THE BRIDGES OF LIMERICK

Sarsfield Bridge is the last that spans the Shannon on its way to the Atlantic. It is also the latest in point of time, for all the others are merely replacements of earlier structures. The bridge was modelled on the Pont Neuf, which spans the Seine. It is approached from the centre of the city by a swampy bridge and two quay arches. Its foundation stone was laid in 1824 and it was completed seven years later. In the course of erection, employment as a time-keeper was given to a poor young Clareman, later to be known to the learned world as Eugene O’Curry, one of the greatest of Ireland’s Gaelic scholars.

Thomond Bridge, which was built in 1840, replaced the old bridge which lasted exactly 600 years. The new structure cost some ten thousand pounds, as compared with its predecessor, on which the modest sum of £30 had been spent. Lennihan states that the old bridge ‘was inconveniently narrow. It was provided with small chambers or recesses over each of the piers, in which people stood when two vehicles were passing each other, and by this means accidents were prevented.’ It is said that in the wholesale executions of 1798, many of the recusants of the old bridge were used for the gallows, on which the criminals were hanged. Old Thomond Bridge was the scene of much of the fighting in the Cromwellian and Williamite sieges of Limerick.

Athlunkard Bridge spans the Shannon at the city’s north-eastern boundary. It is also the link between the counties of Limerick and Clare. In this connection it may be mentioned that the Sarsfield and Thomond bridges do not connect the adjoining counties. They connect what territorially Co. Limerick, The city of Limerick does not include any part of Co. Clare. Athlunkard bridge was built in four years, the work commencing in June 1826 and ending in December 1829. It is close to the ford which King William’s army crossed in 1690 and 1691.

O’Dwyer Bridge spans the Abbey River and connects the King’s Island with the Corbally and Park district of the city. It is named, as its inscription tells, after a former Bishop of Limerick. Whatever may be its structural excellence, its appearance is not enhanced by the strictly functional concrete. Its predecessor, Park Bridge, was built about 1798.

Baill’s Bridge (the spelling ‘Baill’ is that used in the relevant Parliamentary Acts) occupies the site of an ancient bridge of the same name, the date of erection of the old bridge is uncertain as to the origin of the name itself. The Gaelic description means the ‘Baill’ bridge, or a bridge without parapets, a description which is justified so far as the old bridge had no parapets but houses and shops. Thus, a stranger to Limerick of the early eighteenth century might well mistake Baill’s Bridge for a continuation of Mary Street. Some scholars claim that the bridge owed its name to a disciple of St. Patrick named Baill. The new bridge was built in one year and opened to traffic in November 1831.

Mathew Bridge, sometimes referred to as New Bridge, was built in 1844 to replace an earlier bridge of 1791. It is named after Father Theobald Mathew, the great apostle of temperance.

Ancient Buildings of Limerick

The last two generations of Limerick men have witnessed the disappearance of many of the city’s historic landmarks. Up to the 1860s, Nicholas St. and Mary St. were said to bear a striking resemblance to the streets of old Flemish towns. The old Flemish-style houses were built immediately after the Williamite siege. Mungret Street and Broad Street (in the Inshowen) contained many similar houses, though Queen Anne style and early Georgian were predominant. Limerick, however, still cherishes many notable reminders of her historic past. Many of the city churches, though modernised, are built upon sites long associated with divine worship. The oldest building in the city is a church, the Cathedral Church of St. Mary, whose story is the story of Limerick itself.

St. Mary’s Cathedral. The full title of this Cathedral is the ‘Cathedral and Parish Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary.’ It was built in 1172 by Donald Mor O’Brien, the last King of Limerick. The original plan of the church was in the form of a Latin Cross. Additions were made to the cathedral, two centuries later, during the episcopate of Stephen Wall, Bishop of Limerick. At the time of the religious recolouring of the sixteenth century, the cathedral passed out of Catholic hands. Catholic worship was restored, however, during the Confederate Wars and the short ill-fated reign of James II. Today, it will find excellent documentation of historical remains within the cathedral itself. Most noteworthy role of the past are the ancient altar stone used when Mary was celebrated in this cathedral, and the splendidly carved marble tombstone bearing the inscription of King John’s Castle.

King John’s Castle. This castle was built in 1210. It was the end of the castle of ‘Great’ in the siege of 1219 and a generation later the Williamite siege. It is the place where the English and their own defensive wall was taken by the Irish in the various sieges of Limerick. Its recovery by the English was effected only when the weakness of the city walls, or the treachery of partisans, rendered possible the surrender of the city as a whole. King John’s Castle ceased to be a fortress on the demolition of the city walls. For many years, until the present generation, it was used as a military barracks. Unfortunately, says a recent work, ‘some years ago it was seen fit to fill the castle yard with rather inappropriate dwelling homes.’

Old Dominican Priory. Some remains of the Dominican Priory may still be seen in the grounds of St. Mary’s Convent. The monastery was founded by Donagh Carraigh O’Brien, early in the thirteenth century. Many of the noble Gaeil and Norman families chose the old Dominican church on grounds of piety. A papal bull of 1144 to establish a Papal University in Limerick. There is evidence that such a institution functioned and that the Recurser was a Fr. Gregory O’Farrell of Longford.

O’Brien’s Castle was situated at the head of Athlunkard Street. Little of this building is left, except a part of the wall that faces the street. The castle is said to have been built by the O’Brien’s as a royal residence, after Donald Mor had given over the royal palace to St. Mary’s Cathedral.

The City Exchange. Only a colonnade (now included in the Nicholas St. wall of St. Mary’s churchyard) marks the site of the old exchange of the city. The Exchange was built originally by William York, a Dutchman who held the mayoralty of Limerick three times, 1674-7, 1682, and 1678. In 1672, it had to be rebuilt. When the city