

Michael Joyce - Maritime Mayor

CIARÁN Ó GRÍOFA

THE YEARS following the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 saw a new flowering in municipal affairs as a more liberal democracy made itself known in city politics. The initial successes of the 1899 corporation were added to in the following years as a new generation of local politicians found their footing in the first decade of the new century. Among them was Michael Joyce, the Shannon pilot, and his numerous voyages into the political seas of Limerick, Ireland and Britain are explored here.

Michael Joyce was born in Merchant's Quay, near the ancient port of Limerick, on 4 September 1851. His father Richard was the Shannon pilot, entrusted with guiding ships through the various dangers of the Shannon Estuary to dock at Limerick, and therefore a key person in ensuring the prosperity of Limerick port. Sailing was an intricate part of the Joyce family lifestyle, with many of Joyce's uncles being involved either in the Shannon pilotage or working at sea. He was educated at the Christian Brothers' School in Quay Lane, just around the corner from his home, and then moved on for a short period to a school in Pery Square. After this he went to the Christian Brothers' secondary school in Sexton Street.

In keeping with his family tradition, Joyce left school at the age of 14 to embark upon a maritime career. The first ship he worked on was the *Red Guantlet* and during his career he travelled far and wide, many of his voyages being not without incident. Between his first voyage and 1918, Joyce was to be

shipwrecked four times, in various parts of the world, but managed to come safely out of these predicaments. In the late 1870s he returned to Limerick and in 1878 received his pilot's licence from the Limerick Harbour Commissioners, taking up a post that had been with his family for several generations. He later became a member of Limerick Harbour Board, a post which he retained until January 1920.

Joyce seems to have been a dynamic character, involved in many aspects of Limerick life. His first foray into politics of any kind came about in 1882 at the time of the rise of Parnell and the famous 'Kilmainham Treaty' which settled the land question sufficiently for Parnell to turn from that issue and address the question of Home Rule. This had always been his primary concern. The Land League had been suppressed during the summer of 1882 and in October Parnell launched a new movement, the National League, whose priority it was to bring about Home Rule in Ireland. The Limerick branch, called the Sarsfield Branch of the National League, was founded in that year by Joyce and a Rev. Robert Ambrose. The movement as a whole functioned remarkably well during the following years to the point where it succeeded in getting a Home Rule Bill brought before the Commons, only to be defeated. Though its power and popularity was to be considerably weakened following the death of Parnell, it was an organisation which appealed to Joyce in its principles, and he was to stay involved in it in a major way in the years and decades to come.

During this time Joyce also played an active role in the busy social and sporting life of the city. He was from working class stock and was proud of it, and participated in two of the main sports of the city - rugby and hurling, in both of which the working classes played a very significant part. At a public meeting held in the Athenaeum (now the Theatre Royal) on 19 September, 1884 it was decided that a rugby club be set up, and Michael Joyce proposed that it be called 'Garryowen', that name which, in his words, 'has been immortalized by the poets and dramatists' as representing Limerick.¹ Joyce became the first treasurer of a club which was to become a vital part of Limerick sporting and social history. Joyce was by no means a sporting bigot, however, as he also at one stage hurled for St. Michael's Parish. The parish also drew his allegiance for other reasons, and he was a very active member of St. Michael's Temperance Society, among other organisations. Undoubtedly, this experience of participation in large organised groups was to help him in his future political career.

It was not until the local government elections of 1899 that Joyce began his career as a public representative when he was elected alderman for the Customs House Ward. Like many of the members of what became known as the first 'labour' corporation, he had been a long time waiting for such a moment. The corporation was made up of a mixture of men of different shades of nationalist beliefs, from Joyce who believed in peaceful constitutional nationalism, to Mayor John Daly, a dedicated Fenian who was still at this time actively involved in the I.R.B. Though there were many similarities between the basic beliefs of the two men, the fundamental difference was that one favoured a military, physical force approach to the question of Irish freedom, while Joyce, who operated

within a pledge-bound party political system, sought to change the constitutional system from within.

It was while Daly was still enjoying the mayoralty and making as much political profit from it as he could, that Joyce moved quickly on to a more powerful and prestigious position when in 1900 he was elected as the Nationalist M.P. for Limerick, responsible for representing all the people of Limerick in the British House of Commons. His election message 'To the Electors of Limerick' set out his policies as part of a strictly disciplined 'United Independent Nationalist Party'. His chief priorities were listed as the restoration of a national parliament, and the settling of the land question, in that order. Other aims included the adoption of a 'fair wage resolution', the setting up of a Catholic University and the preservation of the Irish language.² Joyce was opposed in the election by a Mr. Kearney, who was put forward by the unionists of the city. He had a resounding victory, however, receiving 2521 votes for Kearney's 475 and went proudly to take his place in the Mother of Parliaments. Joyce was to keep this seat for the next eighteen years, and through several elections, until he stood down in 1918.

Joyce's first speech in parliament took place under pressurised circumstances. The Irish Party was engaged in a campaign of obstructionism, where its members spoke at length, largely on superfluous topics, as a way of holding up the passage of bills and therefore gaining attention for their cause. When the time had come for Joyce to speak, Kier Hardie, the Labour M.P. was delivering a speech but the Speaker called upon Joyce to take the floor. Joyce commented that as a pilot he knew the ways of the sea, he would now be 'looking to him [the Speaker] as chief pilot of this house' to guide him through the different aspects of parliamentary life.³ At the end of his speech, John Dillon, the famous Irish Party Leader shouted out, 'Well done Admiral' and 'Admiral' became Joyce's nickname for the rest of his career in Westminster⁴.

Throughout his career as an M.P. Joyce worked diligently in the Commons, making many speeches, some concerning his political outlook as an Irish Nationalist M.P. and others concerning his interests as a sailor and in particular as a pilot. When he became elected, the United Kingdom 'Pilots' Association immediately made him their president, and Joyce carried out sterling work concerning the safety and conduct of pilots, which culminated in the passing of the Pilotage Act in September 1913. Though this work was undoubtedly important, I wish to take a more detailed look at the nature of his nationalistic politics. While the policies which Joyce supported were the policies of a pledge-bound party and therefore tell us little of his own opinions, there are still extant among his papers extracts from his speeches which, though unfortunately undated, give us an indication of what degree of nationalism he expounded.

The first of these pieces is a speech given in answer to the toast 'Ireland a Nation', where Joyce from the beginning speaks in militaristic tones, starting off by saying that, 'Ireland a Nation has been . . . the dream of the soldier's life'. In common with the nationalist historical thought which held sway even up to recent decades, he traces a line through Irish history back to Brian Boru, show-

ing how Irishmen had fought for their nation **all** through the **generations**.⁵ This type of language and thinking had much in common with the philosophy of the Fenians, who, by their very name, connected themselves with what folklore claimed to be the first standing army in Ireland, the **Fianna**. But the Nationalist Party drew back from fomenting rebellion, preferring to go about achieving their aims through the parliamentary system. The degree to which constitutionalists and revolutionaries were removed from each other was sometimes blurred however, with the founder of the Home Rule Party, Isaac Butt, having defended Fenians during his career **as** a barrister and many Nationalist Party **M.P.s** supporting the cause of amnesty for **Fenian** political prisoners such as John Daly. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Joyce was involved in any of these activities and the Shannon pilot seemed to weave his way unscathed through the complexities of the Irish nationalist political scene.

When giving a speech, presumably to an American audience, about the Irish Brigades which fought during the American Civil War, Joyce again leaves us with no doubt on his position regarding England. Irish emigrants had, he stated,

... an imperishable hatred of **E.[England]**, a hatred born of Centuries (sic) of persecution, a hatred nursed by the blackest crimes that nation could inflict on nation, a hatred fed on murder and spoilation a hatred that drove them **beggers** and in tears to the outermost end of the earth.⁶

The speech continues in much the same vein, referring, as the previous speech did, to 'gallant **Sarsfield**' and his famous raid on **Ballyneety**, drawing on the usual themes and examples to be expected in such a speech written by such a politician.

Speaking before a sympathetic crowd was one thing, but when he took the floor in the House of Commons Joyce did not temper his words. I refer to another undated fragment of one of his Commons speeches:

let any thinking man ask himself why do the people of Ireland emigrate...he will see that the reason is that they are denied the right to-live in their own land by the cruel and unjust manner in which the laws are administered ... [a feeling] predominant in the breast of the Irish Exile ... is a hatred of England, a ~~hatred~~ that at the first opportunity in which he can give it effect you may be sure he will do?

Joyce's involvement in parliamentary affairs did not kill his interest in municipal matters in Limerick. In 1905, when the annual election for mayor took place, Joyce was seen **as** an obvious candidate. As well as being a very successful M.P. for the previous five years, he was now the senior alderman in the Customs House Ward and a much respected figure in the city. The council met on 24 January for the election of the mayor and the appointment of a High Sheriff. Joyce **was** contesting with a number of key figures for the post, including the incumbant mayor, Councillor **Donnelly**, who had held the post for the previous

two years. The meeting was not a quiet one as John Daly caused a fiery discussion, dominating much of the meeting with his criticisms of the outgoing mayor and suggesting that the incoming council, 'pledge itself not to vote for any candidate for any office either for Mayor or for High Sherriff who would not bind himself to refuse British Honours.'⁸ Joyce was quick to respond, as the *Limerick Chronicle* reported: 'Alderman Joyce would not sign any such pledge that Alderman Daly during his mayoralty had not been asked to sign.'⁹

When the votes were cast Joyce was the clear winner, and was quick to outline the aims which he sought to achieve during his time as mayor. Most of them were based upon the bringing about of a reduction in the rates of the city, and introducing improvements such as the phased block-paving of the streets to replace the porous limestone which had made Limerick notorious for her muddy thoroughfares. In finishing his inaugural speech, he proudly announced that he was the 'the first working man to occupy the Civic Chair'¹⁰, something that Daly could not claim, being by a now a noted and wealthy businessman in the city.

The years of Joyce's mayoralty were not marked by any great political events or controversies and unlike Daly he did not seek confrontation with the authorities or try to make any type of propaganda triumph on behalf of the nationalist cause during his time as mayor. His mayoralty was far involved with the more mundane, but necessary, duty of trying to rectify the corporation's dismal financial situation. Throughout the year meetings were taken up with efforts being made to make the books balance and on several occasions there were difficulties when members of committees within the corporation refused to endorse cheques for certain expenditures.

The other main event which took place was that the council took an unusual step and tried to become directly involved in the affairs of the Army Clothing Factory, which, because it was such a large employer, was vital to the economic well-being of the city. A committee was set up, after a proposal put forward by the unsurpressable John Daly, to examine the workings of the factory and to report back as to how employment might be maintained or improved.

It was also during 1905 that the Gaelic League in Limerick carried out a significant coup in managing to get the Borough Council to pass a resolution regarding the teaching of Irish in schools in Limerick. The following year a rule was enforced by the Technical Education Committee that teachers employed by that body would have to have proficiency in Irish." This measure is interesting in its own right because it came well before any government of Ireland made such measures compulsory on a national scale, and shows how progressive the town council was under Joyce. The other main event of the corporation year in 1905 was the implementation of the Shop Hours Act which introduced a compulsory half day on Thursdays, a system which was to remain in place for decades to come.

At the election of mayor in 1906, when Joyce was returned unopposed, he stated that, 'the city was in the same position as it was last year, and he did not believe that the mayor, whoever he might be, could do anything further'¹²; a sur-

prising admission from such a capable man, who was obviously blaming the situation on matters beyond his control. The financial crisis was to continue into 1906, with the city being refused a loan of five thousand pounds by its bank.

Joyce missed many of the quarterly meeting; of the Borough Council, presumably because he was away on parliamentary business. An alderman, such as Alderman MacNeice, took the chair in Joyce's place when he was absent. However, when he was present, the meetings were quite often very heated affairs, primarily because of the presence of one John Daly, who made regular headlines in the local press with his vitriolic tongue. An altercation between Joyce and Daly at a council meeting was commented upon by an editorial in the *Limerick Chronicle* on June 9, 1906. Daly had commented that he, through the election of the labour corporation in 1899, had put Joyce where he now was. The newspaper was dismissive of the altercation, though it did say that: 'The council were witness to a hot altercation between the chair and a member, an edifying spectacle, inasmuch as did not affect public business one iota, except to prevent discussion for a time on other and more sensible subjects'¹³. A number of different issues, all of which Daly contributed to in an angry and bitter manner, culminated in his ultimate resignation as alderman for the Irishtown Ward in September of 1906. This was the end of his political career, whereas Joyce was to continue on in public life for more than a decade.

The other significant event of the mayoralty of 1906 was the visit of the Lord Lieutenant and Lady Aberdeen to Limerick to visit the Munster and Connaught Exhibition being held in the city. According to a retrospective article in the *Limerick Leader* on 19 February 1949, Lady Aberdeen hinted to Joyce at that time that if he, as Mayor, invited the King to visit the exhibition, he might receive a knighthood. Joyce refused to do so citing his nationalist feelings as not allowing him to do such a thing. As a result, the knighthood was not forthcoming.¹⁴

With his municipal responsibilities over at the end of 1906 Joyce turned once more to his parliamentary career and worked with great vigour, turning much of his efforts to the formatting and passing of the 1913 Pilotage Act which brought him great acclaim among his comrades in the United Kingdom Pilots Association. In ways, however, being an M.P. for a city of the United Kingdom was much like our own parliamentary representatives of today, being a full-time local politician. Undated records of his parliamentary questions among his papers detail such Empire-shaking problems as why a certain Hanora Casey lost her pension after spending time in the Limerick Union hospital.¹⁵ Others concerned the issue of who was going to pay for the repairs to some city shop windows broken by drunken soldiers in March 1913, to which Mr. Wyndham, the Irish Secretary and author of the famous Wyndham Land Act, replied that the soldiers themselves would pay like any other member of the public.¹⁶ He also made applications to the Exchequer for a loan to help alleviate the housing problem," and all-in-all proved himself to be a diligent public representative serving as much as possible the needs of his constituents.

However, times were now changing rapidly with the Home Rule Crisis of 1911 and the subsequent formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force to oppose

Home Rule. Between 1912 and 1918 the political landscape of Ireland underwent tumultuous change, in particular with the outbreak of the First World War and the unforeseen rise of Sinn Féin following the 1916 Rising. These two events changed Ireland irrevocably, and one of the results of that change was the complete undermining of the Irish Nationalist Party and its replacement by the new national movement of Sinn Féin.

The general election of 1918 brought all this to a crux. Throughout the country it was obvious that Sinn Féin had overwhelming support and in many areas the Irish Party did not run candidates, allowing the Sinn Féiners to get a clear majority. Joyce decided at first to run once again for the seat he had held for almost two decades. Following a United Irish League meeting in which his candidature was endorsed, Joyce held a public meeting in the Council Chamber of the Town Hall on 25 November 1918 at which an election committee was formed and a subscription opened. Though held in the rather formal surroundings of the council chamber, and with so many stalwart supporters around him, the meeting took a turn for the worse. Members of the public were present behind the barrier, and heckling and shouting from supporters of the Sinn Féin candidate P. Colivet, often interrupted the meeting. Colivet was in jail at the time in common with many of the Sinn Féin candidates throughout the country. Seemingly, as a result of the barracking and heckling at the meeting, Joyce reconsidered his position and eventually withdrew his nomination, allowing Colivet to be elected unopposed, and ending a public life which had consisted of two decades of dedicated service to the people of Limerick.

In the last two decades of his life Joyce seems to have retired to his residence in O'Connell Avenue where he lived quietly. He was, however, continually involved in the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an organisation dedicated to upholding 'Faith and Fatherland', that is, the Catholic faith and the Irish Fatherland, and often seen as the Catholic equivalent of what the Orange Order was to Protestant Ireland, a comparison which shows the intensity of Joyce's dedication to the cause he followed.

Michael Joyce died in his home, *The Moorings*, in O'Connell Avenue on 9 January 1941, when Ireland was facing yet another peril in the shape of the Emergency, or Second World War. His funeral was a solemn affair headed by the incumbent mayor and watched by many of Limerick's citizens which Joyce had endeavoured to serve. He was part of a political generation which had mysteriously disappeared in 1918, never to re-appear on the political stage again, but his contribution to Limerick was one that should not be forgotten.