

THE fingers of the Derryman curled around his glass in a pub on Dublin's waterfront. His thoughts were those of an exile many, many miles from his beloved braes and moorlands where, as a boy, he had gathered many the tuft of heather and sleaned many the sod of turf.

"Fifty years since I've been back and I'm an ould man now," and he let his thoughts trail off into silence for several long moments. We respected the moments and held our tongues.

"I've heard tell it's a brave place," volunteered the dockerman, who'd never been further north than Skerries in all his 50 years, as the silence got him down.

The Derryman turned to us. "Limavady. That's where I come from. That's where many great men came from," and he took a strong man's gulp from the glass while another thought came.

"There's a place near it up there. A place called Drumammer. Did you ever hear of St. Canice? You know that Kilkenny was named after him? He's buried there. He was a Drumammer man. Did you know that?" and the fire in his eyes was a challenge.

"I wasn't born in Drumammer. I was born in Limavady—near enough to it, anyway."

"It must be a lovely spot. Why did you never go back?" and I made the question sympathetically.

He ignored the question but agreed that Limavady is a rare spot of unspoiled Irish beauty. "It's all that and more. Do you know what it means?" but he didn't wait for us to even guess.

"It means dog's leap. I mind my father telling of it. The O'Cahan chieftain was under siege and this dog of his brought back information to him about the enemy by jumping the river Roe. Ever since then it became known as Dog's Leap. And do you know, the whole place up there was once a cabbage garden?"

That we didn't, and encouraged the Derryman to tell us.

"In the plantation of Ulster all the land around there was given to the King's Agent, a fellow named Sir Thomas Phillips, for a cabbage garden. And there's a damn sight worse to come. The lovely spot of Castledawson was given to the same man for his duck pond."

He gave us time to digest this information by gloomily glaring into the bottom of his almost empty glass. It was a moment to cheer the Derry exile.

"Have another?" I suggested. "I'd as soon try eating the glass. The stuff turns sour in my stomach at the thoughts of what I'm telling you, but thank you all the same."

The mood didn't last for long. The glass was replenished anyway and soon he was capturing more memories of his far away Limavady.

"Many was the time as a bairn I went out to Drumceatt. That was known as the Whale's Bone because of its shape out at Mullagh Hill. It was once known as Gortanima meaning the Garden of the Soul," and he sighed again because the description could have matched easier his thoughts about his native town.

The Garden of the Soul is hallowed ground indeed. There, in the 500s A.D., a convention was held under the chairmanship of St. Columba which determined the future of the Kingdom of Scotland, he told us. And there was more. It was

there that the saint baptised baby Domnal, who was, later, to overthrow the Picts at the Battle of Brae Slieve.

"But it must have been holy ground even before then, judging by the burial mounds which have been found out there," he told us.

The dockerman turned to me. "It's beginning to sound like somewhere you should visit," and he turned back to the Derryman, "this fellow writes a column in the IRISH PRESS—a thing called Around and About."

The Derryman showed a new interest in me.

"Are you the one who wrote about the Kingdom of Mourne?" I admitted it.

"Waste of words. You should have gone to Limavady."

"I'm beginning to think that I should," I agreed.

"You go to Limavady but come to me first. I'll tell you all you want to know about it. You're a literary man. Now, tell me have you ever read Thackeray? Have you ever read the poem he wrote about Peg of Limavady?"

I hadn't and invited him to give me a line or two. But memory failed him. He tried, but gave it up in exasperation.

"It's one of those times I wished I'd been born the Donemana Memory Man. But I'll tell you something else. You know, of course, Danny Boy as some people call it—the Londonderry Air?"

I nodded. "Well, that air was being sung in Limavady long before the country, or the world for that matter, ever heard it. There's a legend up there that it came from the fairies. That it was a fairy tune. . ."

"Not really?"

He looked to see what way I'd said it. Satisfied, he continued.

"Yes. I don't know when it was first heard or how long it had been played. But one day, in the middle of the last century, a woman named Jane Ross heard a tinker playing it. A fellow named McCormick. She wrote down the music of that song you know as Danny Boy."

He admitted that not everyone accepted the idea that the Derry Air had come from the pipes of fairy musicians.

"There is a school of thought that claims the air was written by Rory Dall O'Cahan, a descendant of the fellow whose dog gave Limavady its name. Be that as it may, it doesn't take away from the fact that fellows like Tom Moore were just rascals, stealing these lovely airs and putting puny words to them and then getting all the glory for it."

It was another thought to bring back gloom—but his glass was still threequarters full and this time I could do nothing to dispel the oppressiveness.

"You really never have got

ONLOOKER MEETS

THE MAN FROM LIMAVADY

Limavady out of your system," I suggested.

He shook his head.

"How could I? How could you get Dublin out of your system? You may forget yesterday or the things that happened only this morning but you never forget your childhood."

The gloom deepened. The dockerman tried to brighten it.

"In smashing weather like this it would be a good idea to take holidays and go back for a visit."

The Derryman shook his head. "There'd be no one there that I know now. They'd be dead and gone and I'd be a stranger on my own hearth."

I chipped in. "True. They say it is a mistake to go back. Things are never the same. You'd only feel more lonely. Why did you leave and never go back?"

He thought for a time, lit a cigarette and then spoke.

"You know what they mean when they speak of a 'spoilt priest'? When you're that, you don't go back—not to Limavady, no matter what the Vatican Council says."

The dockerman and myself digested the reluctant speech and frantically sought for words. The dockerman found them. He rubbed his chin.

"That explains it. From the way you were talking I knew you were a well read man."

It was only on the bus going home I realised that I hadn't even been introduced to the Derryman. I didn't even know his name.

"But I couldn't have used it, anyway," I muttered to myself and the conductor asked me: "What did you say?"

I got a bit red.

"Nothing. Just going over some lines of a play I'm in," and he took the money for my ticket, satisfied.