

## Essay Competition

In the competition this year all competitors were uniformly good and it was difficult to award the prize. As a record of local history it is awarded to the following essay but better presentation would be recommended.

A folklore essay on Irish curses deserves commendation for originality.

### James Stephens Barracks

#### from the day it was built to the present day

**I**N 1801 the Act of Union came into effect in Ireland, an Act that was to bind our country to Britain for over twelve decades. In the same year a man called James Switser put the finishing touches to a Military Barracks in Kilkenny. This Switser was a particularly apt choice for the job as his grandfather had spent many years in the local Militia. With the money earned from building the Barracks Switser built, in 1803, an asylum to cater for the needs of twenty women, which asylum is still in operation and houses eight women, using for the most part the original funds. This Switser was also the grandfather of the man who founded "Switsers" shop in Dublin.

The new Barracks was built on land acquired from the Earl of Ormonde. It was quite small, built to house only one company of infantry and one supporting troop of cavalry — about 200 men in all. There were facilities for schooling, exercising and stabling horses. The men's needs were catered for to a similar extent by a square, a chapel, a hospital and sleeping accommodation. There were no cook-houses or dining halls but this in no way reflects on the authorities. It was the practice of the time. The feeding problem was coped with by the soldiers' wives, who were "billeted" with their menfolk. The wives cooked for their husbands and children in a communal kitchen whence the food was carried up to the billets or rooms.

The company stationed in Kilkenny throve, and "Ye Faire Citie" was considered so favourably by the authorities that in the 1840's it was proposed to turn the local Barracks into a General Headquarters (G.H.Q.). The idea was opposed vehemently by the local people, however, on the grounds that the introduction of a larger contingent of soldiers to Kilkenny would upset the social equilibrium of the city. In the face of such opposition

it was decided to drop the idea of developing the Barracks. Despite this fact, however, improvements were made in the 1850's. Among these was the building of the Married Quarters block a few hundred yards from the barracks. These same quarters are still available to soldiers to-day.

Towards the end of the 19th century the local barracks was left unoccupied for various stretches of time. When there was a garrison there, however, the soldiers contributed in no small way to the local social life. They were not popular. Not alone were they British, but they had also acquired a very unsavoury reputation. The anti-military, anti-British feeling was so strong that it began to reflect on the Kilkenny girls who were "walking out" with the soldiers. No "nice young girl" would walk unaccompanied up Green's Hill where many of the young soldiers were billeted. As for the hussy who was seen with a soldier — she had renounced her good name for ever and had cast her reputation to the winds. It was not only the local laity who disapproved of the British soldiers, frequently the clergy expressed their low opinion of the military forces. In fact some 70 years ago a local girl was excommunicated with "bell, book and candle," having committed no "sin" other than that of falling in love with and marrying a British soldier. It is not surprising that this feeling against the army should have persevered even when the barracks was handed over to Irish troops. This is indeed what happened, and it is only in very recent years that marriage to a soldier has been recognised as meriting congratulations rather than condolences.

The sporadic occupation of the barracks continued. It was occupied during the struggle for independence and, with the signing of the Treaty, was handed over with all due pomp and ceremony to Capt. Martin Cassidy, father of Comdt. Brendan Cassidy, who was stationed until recently in Kilkenny Barracks. The pomp was short-lived, however, as the barracks fell once more into disuse. It was not until 1939, in the time of the Emergency, that the gates of Stephens Barracks were opened once more to columns of soldiers. At this time also the Castle and what is now the Design Workshops were occupied by members of the Irish Army. But all good things come to an end and so it was with the garrison in Kilkenny. After the war the barracks was once more let fall into disuse. This state continued for a few years until 1947 when, in the Spring, Kilkenny was struck by a terrible flood which is still remembered by many people. Boatmen ferried the stranded from the roofs and upper windows of their homes, and it was quickly established that some streets such as Abbey Street would be uninhabitable for some time. The local authorities were asked to get permission to open up the barracks to house the homeless.

Permission for this operation was granted and the victims of the flood stayed in the barracks until they could return home.

After this event the barracks was empty for only a decade or so. In 1958 and '59 it was decided to reframe and expand the army. The F.C.A. was to be expanded and new battalions were to be formed within the regular army. This time Kilkenny figured in the calculations and so it was that the barracks saw yet again the arrival of soldiers to man this "garrison town" of Kilkenny.

To-day Stephens Barracks is the headquarters of the 6th Infantry Brigade. It also houses some elements of the historic 3rd Battalion which has had its headquarters in the Curragh Camp since 1922. Because of the fact that various troops pass brief periods there it is difficult to establish the exact manpower of the barracks. Usually, however, there are between two and four hundred men stationed there, and when the "top brass" arrives by helicopter from G.H.Q. in order to review the Kilkenny troops and their modern equipment, weaponry and jeeps, the parade which is inspected must surely present a picture which differs enormously from the sight of the original single company of infantry and its supporting troop of cavalry of 1801.

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