

How Queen Victoria's Death was received in Limerick

by Denis O'Shaughnessy



One hundred and five years ago, on Tuesday 22 January 1901, the death occurred of Queen Victoria in the Isle of Wight. Aged 82, she was the longest ever reigning British monarch (63 years) and her demise elicited mixed emotions in Limerick, with the loyalists proclaiming deep mourning and the nationalist faction doing their best to ignore the whole thing.

The division was reflected in the columns of the city's two main newspapers of the day. The *Limerick Leader*, whose proprietor Jeremiah Buckley was to go to jail two years later for his nationalistic stand, trotted out the damning statistics of deprivation that this country had suffered under the monarch's reign: died of famine, 1,225,000; number of emigrants, 4,185,000; number of persons evicted, 3,668,00.

"This is the record of Ireland under the glorious and prosperous reign of Queen Victoria! A reign which our country has been slowly bleeding to death," the article thundered. "In 1846 Lord John Russell stated: 'We have made Ireland - I speak it deliberately - the most degraded, the most miserable country in the world.' The editorial added: 'Queen Victoria was a good mother and a model woman according to her lights, but it cannot be said that she took the private interest in the trials and troubles of Irish subjects which would make us mourn her death with a sense of irreplaceable loss.'"

While the *Leader* did its best to show the Queen in a poor light regarding the fortunes of this country, the *Limerick Chronicle*, organ of the city's loyalists, used up all possible superlatives eulogising the late queen:²

"The fierce light that beats around the throne has never shown one single action unbecoming the queenly dignity. No sovereign has ever reigned so worthily deserved the appellation Queen to her people. She was a queenly Queen, a motherly mother, one of the purest and most unspotted lives is ended, and on every hand is heard the prayer: *Requiescat in pace.*"

All her attributes were trotted out, her musicality amongst them. "The Queen once sang one of his own songs to Mendelssohn. Just as she was about to sing, she exclaimed: 'but the parrot must go out of the room first, or he will screech louder than I can sing.'"

According to Mendelssohn, she sang the Pilgrim's Chorus really quite faultlessly and with beautiful feeling and expression. "I praised her very heartily, and with the best conscience in the world, for that phrase near the end, having the long sustained C she so sang well, joining the C to the three following notes - all in one breath, as one rarely hears it done - that it highly amused me that she herself should have spoken about the very long breath it required. 'Oh! If I had not been so frightened,' said the Queen."

Placards were sent by the *Chronicle* through the streets of Limerick pronouncing the Queen's death and, according to the newspaper,³ the demise of the Queen became the one topic of conversation.

"The greatest sympathy was expressed on all hands, one very noticeable expression being that of satisfaction that Her Majesty had not had a long, lingering illness. In the hotels and public institutions little knots gathered and talked the matter over, while for hours the *Chronicle* office was thronged with an eager crowd seeking for further intelligence than the meagre telegram conveyed.

"Today the Union Jack is flying at half mast on St. Mary's Cathedral, at the barracks, the City and County Prisons, the Condensed Milk Factory, Lansdowne; Messrs. Bannatyne's, Matterson's, Shaw's, Monster Drapery Houses, and other places of business. Blinds are drawn at the Chamber of Commerce, the Protestant Young Men's Association (where the flag is draped in black), the County Club, General Post Office, etc. The Union Jack is also at half mast at the Limerick Boat Club, and on all the vessels in port."

Comparisons were made with Queen Elizabeth 1st. "The other great queen of English history, Elizabeth, reigned 44 years and died in her seventy-eighth year⁴ - a great monarch surely, with the intellect and strength of will of a man, but deficient in those endearing qualities of heart which made Queen Victoria so beloved."

The Queen was reputed to be one of the wealthiest women in the world with an annual income of £385,000. It was not unusual for adoring subjects to remember her in their wills, and John Neff, who died in 1852, left £250,000 to Her Majesty. This

sum, which had been practically left untouched, had largely increased by the time of her death. She was also left £600,000 by her late husband."

The claim that Queen Victoria was an exemplary mother was a recurring theme in the arguments put forward in attempts to have meetings adjourned as a mark of respect.

At the Ennis Board of Guardians an amendment that the meeting should not be adjourned was spoken against with vehemence by Mr. Cotter⁵. "Are we not an English speaking nation and should we not show respect? The Queen was a good mother and if we got Home Rule in the morning would she not have signed it if she were alive?" The amendment was carried and the proposer that the meeting be adjourned, Mr. Scott, left the meeting in a huff, saying it was a disgrace that great disrespect had been passed on the Queen.

At a lively meeting of the Limerick Harbour Board,⁶ Mr. William McDonnell, J.P., suggested that the business should be adjourned owing to the death of our "good Queen."

The Mayor (the Nationalist John Daly, who was to be returned for an unprecedented third year later on) retorted (warmly): "I think the least you ought to do is not try and force us in making declarations here or in any other board, or if you do we will do our—"

Mr. McDonnell - You can do your best as far as I am concerned.

Mr. Holliday then made an impassioned speech, saying that the Queen was a good mother, a good wife, a good Queen, and a pattern to them all, and there should be no heat in the matter.

Ald. Michael Joyce, M.P., being the astute politician that he was, said he would oppose the motion but would agree with a vote of condolence. "They in Ireland had nothing for which to thank the reign that had passed." It was eventually decided to pass a vote of condolence.

At the Board of Guardians meeting,⁷ Captain O'Brien, J.P., tried might and main to get the meeting adjourned. "The Queen's eulogies would be pronounced in every part of the world, and he thought the least they, as a public body, could do was to show her Majesty every respect as a Queen and woman," he said.

There was no seconder for the captain's proposal and the chairman, Mr.

John McInerney, said he could not put it from the chair. Capt. O'Brien then left the meeting.

Another member, Mr. O'Regan, said he did not think the action of Captain O'Brien should deter them as Nationalists from doing their duty. "They should not be bottled up in a matter of this kind by Captain O'Brien. He was glad that the Board did not adjourn. The Queen during her reign never did any good for Ireland. If Captain O'Brien choose to leave the room, let him."

The *Chronicle* lashed members of those boards who voted against the adjournments. "These nonentities ought to be looked upon as too contemptible a group to excite the smallest anger. They serve to heighten the effect of the universal sympathy displayed throughout the civilised world for the sorrow and woes of Great Britain."

On the actions of the nationalistic members of the Harbour Board, the editorial commented that "despite their wretched displays of disloyalty and inconsistency, the Crown and Constitution will continue to exist in spite of the shrieks of those who would trample both under foot."

The Limerick Board of Guardians also refused to adjourn their meetings, as did the vast majority of boards with nationalists in the majority.

One man who took the Queen's death to heart was the famous Judge Dick Adams, widely acknowledged as the wittiest justice in the state, and whom the illustrious *London Times* sent a reporter to Limerick to witness his courtroom witticisms. At a sitting of the County Court, the Judge went into deep mourning, wearing "weepers" complete with mourning bands. A sitting of the Petty Sessions was adjourned with the chairman, Mr. Ambrose Hall, former mayor, delivering a eulogy:⁸

"She was a good mother and a good wife and above all she was a sincere friend. He would remind his fellow Catholics that their religion was more free than in any country in the world (here! here!) and giving an example of her morality he said that a Colonel of her Regiment, and a great friend of the Prince of Wales (now the King), acted in a manner in a first-class railway carriage that he should not have, and she had him immediately dismissed from her service."

On the day of the funeral, practically all the of the city's business houses (almost all Protestant owned) closed down. The *Chronicle* appealed to local publicans to close their premises, but this appeal was superseded by an edict from the Government that all licensed premises be closed for the day. All sports fixtures in England were cancelled for the following weekend and the Ireland v. England rugby international, due to take place the following week, was also cancelled.

A highly impressive funeral service took place in St Mary's Cathedral⁹, which was packed to capacity. The Cathedral was draped in black and mourning was

NOTICE OF PUBLICATION
OF
PROCLAMATION
IN THE CITY OF LIMERICK
OF
HIS MAJESTY KING EDWARD VII.

I THOMAS HENRY CLEEVE, Knight, High Sheriff of the City of Limerick, hereby give notice that I will attend at the CITY COURT-HOUSE, LIMERICK, on Wednesday, the 30th January, 1901, at the hour of 12 o'clock noon, and then proceed in front of said Courthouse, and other parts of the City where it shall appear desirable, to proclaim His Majesty King Edward the Seventh, by the Grace of God, King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and Emperor of India, Defender of the Faith, pursuant to Proclamation given at the Council Chamber in Dublin on the 24th January, 1901, and I call on all His Majesty's subjects to attend and be aiding and assisting in said publication.

Head of Limerick, this 26th January, 1901.

THOMAS H. CLEEVE, Knight,
High Sheriff, City of Limerick.

GOD SAVE THE KING.

**Notice of publication of proclamation
in Limerick of Edward VII as king, 1901
(Limerick Museum)**

universally worn by members of the congregation. The troops of the garrison attended including some 300 men and officers of the Yorkshire Light Infantry, whose band played during the service. The cathedral choir, numbering 50, was augmented by some lady and gentlemen amateurs.

The Lord Bishop, in his eulogy, said: "the Queen had passed on but her personality would not die as long as the British nation exists." He took his text from the 9th Chapter of Genesis, Verse 14: "And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the Earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud."

The Bishop said: "A dark cloud hangs over our vision as we mourn the greatest monarch who ever occupied the throne. Was it right on the present occasion to banish all feeling save that of gloom and sorrow? Did they see no bow in the cloud at their sorrow at the cessation of her glorious reign."

He quoted some of the queen's sayings which included "I shall be good" immortally uttered when she was a princess, "which in the Providence of God has been truly fulfilled.

"The Queen has passed from this life, but she lives with greater intensity of feeling amongst her people than ever she did before. Her personality was not dead, it would not die as long as the British nation exists."

The anthem, *Blessed are the Departed*, was sung with true expression and so also was the beautiful and appropriate hymn, *Now the Labourer's Task is O'er*.

Dead March in Saul and Beethoven's *Grand Funeral March* were amongst the pieces played and afterwards in the grounds, *God Save the King* was played as

the royal colours, which had been at half-mast during the service, were hoisted to full.

It was reported that memorial services were not held in the Catholic churches, but it was noticeable that many who attended the Masses displayed emblems of mourning and in some of the churches bells were tolled during the hours of the memorial service at Windsor.

A Notice was published on 28th¹⁰ January proclaiming His Majesty, King Edward the Seventh, by the Grace of God, King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and Emperor of India, and Defender of the Faith. It was signed by Henry Cleeve, Knight, High Sheriff of the City of Limerick.

The actual proclamation, in the grounds of the Cathedral, was attended, according to a *Leader* report, "by a majority of idle curiosity seekers."

The *Chronicle*, which turned up the bottom of its column rules to give a 6-point black mourning background on its pages, patted itself on the back¹⁰ on having its first real-stop press in its history regarding news of the Queen's death:

"Self-praise is said to be no recommendation, but we feel sure we shall be forgiven if we venture to mention the great success of the first real stop-press edition ever issued from the *Chronicle* office, and probably in Limerick, on Tuesday night. Our citizens may congratulate themselves on the fact that in receiving the intelligence of the death of Her Majesty the Queen they were not one whit behind the Metropolis itself.

"The rapidity with which the copies were bought up was phenomenal, and advertisers may be pleased to know that their advertisements had a circulation equal to at least three times of all the other Limerick papers added together.

"Yesterday we published another Special, our aim being to give Limerick readers precisely the same advantages with regard to special news as are enjoyed by such cities as Belfast, Dublin and Cork, which possesses daily and evening papers. Perhaps in time Limerick may possess them too. If our citizens continue to support us as they are doing, it is only a matter of time. We trust our readers will forgive us this little self-advertisement which, however, every one, happily, knows to be true."

News of the death of the Queen had been received by the *Leader* by telegram, the first time any major news event in Britain had been received by such means.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Limerick Leader*, January 25, 1901.
2. *Limerick Chronicle*, January 24, 1901.
3. *Ibid*.
4. This is an error, she was seventy when she died
5. *Limerick Leader*, January 25, 1901.
6. *Limerick Chronicle*, January 29, 1901.
7. *Limerick Chronicle*, January 24, 1901.
8. *Limerick Leader*, January 25, 1901.
9. *Limerick Chronicle*, January 29, 1901.
10. *Limerick Chronicle*, January 24, 1901.