

Gerard Lee SC

A tribute by
Charles Lysaght

WHEN Gerry Lee ceased to practise as a senior counsel in 1999 at the age of 82 he was the Father of the South-Western Circuit. In the previous 20 years he had achieved a success at the Bar that had eluded him in early life. He was a man who managed to combine prowess in a highly practical profession with an unworldly romanticism.

Born in Kilfinane, Co Limerick, in 1917 he was the youngest of 12 children of a general practitioner who married a girl of 17 who had been his ward. Gerard (as he was known to his family) started medicine but was struck down by tuberculosis necessitating a thoracotomy. He turned to law and after a not undistinguished career at UCD - where he took a first class masters degree - and King's Inns he was called to the Bar in 1942.

He joined the South-Western circuit. There was little work to go round and fees were low. As he bided his time he rejoiced in the companionship on circuit of men like Maurice Danaher and William Binchy who were learned in literature as well as in the law. Gerry loved the towns and countryside of Limerick, Kerry and Clare whose beauty and history was an abiding interest. When peace came he travelled regularly to continental Europe in whose culture he was well versed.

On circuit Gerry's progress was retarded by an imperfect sympathy with the circuit judge. Then, about 1960, he was precipitated into a nervous breakdown by a broken romance. He was in hospital for four years. He did not think he could return to the hurly-burly of practice and spent a short time with the International Labour Office in Geneva and as a lecturer at Boston College.

Eventually he found an opening, as a part-time lecturer in the Incorporated Law Society and returned to practice. In 1973 he was appointed counsel for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, which gave him a sufficient practice to take silk six years later at the age of 62. Patently sincere and always clear he struck a chord with juries and was a most effective advocate in personal injury cases. He was free of the irritating condescension and mock sophistication that is a besetting sin of many barristers.

A large soft benign man, he was less successful as a prosecutor for the Department. "Mr Lee, please remember that you appear for the prosecution," said one judge who noticed Gerry's obvious sympathy for an unfortunate accused. He was pleased to



**FATHER OF THE CIRCUIT:
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confine himself to civil work thereafter. In that sphere, for all his unworldliness and human sympathy, he had qualities of steel when fighting for his client. On circuit he acquired a niche in more technical cases involving, in his own words, "lots of lovely law".

He liked the community of the Law Library and took a fatherly interest in the burgeoning number of young women entering the profession. His favourites had poems dedicated to them.

He also pursued his interests in history and literature and read papers to bodies like the Old Dublin Society. A selection of his papers was published entitled *Dublin as a European City*.

He also published a charming memoir of the South-Western Circuit that depicts a vanished way of life among the members of the Irish Bar. There are no uncharitable words about any of his brethren. Those who had caused hurt to Gerry's sensitive nature are simply not mentioned. As Father of his Circuit he presided at dinners where he gave carefully crafted addresses rich in literary and historical allusion.

After 1988 when juries were abolished in personal injury actions Gerry derived less pleasure from practice, having to address judges who were hell-bent on the rapid dispatch of business. But he remained busy enough into his late seventies. He made no concession to modern methods: all his paperwork was done in a clear hand that betokened a man without guile.

In 1997 an escaping prisoner crashed into Gerry outside the Four Courts and broke his hip. Thereafter he was on crutches. His immobility soon made life at the Bar impractical.

Last autumn in a ceremony at his nursing home attended by Chief Justice Ronan Keane and former Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, a contemporary at King's Inns, Gerry was made a Vice President of the Law Students Debating Society of which he was the senior surviving ex-officer. He gave an eloquent address, mainly about literature. ©Irish Newspaper Archives

LEE (Rostrevor House, Rathgar, Dublin 6 and late Killinane, Co. Limerick) — Nov. 15, 2003, (peacefully), at St. James's Hospital, Dublin, Gerard A.S.C. (Gerry); very deeply regretted and sadly missed by his brother Dr. John B., sister-in-law Gene, nephews, nieces, grandnephews, grandnieces, extended family, colleagues and a large circle of friends. May he rest in peace. Removal this (Tuesday) evening at 5.30 o'clock from Fanagan's Funeral Home, Lower Kimmage Road to St. Joseph's Church, Terenure arriving at 6 o'clock. Funeral tomorrow (Wednesday) after 10 o'clock. Requiem Mass to Abbey Cemetery, Ballyorgan, Killinane, Co. Limerick arriving at approximately 3.30 o'clock.