

CHAPTER THREE

Limerick, a Defiant City

"...with the exception of Londonderry, there is perhaps no other town in Ireland in which its history bulks so large as it does in Limerick."

- **"The Times", March 17, 1913**

The Vikings founded the city and port of Limerick on the River Shannon in the Ninth Century. The city became a legend in Irish history with Patrick Sarsfield's Jacobite defence of the walls in 1691 against the siege of the Orange King William. The Treaty Stone, where by tradition the subsequent Treaty of Limerick was signed, still stands as a monument near the Shannon.

A "Times" special supplement on Ireland, published on Saint Patrick's Day 1913 caught the flavour of Limerick exactly when it said: "...with the exception of Londonderry, there is perhaps no other town in Ireland in which its history still bulks so large as it does in Limerick"

The city had a strong tradition of Fenianism, personified in the Fenian leader John Daly who was elected a Member of Parliament in the Eighteen Nineties and was Mayor from 1899 to 1901. In 1867, five thousand people marched in memory of the Manchester Martyrs, Allen, Larkin and O'Brien. With the one time leader of the Irish National Party, Isaac Butt, as a previous MP, Limerick was also strongly imbued with the constitutional nationalist tradition. But, in Limerick, as elsewhere in Parnell's time, the dividing lines between the two policies was often hazy.

Limerick was affected, too, by the Gaelic cultural renaissance that was emerging towards the end of the Nineteenth Century. In 1887, three years after the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association, a club was established in Limerick. That year, the Limerick Commercial's Club won the first All Ireland final in Gaelic Football. A branch of the Irish language revival organisation, the Gaelic League, was formed in Limerick in 1898, five years after its national foundation.

A year earlier, during Queen Victoria's Jubilee, the most important anti-Royalist demonstrations were in Limerick. A black flag of protest flew from John Daly's house and another was suspended across the river at Thomondgate.

The Irish Volunteers, founded in 1913, established a Limerick branch in December of that year and at the time of the split over World War One, nearly seven thousand members followed John Redmond into the National Volunteers, while five hundred remained as Irish Volunteers. Limerick had a close enough connection too with the 1916 Rising. Two of those executed were born in Limerick - Edward Daly, and Con Colbert - while a third, Seán Heuston, had worked there for a number of years

Prior to the great famines of the Eighteen Forties, Limerick had a population of over sixty thousand, but starvation and emigration forced that down to less than forty thousand. Between the end of the Nineteenth Century and the Census of 1911, the population recovered slowly, to almost forty thousand people - making Limerick Ireland's

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fourth largest city. The city's economy was disproportionately dominated by industries engaged in food processing: Cleeves' Creamery, four large bacon curing factories and distilling. Apart from those, the only other major employers were the Limerick Clothing Company and O'Callaghan's Leather Factory.

World War One brought higher prices and increased prosperity to Ireland's farmers. In turn, that meant increased wealth for the thousands of pig-buyers and cattle-dealers who acted as the middle men in the booming trade of exporting live animals to feed Britain's citizens and armed forces. Bankers' deposits and profits were boosted by farmers' savings and retailers too grew wealthy from farm spending.

But the composition of Limerick's industry meant that the city derived little direct economic benefits from War work. Since before the War, the Clothing Company had been getting military contracts, but there were no major engineering or munitions works that would have allowed the city to really cash in on the War effort. Irish munitions works always stood in danger from extremist raids. In addition there were the additional costs and the U Boat hazards of the sea journey to Britain. Eventually, after much local agitation, Limerick got a small share of the munitions work done in Ireland. Overall, though, there was little reason for the Government to give additional War contracts to Limerick firms, despite the frequent pleas of the city's business community.

The War also dealt a heavy blow to Limerick port. The city's geographical location, facing Westwards to the Atlantic, meant that sea journeys from there were longer and more hazardous than from ports on the East coast. Strategic and economic reasons dictated a change to ports that were nearer to Britain and faced the shorter journeys and relatively safer waters of the Irish Sea. The result was a calamitous decline in traffic through Limerick port.

In 1913, four hundred and fifty four vessels, carrying 190,000 tons of cargo used the port. In every succeeding year, the figures for vessels and cargo declined sharply. By 1918, the number of vessels was down to only sixty eight and the tonnage was less than one third of pre-War levels. The shift from West to East coast ports is illustrated by dramatic increases in imports of coal into Belfast and Dublin in the first two years of the War and by a dramatic decline in imports into Limerick. The point is further underlined by figures showing that the first recovery in the number of vessels and tonnage through Limerick did not occur until after the War, in 1919.

Limerick port might have faced problems anyway. In 1916, the coal importers estimated that a six hundred to seven hundred tons ship could be unloaded in Belfast in five to seven hours or in ten to twelve hours in Cork, but it took two to three days in Limerick. The employers blamed the dock labourers and their union for this state of affairs.

But the port was under-capitalised and unmechanised. There was no rail extension to the docks, nor were there any cranes. Throughout the War years, the dockers fought a rearguard action against the introduction of mechanisation in a vain effort to arrest a declining number of jobs. By 1917, they had reached agreement on the introduction of cranes with buckets, but when the employers tried to

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introduce "grab" cranes early in 1918, these were dumped in the River Shannon.

The overall poor economic conditions in the city, even in the War years, meant daily lives of abject poverty and misery for many Limerick people. In 1916, a local priest claimed that nearly forty per cent of the population lived in one or two rooms, ten times the proportion in Belfast or five times that of Derry. Many Limerick workers faced low wages, lack of permanent jobs, emigration, ill health, poor housing and high rents.

The Limerick Trades and Labour Council was established in May 1905 - some time after similar Irish cities - to cater almost exclusively for skilled workers. Pressure to form a Council had come from the Irish TUC who had complained that Limerick had failed to manage a respectable representation even once a year at the Congress. Some time later, a Federated Labour Council was formed to look after the interests of unskilled workers

The Trades Council was dominated by men whose sole concern seemed to be the protection of their craft status. They were pre-occupied with policies on maintaining apprenticeship rules, strict ratios of journeymen to apprentices and opposition to mechanisation or other innovations that might weaken their position in the market place.

Even before 1905, the trade unions had been active in local politics, but in a sporadic and uncoordinated way. They confined themselves largely to endorsing sympathetic candidates. These people generally supported the unions on issues like the direct employment by Limerick Corporation of its own building workers or an insistence on the use of trade union labour in public contracts given to private employers.

Many members of the Trades Council were fairly suspicious of the new politics emanating from "advanced" trade union elements in Dublin, particularly after the Irish TUC decision of 1912 to form an Irish Labour Party. John Cronin, who later led the Soviet, in 1916 was prepared to characterise the Dublin leadership as a "socialist clique" and feared that "the movement was run entirely by people who never worked at any trade or labour or were at present not following any trade or labour."

Nevertheless. some trade union activists in Limerick had been influenced by the events of the 1913 Lock Out in Dublin, by Connolly's writings and by his part in the 1916 Rising. James Larkin, speaking at the 1914 Irish Trade Union Congress paid special tribute to the Limerick Pork Butchers who had "sent more every week in proportion to their strength than any other union" in assisting the locked out workers.

The arrival of the ITGWU in Limerick, in October 1917, was the catalyst for the Trades Council's transformation. The Council supported the new union, and urged unskilled workers to join its ranks. The ITGWU responded by affiliating to the Council rather than to the unskilled workers' Federated Labour Council. The Trades Council rapidly changed from being a localised, relatively backward, craft-dominated body into a broadly-based, well-organised movement that could later lead the city in a time of crisis and dare to challenge the Government.

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In May 1918, the ITGWU National Executive sent Joseph O'Connor to organise membership in the city. The first breakthrough was the incorporation of Cleeves' workforce into the union, within a month. By the end of 1918, the ITGWU claimed to have over three thousand Limerick City members and a wave of farm labourers' strikes had built up the membership in the county.

October 1917 also saw another event that considerably sharpened the workers' trade union and political responses. This was the appearance of Limerick's first working-class newspaper, "The Bottom Dog". On October 20, the first issue outlined the "Dog's" aim: "He believes in the truth of the old saying that 'Every dog has his day', but at the same time he must assert that the Bottom Dog's day appears to be a long way off, shrouded in the misty future. The work at hand then - hastening the day of the Bottom Dog." The paper defined the "Bottom Dog" as the oppressed - whether nation, class or sex.

The paper strongly backed the Transport Union, saying that before its arrival the ordinary labourer had been "down in the dust simply for the want of unity and organisation." (6) It insisted the Bottom Dog would only come into his own when every worker, male and female, was thoroughly organised.

For the first time, the "Bottom Dog" brought together the forces of industrial unionism and radical elements among the craft unions. It was written and circulated by prominent members of Limerick United Trades and Labour Council. Ben Dineen, a baker, was the paper's editor and it could call on the services of sympathetic compositors and typographers. In November 1918, thirty nine years old Dineen, together with two of his young children, succumbed to the ravages of the European-wide influenza. Up to his death, forty eight editions of the paper had been published, though there is evidence that the "Dog" may have limped on for one or two more editions after the editor's death.

The editorial policy of the "Bottom Dog" was a curious mixture. It had an extraordinarily hazy concept of socialism, based more on practical and pragmatic opposition to bad social conditions than on any thought out theoretical position. The paper veered frequently from advocating a syndicalist policy of taking power through industrial action to advocating the need for a socialist political party. Mixed in with this, was a strong ration of nationalism, some Catholic piety, a bigoted sectarian attitude towards Protestants, some anti-Semitism and an emphasis on local Limerick issues to the virtual exclusion of earthshaking events like the Great War or the Bolshevik Revolution.

It would be wrong to overemphasise the "Bottom Dog's" influence on events in Limerick. Yet its witty, tabloid-style of journalism made it popular and widely-read, even in the rural areas of the county, as the ITGWU spread its membership during 1918. Given the paper's editorial content, it could not be said to have helped develop a socialist consciousness among Limerick workers. Yet, the constant and uncompromising references to bad housing, low pay and poor working conditions must have heightened some form of radical consciousness in the city. The new militancy in Limerick was manifested during 1918 in

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a large number of long strikes. The year started with unrest on the docks over pay and mechanisation. A plumbers' strike lasted almost four months until April and there was a three months long bakers' strike.

But co-operation in the production of the "Bottom Dog" was not enough to prevent the clashes with the craft unions over "who represents whom" that were a hallmark of the growth of the ITGWU elsewhere. In May 1918, the Delegate Board of the Mechanics' Institute tried to reduce the influence of the ITGWU and the "Bottom Dog" by starting a second paper, "The Worker". It lacked the political and industrial bite of the "Dog" and concentrated instead on faithful reporting of the Trades Council and its affiliates. The move could be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the influence of the "Bottom Dog" and the ITGWU.

Limerick Workers celebrated Labour Day for the first time ever in 1918. (8) On Sunday, May 5 an estimated ten to fifteen thousand workers marched through the city streets in response to a call from the Trades Council. The demonstration ended with speeches from eighteen speakers standing on three platforms at the Markets' Field, where the assembled workers passed a resolution, to the sound of a trumpet.

The first part of the resolution showed where some Limerick workers were deriving their inspiration. It read: "That we the workers of Limerick assembled, extend fraternal greetings to the workers of all countries, paying particular attention to our Russian comrades who have waged such a magnificent struggle for their social and political emancipation." Michael Keyes, of the Railwaymen's Union, seconding the resolution, said Limerick had the reputation of being one of the best organised Labour centres in the country. The baker, Ben Dineen, Secretary of the Trades Council, said the national strike against conscription, less than a fortnight previously, had shown that "Labour was supreme to all parties." Limerick, he said, had been the first city in Ireland to put forth the propaganda of downing tools against conscription, a boast that was greeted with cheers. R P O'Connor said he supposed they would be called Bolsheviks because they extended greetings to the Russian workers, but Irishmen could claim that as a small nation they had put backbone into any part of the world they were in. Again, this comment was met with cheers

The influence and standing of the Trades Council may also be judged from the fact that its meetings were regularly reported extensively in the local papers. A clue as to how the Council stood on the broad issue of syndicalism may be gleaned from the minutes of a Council discussion on the revised draft constitution of the combined Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, which had been circulated to affiliated bodies.

The draft 1918 constitution renamed the movement to emphasise that the political and trade union elements were united in the one movement, a classical syndicalist position. It aimed to recover the nation's wealth and to win for workers, collectively, the ownership and control of the whole produce of their labour. Industry and services would be democratically managed and controlled by the whole body of workers involved, both manual and mental. In the aims and methods, it listed industrial and social organisation ahead of political. The Limerick Council agreed to the name and objects as set out, and quibbled only

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about details of how individual membership and trade union corporate membership of the Congress-Party could be reconciled.

The stirrings of nationalism also found a response in Limerick. In 1917 and 1918 two new papers published in the city reflected this. These were "The Factionist" and "The Soldier Hunter". The first issue of the "Soldier Hunter" in February 1918 made it clear it would be a weekly watch-dog against the moral corruption of the young women of Limerick by the British garrison. "We are out to clean up the town. Social Hygiene, if you will, is our objective", the paper thundered. The paper listed many streets on the outskirts of Limerick which, it claimed, were "dens of infamy where immorality stalks naked and unabashed."

The "Soldier Hunter" realised the clergy had been doing "police work as well as priest's work" and this would have to be supplemented by tougher tactics. The paper carried a plaintive letter from Father Dwane, Administrator of Saint Michael's Parish, complaining about a military chaplain who had been assaulted by a Welsh Fusilier when he had sought "to protect a girl of sixteen years of age against the lustful passion of this low clodhopper." Another report told of a "khaki-clad demon" who had tried to seduce a young girl by "offering her drugged chocolates."

Small, local papers of this kind became a powerful weapon in the propaganda war between Sinn Féin and the Government. Early in 1917, the Intelligence Officer for the Southern Military District had commented: "A determined effort is being made to spread extremist ideas by means of so-called newspapers, containing no current news, which circulate largely throughout the district.... Papers of this kind...do an immense amount of harm among the semi-educated people who are their readers, and who notice the Government do not interfere with them or contradict their mis-statements".

But the real turning point in the development of separatist politics locally was the release of the 1916 Rising internees and the lifting of martial law on January 21, 1917. Those decisions released to Limerick, as to other parts of the country, men who had become hardened rather than embittered and who were determined to organise for a final push to freedom.

Within a month, the first Sinn Féin clubs were formed in the county. In June, an estimated seven thousand people turned out to hear Michael Collins, the military and intelligence genius of the coming revolution, address a public meeting. In November, twelve thousand people welcomed home the Republican hunger strikers, much more than had received the released internees almost a year previously.

Membership of Sinn Féin and the Volunteers in Limerick increased in line with the changing circumstances. At the end of June 1917, Sinn Féin had 1,661 members and the Volunteers had 943. In May of 1918, the numbers were 4,000 and 1,912 respectively and by January 1919 there were over 4,600 Sinn Féin members and over 2,600 Volunteers.

Early in 1918, Sinn Féin and the Trades Council became allies in an agitation to prevent the live export of pigs to Britain because of the resultant loss of processing jobs in the city. With a capacity to

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kill up to fifteen thousand pigs a week, the city's factories were getting only two thousand. British buyers, with good contracts to fill, were prepared to pay well over the official recommended price and live exports of pigs were booming.

The Conscription Crisis of April 1918 saw Limerick Trades Council play the same leading role locally as the Irish TUC was doing nationally. After the Government's intentions were announced, Limerick was the only Trades Council to actually call for a general strike. The call came the day after the Trades Council had led a demonstration of about ten thousand people, including Sinn Féiners and Irish Party members, against conscription. Even the banks were closed and the "Bottom Dog" claimed only two shops and two workers defied the strike call.

In the 1918 Mayoral election, the Sinn Féin supporter Alphonsus O'Mara was elected, replacing a Unionist sympathiser, Sir Stephen Quinn. Shortly after his election, the Limerick Branch of the Irish Post Office Clerks' Association held a public meeting to protest against the dismissal from his job of their Chairman, Robert Byrne, and the new Mayor shared a platform with the Trades Council to denounce what he called "star chamber" methods

The new year of 1919 saw a strengthening of opposition to the Government and further support for separatism in Limerick. In his confidential monthly report to Dublin Castle, for January, County Inspector Yates of the RIC reported that the outward state of the city and county was peaceable but under the surface it was unsettled and uncertain. There was a strong undercurrent of discontent and disloyalty and the outlook for the future was not good.

The influence of the ITGWU was spreading, according to Yates. The following month, after several strikes organised by the ITGWU, he was of the opinion that the union was rather overshadowing the active local Sinn Féin clubs. On Saint Patrick's Day, 1919, in Adare, County Limerick, the closeness of the two seditious forces was underlined by a joint meeting of Sinn Féin and the ITGWU addressed by a Catholic curate and a union organiser. While the police reported a static membership for the Volunteers and a small increase in Sinn Féin numbers, the number of ITGWU branches increased from fifteen to twenty three, and membership in the city and county totalled over three thousand eight hundred.

These confluent trends of trade unionism and nationalism were almost personified in the life and personality of Robert Byrne. Byrne was prominent in nationalist politics as Adjutant of the Second Limerick Brigade, IRA. He was also President of the Limerick Branch of the Post Office Clerks' Association and he represented them on Limerick United Trades and Labour Council

It was his imprisonment on arms charges, his hunger strike and death in a melee with the RIC that were the sparks that lit Limerick's fuse.

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