



imerick is one of the most written about places in Irish history. The White Manuscript and the works of John Ferrar, Maurice Lenihan and

other historians have given us a comprehensive account of our history. In more recent times, Dr. Robert Wyse-Jackson and Mannix Joyce have contributed two readable books on the subject. And earlier this year, Patrick O'Connor published his major study, *Exploring Limerick's Past*. A number of local historical magazines continue to flourish in the city and county and have made Limerick history more accessible to students and general readers. From all these written sources, a fairly full picture can be gleaned of the place and its people.

Like many other towns and cities in Ireland, Limerick was founded by the Vikings. In the 9th century, the invaders sailed up the Shannon Estuary in search of loot from the monasteries on its banks and islands. They settled on an island known as Inis Sibhton (later to be known as King's Island). They built a clay and wattle settlement and, after some years of bloody skirmishings, began to trade with the native Irish. It was from this crude settlement that the city of Limerick originated.

In the twelfth century, the Normans penetrated to the city. In 1168, St. Mary's Cathedral was built, and it remains to this day the most interesting and important building in Limerick. The city was chartered by Richard I in 1197, making it the oldest chartered city in Ireland. In 1210, King John visited the city for the second time, and built King John's Castle there. The building is one of the finest examples of Norman architecture in Ireland.

In the following years, Limerick became an English town, surrounded by high walls. Across the Abbey River (a diversion of the Shannon) lived the Irish and the Danes, who had also been

An Introduction to Limerick History

by Jim Kemmy

driven to live outside the walls.

The work of erecting walls around the Irish town (as it became known) was begun about 1395, and it was finally enclosed at the end of the 15th century. Thus Limerick took on the shape of an hourglass in its physical layout, with the Englishtown on the north and Irishtown on the south.

In 1467 a mint was set up in the city. In 1497 and 1498 there was a great famine, followed by pestilence in 1521. Payne's *Description of Ireland* gives a favourable account of the city and of one of its schools in the year 1589:

"A wondrous proper city and a strong; and it standeth environed with the river of Shenan and it may be called little London for the situation and the plenty, but the castle hath need of reparation. I saw in a grammar school in Limerick one hundred and three score scholars, most of them speaking good and perfect English, for that they have use to construe the Latin into English".

There followed another turbulent period in Limerick's history. The 17th century saw three terrible sieges inflicted on the city – the Cromwellian Siege of 1651 and the two Williamite

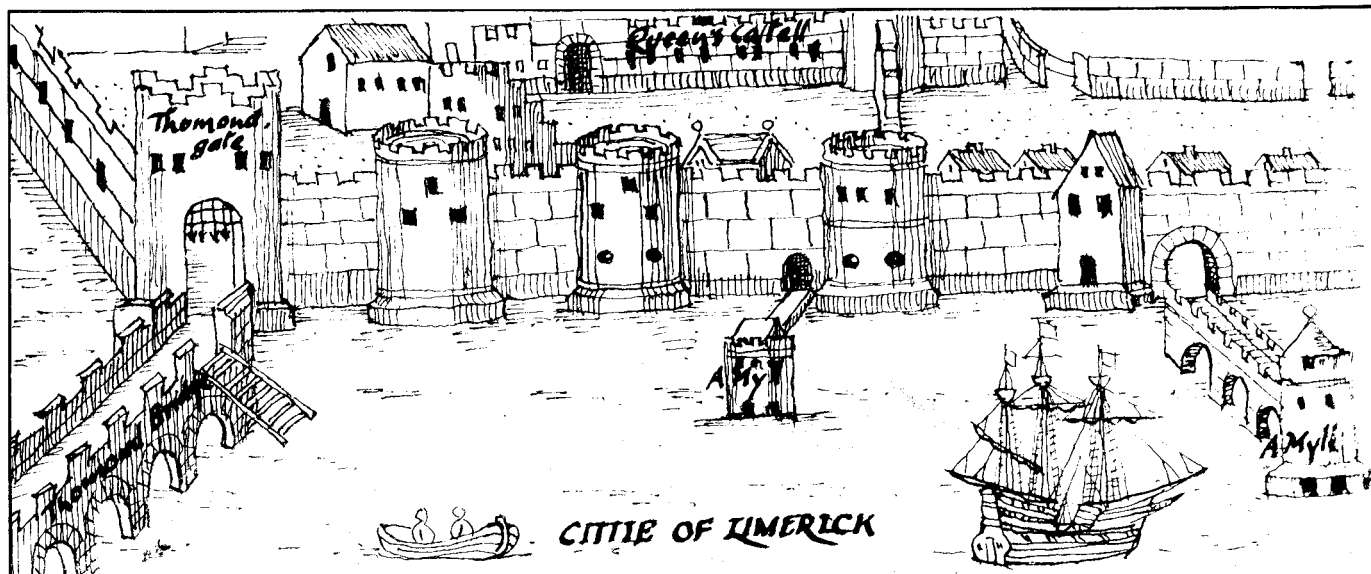
Sieges of 1690 and 1691. These wars decimated the population and destroyed many buildings.

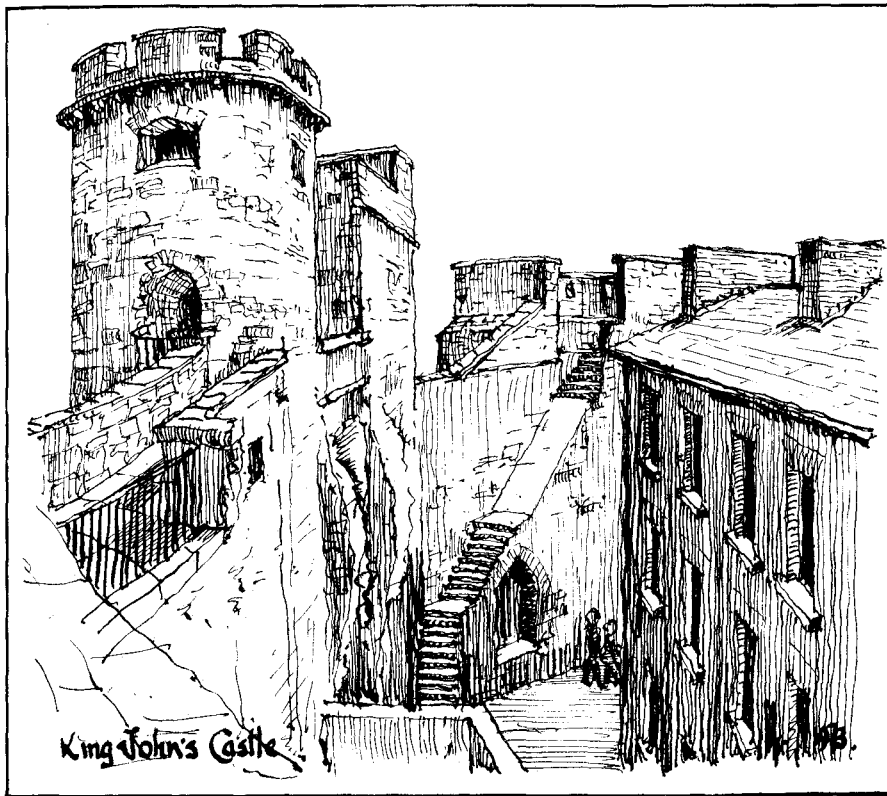
By contrast, the 18th century was a period of growth and expansion. The worst of the city's troubles were over, though life continued to be hard for the ordinary people. As well as the rebuilding of the ruined city, other major works were also undertaken.

In 1760, there were 17 gates in the city's walls:

Thomond Gate, Island Gate, Sally Port, Little Island, Abbey North Gate, Abbey South Gate, Fish Gate, Baal's Bridge, East Water Gate, John's Gate, Mungret Gate, West Water Gate, Creagh Gate, Quay Gate, Bow Gate, New Gate, and the Water Gate of King John. Today, more than two centuries afterwards, most of the names live on in the city as local placenames.

The year 1760 marked a dramatic change in the development and physical layout of Limerick. The old city was bursting within its cramped boundaries, as dreadful slums and warrens of lanes criss-crossed its thoroughfares. In response to this pressure, the city walls were largely demolished, and a new brick city built outside. The man





responsible for this development was Edmund Sexton Pery, the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons. He was the great driving force in the building of Georgian Limerick, and the centre city area today is still known as 'New Town Pery'. Pery also built John's Square, and these recently restored stone houses are also an enduring monument to him and the other men involved in their construction.

The merchants and traders also flourished at this time. Four dancing masters showed their paces at the Assembly Rooms; there were seven wine merchants, seven apothecaries, fourteen peruke-makers, two hatters, thirteen shoemakers and one glover. Limerick gloves, made by a manufacturer named Lyons, were so fine that they could be enclosed in walnut shells, and orders for these gloves were received from as far away as the Court of Russia.

Social life in the city also enjoyed a revival. Balls, assemblies and 'drums' were held in the Assembly Rooms, near Charlotte Quay. And there was an Oyster Club for people who were partial to this delicacy. Fox-hunting and dinner parties were among the other entertainments enjoyed by the city's gentry.

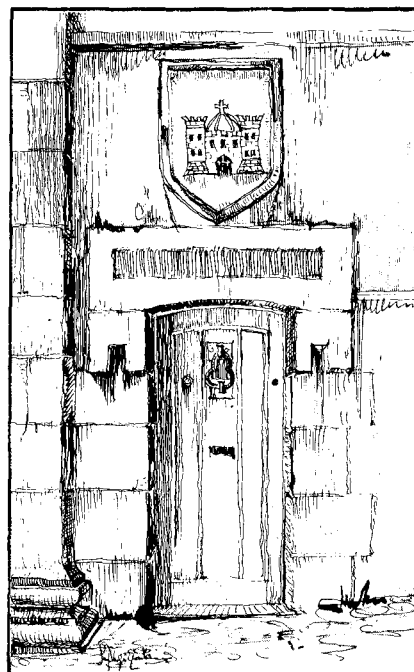
Apart from food, drink and fashion, the other needs of Limerick were filled: in law by two attorneys and three notaries public, in duelling by two gunsmiths, in transport by two coachmakers, in plumbing by two plumbers, and in building by one architect. There was also a French master, two booksellers and an auctioneer.

A subscription list shows that the

prominent Limerick families of the time were Pery, O'Brien, Massy, Maunsell, Sexton, Roche, Tunnadine and Rochford.

A theatre was built in Cornwallis Street in 1770 in which the leading players of the day, including Garrick, Barry, Kemble and Mrs. Siddons, performed.

The nineteenth century was relatively peaceful, broken only by occasional murders and disturbances. As the workers, mainly in the craft trades, began to organise industrial disputes



The doorway of the governor's house at the old City Gaol.

and strikes became more frequent. Elections took on a more competitive form and lives were lost as rival supporters clashed. It was also a period of rapid educational expansion, as many schools and colleges were built in the city, especially after Catholic Emancipation. Limerick was spared some of the worst rigours of the Famine and its people fared comparatively well.

By 1848, Limerick was connected to Dublin by rail, opening up many local markets on the route to the larger manufacturing interests in Ireland and Great Britain.

On 14th July, 1880, the Freedom of Limerick was conferred on Charles Stewart Parnell, and, in 1882, Michael Davitt received the same honour.

It is not generally known that Limerick won the only All-Ireland senior football title to be decided on the 'open draw' system when the club team Commercial's won this title in 1888.

The twentieth century saw more military action, as the War of Independence and the Civil War caused their share of casualties and destruction in the city and county. March 7th, 1921, marked a black spot in the city's history when mayors O'Callaghan and Clancy were murdered in their own homes by the Black-and-Tans. The achievement of self-government in 1922 marked the end of the old order.

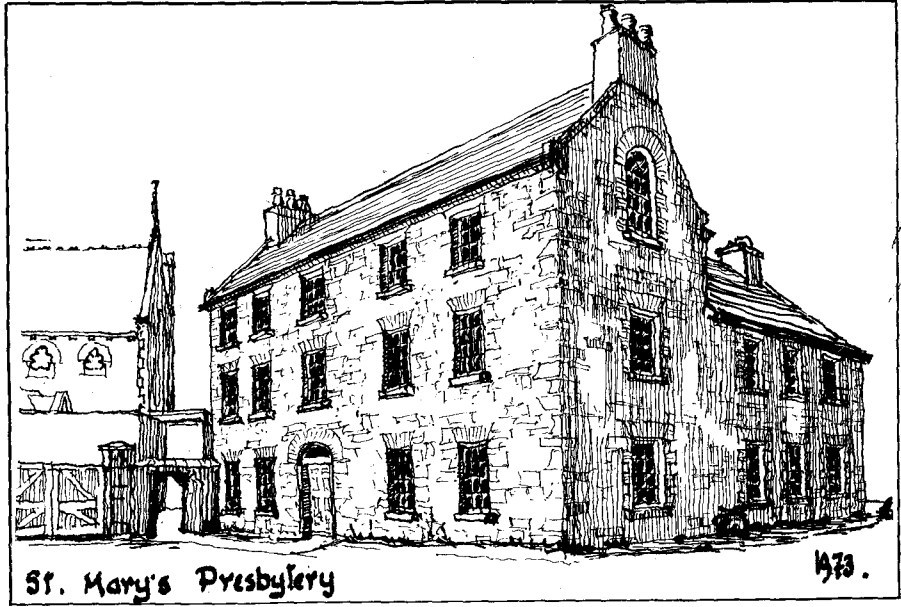
Limerick had been garrisoned for more than 700 years and the pervasive influence of the garrison can be traced to this day. King John's Castle, and a variety of other buildings are physical remnants of this period. In the sporting world, the local popularity of rugby and rowing are two obvious examples of how Limerick people have taken to these 'foreign' codes. The musical and cultural values of the city were greatly influenced by the life of the garrison. Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and Christopher Isherwood have left valuable accounts of military life in Limerick in the second decade of this century.

For more than a thousand years, the city has been a trading centre. Even before the coming of the Vikings, the native Irish herded cattle there. With the development and diversification of commerce, the population grew and the settlement expanded. Much of the trade was agricultural based. As the regional capital of the Golden Vale, Limerick became a large market town and its port served as an outlet for world markets. Fluctuations in trade, resulting from booms and slumps on the world market, wars and three calamitous local sieges all influenced the growth of the city and its population. The contribution of the labour movement formed an important part of the city's development. Limerick silversmiths gained a high reputation for their skills in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The story of the

local trade guilds and trade unions is an eventful one, marked by many stirring struggles and campaigns.

The Shannon River continues to occupy a central place in the life, work and recreation of the people. The history of two local communities, the Abbey Fishermen and the Sandmen, who delved the river for salmon and sand, is a unique combination of river-craft and heroic endeavour. The people of Park, an area near the Dublin Road, linking Singland, Rhebogue and Lower Park, formed a distinctive, rural-like community of market-gardeners within the city. For centuries, they worked from dawn until dark in cultivating their little plots and supplying the population with vegetables and milk. Outside the city's walls, other local communities such as Garryowen and Thomondgate, grew up in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; in time, these localities also developed their own customs and traditions.

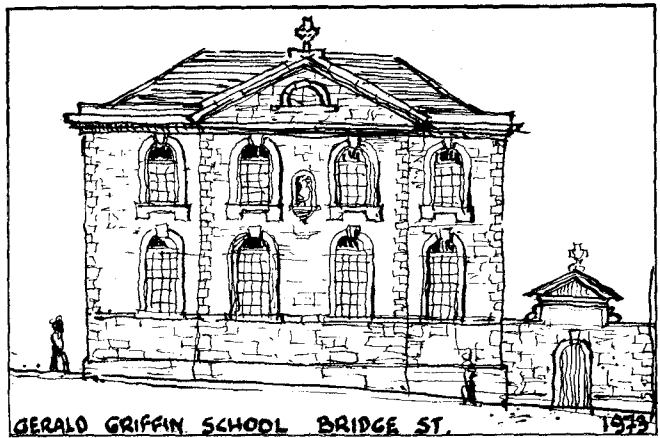
In any historic settlement, but especially in a place where people have lived continuously for more than a thousand years, a wealth of legends, traditions and folklore is certain to accumulate. Limerick is rich with such a heritage. The 'Curse of St. Munchin' and the 'Story of Shawn-a-Scoob' are two of the city's best known legends. Another colourful tale, 'Drunken Thady and the Bishop's Lady', has been set down in rollicking verse by Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond. It is Limerick's best loved poem. The unruly activities of Johnny Connell and his Garryowen clan have been chronicled by Gerald Griffin and by the unknown versifier who wrote 'Garryowen 'n Glory'. The Bells of St. Mary's feature in a number of stories and legends. Although urban folklore has not received the same attention as rural folklore, Limerick is fortunate that



St. Mary's Presbytery

much of the traditions, customs, and lore of its people has been documented.

In the nineteenth century, industry prospered for much of the period, particularly bacon-curing, and Limerick bacon became famous throughout Europe. After Catholic emancipation, in 1829, many new churches and schools were built in the city and county, giving increased employment in the construction industry. When the building of the Wellesley (later Sarsfield) Bridge was completed in 1835, the Ennis Road was opened up and lined with rows of red brick houses. In the 1850s, Peter Tait



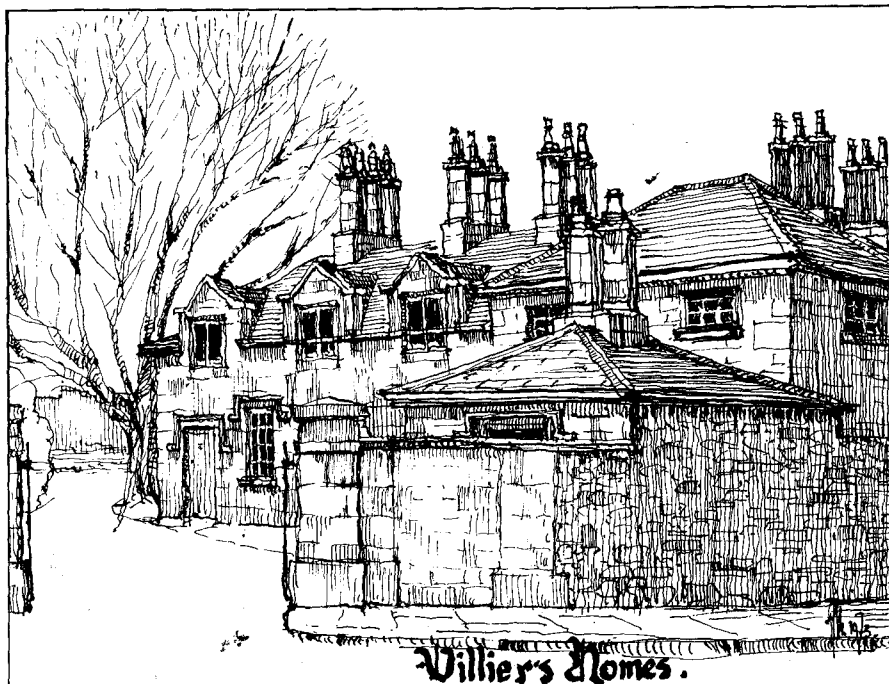
GERALD GRIFFIN SCHOOL BRIDGE ST. (This and other drawings in this article by S.O.P. O'Ceallacháin).

established the Limerick Clothing Factory and developed the first mass production of clothing in the world. He exported uniforms and suits to America and other countries.

In this century, after the setting up of the Irish Free State, many new housing estates were built throughout the city. Emigration, always a drain on the population, continued as many of the traditional industries based on the products of the rich agricultural hinterland experienced financial difficulties and collapsed. But the advent of foreign industries to Limerick and Shannon in the late 1950s brought a new upsurge in industrial development.

To keep pace with these changes, education in the city has also undergone a quiet revolution in the last two decades. The Moylish Regional Technical College and the National Institute of Higher Education at Plassey are merely two examples of this transformation.

So the people of Limerick face an uncertain future with a fortitude born of a long experience of turmoil and conflict, an experience best summed up in the motto carved on the city's coat of arms: *Urbs antiqua fuit studisque asperrima belli* (It was an ancient city hardened in the pursuits of war).



Williers Homes.