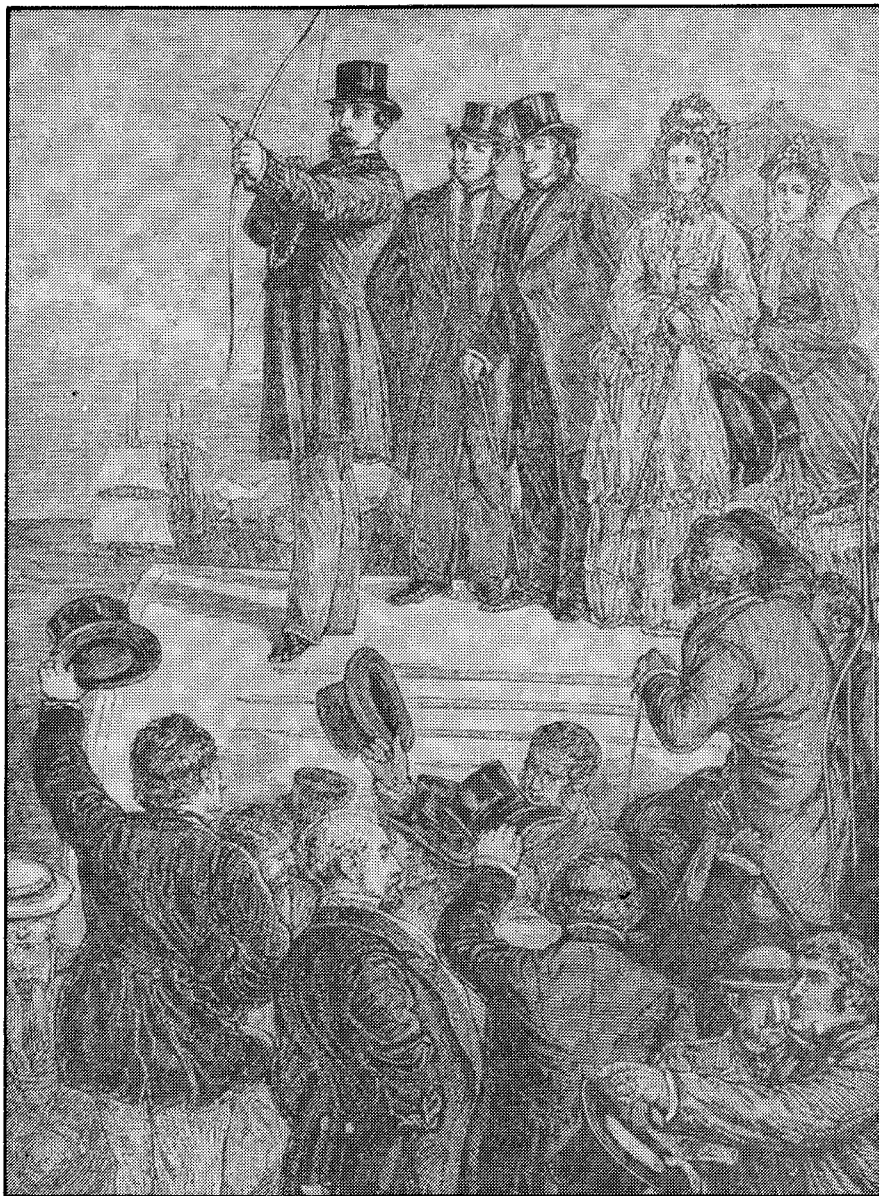


# Maurice Lenihan:

## HISTORIAN OF LIMERICK

by Francis Finegan  
Part IV



Mayor John J. Cleary shoots the arrow into the Shannon in 1872. The mayor of Limerick, by virtue of an old charter, is 'Admiral of the Shannon'. The title is a nominal one and the functions of the office are more picturesque than authoritative. Up to recent times, the mayor, in his capacity as 'admiral', carried out the ceremony of 'throwing the dart', when he cast a silver arrow, during his year in office, into the river.



Lenihan's merits as an historian were recognised by the Royal Irish Academy in April 1869, when he was elected to membership. It must have been a source of deep gratification to him that his friend Father O'Hanlon of Dublin was elected a member also, on the same occasion. The offices of the *Reporter* had meantime been changed to 104 O'Connell Street. Lenihan was made a Justice of the Peace in 1870, through the influence (it is said) of his friend John O'Hagan, Q.C., whom he had known since O'Connell's time. It may be recalled that O'Hogan, who later became Lord Chief Justice, had been counsel for the defence of Gavin and Russell at the sworn inquiry following the stormy election of 1868. But these honours did not help to increase the sales of his *History of Limerick*. He soon learnt that historical research and, least of all, its publication did not infallibly secure good financial dividends. And yet his financial losses over the *History* did not deter him from planning an even more ambitious work in the early seventies. He collected and published, by weekly instalments, materials for a history of the Dalcassians; but this work got no nearer publication than its original news-column format – though he had the encouragement of many friends, especially of Archbishop Leahy and Fr. O'Hanlon.

His newspaper had a wide circulation at this time, but it certainly met with a mixed reception from many readers. Lenihan seems to have been discouraged by the unfriendly attitude of some of the local journals. A letter of the Archbishop of Cashel in 1872 would indicate that Maurice felt in need of his old friend's support. He writes from Thurles: "... I am fully sensible that the maintenance of the *Limerick Reporter* is the maintenance of one of the ablest, if not the very ablest, Provincial Paper in Ireland as an organ of Catholic interest. The very best, far the best articles I see on Catholic questions are those which come from your own pen in the *Vindicator*. Apart, therefore, from my friendship for yourself individually and from the interest I should feel in any thing with which you are identified, I should feel called upon to support the *Limerick Reporter*." The friendship of Archbishop Leahy and Maurice extended back almost to Lenihan's earliest days in journalism, and scarce a week passed that they did not exchange letters. For years the *Limerick Reporter* was the semi-official organ for news of the Archdiocese. But besides the news of diocesan interest, the *Reporter* faithfully stressed whatever Archbishop Leahy asked the editor to emphasise. A letter of the

Scrap-book indicates the archbishop's views on the national status of Irishmen abroad. Two Irish gentlemen were on a pilgrimage to Rome and were spoken of as Englishmen when attending an audience of the Pope. They protested that they were Irish and not English. The Italian newspapers of the day reported the incident. The archbishop was evidently pleased with the Irishmen's protest and writes to Maurice to have the fullest publicity given the incident.

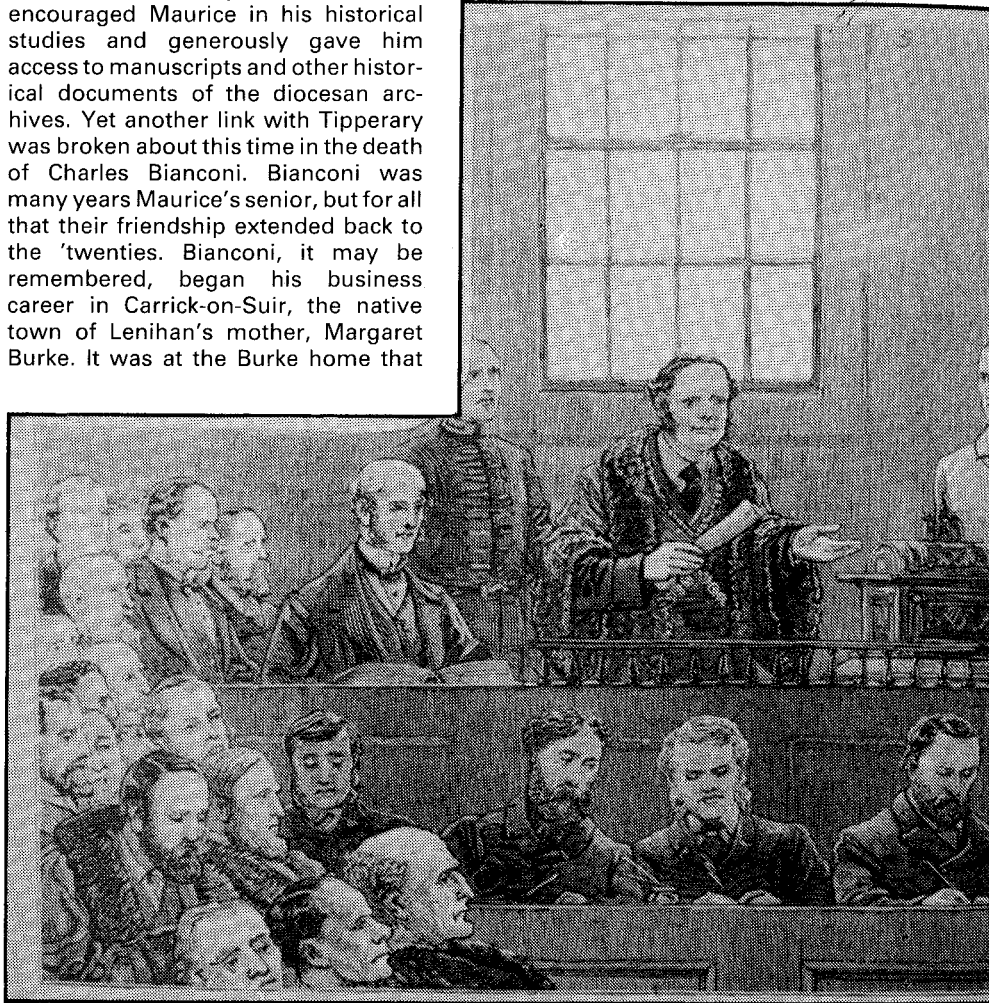
Archbishop Leahy proved himself a friend of Lenihan, however, not merely by the encouragement of his private letters, to Maurice but in coming out openly when the *Limerick Reporter* met with heavier weather than usual. Thus, in 1874, a series of attacks in the local press culminated in a libel action against the editor. The Mayor, J.J. O'Cleary, had been elected to a third term of office, and many newspapers throughout the province commented rather severely on what they called the juggling of local politics in the Limerick Corporation. Lenihan was opposed to the election of Cleary, and it was natural that he should say something on the matter in his paper. He did not publish a line of his own writing however, but merely inserted the disappointing comment of one of the provincial papers. A libel action was taken against him, and he was fined £50 with costs. The lowness of the fine can be explained by the fact that he was caught out only on a technicality. The real blame attached to the original publication and not to Lenihan's. The matter did not end at that. The verdict of the court was discussed in the press throughout the country, and for weeks in succession the *Reporter* published excerpts from the editorials - all of which supported him. It was on this occasion that Archbishop Leahy published his letter of sympathy for the editor and expressed his disapproval of the attacks made upon his paper. Lenihan, as the outcome proved, was not a penny out of pocket over the transaction. The legal bill was promptly paid by a subscription raised by his readers and fellow journalists.

It must not be forgotten that Lenihan devoted much time to his duties as a member of the Corporation. No committee for drawing up a public address or forwarding a protest to Dublin Castle on some current grievance was complete without him. He was a shrewd member in debate on matters of civic administration. In the Corporation his voice was raised again and again on behalf of the Fenian prisoners. This is the more remarkable when we remember that his political views underwent no change from the days of his association with O'Connell. He still believed that constitutional means were alone the best means to bring about the repeal of the Union. At the

Corporation meetings and in his newspaper he warmly supported the land policy of Isaac Butt. Not every member of the City Fathers, however, agreed with this policy, which they roundly denounced as "interfering with the rights of private property".

The death of Archbishop Leahy, in January 1875, was a severe blow for Lenihan. Their friendship was one of many years standing. The Archbishop encouraged Maurice in his historical studies and generously gave him access to manuscripts and other historical documents of the diocesan archives. Yet another link with Tipperary was broken about this time in the death of Charles Bianconi. Bianconi was many years Maurice's senior, but for all that their friendship extended back to the 'twenties. Bianconi, it may be remembered, began his business career in Carrick-on-Suir, the native town of Lenihan's mother, Margaret Burke. It was at the Burke home that

his opinion of the *History of Limerick*: "Those who desire to become acquainted with the minutiae of these events in connection with Limerick, I would refer to the able and comprehensive work of Mr. Lenihan, the accomplished and erudite historian of Limerick, whose valuable book contains not only the most complete details respecting the Catholic Met-



Charles Stewart Parnell is admitted as a Freeman of Limerick, 14th July 1880.

Maurice first made Bianconi's acquaintance. Possibly it was through Bianconi that Lenihan made the acquaintance of Daniel O'Connell. There are extant many letters of Bianconi to Lenihan. For the most part they consist of invitations to Maurice to pay a visit to Longfield or to meet him when passing through Limerick on business. In a memoir of Bianconi, Maurice tells us that he was constantly called upon by 'his excellent friend' to act as the dispenser of Bianconi's charities to deserving causes. Bianconi's name was proverbial in its day for generosity.

In this same year, 1875, there was still another break with the past for Lenihan in the death of Sir John Gray. Their friendship went back to O'Connell's time. Gray was for many years editor and proprietor of the *Freeman's Journal*. It may be of interest to recall

ropolis of Ireland, but much which the general reader of Irish History ought to be acquainted with and will not find elsewhere."

Lenihan was unfortunate in his children. With the exception of two of his daughters all were dogged by ill health, and Maurice continued to be the family breadwinner almost to the end of his long life. In the early eighties, one of his daughters, an invalid, was killed while walking in her sleep, and two other members of his family died after lengthy illnesses some few years later. It was in the early eighties that he began to feel the pinch of poverty, though he struggled bravely to keep up appearances. Desperately in need of money, he was forced to part with his valuable library and his collection of historical manuscripts. Before he was driven to this extreme, he had previ-

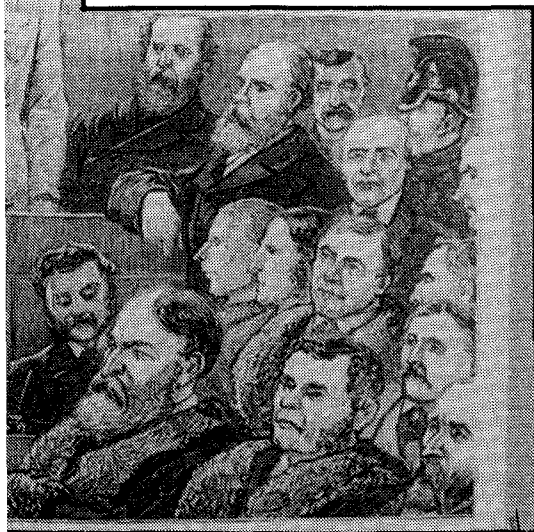
ously consulted Fr. O'Hanlon about the disposal of his manuscripts in the event of his death. Fr. O'Hanlon had acted as his go-between with various research scholars – Sir John Gilbert and others – but nothing came of Fr. O'Hanlon's inquiries. He now sold his valuable collection to the British Museum, probably because its curators offered him the best price. It is regrettable that the principal treasure of his collection, the Arthur Ms., thus passed out of the country. Still, it is hard to blame Lenihan for disposing of his manuscripts as he did, for sentiment must count for little when hard necessity presses. It is the Corporation rather that is deserving of blame for not having purchased – and purchased at a handsome price – Lenihan's books and manuscripts.

Lenihan was elected Mayor unanimously on December 1st. 1883. His term of office is worthy of remembrance for the successful outcome of Limerick Corporation's resistance to unjust taxation, in which Lenihan himself played no small part. To understand the full story we must recall briefly the series of

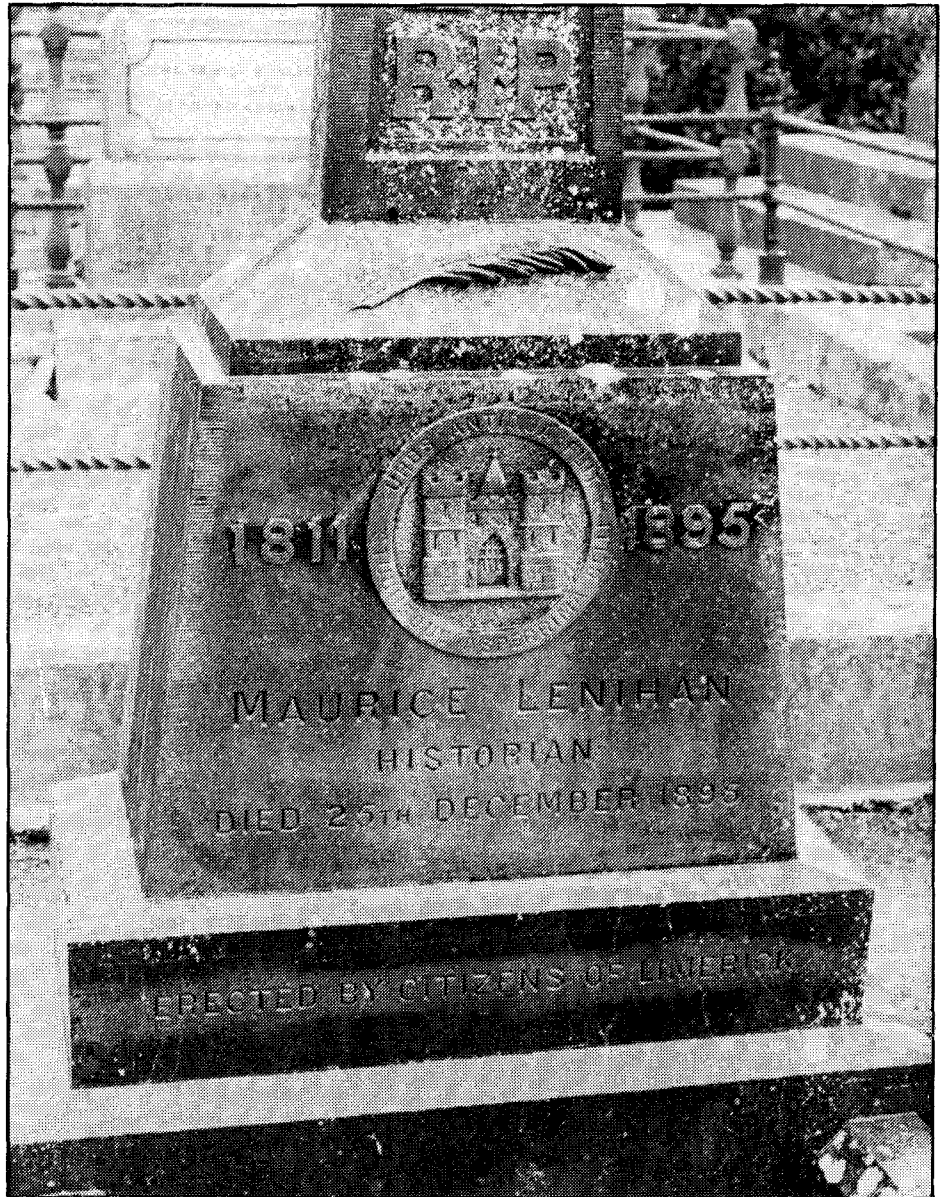
installed in office when a demand for the money was issued from Dublin Castle. By this time the additional police had been withdrawn from the city. A writ was served from the Four Courts, but it received no more notice than the bill sent in by the police authorities. The Viceroy then intimated that the Corporation would be served with a writ of *Mandamus*.

The Mayor (Lenihan) and three members of the Council, on their own initia-

which they received the deputation who recently waited on them with reference to the extra police tax and for the able manner in which they subsequently debated that question before the House of Commons. That the best thanks of the Council be voted to the deputation, the Mayor (Mr. Lenihan), Mr. O'Mara and the town clerk for the spirit they manifested in going across to London to represent the case of Limerick against the Extra Police Tax, at



events from the late Spring of 1882. Shortly after the Phoenix Park murders, the Corporation of Limerick was notified from Dublin Castle that the city was declared to be in 'a state of disturbance' and that the cost of maintaining additional members of the police force must be met by an increase in the rates. The reasons submitted by the government for augmenting the police force were shown by the Corporation to be utterly groundless. "Resistance to the police" was shown to be merely the routine drunk and disorderly type of offence; "an attempt on the barracks" had no connection with any of the citizens; and "damage to property" was assessed at the current Assizes to amount to the modest sum of £15. The Corporation Estimates, therefore, ignored the cost of maintaining the extra police. But scarcely was Lenihan



*The monument over Lenihan's grave, at Mount St. Laurence Cemetery.*

tive and at their own expense, then left for London to place all the facts before the Irish members of Parliament. Parnell and his colleagues introduced the topic in the House of Commons and made an excellent case for the Corporation's resistance to the tax. At a meeting of the Municipal Council held on 22 July 1884 the following resolutions were passed: "That the thanks of this Corporation be given to Charles Stuart Parnell Esq. M.P. and the Irish Parliamentary Party for the manner in

their own expense and at great inconvenience, and for the successful manner in which they discharged their duties." The Viceroy, now alarmed by the Corporation's stand and imagining that cajoling might be more effective than threatening, invited a deputation of Council members to a round table conference. The Viceroy's invitation was refused on the grounds that acceptance would amount to admission of liability, and his attention was drawn to the fact that in the recent parliamentary



debates the extra police bill for the country was shown to be 'oppressive, illegal and unjust.' The Corporation was then informed that the Viceroy, after due consideration, discovered that he could justly reduce the bill by about twenty-five per cent., and at the same time he reminded the Corporation that fiery speeches by Irish members of the House of Commons were not acts of Parliament. Meantime, mes-

long association with the Corporation ended towards the end of 1887, when he withdrew his name from the list of candidates owing to advancing years as well as increasing embarrassments in maintaining his family business. He had to change his offices and residence that same year from O'Connell Street to a smaller and less expensive establishment in Catherine Street. Pathetically, he explained to his readers that

three daughters. His wife and son died in poverty in the first decade of the present century. His daughter Margaret also died in poverty in the early 'twenties. His two surviving children, Mother Anastasia Lenihan, F.C.J., of Bruff Convent, and Harriet Patricia died in the middle 'twenties. The latter, who lived for close on fifty years in Australia, was able in her later years to enjoy a modicum of comfort from a Civil List pension accorded her by the then British Government in recognition of her father's merits as an historian.

The *History of Limerick* is not of course Lenihan's only claim to remembrance, though few will deny that it is a work of rare merit. In the course of this short sketch of Lenihan's life frequent reference has been made to the "Reminiscences". This work, whose complete title is "The Reminiscences of a Journalist", appeared in weekly instalments over a period of three years in the *Limerick Reporter*, 1866-1869. It is not a formal autobiography. Where we glean any information about himself and his family it is almost by chance. Thus memories of boyhood's days are apt to be found thrown in unexpectedly in any chapter. This does not mean that there is no order in the "Reminiscences". Lenihan begins with memories of outstanding people in Church and State and continues with a variety of topics - such as the Tithe War, the Great Famine, Young Ireland, Irish Painters, Poets, Musicians, Priests. An occasional glimpse is allowed us of some member of his family in a chapter whose title suggests little of what we are looking for. Thus in a chapter entitled "Painters of Carrick-on-Suir" we find tucked away in a long paragraph a reference to a painting by Ronayne of his grandfather Thomas Burke who died in 1801. The "Reminiscences" cover an extensive canvas, in which Lenihan has managed to present a wealth of interesting information on personalities and events of his time. Limerick gets its share of recognition, but to a lesser extent than his native Waterford or Clonmel or Carrick-on-Suir. The "Reminiscences" were eagerly received by his readers, as the editorial correspondence shows. Much against the advice of some discerning contemporaries, he did not venture to give this work the more enduring format of a book. His *History of Limerick* was not a financial success; and so his "Reminiscences", a valuable work, is virtually inaccessible today, unless for those who have the opportunity and the patience to read through the few files now available in the country. If however Lenihan's "Reminiscences" ever find the format of a large volume or two, then students of local Irish history in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries will be grateful to the publisher.

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is a paper which you would  
be pleased to receive.  
Some of the nobility  
take it, including your  
Lordship's nephew, Lord  
Archibald. I have the honor to be  
my Lord  
Your very faithful  
servant  
Maurice Lenihan

Maurice Lenihan's signature.

sages of congratulation and encouragement had been pouring in from many parts of the country. The conclusion of this episode may be read in a letter of Thomas Sexton, M.P. for Limerick, and dated from the House of Commons Library 6 December 1884. It will be sufficient to quote the last sentence: "I heartily congratulate the Council on the effective check they have administered to arbitrary rule and on the victory they have won in a cause of public right."

Other events of interest in the mayoralty of Lenihan were the raising of the tolls on Athlunkard Bridge and the admission of Michael Davitt to the city's freedom. On the same occasion two other notabilities of the day, the M.P.s for Carlow, Charles Dawson and Edmund Dwyer Gray (son of Lenihan's old-time friend Sir John Gray), were also enrolled as Freemen of Limerick. Lenihan's term of office as Mayor of Limerick ended in a blaze of glory owing to the Corporation's successful resistance to the police tax; and at the inauguration of the new Mayor on January 1, 1885, the thanks of the Council to Lenihan were, on the motion of Alderman Cleary his former adversary, carried by acclamation. Lenihan's

the change would benefit the *Limerick Reporter* owing to the nearness of his new offices to the railway terminus. A cursory glance at the files of his paper for the late eighties and early nineties is enough to show that the printing and proof-reading of this once great provincial newspaper left much to be desired. It was pathetic that a man so advanced in years and who in times past saw good days should have to continue a grim struggle to support himself and his family when a peaceful old age ought to have been his lot. Yet he seems to have met the days of misfortune with serenity. Up to the end, he never lost his passion for pottering amongst historical works. In the summer of 1889 he presided over the meetings of the Royal Society of Antiquaries and, with all the zest of his earlier years, conducted the Society's members on their tours of Co. Limerick and the islands of the Shannon.

At the time of his death Lenihan had been sixty-five years a journalist. His death, though not unexpected, came suddenly. On Christmas morning 1895, as his family were preparing to go out to early Mass, they found that he had just passed away in his sleep. He was survived by his wife, his son James and