The passage of nearly two centuries has not altogether eroded the memory of Sylvester O’Halloran, surgeon, historian, poet, patriot and antiquary. Though the ingratitude and indifference of generations of our citizens have allowed the name of this great man to remain unknown to the majority of people, a few dedicated local historians and the scholarly, Dr. J.B. Lyons, have kept his memory alive down through the years in biographical memoirs and papers read from time to time at historical society meetings.

O’Halloran was born at Caherdavin, in the old parish of Kileely, in the North Liberties of Limerick, on December 31st, 1728. He was the son of Michael O’Halloran and Mary McDonnell, a Catholic couple who must have enjoyed a fairly substantial way of life, despite the rigours of the times in which they lived. The anti-Popery laws were at their worst, and the priest-hunters and other informers were active in every parish: indeed, it was a time when the whole military and civil services of the country were Protestant to a man and the whole administration was bolstered up by an army of Puritan middle class planters.

Young O’Halloran grew up with a fervent love of his country and a lively interest in its antiquities. His early education was in the good hands of his mother’s cousin, the illustrious Sean Claragh McDonnell, the Gaelic poet and scholar, who instilled a thorough knowledge of Greek, Latin and Irish in his young pupil. He also attended the school in Limerick run by a Protestant clergyman of note, Rev. Robert Cashin.

At an early stage in his life, he was intelligent enough to recognise the travesties of Irish history as written by foreigners. He was later to take up the pen and produce his monumental History of Ireland. In this work he erased many of the errors and slanders on his native land which were written in bitterness and bias. The critics of later years were struck by the brilliance of its illustration, its graphic description and the charm of its style.

While yet under the age of seventeen, his patriotism was such that it was only with difficulty that his family and friends dissuaded him from joining the forces of Bonnie Prince Charlie at the fateful battle of Culloden. More than one historian was inclined to the opinion that this fervour was nurtured by the many stories the young militant had heard from some of those who had witnessed and experienced the cruelities and deprivation following the 1691 Siege of Limerick.

Though intended for the priesthood, his choice of career was eventually influenced by the lack of medical and surgical services in Limerick. He was especially touched by the large numbers of young people afflicted by premature blindness.

After completing a brilliant course in London, Leyden and Paris (because of his Catholic religion Dublin was taboo),
he returned to his native city to begin his great humanitarian task.

From the beginning, his life was crowded - treating his patients, writing and visiting archaeological sites. To cope with his many tasks he lengthened the days by rising with the lark and remaining on his feet until the small hours.

Though the historian, John Ferrar, gives the credit for our first hospital to Dr. Giles Vandeleur, a number of other authorities name O'Halloran as the founder. Ferrar, whose shop was only about 200 yards from O'Halloran's residence in 'Change Lane (Exchange Street), writes:

"In March 1759 Giles Vandeleur, Esq., late of the City of Limerick, Surgeon, became tenant to four small houses, in the Little Island, and at his own expense, threw them into one for the reception of the sick and maimed; but the design not having favoured with the attention of the public soon expired. On the fifth of January, 1761, a charity play was solicited by a few other gentlemen to revive the said charity, and from a charity sermon which was preached at the following Assizes, and by a subscription which was opened at the same time, four beds were erected, and the poor were attended gratis by the several Physicians and Surgeons of the city".

Dr. Kidd, an early nineteenth century doctor and historian, apportions the favour to O'Halloran: "Among his other remarkable achievements, O'Halloran we may say was the founder of the County Limerick Infirmary. An old lady still alive recollects distinctly his renting three or four houses, which he threw into one, for the reception of the sick and maimed ... Becoming an established and necessary institution it was later adopted as County Infirmary and, following the appearance of the Whiteboys, it soon became a sort of sine qua non quite as necessary as the gaol, of which at present it seems but the outer porch".

Sir William Wilde also attributes the foundation to O'Halloran, but adds: "In the founding of the County Limerick Infirmary he (O'Halloran) was associated with another surgeon named Vandeleur".

O'Halloran himself refers to the foundation in his diary:

"In January 1759, after soliciting in vain gentlemen to form a small fund for a hospital in this City, Giles Vandeleur took from an Alderman three small houses in the Little Island at £160 a year, which we threw into one and opened four beds; supported them with difficulty for about 16 months, when Mr. Vandeleur dying, I engaged the Rev. Deane Hoare and the deceased Dr. Clamet to unite with me in a benefit play to advance that charity ... from which we had a nett sum of £3212.0 for the charity, after which it advanced apace and is noted for its strict economy, etc., the most respectable in the kingdom. In 1763 published my "Treatise on Gangrene", the appendix to which gave rise to the 'Infirmary Act', the most useful in its way".

View in of this conflict of accounts it would be only fair to suggest that both Vandeleur and O'Halloran were responsible, one way or another, for the foundation.

In a short time a number of persons of weight and consequence were so impressed with the hospital and its dedicated workers that a fund was opened for the purpose of improving its services. Again Ferrar informs us: "On the nineteenth of March, 1765, Edmond Sexton Percy, Esq., conveyed to Charles Smyth, Esq., and to the Rev. Deane Hoare, as trustees of the said charity, in perpetuity, at a peppercorn a year by Edmond Sexton Percy Esq.

As a matter of interest the bodies of many criminals were dissected at the Mulgrave Street hospital, all except that of John Scanlan, the murderer of Ellen Hanley (the Colleen Bawn). The culprit's family were spared this further indignity through their social status and the influence of their well-con-
nected friends. The body was given to his relatives who had it interred in the old graveyard at Crecore.

O'Halloran laboured in and out of the Co. Hospital for forty years, and during that time he excelled his contemporaries in the science and practice of ophthalmology, and in the treatment of head injuries, while his "new method of amputation" was a most valuable contribution to the practice of surgery in his time, though the profession generally was slow to accept it. O'Halloran, however, convinced of the efficacy of his method, was solicitous for the welfare of those who had to endure the horrors of amputation, used all the power of eloquence and every other method of persuasion to promote the acceptance of his new method. His endeavours were rewarded in a big way: soon his method was in use in England, and, on the continent. The Limerick Chronicle of Nov. 18th, 1771, published the following:

"On Tuesday last Ellen Byrne had her leg amputated in the new manner and is in a fair way of recovering. It must give pleasure to every lover of his profession that so useful a method, brought to perfection in this city, and published in 1765, should be now the almost universal practice in the English hospitals and coming into repute in France".

The publication of: A New Treatise on The Glaucoma, or Cataract, followed by A Critical Analysis of the new Operation for Cataract, spread his fame all over Europe. A feature of the work of O'Halloran was his ability as a writer: thus every advance he made in the treatment of disease and injury was written down and published for the benefit of his fellow members of the medical profession and their patients at home and abroad.

No doubt some of his writing on his great achievements in the advancement of surgery may have been prompted by human vanity. Indeed, the great man was not above conceit, as can be gleaned from the following snippet from the Limerick Chronicle though it must be remembered that doctors and surgeons advertised as widely as the media of the day permitted:

"I could produce an instance in this Town of a Woman who had a cataractous eye ... which Taylor (another surgeon) had declared incurable, which I nevertheless restored her the use of. The twentieth of March 1749".

In the course of a biographical memoir, written about the middle of the last century, by Dr. Kidd, we are given the clearest picture of what O'Halloran really looked like:

"He (O'Halloran) is yet remembered by all the old people of Limerick, as a man of wonderful ability, with at this period of his career, but little practice outside the walls of the Infirmary, his entire time nearly given up to literature and the discovery of antiquities. His house ... the resort of all the foreigners and literateurs that happened to visit this part of the country at the time. The tall thin doctor in his quaint French dress, with his gold headed cane, beautiful Parisian wig and cocked hat, turning out every day responsibly to visit his patients".

What a picturesque figure to imagine walking down eighteenth century Nicholas Street!

He had a passion for research, and much of his time was spent in probing the imponderables and seeking better ways of dealing with the many afflictions with which he came face to face every day of his life. In this field he was eminently successful. Though the publication of his New method of Amputation was not well received at first - like all new advances in the medical world - but afterwards it was read in every medical school and practised universally.

Likewise, he was ahead of his time in the treatment of head injuries. He was greatly assisted in his work by the large numbers of broken skulls constantly supplied by the factious fighters of the time. O'Halloran's fame had, at an early stage, spread far beyond the city, and many a fallen cudgel-weilder was brought, in a donkey cart, to his hospital in 'Change Lane in the hope of a cure for a hopeless case of depressed fracture of the skull, and when his hospital was opened, the numbers increased to unmanageable proportions.

O'Halloran's comments on the unbridled savagery of his day - almost as bad as our own day - are worth noticing again:

"I have had no less than four fractured skulls to trepan on a May morning. There is no part of the habitable globe, that for a century past afforded such an ample field for observation on injuries to the head, as Ireland in general; this province of Munster in particular, for our people, invincibly brave, not withstanding the cruel oppressions they have suffered for a century past, and highly irritable, soon catch fire: a slight offence is frequently followed by serious consequences; sticks and stones, and every other species of offence next to hand, are dealt out with great liberality".

Here the doctor shows his great tolerance and forebearance, and is almost poetic in advancing some justification for the savage behaviour of the factious fighters.

In 1773, in response to many requests from the women of Limerick, a lying-in hospital - for the treatment of married women - was opened in the city for the first time. Both Dr. O'Halloran and Dr. Patrick Unthank were mainly responsible for the establishment of this institution, in which they both gave their services free. This hospital was afterwards moved from the English Town to Nelson (Parnell) Street and again to Henry Street.

As a litterateur, surgeon and historian, O'Halloran was a national figure at an early age and his name was known in every parish in the country. He was honoured in a poem which appeared in the prestigious Medical Review, in 1776: the first four lines of which proclaim:

"In Limerick O'Halloran resides, And o'er the County Hospital presides; Exolls in surgery an healing arts, With flowing pen displays uncommon parts".

Despite his outstanding achievements in medicine, surgery and literature his most enduring success is the College of Surgeons. Though this noble institution was not founded directly by O'Halloran, his Proposals for the Advancement of Surgery in Ireland paved the way for the establishment of the college. The historian, Dr. J.B. Lyons, notes: "The Dublin Society of Surgeons obtained its charter in 1784; two years later an honorary membership (equivalent to the modern Fellowship) was bestowed on Sylvester O'Halloran. Another honour was the Membership of the Royal Irish Academy".

The publication of A General History of Ireland (1774) and A History of Ireland (1803) did not find favour with the Anglo-Irish Ascendency classes who ruled the roost in his time. Perhaps his honesty and impartiality exposed too many unpalatable truths.

If the veracity of his patriotism needed illustration, surely his attitude to the implementation of the Act of Union cleared the air. He spoke out with great vehemence against this legislation. In January 1800, he became chairman of a select committee which passed a resolution expressing disapproval towards a measure "fraught with ruin and degradation to a country which since the glorious epoch of 1782 has been rapidly improving in commerce, manufactures, industry and population".

During the last years of his life he resided at Merchants' Quay, where his bedroom windows overlooked the old harbour. The only members of his family left to comfort him in his last years were a number of grandsons - children.
of his son, Joseph—who resided with him.

He died on the 11th August 1807, full of honours, and in the complete fulfilment of his several avocations in his long life. He was laid to rest in the family vault in the old churchyard of Killeely, beside his wife and daughter and two sons. The following death notice appeared in The Dublin Evening Post at the time:

"On Tuesday last, at Limerick ... the venerable and highly respected Sylvester O'Halloran, Esq. an eminent Surgeon and Manmidwife, as well as a celebrated historian, M.R.I.A. and of most of the Literary and Honorable Societies in the United Kingdom: he studied physic in Paris and London, and made a rapid progress in his studies, as he published the first of his works before he was 21 years of age: he afterwards wrote different treatises medical and political; a General History of Ireland down to the close of the 12th. century; and in 1803, he published a second edition thereof, greatly improved; he was highly learned in the Irish language and Ancient Laws, and was remarkable for his loyalty and attachment to the house of Brunswick, a steady supporter of its constitution, and a warm advocate of the honour and interests of his native country".

He was predeceased by his wife, Mary O'Casey, who died in 1782. His son, Michael, died in the same year as a result of a fall from a horse. He was married to a niece of Lord Clare's (the architect of the Act of Union). He left no issue.

Michael was the black sheep of the family. Though his wife's uncle was the virtual ruler of the country, his 'catch' brought no joy to his parents. After his untimely death at the age of 28, his father wrote of him in his diary:

"Born with great talents, but greatly perverted; he has been a constant source of distress to his amiable mother and to me 'til his death, which was sudden and unexpected".

O'Halloran's only daughter, Catherine, died in infancy. His son, Thomas, died of smallpox at the age of four. Of him Sylvester wrote:

"A lovely stout and manly boy".

Another son, John, became secretary to the Governor of the Bahamas and his only son, Sylvester, died without issue.

His youngest son, Joseph, became a Major General in the British army. He was knighted by William IV, and afterwards honoured by Queen Victoria with the Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. He received the freedom of Limerick, his native city, on February 25th. 1838. He had 8 sons all of whom became army officers. His 5 daughters who managed to survive infancy married army officers.

After many narrow escapes in battlefields, mainly in India, he died on the 3rd of November, 1843, in London, as a result of slipping on an orange peel! He was aged eighty years.

The vault of the O'Hallorans was completely hidden for many years in a rich profusion of briars and nettles, until it was uncovered, in the early seventies, by a committee of local people who cleaned up the place at that time.

In 1976, St. Senan's Historical Society undertook the task of refurbishing the tomb. They inscribed the following legend on a plain slab set into the front of the vault, beside the old inscription which did not include Dr. O'Halloran's name:

Sylvester O'Halloran
1728-1807
Historian Surgeon
Antiquary Patriot
His country's honour and good name ever found in him a ready and unflinching champion.

It was a belated honour, but at least historians of the future cannot inveigh against the absence of the great man's name in Killeely.

Now the citizens can take further pride in the dedication of the splendid new footbridge over the Abbey River to the memory of this long neglected Limerick genius.

Inscription on the tomb of Sylvester O'Halloran at Killeely Graveyard.