

Editorial

The Death of Kevin Hannan

Last month Kevin Hannan died. For almost five decades he had been one of the leading local historians in Limerick. During that time, he has maintained a ceaseless flow of articles and letters to newspapers and magazines, as well as contributing to radio and television programmes, and had done much to sustain public interest in the history of the city and county.

By any standard Kevin Hannan was a remarkably gifted and versatile man - historian, tailor, writer, nature-lover, traveller, poet, fisherman, story-teller, artist, he filled all these and many more roles with distinction and without turning a hair or changing a gear. He did not pick his talents off the ground. His father before him was a richly cultured man, steeped in the literature and lore of his native city, who wrote on a variety of literary subjects, including a fine appreciation of the Limerick poet, John Francis O'Donnell. If a person born within earshot of Bow Bells can call himself a true Londoner, then Kevin Hannan was a genuine Garryowen man, having been born literally 'under the tower' of St. John's Cathedral, and his affection for the scenes of his childhood has been vividly reflected in his writings on the Shannon, Abbey, Groody and Mulcaire rivers, on the Irishtown and the market-place, on Garryowen, Park, Corbally and Plassey and in his memorable vignettes of the characters who vividly impressed themselves on his youthful, fertile mind. He was a most delightful companion on a 'day out' when his vast fund of knowledge flowed naturally, as he discoursed on churches, castles, graveyards, flowers, rivers, local events and people.

From the start Kevin Hannan was an avid reader with a phenomenal, encyclopaedic memory. The historians, Maurice Lenihan and Canon John Begley, were his mentors and he also read all the great poets of the age. To his last day, he could quote effortlessly the whole of Michael Hogan's *Drunken Thady* and the poetry of Browning, Burns, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Gerald Griffin, as well, of course, as chunks of Lenihan and Begley. He was unselfish to a fault and his generosity in helping teachers and students was legendary. Because of his single-mindedness and enthusiasm he often found himself at odds with his colleagues, be they fishermen or historians. A case in point was his provocative interpretation of the 1690 and 1691 Sieges and Treaty of Limerick. The fall-out from his three articles, published in 1990, stirred up much controversy and discussion.

Kevin Hannan set his face firmly against modern poetry and art, and had been a severe and vocal critic of the sculpture that has appeared on our streets in recent years. He saw little merit in most post-1900 poetry and prose, and dismissed almost all of modern art as dross. In recent times, he became a controversial figure in Limerick life because of his public stances. When embroiled in battle he enthusiastically tackled all-comers and brought the full range of his formidable Victorian vocabulary into play in these encounters. Despite his shy, self-effacing private persona, he had come to enjoy his new found notoriety and to savour his television, radio and press outings. Many of his friends found themselves poles apart from him on a variety of issues. Fortunately, these differences never blinded them from recognising his unique and tireless contribution to his native city and in admiring his zest for life, his boundless energy, his writing verve and his mental serenity.

Up to the very end, having attained the biblical life-span of 'three score and ten,' plus nine more years and despite the debilitating death of his wife, the loss of his right eye and a dreadful illness which necessitated major surgery, Kevin Hannan remained as vigorous as ever and his writing lost none of its force or vitality. We often leave it too late to acknowledge our debt to such people but, fortunately, such was not the case in this instance.

Last year, with prophetic and highly commendable foresight, a group of his friends came together to consider the most appropriate way of honouring his lifetime's work. The happy and valuable result of this gathering was the publication of a collection of his writings, *Limerick: Historical Reflections*, published earlier this year. It was a worthy and well-deserved tribute. It is a true reflection of the measure of esteem in which Kevin Hannan was held by his fellow-citizens that the book sold out within a month and is now a collector's item.

Kevin Hannan is irreplaceable. His iconoclastic but, invariably, entertaining contributions to the meetings of the Historic Monuments Advisory Committee, the Museum Committee, the Limerick Civic Trust, the Thomond Archaeological Society and the Old Limerick Society will be greatly missed - their meetings will never be the same again without his lively presence. Above all, his work as Consultant Editor of this *Journal* has left us all in his debt. Kevin Hannan was one of a rare breed and he made a lasting contribution to the life of his native city.