

## STROLLING ROUND THE TOWN - A VISITOR'S IMPRESSIONS

*(The following extract of a visitor's impression of Limerick appeared in the Limerick Leader on 14 and 18 August 1900. The author employed the pen-name 'The Stroller.')*

Perhaps I ought to say strolling round the city – but, then, you see I am a stranger and to the stranger Irish characteristic generosity yields much, so strolling round the town let it be. It is commonly said that the onlooker sees more of the game than the player. Perhaps it is true and perhaps it is equally true that the stranger within your gates may probably see in a different light that which long use has made one familiar with or accustomed to. Anyway, a flying visit to your city gave me certain impressions which, for what they are worth, I venture to submit for your readers' consideration. In the first place, Limerick City must, I think be credited with an air of old world quietude and comfort – 'Dead-alive,' I heard one gentleman describe it. I don't *altogether* agree with him, but ---. This quietude, however, provocative of ennui to the traveller who is forever gadding about and *must* be amused, is decidedly restful to one accustomed to the busy activity of some of our great cities. Happily, I am not built on the former lines and that may be the reason I have felt the restful repose incident to a Sabbath in a city where steam trams cease from troubling and the factories are at rest and where nought exceeds the beauty of a tranquil Sabbath – except, perhaps, the beauty of its female residents and about the latter I have a firmly rooted impression that nowhere can the Limerick girls be beaten (and I hope they never will). At all events that is my impression.

Then your principal streets are clean, spacious and well kept and as for the plan on which they are arranged – during my two days stay – chiefly devoted to perambulation of the thoroughfares - and couldn't. But for all that, all the Limerick streets are not of the same character. Oh the sweet (?) savour of those slums close to your historic old Castle and famous Cathedral, where by the way, it is somewhat of a novelty to see an inscription in stone (and battered and only half legible at that) apparently apropos of – nothing. Maybe the inscription refers to the window above it.

Apropos of names and inscriptions, a man with half an eye, if such a natural curiosity could be found, could see that the Limerick Corporators of the past were men who did not intend to let their light be hidden under bushels. Everywhere you will, their deeds are proclaimed to all and sundry. Not in your perishable stone from which in a few years the mischievous fingers of the gamin or the ruthless hand of time may obliterate the record of the past, but in hard, solid, imperishable steel are their good deeds recorded, whether it be the erection of a bridge, a block of workmen's dwellings, the opening of a market or the widening of a street. Russell's men, too, know the value of such lasting perpetuation of good deeds done and wisely choose the material for recording their beautiful gift to the people in that really beautiful Peoples' Park, which in truth would be even more attractive if unwashed, hobbledehoys<sup>1</sup> were not permitted to indulge in their horse play

<sup>1</sup> Hobble de-hoys: A clumsy or awkward person especially a youth.

and to use language which certainly savours not of the Sabbath schools or other helpful organisations of which you have a right to be proud. But that is only *en passant*. Talking of statues what about the dwarfing of the statue on the pedestal in the Park, crucifying don't say I am right, I am not an artist. Neither do I have telescopic organs of vision. You need them though to see that memorial figure in all its artistic beauty.

Of the glorious old historic castle, time honoured and beautiful Cathedral, the rushing and the roaring of the magnificent sweep of waters of the lordly Shannon, of the varied natural beauties all around or even of the beautiful melodious tone of the bells of Limerick, one cannot speak too warmly; but apropos of bells, what about the clanging, untuneful bachelor bells of the city? By bachelor bells I mean the single ones. The tintinnabulation of some, the blatant clang of others would be scarcely durable at the best of times, but when, as on Sunday night the singles went into competition with the peals, the result was not only decidedly unmusical but incongruous. In melodious cadences rang out the excellent peal of the Catholic Church booming behind half a tone lower and in such rhythmical accord as to make the isolated bell 'ring in' as one of the peal 'boom boom!' went this solitary performer. It couldn't be helped perhaps but it spoilt the melody of the peal and probably was no more effective in getting people to church than the majority of half hour monotonous tollings are. This may not be quite so much an 'impression' as an opinion but I should like here to say I never could see the real necessity in these days of musical clocks and watches of a continuous clang for half an hour to tell the people 'its church time'.

It cannot certainly be said that Limerick lacks the time. It may be behind time in some senses for 'time' is essentially to the front and few cities possess a larger and shall I say a more varied supply of public clocks. My impression is that some of them are worse than useless *at present* because they are unblushing deceivers. True they hold their hands before their faces but it isn't modesty by any means if they proclaim a lie all through the day and night except for the odd minute at which they happen to accord with their more truthful brethren. The hands of one clock showed 4:45 every time I passed them. Even when one of your public clocks does tell the truth it does it with an irritating unmusical persistency, which makes one long for the wherewithal to present the city with a new and accurately tuned set of Cambridge chimes. Contrast the deeper, musical and correct notes of Cannock's Clock, for instance, with the fire-poker-and-tongs-like ting tang and jangle of the Tait Memorial Clock. The latter, like many small mortals, is dreadfully irritating.

I am bound to say that apart from the little things I have mentioned, he would be a very ungenerous individual who would deny to Limerick the praise it undoubtedly deserves for its – what shall I call it? – well *tout ensemble*. Of course I *know* but little of it. I only receive my impressions from that which presented itself to me. It was one of the most pleasant impressions I received, even when walking through the poorer quarters on Saturday night, that the violence and rowdyism and especially the fearful language one hears in larger cities was almost (though not quite) conspicuous by its absence. My impression is that this is due to the earnest labours of those connected with the places of worship you have, irrespective of creed.

Certainly Limerick is rich in churches and they all seem well kept too. It's a pity perhaps that a uniformity of time of services could not be hit upon. If it were it would probably spare the congregations the infliction of hearing sonorous bells breaking into sweet music of devotion. I gained this impression from what occurred while I was attending service at St Michael's, for right in the middle of some of the prayers, the clanging peals at other places of worship was somewhat distracting.

Apropos of this, the Limerick ladies admittedly beautiful must be musical. I have rarely heard more exquisite singing than I heard on Sunday night. There were none of your florid effects about it. The tunes, both of chants, the glorias and the hymns, were familiar. The congregation joined in as congregations should, but high above all rose the exquisite tones of some of the purest female voices I have listened to in all my travels. My impression is that their hearts were in it and I feel that my impression is not an erroneous one. I had the opportunity of hearing something of the same character at the Presbyterian Church which modestly hides its ugliness behind one of your hotels, but which, I was glad to see in my peregrinations, is soon to have a more worthy building of no small amount of architectural beauty.

As far as amusements or 'life' as my 'dead alive' friend would call it, my impression is that Limerick residents are easily contented and find

'Sermons in stones,  
Books in the running brooks,  
...And Good in everything

or they would never be satisfied with the 'life' as provided for me-a stranger-on Saturday night. True, the busy shops were bright and alluring; the constantly hurrying throng were in themselves interesting, but these things pall in the course of a few hours and I have an impression that 'where can I go, what can I do' enters occasionally into the minds of the residents as well as the stranger when the night has fallen and it is yet early to seek repose. I may be wrong, but the impression I got was that the only answer was 'nowhere' unless to the public house on the one hand or the little Bethel<sup>2</sup> on the other. I am no prude on the prowl, nor yet a Bunyan, but neither of these fills the book for me, though *en passant* I may say I have been in other towns which might well take a lesson from Limerick in the way the public houses are conducted, if those I passed and the few I entered are any criterion of the whole.

So that amusement for the people does seem sorely needed. I looked for the theatre. I found it, and candidly, I am glad it wasn't open. It looks altogether too melancholy for anything at present and the bills announcing 'A Joking Girl' who appears to have been there on May 7<sup>th</sup> hung limply and forlorn as though they told of bygone glories which now, alas have faded. But perhaps 'Ichabod' is not yet written. I can't say. I can only record my impression that either Limerick does not patronise its enterprising caterers or that the catering is not what the Limerick people want and have a right to have.

A handsome, stalwart policeman told me, 'We have the theatre but we haven't the theatricals' and it just struck me that among so many people of undoubted taste it would

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<sup>2</sup> Bethel: 1. A place where God is worshiped. 2. A Nonconformist chapel; a seamen's church.

not be difficult to form even a dramatic society. But there – I am recording impressions and perhaps have no right to make suggestions. Anyway, I can't get rid of the impression that the thing could be done. Here I am glad to recognise the exceeding courtesy and gentlemanliness I received from every policeman whom I spoke to and I purposely spoke to many. A finer body of men I never saw, nor yet a more courteous withal. My impression is that an' they chose, there would be very few single men in the barracks if the ladies of Limerick are as susceptible as the ladies elsewhere.

The 'red coats'<sup>3</sup> too seem to know their place and keep it. Tommy Atkins<sup>4</sup> can be a nuisance in crowded streets after dark when he chooses. He did not, as far as I could see, choose on Saturday night and he was infinitely more decorous and less drunken on Sunday than I have seen him in many towns during my rambles.

I do regret that owing to arriving late in the afternoon I had no opportunity of seeing the famous Limerick factory hands as they left their employ, but my impression of some of them, when I saw whole tram loads in Dublin recently, was that there's a good deal of truth in the old adage, 'A good master makes a good servant', for a bonnier, brighter and more happy looking lot I never did see. I had an impression that some of the daintily-dressed members of the female sex I saw on Sunday do not disdain a wage-earning occupation on the weekday. No wonder Limerick's fame in what it does produce is worldwide when it has employers who think not only of themselves but of workpeople who appreciate a profit by that, 'one touch of nature' which makes the whole world kin.

Before I close I would like to ask one or two question on the hop, that the asking will show my goodwill to those who treated a stranger so kindly and whose interests I would like to advance if I can. These are the questions. Why should strangers be compelled to traverse half the length of any street in the city before they can find a sign which shows what its name is? My impression is that it would not cost much to paint the names on opal tablets for each of the lamps at street corners and I present the suggestion to the Corporation.

Then why should the railway station be such a rendezvous for all and sundry on Sunday nights – the railway authorities (whom I found to be excellent men and obliging to a degree) are troubled with a crowd whom they do not want and whom they have much trouble in keeping in order? One uniformed policeman stationed there before the returning trains come in would disperse those who, according to my impression, only congregate on the off chance that some of their returning friends may act the part of the Good Samaritan, though my impression also is that the gentleman and the lady who guarded the portals of that refreshment room knew what they were about and that more than one thirsty soul on deceiving thoughts intent bad to go empty away.

Now one more observation with your permission, Mr Editor and I have done. During my brief stay I discovered a *rara avis* and if I had the power I would emulate your old time Corporation and give the discovered curiosity a public tablet all to himself. It should be a

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<sup>3</sup> Redcoat: A British soldier.

<sup>4</sup> Tommy Atkins: A name for the typical private soldier in the British Army.

shell one too in order to be lasting, for these are memories of little deeds of kindness we would not willingly let die. I have heard of witty jarveys, of conscientious jarveys and sometimes of extortionate jarveys but never yet have I met a jarvey that absolutely refused to take a fare after he had performed the duty he is licensed to perform and by what he gets his living. I found him in Limerick. It was after a walk with the burning sun of Sunday to Corbally. Jarvey seeing our fagged condition took us up, brought us to town and absolutely refused to receive any payment for his services. It isn't a question of the money. It is the kindly generosity of the action and to a stranger. May his fares increase and his kindness never grow less, whoever he was, for he was, and is, perfectly unknown to

The Stroller.