



Another interesting item from Jim Houlihan on Faction Fighting in Limerick.

Faction fighting developed as a curious Irish phenomena in the early years of the eighteenth century and continued for almost two centuries. Limerick had its share of bloody encounters. Fairs, Markets, Race meetings or wherever people gathered became a venue for the warring factions. Priests had to suspend Pattern Days because rival gangs turned up, took part in the prayers and then turned on each other in a wholly un-christian encounter. A strong blackthorn stick, four feet long, well seasoned, with knots on it and a steel tip was a much favoured weapon. Others used ash and some whitethorn.

There was no recognised set of rules though some conventions were observed. Knives

were rarely used. That did not however prevent some turning up with pitchforks, spades, and even scythes. Some of the women who came as supporters brought a stone in a stocking, just in case their help was needed.!!

There were smaller gangs representing just townlands or extended families right up to the larger gangs of several hundreds. Historians generally have not found it an attractive topic and many areas that witnessed bloody encounters prefer not to be remembered for such happenings. However, it is part of our history and thanks to a small number of collectors there are detailed records available. The most notorious gangs in Limerick, North Kerry and extending to Tipperary were the “Three Year Olds & Four Year Olds”. The title conjures up images of three and four year old raging bulls going for one another. It is known there was serious fighting at the Fair of Croom but the most serious fighting in this local area took place at, The Fair of

the Well, Saint Gobnait’s Well, Ballyagran. In 1937, Mr. Ned Walsh, Crougteen,

Castletown, (then aged 65) recalled his boyhood memories of what he had heard spoken around the fire at night. The elders of the time had first hand experience of what went on. He recalled the names of some local factions such as “The Clashers” (Clashgortmore) and families that were regarded as good fighters. The big fair of the year was held on, 12th of February.

It attracted all kinds of people from a radius of twenty miles. The dealers, the stand-holders and the slight-of-hand were all there. Everyone was ready to witness the fighting. Local factions did not go to the extremes of the major gangs. Alcohol would have been a motivating factor, consequently, the parties needed only some lame excuse or none at all.

Dr. Mannix Joyce takes up the story when writing in the 1990s; he gives a detailed account of what was the most brutal fight ever witnessed at Ballyagran. Locals were not involved. Lieutenant John Fitzgerald who was in charge of a detachment of the 39th Regiment stationed at Ballyagran, in the course of a report to, Military Headquarters, Kilmainham stated -

“At about half past four on the morning of February 12th, 1824, Mr. Massey (a local Magistrate) called to require our immediate assistance to prevent a riot. It was with the greatest difficulty we could separate the parties without resort to severe measures. We frequently succeeded in dispersing them but in spite of our combined efforts, military and police, they managed to recommence. However, we succeeded in preventing a great deal of blood-shed as stone throwing was the order of the day. I never saw fellows so determined on the destruction of each other. Mr.

Massey's chief anxiety was to take prisoners and we apprehended twenty four. One man affected his escape and broke one of our firelocks (guns) with a blow of a stick. We tried to retake him but could not, unless we fired on him. Another man's firelock was broken from a stone thrown.

Notwithstanding our efforts one man was killed and another not expected to live, which sufficiently shows what destruction would have been committed were it not for the intervention of the military and police.

The combatants were the Three Year Olds and the Four Year Olds. Some of the Three Year Olds had firearms and numbers of them had scythes with which they cut the calves of their opponents legs." According to Mr. Walsh, The last Fair of the Well and the last fight were held in early 1870's. The last recorded faction fight was held at Cappawhite, Tipperary in 1887. It has been noted by others that football matches in Limerick in the nineteenth century were often proxy faction fights and there are probably grounds to link the founding of the GAA and the codification of hurling in 1884, with the decline in faction fighting.

