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Larry Dillon—Song-Writer and Wit of Lower Ormond

By Daniel Grace

The Irish have always admired the one who had a way with words. In every locality there is the memory of a man (or, less usually, a woman) who could turn a witty phrase, give a biting retort to his social betters, or craft a poem or song on some local event, place or personality. Such was Larry Dillon, the Lower Ormond songster and wit. Larry's quips and sayings, and snatches of his songs, were still remembered in his native Lorrha district in the 1930s, almost a century after his death.

The facts of Larry's life are somewhat obscure. He is believed to have been born in either 1766 or 1768 in the townland of Derry, about 300 yards from the village of Rathcabbin. The house where he was born was later used as a forge. His father (also Larry), a farmer, was reputed to have been good at composing verses.

Larry worked with his father for a time, but later went to live at the Pike of Rathcabbin and had a small holding of two acres there. One account claims that, in addition to being a farmer, he was also a maker of cider. Larry is said to have attended night school at Banagher to a teacher named Peter Madden, but apparently was not a brilliant scholar. Tradition recalls Larry as small in stature and always dressed in a cut-away coat and knee-breeches.

Larry Dillon seems to have died in either 1846 or 1847; but it is not certain where he is buried. Some claim that it is in the old cemetery at Lorrha; others believe that he is buried with relatives at Birr. Neither graveyard has a tombstone to his memory, nor have I been able to trace any reference to his death in either of the contemporary North Tipperary newspapers, the *Tipperary Vindicator* or *Nenagh Guardian*.

The information on Larry's life given above was recorded by school-children of Lorrha parish for the Irish Folklore Commission in the late 1930s.¹ Many of the informants were then old men or women whose parents or grandparents would have known Larry Dillon personally.²

Earlier, perhaps more authentic, information on Larry appeared in a lengthy article entitled, 'Street Songs of Sixty Years Ago', in the *Nenagh Guardian* of 23 May 1877. The anonymous writer (referred to hereafter as "Contributor") had this to say: "There was one of those poets whose ditties I delighted most in. It was Laurence Dillon of the Pike of Rathcabbin, a man of most miserable appearance, poor and illiterate, yet the possessor of an inexhaustable well-spring of song. He was a perambulating hackler of flax, to which he added some other acquirements, which made him a welcome and honoured visitant to any farmer's house."

"He was the author of many songs, which won him much popularity among the rural classes. By most he was idolized and by a few he was feared — if not hated — for he was an unsparing and bitter-biting satirist, when he considered himself either injured or insulted."

"Contributor" wrote that in his youth, Larry Dillon's songs were popular among the peasantry "all through Munster and Connaught and far into the heart of Leinster". The names of some of the songs were still remembered in the 1930s: *The Shades of Sweet Bellisle*, *Portland Plains*, *Shraduff*, *The Plains round Knockshegowna*, *Sweet Birr Town*, *The Maid of Sweet Gurteen*, *The Cottage Maid*, *An Buachaillín Donn*.

Unfortunately the words of most of them were lost, although in a few cases snatches survived. *The Maid of Sweet Gurteen*, which dealt with a local story of a well-to-do son, who was refused permission by his father to marry the servant girl, had one verse which ran as follows:³



Ah father, dearest father,
 Don't part me from my dear,
 I would not give my servant maid,
 For ten thousand pounds a year.
 If I were heir to England's crown,
 It's her I'd make my queen,
 And in high renown,
 I'd wear the crown,
 For the Maid of Sweet Gurteen.

Although the songs were usually about local places — Bellisle, Portland, Shraduff — they were, said “Contributor”, heavily loaded with references to classical mythology, especially to the divinities of Homer and Virgil. This was commonplace in peasant songs of the early nineteenth century; and “it was no wonder”, remarked “Contributor”, “that the Irish peasant’s mind was stored with gods, goddesses and heroes, that he knew little or nothing about beyond their names, when they were mixed up in the songs sung on Winter’s evenings, where the boys and girls crowded around the huge peat fire at some farmer’s house selected for the purpose”.

The song *The Cottage Maid*, which appeared in “Contributor’s” article, is in this style, peppered with classical allusions. The inspirer of the song was believed to have been the daughter or niece of a well-to-do shepherd to a gentleman in the neighbourhood of Rathcabbin. The shepherd was apparently an excellent flute player and was said to have provided or “organised” the airs for Larry’s songs; hence the reference to “organising shepherd” in the last line.

Larry Dillon also seems to have been capable of writing songs of simplicity and feeling, as for example, *An Buachaillin Donn* (pronounced as in ‘down’). This song concerns the poet’s son, who enlisted in the British Army. He was shipped to India, leaving a wife and child, and was taken prisoner there. It is claimed that Larry was offered a Government pension if he would delete the anti-war sentiments in the song, but that he refused.⁴ *An Buachaillin Donn*, together with *The Cottage Maid*, are reproduced at the end of this article, since they are the only Larry Dillon songs recorded in their entirety.

Ironically, it is Larry’s quips and retorts which survived, rather than his songs. His best remembered was his reply to the parish priest of Lorrha, who also fancied himself as a versifier and liked to engage in verbal joustings with the poet. One Sunday, when the priest was taking up a collection outside the chapel gate, he saw Larry approaching and cried out:⁵

‘Here comes Larry Dillon
 Going to give the priest a shillin’

To this Larry, placing his coin on the table, retorted:

‘You come so often with your call
 That soon you won’t leave us a penny at all’

“Contributor” has a fuller and more interesting version of the encounter in his article. When Larry advanced with his offering the priest hailed him thus:

‘You’re Larry Dillon from the Pike,
 That God or man could never like,
 You have the genius of a poet,
 And some folk to their sorrow know it,
 From the wild way you sometimes show it.’

Larry's rejoinder was:

'You're Fitzgerald the friar,
Who preaches for hire.
You come so often with your call,
You soon won't leave us a half-penny at all.
And then to foreign lands you'll hie,
Bidding Rathcabbin for life good-bye.'

The priest in question was Fr. Alexander Fitzgerald, a member of the Dominican Order, who was appointed parish priest of Lorrha in 1796. The Dominicans had been associated with the parish since medieval times, and acted as parish priests for much of the eighteenth century. It was Fr. Fitzgerald who built the chapel at Rathcabbin in 1797 and Lorrha chapel in 1813. He retired as parish priest in 1814 and emigrated to Newfoundland. After a rather controversial career there, he returned to Ireland and died as Prior of Kilkenny in 1833.⁶

The priest was in the habit of imposing the duty of holding the "stations" on reluctant householders. At one station at the Pike, the priest called out rather sharply:⁷

'Now Larry Dillon
Come here with your shillin'

Larry, somewhat incensed at the peremptory demand, rebuked him thus:

'Although you may deem me low in rank and proper station,
I've never gone to any house without invitation'.

Larry was once on his way to a hurling match at Moneygall, when someone enquired where he was going. "I am going to face the root of all evil [money] and the bitterest thing in the world" [gall], he replied grandly.⁸

He once had a rooting sow, so he decided to ring her nose and enlisted his neighbours to bring her into the kitchen and hold her. As the neighbours were pushing the reluctant, screaming animal into the house, Larry called out calmly from inside:⁹

'Bring her in and don't distress her,
For I have the ring upon the dresser'

While he was lodging at the Pike with a Mrs. English, Larry arrived home one night stupified drunk, crawled into bed and slept for two days. The good landlady, thinking he was dead, lit candles and placed them at the foot of the bed. Larry awoke with a start, quickly took in the scene, and roared:¹⁰

'English or Irish
May hell be your bed
To wake the poor poet
Before he is dead'.

Larry Dillon was a frequenter of the town of Birr, where his favourite haunt was a public house owned by a man called Peace, who was married to a woman named Patience. Outside the door of the public house stood a pair of wooden angels. Peace died and the management of the pub fell to the widow. Soon she adopted a dissolute lifestyle and the two angels disappeared from before the door. On one occasion Patience refused Larry drink; as he stormed out the door, he turned and spat:¹¹



'When Peace and Patience stood at the door
Two angels stood between them
With Peace long dead, the angels fled
As Patience turned a whore'.

There was another tavern in Birr called the 'Bee Hive'. Pinned to the door was a written invitation in verse:¹²

'Tis in this hive,
We're all alive,
Good liquor makes us funny.
If you be dry,
Step in and try,
the flavour of our honey'.

Larry was not satisfied with this, so he added underneath:

'This bee within,
She would you sting
If you had not the money'.

Some of Larry's sayings reflect the bitter sectarianism existing in Ireland in the early nineteenth century. When Pallas Protestant church had been built, Larry walked over to see it. The minister met him and invited him to compose something suitable to the occasion. Larry composed:¹³

'Four corners and four spires
To decorate the house of liars'.

One day Larry was in a graveyard near Rathcabbin while a Protestant clergyman was being buried. Before the clay was put over the coffin, he said:¹⁴

'Here lies a lamb of Lucifer's flock,
A useless ram let no man mock,
For forty years he preached and lied,
For which God damned him when he died'.

FOOTNOTES: — In the following footnotes "I.F.C." means Irish Folklore Commission.

1. I.F.C., Ms. S530, p.8, pp.81/82, 291/292.
2. For instance, the informant James King, Lord's Park, Rathcabbin, was 70 years old in 1938.
3. I.F.C., Ms. S531, p.163.
4. I.F.C., Ms. S530, p.5111.
5. *Ibid*, p.354.
6. Ignatius Murphy: *The Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1991), p.105. Also Hugh Fenning O.P.: "A List of Dominicans in Ireland, 1832", in *Collectanea Hibernica* No. 29 (1987), p.122.
7. I.F.C., Ms. S530, p.354.
8. *Ibid*, p.263.
9. *Ibid*, p.360.
10. *Ibid*, p.261.
11. *Ibid*, p.510.
12. I.F.C., Ms. S531, pp.169/170.
13. I.F.C., Ms. S530, p.262.
14. I.F.C., Ms. S531, p.147.



The Cottage Maid

'Twas in the month of May,
When lambkins sport and play,
As I roved out to receive some recreation,
I espied a comely maid
Sequestered in a shade,
On whose loveliness I gazed with admiration.
Had Alcides seen her face,
Ere Dejanira's first embrace,
He'd ne'er have been consumed in the cedars,
Nor Helen prove the fall
Of the Grecian leaders all
Nor Ulysses by 'mongst towering Troy's invaders.

Each contemplated stride
Was like an agitated tide,
By Albion's rocks repulsed from rolling landward;
Inverted was my fate
In that mediocre state,
Like a sentinel confined to the main-guard.
Till Cupid by his art
Played dexterously his part,
And pierced me with a dart that was quadrupled,
Which so burdened me with care,
That 'twixt joy and deep despair
I could scarce accost the fair, I got so stupid.

Famed Iris on her bow
Such refulgence could not show,
Or the beautiful Io when Jove embraced her,
Nor Eurydice her excel,
Tho' for beauty stole to hell,
Till Orpheus by his music had released her.
Diana the most chaste,
Or the Carthage Beauty traced.
Or the statue of Pygmalion's abdication,
Could never yet compare
With this sweet seraphic fair,
Tho' a simple country cottage be her station.

Telamachus the grand,
Ere the scepture reached his hand,
Would surely be trepanned had he perceived her,
Nor could Mentor him dissuade
From that sweet and simple shade,
Tho' Calypso by her art could not mislead him.
His sire he'd seek no more
On Pluto's dreary shore,
Nor venture on the Syrens' dire alarms,
But he'd daily place his care
On this sweet seraphic fair,
And would barter coronation for her charms.

Like stars in azure skies
Shine her sweetly rolling eyes,
Or bright Cynthia descending to the ocean,
Her gold and silken hair
Spreads o'er her shoulders fair,
She's an ornament of beauty in proportion,
She is graceful and divine,
Benignant and benign,
More delicious than the fragrance of Flora,
More slender, tall, and straight,
Than bard can explicate,
Or that celebrated beauty called Pandora.

The apple once decreed
Where Ida's flocks did feed,
To Venus by the deeply smitten Paris,
Were she to join the three
In that glorious rivalry
Of the golden prize he'd surely make her heiress.
Penelope then might be
From her crowd of suitors free,
And the great unerring bow deny its duty;
And Mars' alarms cease,
And Jove's thunders sound a peace,
And the canticles of heaven praise her beauty.

But Mercury I fear
On some errand may draw near,
As he pilfered Vulcan's tools from Polyphemus,
And waft away the prize,
To some other distant skies,
As he stole the sacred Cestus wore by Venus.
He stole ethereal fire,
And music from lyre,
And by virtue of his harp he won his pardon.
But he'll ne'er beguile this fair
To his far-off shining sphere,
While an organizing shepherd is her guardian.



Buacailín Donn

You Muses why absent you from me?
If I could my sorrows conceal
The burden I nurtured so long
I think it now time to reveal.

I beg you will not from me elope,
For thy client is nearly bent down
who holds yet a remnant of hope
That I shall yet see my
Buacailín Donn.

He enlisted from me as a soldier
To fight for her majesty's crown
And that was the fantastic notion
That banished my
Buacailín Donn.

Long, long shall I think on the moment
When he went with reluctance away,
And hurried he was upon ship-board
To be wrecked by the tempest at sea.

He is gone, my dear child, to the ocean
And wedded to one I admire
In search of some higher promotion
Than he could expect from his sire.

He landed in fav'rt Gibraltar
"An island" he did not run down
From whence I received the last tidings
I got from my
Buacailín Donn.

And now there's fresh information
In India a prisoner he lies
With numbers of brave Irish heroes
who perish for want of supplies.

I'd rather they would send him to battle
To fight on the field of renown
Than bind him a prisoner in India
To hardship, my
Buacailín Donn.

Far, far from his country a stranger!
The hardships will soon cut him down
Which makes me lament the great danger
That threatens my
Buacailín Donn.

And what of my juvenile soldier
To be sentenced to part from his dear.
And fall as a victim to tyrants
In a land where his parents can't hear.

His consort and child are forlorn
To wander in want up and down
(Like lambs from dams they are torn)
In search of my
Buacailín Donn.

If I had the wings of an eagle
The Mediterranean I'd roam.
I would search every place of confinement
Till I find out the boy I bemoan.

I would fly as the Roc did with Sinbad
And home to old Ireland I would come
I would then bid adieu to the wars
If I once had my
Buacailín Donn.

I hope you will excuse my intrusion
For letting my grievances known
But you know it is ordered by nature
Each creature should feel for his own.



"You're Larry Dillon from the Pike,
That God or man could never like."

— ILLUSTRATION BY BERNADETTE LYONS