



GEORGE GEARY BENNIS

BY JIM KEMMY



George Geary Bennis.

The history of the public library service in Limerick is a chequered story. The first recorded attempt to establish such a service was in 1843 when the Limerick Philosophical Society, with Aubrey de Vere as its president and William Smith O'Brien as a member of its committee, opened a semi-public library and museum, aided by a Limerick Corporation grant of £120 annually. The venture was not successful and lasted for two years only.

In 1847, two years after this closure, a new group, with the ambitious title, The Limerick Society for the Promotion of Literary, Scientific and Industrial Education, tried to revive the library and museum. The effort was as short-lived as the first enterprise, and, in 1849, the books and exhibits were scattered, some going to the Limerick Institution and the rest to Barrington's Hospital.

The next part of the story begins a long way from Limerick and a remarkable man enters the scene - from his deathbed. When George Geary Bennis died in Paris in 1866, he bequeathed a large collection of books, many of them in French, Spanish and Italian, 'to his native city of Limerick for the free use of the citizens'.

George Geary Bennis was born in Limerick in 1793. While still a young man, he carried on a flourishing tea and coffee business near Cannock's store. However, he was soon attracted to a literary life and, in 1822, went to London. He later took up permanent residence in Paris. In that city, he edited *Galignani*, (described, at the time, as the *Times* of Paris). He also printed and published books, among them an illustrated Guide to Paris, and a fine edition of *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation* by Sir Jonah Barrington, with woodcuts of the leading political figures named in the text.

George Bennis was to feature in a sensational drama in France. During one of the several attempted assassinations of King Louis Philippe, he saved the life of the monarch and was awarded the title of Chevalier.

The bequest of the books was formally accepted at a meeting of the Limerick Corporation on 13 January, 1866. In May of the same year, Edward Bennis, a nephew of George Bennis, and John Ellard, the Limerick Town Clerk, went to France on behalf of the Corporation to bring back the library. The following declaration was made by John Ellard in Paris:

George Geary Bennis, deceased - Received on behalf of the Corporation of the city of Limerick in Ireland, from Mr. Edward Bennis, of the said City of

Limerick, executor of Mr. George Geary Bennis, deceased, by the hands of Mr. R. O'Maugham, of 54 Faubourg Saint Honoré, Paris, solicitor, the library ... bequeathed in the will of the deceased, proved at Dublin on the 23rd day of January last. Dated at Paris this 8th day of May, 1866 - John Ellard, Town Clerk.

The books duly arrived in Limerick and were deposited in a storeroom in the Town Hall, where they were to remain undisturbed for the next 4½ years, when they were taken to another storeroom in the Athenaeum in Upper Cecil Street. This move was carried out at the expense of Mayor William Spillane 'to form a library for the citizens generally and the artizan population in particular'.

The failure of the Corporation and the town councillors to provide a proper library in accordance with the wishes of George Bennis did not go unnoticed. Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, spent most of his life at odds with the Corporation, and was not going to let pass the opportunity to lampoon the local authority. In his pamphlet, *The Story of Shawn-a-Scoob*, Part II, published in 1868, he let fly:

*One small transaction here I name,
Be it recorded to their shame;
From France to Limerick harbour
straight,
A library was sent of late,
Bequeathed by a dying man
To the erudite Corporate clan;*

*Poor man, he really did resign
His literary pearls to swine;
For when the books arrived in dock,
Our Neroes wanted no such stock;
The freightage they refused to pay,
The library was cast away
Into a limber-store to rot,
And 'Bogstick' rose to 'second thot'.*

Although the library at the Athenaeum was announced with a flourish and opened with a lecture by Rev. Dr. Russell, S.J., on 16 December, 1870, members of the public were not allowed free access to the books. A further 19 years were to elapse before the Library Acts were adopted by Limerick Corporation, and, on 6 March, 1889, on the proposal of William Spillane, a library committee was formed. Among its members were: Rev. James Dowd, James Frost, George Fogerty, Rev. Timothy Lee, and J.P. Lynch, all of whom were prominent members of the Limerick Field Club.

The books of George Bennis were destined to move again. On 11 December, 1893, the first public library in Limerick was opened in Lower Glentworth Street, in a building later to be occupied by the Mechanics' Institute. A former secretary of the Limerick Congregated Trades, John Hogan, served as librarian.

On 20 October, 1903, the foundation stone of a new library was laid by Andrew Carnegie on a section of the People's Park, Pery Square. When he arrived in the city, Carnegie was given a civic reception and was made an Honorary Freeman of Limerick at a special meeting of the Corporation. Later, a procession was formed at City Hall and, with members of the Corporation, the Free City Library Committee, the trade societies and other bodies, Carnegie proceeded to Pery Square.

The site of the new building was located near the main entrance gate of the People's Park. In a recess in the foundation stone were placed four bottles in which were sealed the current coins of the realm and copies of the four local newspapers - the *Limerick Chronicle*, the *Limerick Leader*, the *Limerick Echo* and the *Munster News*. The cost of the library (£7,000) was paid for entirely by Andrew Carnegie.

J.P. McNamara was appointed as the first librarian and the library was opened to the public in 1906 - just 40 years after George Geary Bennis had bequeathed his books to his native city.

SOURCES

'The City of Limerick Public Library and Museum', by Robert Herbert.
The North Munster Antiquarian Journal, 1940.
Reminiscences of Old Limerick by Ernest Bennis, Limerick, 1951.