasty, irrational, indiscreet, easily deceived, naturally lascivious, extravagant, emotional creatures, be possibly expected to fill the onerous position of mayor? For, was it not St. Paul himself who said, in his First Epistle to Timothy, that he would not allow a woman:

to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing.

(1 Timothy. Chapter 2. Verses 11-15).

Here was proof positive and Biblical sanction, if proof should ever be needed, for the denial of political authority to women and confirmation of the fact that women's place was by the hearth and in the bed. It was indeed the Bible and the traditional teachings of the Church that encouraged men over the centuries to think of women as being intellectually inferior to men; it was not until the twentieth century that women have been allowed into universities. In times past the Biblical myth of Adam and Eve was constantly cited to reinforce this ideological attitude, a story that in late medieval times was performed once a year in public during the processional festival of Corpus Christi observed on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. A moveable summer feast that could occur

between 21 May and 24 June, Corpus Christi was one of the great religious festivals of the medieval Christian calendar, a day on which trades guilds throughout Europe traditionally performed open-air religious dramas known as *mystery plays*.

Corpus Christi was founded by the papal bull of Urban IV in 1264, but he died shortly afterwards and the festival only really got off the ground in 1317 when the bull was reissued by Pope John XXII. Within a few years the feast was being celebrated all over Western Europe. Assuming a processional mode of celebration it centred around the carrying of the Eucharist, the consecrated host which became Christ's body by the ritual of the mass, through the streets. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Corpus Christi procession in the towns became ever more elaborate as town councils and the trade guilds became more and more involved in the planning, organisation and funding of the processions and the presentation of the mystery plays.

In the late medieval English and Anglo-Irish city, economic and political power rested in the merchant and craft guilds and it was through their control of the guilds, and civic office, that the burgesses, the wealthy merchants and master craftsmen, ran the town. The organisation, ideological control and presentation of the Corpus Christi plays thus lay under the control of the city's male mercantile and trading elite; excluded were women and the unenfranchised town dwellers, the majority, who were allocated the role of gawping pavement spectators as the procession and the performing burghers rolled past.

In the larger towns and cities the pageant consisted of a series of religious playlets performed on decorated wagons that moved from street to street, the play being performed at each location to a new audience. This cycle of plays covered the most significant of the Biblical stories from the Creation of the World, as told in *Genesis*, to the Last Judgement, as revealed in *Revelation*, and each trade guild was responsible for the enactment of a particular story. In fifteenth century York, for example, the city council organised its own procession accompanied by its famous cycle of processional drama. In smaller towns the cycle of plays would have been performed in succession on a stationary open air platform.

In Dublin in 1498, according to a contemporary document, 'The pagentis of Corpus Christi day, made by an olde law and confermed by a samble befor Thomas Collier, Maire of the Citte of Divilin, and Juries, Baliffs and comones', was to be held on the fourth Friday after 'midsomer'.¹³ Among the many displays presented that day was one devised by the 'Skynners, Houses-Carpynners, and Tanners, and Browders' of Dublin who used a camel as a theatrical prop, to accompany 'Oure Lady and hir child well aperelid, with Joseph to lede the camell, and Moses with the children of Isreall, and the Porters to berr the camell.'¹⁴ The Glovers, on the other hand, performed, 'Adam and Eve, with an angill followyng berryng a swerde'.

An indication of how the story of the Fall from Eden may have been dealt with in Limerick can be gauged from reading a twelfth century Anglo-Norman liturgical play called *Adam*. In the play God leaves Adam and Eve to enjoy the

bliss of Paradise and Adam is tempted by Satan to eat the forbidden fruit, but he naturally refuses. Eve, on the other hand, is a far more pliable creature, easily seduced by the Devil's sly tongue:

Thou art a delicate, tender thing,
Thou'rt fresher than the rose in Spring,

Satan flatters her; but as for that fellow Adam, he is but a fool:

An ill-matched pair did God create!
Too tender thou, too hard thy mate.
But thou'rt the wiser I confess;
Thy heart is full of cleverness.

Eve initially resists Satan's seductive tongue, but succumbs to temptation when visited by the serpent (more phallic symbolism again, I'm afraid, indicating women's loose lascivious nature) and tastes the forbidden fruit. Taunting Adam with cowardice, Eve persuades him to eat the apple. Immediately, he knows that he has made a dreadful mistake and, pointing an accusing finger at Eve, says:

And whom shall I beseech for aid,
When mine own wife hath me betrayed,
Whom God gave me my fere to be?
An evil counsel she gave me!

As they are driven out of Paradise, and condemned to toil wearily in the world, Adam remarks bitterly to Eve:

O wretched Eve! How seemeth it to thee?
This has thou gained thee as thy dowery.¹⁵

My Fair Lady

However, the great consolation for women is that they may gain redemption for Eve's transgressions through pain and childbearing. As a reward for giving birth to a child during their husband's mayoralty it was an ancient custom of Limerick Corporation to mark the happy occasion with the presentation to the Mayoress of an ornament in the shape of a silver cradle. To cite one example, in March 1859 the Mayor, Michael Robert Ryan, and his wife Julia, were presented with a silver cradle for producing a son and heir, Edmund Francis, in January of that year. The presentation was made at the happy couple's home at Temple Mungret and the ornament bore the inscription:

The Corpn. of Limerick & its officers according to ancient usage in their old

city presented this Silver Cradle with their warmest congratulations to their worthy Mayor Michael R. Ryan Esq., & his fair lady on the auspicious occasion of the birth of a son and heir during his year of office A.D. 1859.¹⁶

A similar presentation was made in 1874 to Mrs. John Cleary, Mayoress, in celebration of the birth of a daughter in September of that year. The cradle, made by R. Wallace & Sons of Limerick, was presented on 31 December to the Mayor and Mayoress and 'the interesting baby'.¹⁷ John Cleary, in his speech of thanks, declared that he had always been a working man and it had always been a source of pride to him to publicly declare that his sympathies were with the 'bone and sinew' of the country. 'He did not mean to flatter himself when he said that he had been at all times respected as their mayor. In fact, there had never been, he believed, a mayor who received more universal respect.'¹⁸ The cradle cost £250 at a time when the annual wages of farm labourers ranged from about £8 to £16 a year.

The Right to Bear Arms

One of the greatest and noblest traditions of Limerick was the right of citizens to bear arms in defence of their native city, a right exercised through their membership of the city militia. This tradition goes back to the days of Prince John when the militia was armed with bows, arrows and swords, and continued on up until the eighteenth century when, during the American War of Independence, a number of local volunteer militia units were raised including the Loyal Limerick Volunteers and the Limerick Cavalry.

Limerick Corporation should seriously consider re-establishing the Limerick city militia once again as an urgent priority, because we seem to be having a little problem with Limerick and Clare county councils concerning a proposed extension of the city's boundaries into their lands. This territory historically belongs to Limerick city anyway, because the boundaries of the Viking Kings of Limerick once extended from Tradaree in Clare to Plassey, and south to Ballyneety, and along the southern bank of the Shannon estuary to a point opposite Bunratty Castle. King John in his grant of lands to Limerick in the early thirteenth century gave the city territory which far exceeded the present bounds.

If Limerick and Clare county councils won't listen to reason then I'm afraid that there is no alternative but war. A militia could easily be formed as there are plenty of unemployed people in the city and arms can easily be obtained. For instance, there are two seventeenth century cannon on display in Limerick, one outside the Limerick Civic Trust offices and another outside the Hunt Museum, which could easily be put into firing order. There are also a number of Bronze Age spear heads in the Hunt Museum that just require a broom handle for a shaft, and the contents of the city's gardening centres could be commandeered and handy weapons such as slash hooks, garden forks and chain-saws requisitioned. Operating on interior lines we could easily smash whatever paltry forces the Dalcassians of Clare and the people of County Limerick could mobilise.

As it is, the economic life of Limerick is being strangled by the present restrictive boundaries which lie like a noose around the folk community of Limerick. As Hitler once said when he marched into Czechoslovakia, 'Sure, aren't we marching into our own backyard anyway.'