

LIMERICK'S CAMPAIGN FOR A UNIVERSITY: 1838 - 1845

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was but one university in Ireland, the University of Dublin, with its one college of Trinity. Elizabeth 1 granted it a charter in 1592, and the foundation stone was laid by Thomas Smyth, Lord Mayor of Dublin on 13 March, 1593.⁽¹⁾ However, by this time, the absence of university institutions suited to the needs of the majority of the people became very apparent. Consequently, the Bill to establish the Queen's Colleges was passed in 1845.

With Limerick's early reputation in the area of higher education, together with its geographic position and economic standing, it was not unnatural to expect that there should have been a demand in the city for one of the proposed colleges. William Smith O'Brien worked earnestly towards this end. In

BY PAT KEARNEY

spite of his endeavours and the efforts of many others, Limerick's claim was unsuccessful. Cork, Galway and Belfast were the cities chosen as the locations for the new university colleges.

However, the case which was then prepared and presented left little doubt that there was a genuine aspiration in the city to a university college.

In 1841, the inhabitants of Limerick City numbered 48,391.⁽²⁾ It would appear that it was a progressive city with regard to the provision of facilities, since it was lighted with gas under a contract made with the United London Gas Company in 1824, and works for supplying it with water were commenced in 1834.⁽³⁾ The Limerick Corporation was most active, and existed both by prescription and

charter, and its authority was confirmed and regulated by statute. However, there were social problems, and these were of the order that existed in all cities of the period, as Thackeray observed: 'After you get out of the Main Street the handsome part of the town is at an end, and you suddenly find yourself in such a labyrinth of busy swarming poverty and squalid commerce as never was seen'.⁽⁴⁾ Poverty, poor housing conditions and lack of adequate educational facilities were indeed prevalent. These problems were foremost in the mind of William Smith O'Brien, who was M.P. for the County of Limerick in the period 1835 - 1845. Both the city and county of Limerick sent two members to the imperial parliament at that time.

Smith O'Brien was born at Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare, on 17 October, 1803, and was educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated



George (now O'Connell) Street, 1842.

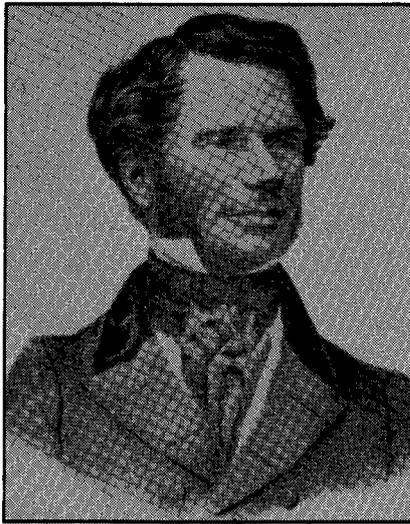
B.A. in 1826.⁽⁵⁾ He was descended from that illustrious Irish family, the O'Briens of Thomond. He decided on a political career, and at a by-election in April, 1828, was returned to the House of Commons, as a supporter of Sir Robert Peel, for the borough of Ennis, which he represented for three years. Though himself a Protestant, he declared his approval of Catholic emancipation and was a member of the Catholic Association.⁽⁶⁾ William O'Brien, as he was christened, (he had assumed the name Smith only on the death of his maternal grandfather from whom he inherited Cahermoyle House and estate, at Rathkeale, Co. Limerick) tried to improve the condition of the poor in Ireland, and to bring relief to the aged. In February, 1831, he brought in a Bill for this purpose but it failed to pass the Commons. After the general election of 1835, he was returned as M.P. for the County of Limerick.

From 1830 onwards, Smith O'Brien had worked in close association with Thomas Wyse, who was one of the first Catholics elected to parliament after Catholic Emancipation. Thus Smith O'Brien seconded the Bill to establish a system of national education which Wyse introduced in his first year in parliament, and Wyse seconded the bill which O'Brien introduced for establishing poor relief.⁽⁷⁾ In 1835, the Whig government of Lord Melbourne appointed a select committee to enquire both into schools of public foundation and into the possibilities of improving, extending and permanently maintaining academical education in Ireland.⁽⁸⁾ Thomas Wyse was appointed chairman, and William Smith O'Brien was a very active member of this committee. A similar committee was re-appointed on 15 February, 1836, and on 5 December, 1837. After each re-commissioning, Wyse was appointed chairman.

The committee presented their report on 9 August, 1838,⁽⁹⁾ written by Wyse, which ranged widely over the whole field of Irish education, highlighted existing conditions and laid down a master-plan for the future. A feature of the report was the emphasis it placed on the educational needs of the middle classes, and it was primarily to cater for these that the Wyse committee proposed the setting up of county academies and provincial colleges. With regard to these provincial colleges the report stated:

... guided by the opinion of many of the most experienced witnesses of the necessity of such institutions, and the conviction that Proprietary Colleges will not supply the want. Your committee think that there gradually should be established and maintained, at the public expense, one college at least of the description, in each of the four provinces of Ireland, under the name of 'Provincial Colleges', and that it could be so established and maintained at no great charge either to the state or to the province in which it was placed.⁽¹⁰⁾

The committee directed the attention of



William Smith O'Brien, 1848.

the House of Commons to the mode by which they proposed this suggestion should be carried into effect, by means of a 'Bill for the establishment and maintenance of academical, collegiate, and professional education in Ireland'.⁽¹¹⁾

It is clear that O'Brien and Wyse had ample opportunity to discuss what sort of college each had in view. By the end of 1837, they had, apparently, prepared a scheme. They were both from Munster and they naturally agreed to concentrate upon demanding a college for the province. By January, 1838, they differed as to the location of the proposed college. Wyse assumed that the first college should be in Cork, while O'Brien believed that Limerick also had impressive claims which should be borne in mind before any definite decision was arrived at by the authorities. Their difference is evident in a letter from Wyse:

At the same time I must candidly confess I cannot agree with you in your sympathies for Limerick. I consider the distribution adopted by the committee, by Provinces, preferable to what you appear to suggest, by Districts: one Provincial College in each Province appears to me quite sufficient for the present; and if we are to limit ourselves to one I know no site in Munster preferable to Cork, for such an establishment. These are opinions I have not hastily adopted, and I do not despair, on a little consideration and discussion, of bringing you over to them.⁽¹²⁾

It has been stated that O'Brien's main argument for Limerick, as against Cork, was that it could serve the West, as well as the South, in case only one college should be established.⁽¹³⁾ It is well to realize that this was January, 1838, and that the Report of the Select Committee was not presented until August of the same year. If there were more than one college to be established, O'Brien suggested a district rather than a provincial distribution. However, Wyse was opposed to this, and was quick to point out that the

distribution adopted by the committee was by provinces. He elaborated further on the advantages of the province in that same letter: 'it is particularly fitted for large objects of public administration, is well distinguished by historical and moral characteristics, and is especially adapted to educational arrangements'.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the summer of 1838, the citizens of Cork city took the initiative and organised what they referred to as the 'Munster College Committee'. James Roche, a Catholic and native of Limerick, was chairman and it was from his offices at the National Bank of Ireland in Cork, that circulars were sent to prominent men of all classes and creeds, requesting their support and their attendance at a meeting in Cork.⁽¹⁵⁾ A copy of the circular appeared in a Limerick paper under the heading 'Irish Provincial Colleges':

Sir, The Committee appointed in this city for the establishment of a College in the South of Ireland, particularly direct your attention to the accompanying abstract from the Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons (Education) Ireland. If the leading object proposed in this document meets your approbation, the Committee hope to be permitted to affix your name to the Requisition, and to request that you will attend at the Public Meeting to be held in this city, on Thursday, October 15th., at one o'clock, to petition the legislature for the establishment of a Provincial College in Munster, and to adopt such proceedings as may appear best calculated for giving immediate effect to this important object.⁽¹⁷⁾

The circular was also sent to all of the influential people in Limerick City and County. William Roche, who was a brother of the aforementioned James, was at this time M.P. for the city of Limerick. He forwarded to their respective addresses many circulars sent to him by his brother. He was very favourable to the scheme, as is evident from the text of a letter to James Roche, published in the Limerick Chronicle.⁽¹⁸⁾ 'As a representative of a most respectable section of this province, I feel myself the more strongly called upon, to express my sentiments and I believe I may fearlessly add those of my constituents at large in approval of this excellent and valuable office'. In fairness to William Roche it must be stated that he was giving his support to a provincial college in Munster and, at that stage, there was no question of location.

William Smith O'Brien also received the circular from James Roche. In fact, he received two circulars. The second circular was accompanied by a letter from the chairman requesting that he (O'Brien) allow his name to be annexed to the requisition.⁽¹⁹⁾

O'Brien apparently considered that Limerick should have the opportunity to make similar preparations and declined to attend the Cork meeting, which was to be held on 15 November. His reply, dated 27 October, 1838, which he considered to

be of a public nature, was published in the *Limerick Chronicle*.⁽²⁰⁾

In reply to your obliging communication respecting the project of establishing a Provincial College at Cork, I shall in one work assign the reason why I did not authorize you to affix my signature to the Requisition. I need hardly say that my abstaining from doing so has in no degree resulted from doubts as to the propriety of establishing a Provincial College in the South of Ireland, as it will ever be a source of gratification to me to have had it in my power, I will not say to assist, for he needed no assistance, but warmly and perseveringly to support my friend, Mr. Wyse, in his Parliamentary labours in the cause of national Education, as well as to give an almost unqualified concurrence to all his views with respect to Education, both of the upper and middling, and of the poorer classes of society in this country. My sole reason for delaying to unite with the operations of the friends of education in Cork, has been the opinion long entertained, that Limerick is the centre most favourably circumstanced, with reference both to the South and West of Ireland for the establishment of an institution of this kind. Perhaps too I have sufficient local pride to make me anxious for the revival of the ancient reputation of Mungret as a seat of learning. I shall therefore do all in my power to stimulate the enlightened minds of this district to urge the claims of Limerick to the endowment of a Provincial College.

It is clear from this letter that O'Brien assumed that the Cork committee was pressing the claims of that city for the Munster Provincial College, though they make no mention of this in their circular.

Indeed, events proved him to be correct, because at their meeting of 15 November (which was attended by Thomas Wyse), the following resolution was proposed:

That Cork, the most populous and commercial city in the South of Ireland is the most appropriate site of such an establishment as in addition to many other advantages, there already exist several scientific and literary institutions which present a suitable basis for the formation of a Provincial College for Munster.⁽²¹⁾

This resolution was proposed by Morgan John O'Connell, M.P. and seconded by Thomas Lyons.

The Cork committee, which by its prompt action, now titled itself the Munster College Committee, still hoped for the support of William Smith O'Brien and requested him to join a deputation to wait upon members of her majesty's government.⁽²²⁾ They were aware that the Cork resolution which aimed at precluding Limerick as a possible site may have alienated O'Brien and tried to make amends when their secretary, Dr. Bullen, wrote anxiously: 'There is not sufficient foundation at present in Connacht for a College, and if the new establishment were found to work in a satisfactory

manner in Cork an irresistible case would then be made out for giving a similar Institution to the West of Ireland, and Limerick ought to be the place selected'.⁽²⁾

⁽³⁾ This letter suggesting Limerick as the site for the western college was indeed tactful, but there was little hint of diplomacy in the letter which Roche despatched to O'Brien on the same day:

I take the liberty of observing that the question of its locality may be considered as determined. Of the six counties, four constituting the three fourths of the population - Cork, Kerry, Waterford and Tipperary, are in favour of Cork, and a claim, therefore, on behalf of any other site, at a moment when union is our surest ground of success, would, I fear, be injurious to our common object.⁽²⁴⁾

It is also evident from this same letter that O'Brien had decided to call a meeting in Limerick to press the claim of that city, or as Roche rather contemptuously put it, 'the pretensions of Limerick'.

He organised a public meeting to be held in the city of Limerick. He was helped by his local organiser, Dr. R. Brodie, and they sent out circulars to influential persons all over the south-west of Munster. He received many very favourable replies, though some few were discouraging. It was to be expected that the reply from M.J. O'Connell, M.P. (Killarney), would be unfavourable.⁽²⁵⁾ While on the other hand, Lord Listowel's letter was definitely encouraging, although he had committed himself to Cork, he wrote from Convamore in a most friendly way:

I assure you that I shall feel most interested in your proceedings, and tho' the first object of my wishes is to see a Collegiate Institution in Cork, I sincerely hope and trust that (like Sterne and the fly) the world is large enough for us both, and that Limerick equally with Cork may be successful in obtaining a College for herself.⁽²⁶⁾

Baron Dunalley wrote from Kilboy, Co. Tipperary, and said: 'I feel desirous to give any assistance in my power towards obtaining the establishment of a Collegiate Institution in the South-West of Ireland'.⁽²⁷⁾ Among the most favourable replies received by O'Brien and Brodie was one from the Catholic Bishop of Kerry, Dr. Cornelius Egan.⁽²⁸⁾

At this stage there had been no talk of the government endowing a purely Catholic college. Yet Dr. Egan did not advert to any possible danger that might arise from undenominational teaching. O'Brien may well have expected a little more commitment from Thomas Spring Rice, who was M.P. for Limerick City. Only recently appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rice's reply was understandably cautious. It would not have been discreet for him, as a member of her majesty's government, to prejudice his position on any question on which his opinion might thereafter have been

sought. He wrote:

I can only repeat to you what I have already written to the Munster College Committee of Cork. That title has I believe already appeared in print. I am very solicitous to see a really efficient Academical Institution established in the South of Ireland; but I regret much that the selection of any particular site should have been mixed up with this great national question. The tendency of this cannot but be to create disunion and to excite local jealousies.⁽²⁹⁾

Under the heading, 'Provincial College for the South West of Ireland', a prospectus was published in the *Limerick Chronicle*, drawn up, no doubt by William Smith O'Brien. Part of it read:

Considering the important position which Limerick occupies with reference to the South and West of Ireland, a similar expression of opinion, on the part of those districts of which it forms the centre, cannot fail to carry with it a due influence. The purpose then of the proposed meeting is to unite with the Cork meeting in claiming for the South of Ireland and the establishment of one or more collegiate institutions.⁽³⁰⁾

The meeting was held on Saturday, 5 January, 1839, at the County Record Courthouse, and 'was attended by several of the influential and respectable residents of the city and county, together with a crowded attendance generally of the citizens'.⁽³¹⁾ The bench, that day, was allotted for the members of the committee. High Sheriff James D. Lyons proposed that Sir Aubrey De Vere, Bart. (who resided at Curragh Chase, near Adare, Co. Limerick), should occupy the chair, and this was approved of by the meeting. He gave a short address, in the course of which he said:

All I shall say is that I, for one, believe that the extension of the principles of education, by the facilities which will here be afforded to the middle and the higher classes, to secure a collegiate education of a very excellent description upon easy terms, is of vast importance to us, and I don't think that there can be any serious opposition to such an object so generally beneficial, and one which involves a question upon which men of all parties may meet, and, for once, extend the hand of fellowship to one another, without allowing themselves to be separated by political or party feeling.⁽³²⁾

These opening words were well received and then William Smith O'Brien addressed the meeting. He spoke at some length and dwelt on the steps that had led up to the requisitioning of the meeting. Since he had been a member of the parliamentary committee which had studied the question, he gave, in a general manner the views of that committee. He was conscious of the fact that there might not be unanimous approval for the proposed measures and tried to bring

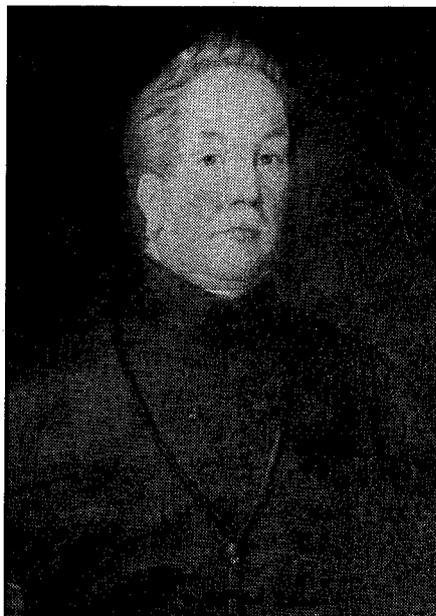
together the diverging views. He said:

Upon other occasions we have been too much separated by party differences, but among the names attached to the present requisition, I find the signature of persons entertaining almost every possible shade of religious and political opinion. We are met, too, for the purpose of laying the foundation of an institution, which itself will tend, by uniting in youth persons of opposite creeds, to soften the asperities which at present exist in society amongst us, to teach us to respect the feelings and opinions of those who differ from us, and in youth to cement friendships which in age will not be discontinued.⁽³³⁾

These are sentiments which could well be applied even to modern Ireland. However, as events were to prove, they fell on deaf ears at that particular meeting. He dwelt on the need to extend the facilities for the education of the more affluent classes. When he posed the question, whether or not the opportunities at present available for this purpose were adequate, he was answered by loud cries of 'yes, yes' on the one hand and 'no, no', on the other. It was clear from this on, that the meeting was divided. The group in favour of the establishment of college institutions consisted of the more liberal-minded Protestants and Catholics, while those against were predominantly Protestant. O'Brien spoke of the select committee of which he was a member and gave high praise to Thomas Wyse, its chairman, 'a man who, with energy and perseverance, laboured to promote the education of his fellow-countrymen'.⁽³⁴⁾ When he came to the question of whether Cork or Limerick was the more eligible site for the establishment of a provincial college for Munster, he was of the opinion that any 'disinterested judge' could not fail to pronounce in favour of Limerick. He was, no doubt, aware that the claim of Cork was very strong, so he opened another avenue when he said: 'I conceive that by attaching to the Limerick district those portions of Galway and the King's County, which naturally belong to it there is ample means for sustaining a college in both cities'.⁽³⁵⁾

O'Brien's speech was well balanced and wide-ranging, and in his final remarks he spoke of that time when intellectual darkness covered every other country of Europe, saying that Ireland was then pre-eminent for its learning and that amongst its schools Limerick was not the least famous. This obvious reference to the old abbey of Mungret was met with loud cheering. He then proposed the following:

That whilst we duly estimate the advantages of communicating to the poorer classes the instruction most suitable to their condition, we, at the same time, regard it as of equal importance that adequate provision should be made for affording to the more affluent orders of society the means of obtaining such a



Bishop John Ryan.

description of education, as is best calculated to fit them for the duties which belong to their station in life.⁽³⁶⁾

High Sheriff, James D. Lyons, seconded the proposition. It is of interest to note that while Smith O'Brien was a Protestant, the High Sheriff was a Catholic (residing at Croom House, Croom, Co. Limerick). It was immediately after the proposal of this resolution that the difference of opinion became more evident. The chairman read the resolution to the gathering and sought its approval. The majority of those present were in favour of its adoption but there was a strong influential and vocal group who were not so inclined. The members of this group included Lords Clarina and Adare, William Monsell, William W. Maunsell, Archdeacon of Limerick, James W. Forster, Vicar General, Archdeacon of Aghadoe, the Rev. Mr. Elmes and a number of other members of the Established Church. In reply to those who favoured a local college, William Monsell, later Baron Emly, contended that the principle upon which such an institution was sought to be founded was erroneous and contrary to the principles of the Protestant Church. He continued:

Now it was worth while to consider what principle those who brought forward the proposition of the Collegiate system of education in Ireland, proposed, or why they had made that proposition. We found their principles already set forth and called into operation in the new Education Board, to which the Clergy of nearly all the Protestants of the country objected - therefore he now, and those who acted with him objected to the plan brought forward by Mr. O'Brien.

He added that there were some, including himself, 'who could not conscientiously dissociate religion and education'. He very clearly expressed conservative Protestant fears when he remarked that

in such an institution as that proposed by Smith O'Brien and others, 'the prevailing religion of the district might be found to preponderate' and thus exercise a power over the young minds of the minority.' Indeed, his rhetoric carried him even further when he saw such an institution 'as an engine to overthrow the Established Church in this country'.

Monsell's speech drew instant reaction from O'Brien's supporters, and there were charges that he had used language which was offensive to the Roman Catholic religion. Others present spoke in support of Monsell's position, notably Archdeacon Maunsell and the Rev. Mr. Elmes, Vicar of St. John's, Limerick. After unsuccessfully trying to have O'Brien's resolution amended, Monsell and his supporters eventually withdrew from the meeting. The motion was then put and carried unanimously.

It is interesting to note that it was some members of the Established Church who reacted strongly against the non-denominational aspect of the proposed colleges. Whether they acted out of religious zeal or not is debatable. Their attitude could only help to maintain the existing position in higher education, where Catholics were almost totally restricted. In 1794, Catholics were allowed to proceed to degrees of Trinity College (34 Geo. III), but they were, nevertheless, excluded from scholarships and fellowships. Few Catholics, however, availed themselves of this partial concession between the years 1794 - 1839.⁽³⁷⁾

After the withdrawal of Monsell and his supporters from the meeting, the remainder of the resolutions were then put and carried, together with an address to the queen and petitions to both houses of parliament. One of the resolutions, proposed by Sir Lucius O'Brien (Baronet, elder brother of William Smith O'Brien), and seconded by Caleb Powell, read as follows:

Resolved - That the City of Limerick, being the most central point that can be selected, with reference to the Province of Munster, and to a portion of the Province of Connaught, is peculiarly well adapted to become an eligible site for such an institution.⁽³⁸⁾

This resolution was similar to the resolution adopted at the Cork meeting concerning the location of the proposed college there. William Smith O'Brien must have had a hand in the framing of the resolution since his elder brother, Sir Lucius, proposed its adoption. By having Sir Lucius propose and Caleb Powell second its adoption it may be assumed that he treated the matter of location as being of the utmost importance. Caleb Powell (Clonshavoy, Murroe, Co. Limerick) was himself a man of some standing in the community. He was subsequently returned as M.P. for Co. Limerick 1841 - '47, and was high sheriff in 1858.⁽³⁹⁾

At the close of the meeting, Sir Aubrey De Vere left the chair and the high sheriff was called thereto. It was

proposed by Sir David Roche, M.P., and seconded by William Smith O'Brien, M.P., that the best thanks of the meeting be given to Sir Aubrey for his dignified conduct in the chair. At a late hour, the meeting finally ended.

The address to the queen, and the petitions to both houses of parliament were placed at the Limerick Institution rooms, where those persons who were favourable to the project were able to affix their names thereto. The address to the queen stated concisely their reasons in favour of collegiate education:

We have, with regret, to inform your Majesty that there is not at present, in the South or West of Ireland, any Collegiate Establishment, in which instruction can be obtained in very many of the most useful sciences, more especially in those which tend to qualify for occupations in which industry require d to be guided by superior intelligence; and that in consequence, many young men of the fairest talents and of the best inclinations, whose parents cannot afford the means of sending them to reside at distant universities, are debarred from the advantages of intellectual culture which in other countries are afforded thro' the means of Collegiate Institutions.⁽⁴⁰⁾

There is a certain social concern evident in this part of the address. However, it is very necessary to state also that in all the agitation for collegiate institutions in Cork and Limerick the idea of a class-based society was evident, the inference being that the National Board, which was established in 1831, catered for the poorer classes, but that the more affluent orders of society were to be educated in the proposed collegiate institutions. Indeed, the very first resolution adopted at the Limerick meeting makes this abundantly clear.

In the meantime, those who were opposed to the establishment of collegiate institutions were very active. They gained the support of the Earl of Dunraven and Lords Adare and Clarina. Dunraven's opposition was evident even before the meeting. In his reply to O'Brien circular, he said:

If I rightly understand the object to be the establishment of Collegiate education unconnected with religion, any opinions I express would be in direct condemnation of a principle which I am fully assured will work out evil instead of good. It is part of the system of expediency and philosophy afloat nowadays, and is very specious and captivating, but if you live, as I trust you may, to a good old age, unless I greatly err in my judgement, you will witness great evils flowing from this unscriptural source.⁽⁴¹⁾

Dunraven, a public-spirited landowner, was devotedly religious, and his sincerity, therefore, on this occasion can hardly be questioned. Although he was the most influential person amongst those who were opposed to the college, it was William Monstall who was the chief

organiser. He had petitions to the queen and to parliament drawn up, which were signed by over five thousand people including the Earl of Dunraven and Lords Adare and Clarina. Their main objection to the proposed college was based on religion. They stated in their petition to the queen:

We implore your Majesty to preserve them from the polluting influence of a proposed institution for Collegiate Education in the South of Ireland, to which your Majesty's approval is to be solicited, being an institution not resting on the precepts and doctrines of our holy religion. We humbly submit to you our assurance and belief, that philosophy, literature, science, and knowledge can be blessings, only when accompanied by moral and religious principles, springing from the firm and sure foundation of the work of God, which the plan of the proposed institution, separating itself from religion, altogether rejects.⁽⁴²⁾

It is worthy to note that O'Brien had support from some members of the Established Church. Edward Hoare wrote encouragingly to him stating 'as a friend of the diffusion of education, I wish well to the project in view and I am not one who entertain fears for the cause of religion, as if the truth had anything to fear from the spread of general instruction and liberal education.'⁽⁴³⁾

The presentation of the petition to parliament in favour of the proposed college was entrusted to O'Brien himself. The secretary of the Limerick committee, Dr. Brodie, informed him that it contained nearly 1,100 signatures.⁽⁴⁴⁾ O'Brien wrote to Thomas Wyse very shortly after the Limerick meeting giving him a full account of the proceedings and enclosed a copy of his (O'Brien's) speech. They had come to disagree among themselves over the respective claims of Cork and Limerick as the more suitable site for the college which they both desired to establish. Wyse's reply, however, reflects the real friendship that had sprung up between them. It shows, further, the single-minded concentration upon this serious purpose which inspired them both. Wyse referred to the Protestant group who were opposed to the project:

The parsons mustered numerically strong, but I never read more astounding instances of ignorance, and presumption of all kinds than what their discourse furnish. No wonder they know so little of the education of other countries, they hardly know anything of what is done in their own. Their ideas in almost every particular, of the education, moral, religious, scientific, and literary of Trinity College are erroneous.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Thus, Wyse rejects the arguments of those opposed to a provincial college. He says in that same letter that Limerick's requisition list 'is a proud array and competes with Cork, I am glad to see it so well and honourably filled'. However there was still disagreement between

them regarding location. Further, Wyse made it clear that should there be more than one institution, the importance of their academic status should be stressed:

I read your speech very attentively, but am not yet brought over to your way of thinking. At the same time, your request is only reasonable. I suspend my judgement until we meet in London. If we can have so many colleges, well and good, but I am for colleges, remember, and not institutions between Colleges and Academies.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The Rev. Bryce, who was principal of the Belfast Academy at the time, had been present at the Limerick meeting. O'Brien wrote to him a few days later seeking information in relation to that institution.⁽⁴⁷⁾ It would appear, however, that while O'Brien may have been interested in an institution similar to the Belfast Academy, Wyse very definitely wanted something more.

Little progress was made between 1839 and 1841. The government alone could introduce a motion to provide for the necessary expenditure. It was a singularly inopportune time to demand provincial colleges for Ireland since the Bill to organise national education in England was only carried after much opposition.

However, the promoters did convene in London a series of meetings of the peers and members of parliament who represented Munster. They had by this time the active support of Thomas Spring Rice, now Lord Monteagle, who was no longer a politician, but had been appointed Controller of the Treasury. He presided at the meetings of the Irish representatives in London. A deputation to Viceroy Lord Morpeth was arranged, which included Lord Monteagle, Smith O'Brien and Thomas Wyse.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Morpeth promised to consult the cabinet, but after months of delay, they were told to interview the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Nothing was achieved since by this time the Whig government was tottering and a dissolution of parliament was expected.

Much happened in Ireland in the years that followed. O'Connell's Repeal agitation had begun to gather momentum at last. In the autumn of 1842, the *Nation* newspaper was established by a group of young men who brought a new impulse into public life. O'Brien joined the Repeal Association in October, 1843. It was then over a year since the last of the 'monster' meetings had been banned at Clontarf, and O'Connell and his principal lieutenants in the Repeal agitation had been imprisoned on charges of seditious conspiracy. During the state trials that ensued, O'Connell and his chief associates were all rendered incapable of political activity and Smith O'Brien was formally appointed as the deputy-leader of the movement.⁽⁴⁹⁾ It was this involvement in the day-to-day business of the Repeal Association that subsequently prevented him from giving his active attention to forwarding Limerick's claim



Thomas Spring Rice, Lord Monteagle.

for one of the proposed academical institutions.

Thomas Wyse remained clear of the Repeal Association, and did not support O'Connell except in the Catholic agitation. He was, therefore, free to pursue matters concerning education, and he persisted steadily with the colleges scheme at Westminster. In July, 1844, on the occasion of the House going into committee for a grant to Maynooth College, Wyse urged the necessity of a solution of the Irish colleges question. In reply, Sir Robert Peel admitted the defects of which he complained, but stated that the subject was one which already occupied the consideration of ministers and to which the attention of the new Viceroy, Lord Heytesbury, would be immediately directed.

Peel further observed that at an early period of next session, the government would strive to increase the means of academical education in Ireland.⁽⁵⁰⁾ These declared intentions were heartily welcomed in Cork and the committee there organised a meeting for 13 November, 1844. They again had a circular printed and again titled themselves 'The Munster Provincial College Committee'. They sent a copy of the circular to many of the more influential people both in Cork and in the neighbouring counties. They also sent a copy for publication to the editors of newspapers in the South or Ireland.⁽⁵¹⁾ James Roche was still their chairman while William Clear and D.B. Bullen were joint-secretaries and the circular itself was dated 26 October, 1844.

A letter from James Roche and a copy

of the circular was forwarded to the Limerick Corporation and was discussed by Mayor W.J. Geary and the members of the Town Council at their Quarterly meeting which was held on 1 November.⁽⁵²⁾ It was at this stage that the mayor and members of Limerick Town Council became actively involved in the campaign to have one of the proposed colleges established in Limerick. Roche sought the co-operation of the Town Council; however, it was agreed that the mayor should return an answer to the effect that the extension of collegiate education was most valuable and desirable, but that in applying to parliament, it was hoped the interests of the city of Limerick would not be overlooked. It was unlikely that Smith O'Brien received a circular in view of his previous attitude, but it is clear also that he did nothing to bring together the Limerick Committee of 1839 or to organise a meeting in the city. The truth was that he was now totally occupied with the affairs and business of the Repeal Association. However, Lord Monteagle did reply to Roche from Mount Trenchard:

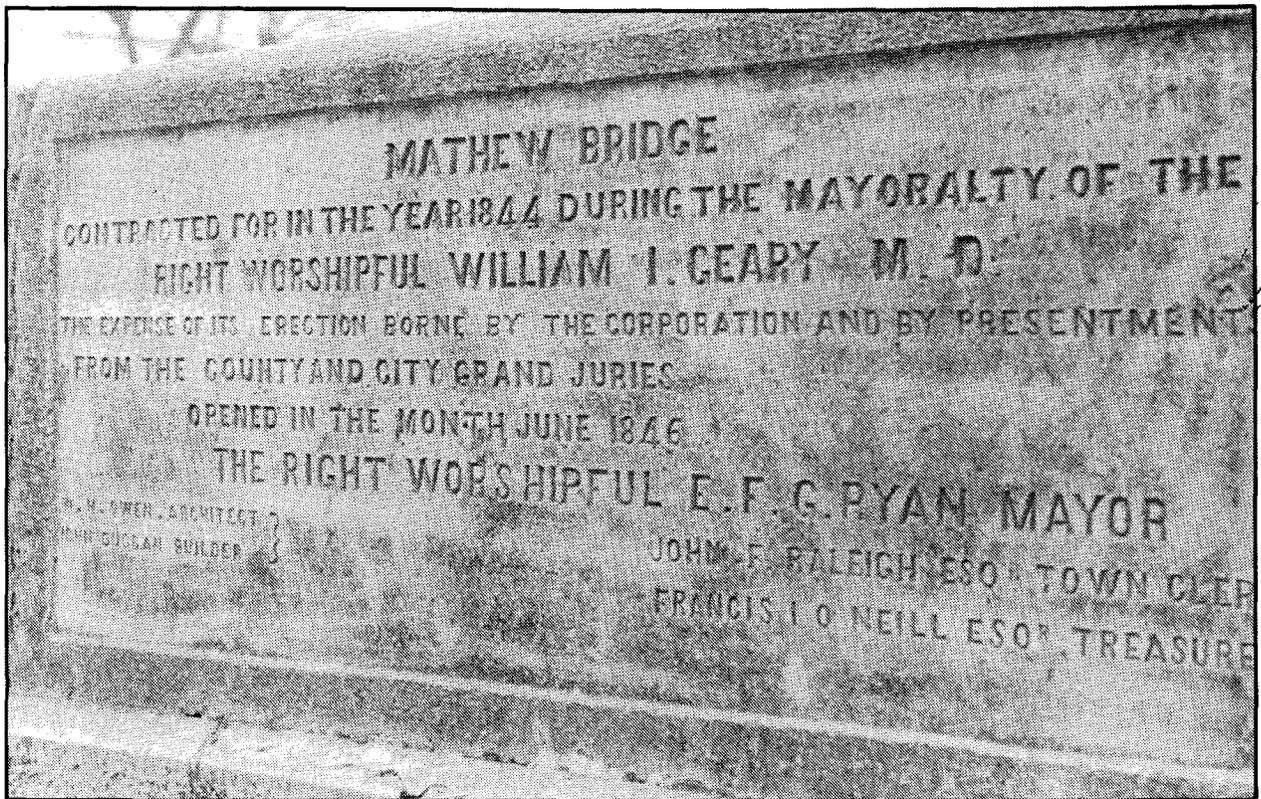
If I possibly can I shall attend your meeting as I consider the object to be one of the most interesting and important questions to which the attention of the Government can be called, and from the very satisfactory and liberal statements made by Sir Robert Peel during the past session I feel we may entertain the most sanguine expectations of success.⁽⁵³⁾

Monteagle's support must have been most welcome to the Cork Committee, as he was one of the most influential Limerick men of that period, and though retired from active politics, he still enjoyed immense respect.

Another who gave support to the proposed scheme was the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. John Ryan. His letter, which was published in a local newspaper, was most favourable, 'concurring in every sentiment put forth in the circular'. He regretted his inability to attend the meeting due to the fact that he had to attend the annual meeting of the bishops in Dublin on 11 November. Nevertheless, he gave them permission 'to make any use of my name in connection with this undertaking you may deem useful to the end in view'.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Dr. Ryan's concurrence may be interpreted by some as being hasty, since he would have had an ideal opportunity to discuss the matter at the forthcoming episcopal meeting.

The meeting went ahead at Cork and the principal speaker was Thomas Wyse. In his speech, he reviewed the whole course of his fourteen year campaign. It is clear that he fully expected Cork to be the site of the proposed college and indeed he went on to advise the people of Cork as to how their educational institutions should be administered.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Limerick remained inactive until after the bill for the establishment of academical institutions was introduced into parliament by Sir James Graham on 9 May,



Mathew Bridge was opened by Mayor William J. Geary in June, 1846.

1845. Graham stated that there would be three colleges and that Cork would be a natural site for the college for the South of Ireland. Though he would not pledge himself to the precise spot, he further thought that Limerick or Galway would be very proper places for the establishment of another of these colleges.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Cork, then was safe, and it was then to be either Limerick or Galway. A special meeting of the Limerick Town Council was held on 12 May⁽⁵⁷⁾ at which Dr. William Griffin adverted to the bill introduced by Sir James Graham. He regretted that the honourable members did not intimate his intention of having four instead of three academies. He proposed that a memorial to the government be prepared praying that one of the collegiate institutions now contemplated for this country be placed in the city of Limerick.

It was also proposed that prominent gentlemen in the city and county be requested to assist, notably the Marquis of Lansdowne, Earl of Clare, Lord Monteagle, the Earl of Dunraven and the Earl of Limerick, together with the county and city members of parliament. The fact that Dunraven was asked to support the claim of Limerick is interesting in the light of his earlier stand.

An editorial comment of the following day explained that Limerick had a far greater claim for a college than Galway, being a city with commerce, revenue and population far beyond Galway, 'a town situate upon a point of the extreme western coast and remote from general access.'⁽⁵⁸⁾ The editorial further stated that

Mayor W.J. Geary and Bishop Ryan waited on William Smith O'Brien, but they found that he, 'originally the eager advocate for such an institution, declined moving in the business without the sanction of Mr. O'Connell'.

O'Connell, meanwhile, made his position clear at the meeting of the Repeal Association in Dublin on 12 May.⁽⁵⁹⁾ He condemned the colleges, in a phrase borrowed from Sir Robert Inglis, as 'a gigantic scheme of Godless education'. Although O'Brien failed to act for the establishing of a college in Limerick, he disagreed with O'Connell and the others who were against the establishment of the colleges. He wrote a letter to this effect to the secretary of the Repeal Association in which he stated: 'I have no hesitation in saying that I regard the extension of Academical Education as a benefit, the value of which to Ireland cannot be exaggerated.'⁽⁶⁰⁾ He was in agreement also with the non-denominational aspect of the proposed colleges. He had reservations, however, which were genuine and deeply held:

I trust that we shall concur in declaring that some provision ought to be made for the religious instruction of the students in the Faith which they respectfully profess, and that adequate guarantee should be afforded against attempts to undermine their religious beliefs. We shall, also, I hope concur in resisting any arrangement with regard to the appointment of the professors which shall place at the disposal of the Executive increased means of political corruption.

He voiced both these objections in later debates in parliament.

The Limerick Town Council and other interested parties advanced the campaign for a Limerick college. The Commissioners of St. Michael's Parish, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Limerick Institution forwarded memorials to Sir Robert Peel and Sir James Graham, requesting that Limerick be determined upon as a location for one of the colleges about to be established in Ireland.⁽⁶¹⁾ The Limerick Town Council met on 27 May and adopted the memorial to Sir Robert Peel. They appointed a deputation consisting of the mayor, Sir Richard Franklin, the Town Clerk, J.F. Raleigh and F.J. O'Neill, to proceed to London, to confer with the noblemen and gentlemen of the county and city at present there and to wait on Sir Robert Peel with the memorial.⁽⁶²⁾ The memorial dwelt on the desirability of selecting Limerick, as the centre of an immense population, whose inhabitants were most anxious for academical education.⁽⁶³⁾ It mentioned the facilities for science, medicine and agriculture which Limerick already possessed. In an obvious reference to Galway it stated:

It is far from the desire of your Memorialists to deprive other localities of those educational advantages for which they are so exceedingly anxious themselves, but they submit if Government are not yet prepared to establish a fourth College in Ireland, which is generally thought to be necessary, the claims of Limerick are on every account too pressing to be postponed. They therefore pray

that you will be pleased to fix on that City as a site for one of the proposed Colleges.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The people of Galway and Connacht in general were active in the matter also. In the *Limerick Chronicle* on 28 May there is a report of a deputation, headed by the Marquises of Sligo and Clanrickarde, having an interview with Sir Robert Peel to impress on him the necessity of establishing a college at Galway.

The deputation from the Limerick Town Council proceeded to London, where they were joined by the city and county noblemen and gentlemen. They had an interview on 4 June with Sir James Graham on the subject of the selection of Limerick. The members of the deputation were: The Marquis of Lansdowne, the Earl of Clare, the Earl of Dunraven, Lord Monteagle, Col. The Hon. R. Fitzgibbon, the Mayor of Limerick, John O'Brien, M.P., Samuel Dickson, F.W. Russell, Mathew Barrington, Charles W. Williams, James Harvey, and the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce.⁽⁶⁵⁾ The petitions and memorials having been presented, Lords Lansdowne, Clare and Monteagle and Mayor Geary fully brought before him the claims of Limerick. Sir James replied that, though the claims of so considerable a city as Limerick could not escape the attention of the government, it was premature in the present state of the question to hold forth anything approaching a promise. In answer to a suggestion from John O'Brien, that a fourth college might be necessary, Sir James stated that the sum required from parliament would, in the opinion of the government, be inadequate for the establishment of more than three colleges.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The deputation retired quite pleased with the courtesy and attention accorded to them by Sir James Graham and were, it appears, sanguine of ultimate success. At a meeting of the Town Council of 24 June, 1845, Mayor Geary reported as follows:

Gentlemen,

In compliance with the Resolution of Council I proceeded to London accompanied by Mr. O'Neill and had the honor to submit to Sir Robert Peel and Sir James Graham the Memorial adopted by you which claimed for Limerick the benefits of being selected as the site of one of the Academic Colleges which Her Majesty's Government propose erecting in Ireland.

We were accompanied on the occasion by Lords Lansdowne, Clare, Dunraven, Monteagle, Hon. Col. Fitzgibbon, John O'Brien, M.P., Samuel Dickson, Mathew Barrington, James Harvey, Charles W. Williams, Francis Russell.

The claims of Limerick were most ably put forward by the deputation, but more particularly so by Lords Clare and Monteagle and Mr. John O'Brien.

After a very lengthened discussion Sir James Graham apprised the Deputation that the claims of Limerick, represented

as they were by so highly respectable a deputation and sustained by arguments so strong as those put forward, would be sure to receive the most anxious and mature consideration of Her Majesty's Government.

To the deputation the interview appeared to have been very satisfactory and we may at least draw the conclusion from it with some certainty, that under any circumstances the claims of Limerick to a College, cannot be deferred to any distant period.⁽⁶⁷⁾



Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850).

The Catholic bishops had, at this stage, met in Dublin. This meeting took place on 21 May and was presided over by Dr. Murray, Archbishop of Dublin.⁽⁶⁸⁾ A minority, led by Archbishop Crolley of Armagh and Dr. Murray, which also included Dr. Ryan on Limerick, were inclined to accept the colleges. The majority, under Archbishop MacHale of Tuam, favoured a demand for purely Catholic colleges. The outcome was a compromise. A memorial was forwarded to the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Heytesbury, accepting the colleges, but with some radical proposals which would alter their non-denominational character.

William Smith O'Brien spoke in the House on 13 June. Sir James Graham moved that the House should resolve into passing a resolution on which to found a grant necessary to the formation of colleges in Ireland. While agreeing with the proposed measures and avowing himself an advocate of the system of mixed education, he (W.S. O'Brien) had grave reservations concerning the appointment of professors and the lack of provision for religious instruction.⁽⁶⁹⁾ He further stated that his constituents were extremely anxious about the subject and were desirous that such an institution should be established. He confessed, however, that he would rather forego all the advantages which these institutions promised to the country, should his

objections go unheeded. He felt he spoke for the majority of the Irish people on these issues.⁽⁷⁰⁾ O'Brien's reservations were noted by the House, but he was verbally attacked by some of the more extreme members, notably Mr. Colquhoun and Sir Robert Inglis. The former was particularly vindictive when he spoke of O'Brien as 'He, who came fresh from Conciliation Hall - He, who had abandoned his duty in that House in order to carry on that most mischievous agitation in Ireland'.⁽⁷¹⁾ O'Brien's defence was able and controlled. However, the personal nature of the debate lessened the influence of his views on the House.

O'Brien delivered a fine speech to the House on the same subject on 30 June. On this occasion he reiterated his objections to the bill, while at the same time putting forward positive suggestions to make it more acceptable. He suggested that the government might well consider the opinion of the Catholic bishops with reference to the appointment of a Catholic chaplain in each of the colleges, as expressed in their memorial. With regard to the appointment of professors, he thought it desirable that the initial appointments be made on the recommendations of a board, whose members should be named in the bill and a majority of whom should be Catholics. For future appointments he said that the professoriate of each college might, 'after public examination', recommend the appointments. In this speech, he also urged the government to bring forward a measure for opening the fellowships and scholarships of Trinity College to Catholics.⁽⁷²⁾

Limerick still persisted in its efforts, and a memorial from Samuel Dickson was presented by Captain Gladstone, M.P., to Sir James Graham.⁽⁷³⁾ Dickson had been a member of the deputation who interviewed Graham on 4 June. The memorial stated the advantages Limerick had over Galway and highlighted the diverging views held by Dr. MacHale, Archbishop of Tuam and Dr. Ryan Bishop of Limerick:

Memorialists refers you to a recent letter from Dr. MacHale, R.C. Archbishop of Tuam, to Sir Robert Peel, denouncing those colleges, and showing clearly, that should one be established in Galway, his district, it must be a decided failure there whereas Dr. Ryan, the highly respectable R.C. Bishop of Limerick, was not only one of the applicants for such a college in 1839, but still is a great advocate to have one in Limerick where its success is certain.⁽⁷⁴⁾

A further memorial was transmitted to Sir Robert Peel during the first week of September which was titled, 'The Memorial of the Inhabitants of Limerick and its Vicinity'.⁽⁷⁵⁾ It set forth the advantages possessed by Limerick in much the same sequence as the earlier memorial of the Limerick Corporation. It made a further point, when it mentioned the building of railroads:

The approaching speed of railroads, too, Sir, will evidently render even the most remote parts of Connacht within three or four hours drive of Limerick, in fact to be accomplished between bedrise and breakfast.

The people of Galway were by this time very active in the matter. A public meeting was held on 7 August, and a deputation met the Lord Lieutenant on the subject. The people of Tuam 'under the nose of its formidable archbishop'⁽⁷⁶⁾ also supported the claim of Connacht for a college.

However, time was fast running out on the matter of location. The bill itself received the royal assent on 31 July. Two inspectors from the Board of Works, Radcliffe and Owen, inspected several sites in Cork on Monday, 25 August, and then left for Galway.⁽⁷⁷⁾ They did not visit Limerick and it must be assumed that by this date the choice as to the location of the colleges had been made. In the *Limerick Chronicle* there is a report of a letter written by the Marquis of Clanricarde to a friend (not named) in Galway, stating that he had interviewed the Lord Lieutenant on the subject of the claim of that town to the site of a provincial college. The Marquis briefly observed that 'I think His Excellency's language gives every reason to be confident that Galway will be the site'⁽⁷⁸⁾ This confidence was not misplaced since, by 1 October, 'the Government had no longer any serious doubt about Belfast, Cork and Galway as the seats of the three colleges'.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Thus, Limerick's claim failed in the end. The campaign for a college had endured for seven years, (1838 - 1845), and although the outcome was unsatisfactory, nevertheless, it must be concluded that the noblemen, politicians and citizens who were actively associated with the campaign endeavoured gallantly to achieve their goal. It would appear that the government was guided, in their final choice, by the report of the select committee, that 'one college at least of the description, in each of the four provinces of Ireland . . . be so established'.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Since, in fact, only three colleges were provided for, and, since Cork and not Limerick secured the Munster site, it was only fair, under the terms of the report, that Galway should have gained the Western college.

APPENDIX

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR ROBERT
PEEL, BARONET,
FIRST LORD OF HER MAJESTY'S TREASURY.

The Memorial of the Corporation of the
Borough of Limerick.

Sheweth,

That your Memorialists have learned with great gratification the intention of Her Majesty's Government to establish Provincial Colleges for the education of the upper and middle classes in Ireland, and they cannot too strongly express their sense of the necessity of

such a measure, and its important and lasting advantages of this Country.

That they have also perceived with much satisfaction that Limerick has been named as a site for one of those Colleges.

Your Memorialists can assure you that in no district or City of Ireland is such an Institution more needed than in Limerick, being in the centre of an immense population, its inhabitants are just sufficiently instructed to feel the want of an Academical Education, and yet too limited in their means to take advantage of any distant Collegiate establishment.

As some evidence of this your Memorialists may mention the great anxiety which has always been evinced by the Inhabitants of this City on this subject; with very inadequate means they have already had in existence for some time two literary and scientific institutions each of which has a museum, one the Limerick Institution, founded in one thousand eight hundred and nine, for the promotion of science and literature, the other the Philosophical and Literary Society and they have since the period of their formation Memorialled every successive Government in this Country for some grant, to enable them to keep up systematic courses of lectures which for want of that aid were delivered irregularly, and at such long intervals that their effect was nearly lost.

Your Memorialists beg especially to call Your Attention to a meeting which took place in Limerick on this subject in the year one thousand eight hundred and thirty nine. It was convened by a requisition from the Nobility and Gentry of this and the surrounding Counties signed by persons of all shades in politics and religion. The meeting evinced the greatest zeal and anxiety for the Establishment of a College in the South West of Ireland and the resolutions adopted fully recognized the principle upon which the measure at present proposed by Government is founded.

Your Memorialists beg further to state that the City of Limerick offers every facility for carrying out the objects of the proposed College, and giving a comprehensive system of instruction in all the sciences, even as regards anatomy and surgery may be mentioned. It has two large Infirmeries (one of which has one hundred and twenty beds) where pupils are instructed and clinical lectures given, and the certificates of attendance on which are recognized by the Colleges of London, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

It is hardly necessary to say, that as the inducement to determine the site of any Collegiate Institutions, must be the existence of the largest and least instructed population within the smallest area. Limerick as the centre of four of the richest and most populous Counties in Ireland, possess peculiar claims. Those Counties present a variety of soils capable of vast improvement which would make the application of science to agriculture of inestimable advantage, and its increasing commerce as well as the importance of its central position and facilities of communication generally renders the diffusion of scientific knowledge essentially necessary to its future advancement.

It may possibly be suggested that as one of the proposed Colleges is to be Established at Cork a second at Limerick would be unnecessary.

Your Memorialists however beg respectfully to suggest that one College such as that proposed is wholly inadequate for so large a Province as Munster containing a population of nearly Two Millions and an half, and is in fact little more than proportioned to the wants of the City and County of Cork alone, containing a population equal to that of all Wales.

It is far from the desire of your Memorialists

to deprive other localities of those educational advantages for which they are so exceedingly anxious themselves but they submit, if Government are not yet prepared to Establish a fourth College in Ireland which is generally thought to be necessary, the claims of Limerick are on every account too pressing to be postponed - They therefore pray that you will be pleased to fix on that City as a site for one of the proposed Colleges.

Your Memorialists further desire to state, that there can be little doubt, the vast majority of the students in the proposed Colleges must be contributed by their immediate localities and the surrounding districts with which those localities are intimately connected. The expense attendant on sending pupils to distant Provincial Colleges will approach as nearly to that attendant on sending them to Trinity College, Dublin, as to operate altogether in favour of the latter among the class of persons who could afford it; a residence in Dublin and education in Trinity College offer so many advantages to young men intended for the learned professions (who form in fact the only class likely to be sent far from home at a heavy expense) that parents or guardians will necessarily secure them for the children in preference to lesser advantages in the provinces at nearly the same cost.

Looking at those Colleges therefore, as Institutions mainly adapted for the Academical instructions of the youth of their immediate localities, the consideration of their central situations and the density of the population around them in every direction, is one of the utmost importance and your Memorialists would humbly suggest ought to form an essential element in determining the several sites.

William J. Geary,
Mayor of Limerick.

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To The Right Honorable Sir Robert
Peel Baronet, first Lord of Her
Majestys Treasury

The Memorial of the Corporation of the Borough
of Limerick

Sheweth That your Memorialists have learned with
great gratification the intention of Her Majestys Government to
establish Provincial Colleges for the education of the upper and

lower and your Memorialists would humbly suggest
ought to form an essential element in determining the
several sites -

William Geary
Mayor of Limerick

1845

Memorial of the Corporation of the Borough of Limerick to Sir Robert Peel, signed by Mayor William Geary.

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