

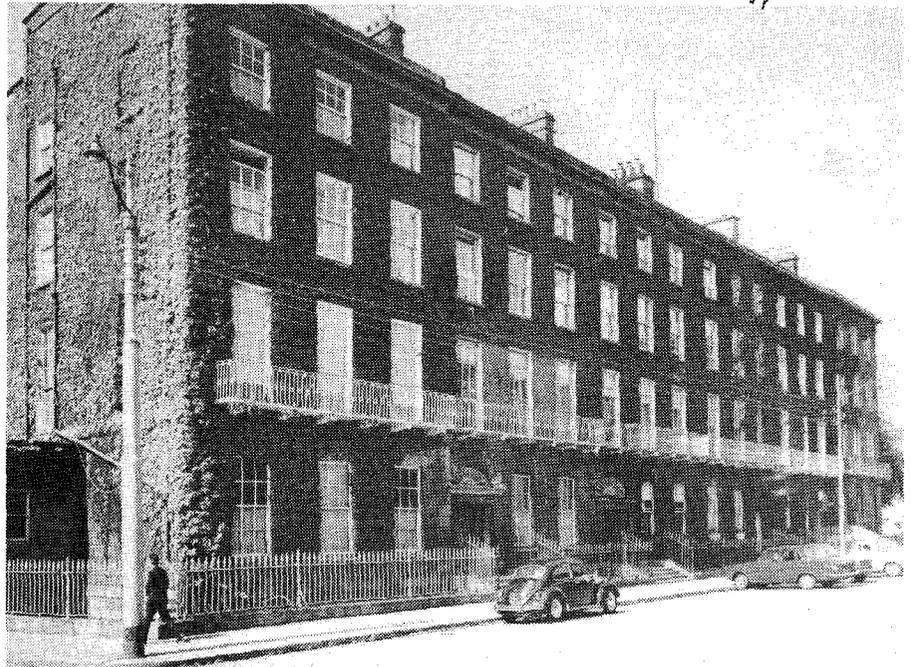
Limerick: Building and the Famine

by Judith Hill

"The city itself is a very interesting one, but I ought to speak of it as it is, namely two towns in one. There is an old Irish town, consisting of narrow and gloomy streets and tall houses, and an English one, regular and handsome".⁽¹⁾

The 'two towns' observed by the visitor in 1835, so different in architectural character, were also administered separately and had very different inhabitants. Newtown Pery, the 'English one' was the place where the successful merchants, solicitors and traders and their servants lived, in the new Georgian terraces. It was administered by the Commissioners for the Parish of St. Michael. The old town had become the location of the dirtier trades and the poorer people, workers in the mills and with the ships on the quays that were the source of Limerick's wealth, and the unemployed. An entrenched and mainly Protestant oligarchy dominated the Corporation that administered this area so that the largely Catholic and mostly disenfranchised population had no representation in the Council chamber.

The great theme of Irish 19th century history is surely the emergence of this group as a problem, a voice and a presence in Ireland. Already a start had been made. The Act of Catholic Emancipation had enfranchised many of

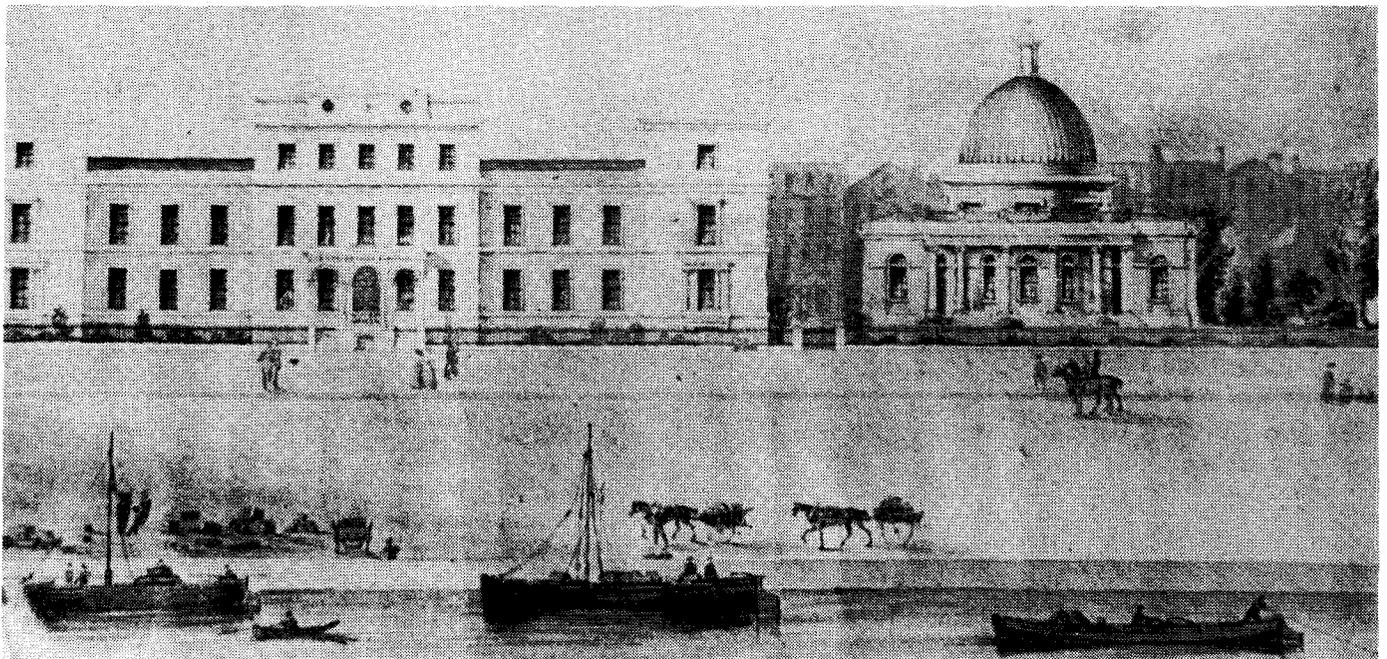


Tontine houses in Pery Square, built in 1840.

them and paved the way for the resurgence of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1840, the Municipal Reform Act set up new corporations which broke the old oligarchies. Broader political changes were being proposed with Daniel O'Connell's Repeal campaign, a programme which, with its basis in mass meetings, was politicising the urban working class and the tenant farmers. The Grand Juries had been busy in the early

19th century building hospitals and gaols; Limerick acquired its County Infirmary in 1811 and its County Gaol in 1817. And central government had begun to get involved with provision for the poor with schemes that were planned and built by the Board of Works. Limerick had a lunatic asylum by the early 1820s. All these were situated beyond both the new and old towns along Mulgrave Street.

By 1831 Limerick also had a general



Barrington's Hospital and the Mont de Piété.

hospital situated in the centre of the old town, facing the Abbey River.⁽²⁾ Barrington's Hospital, built to complement St. John's Fever and Lock Hospital and the Lying-in Hospital, neither of which catered for accidents or general medical cases, had been purposely set among its potential patients. The project had been instigated, and largely funded, by the Barrington family and relied on public donations as well as small grants from the Grand Jury and the government for its running costs. The essential weakness of this arrangement was demonstrated by the perpetual debt which the hospital sustained. In an effort to relieve this debt and make the hospital self-financing and, additionally, to attempt to break the insidious hold of corrupt pawnbrokers on the poor, Matthew Barrington proposed a Mont de Piété or Charitable Pawn Office for Limerick.⁽³⁾ It was built, a delightful classical temple with portico and cupola, on the green next to the hospital and was opened in 1837. It too was a failure. In 1845, it was converted into a convalescent hospital for patients discharged from the fever hospital.

If the building of Barrington's Hospital and the Mont de Piété looked like an anticipation of the famine which took hold in 1845, how much more so did the construction of a purpose-built workhouse in 1841. These projects in fact reflected the economic disruption following the end of the Napoleonic Wars which had resulted in widescale poverty, as one witness to a parliamentary commission on Irish poverty observed: "it would have been better for the Irish farmer if Bonaparte never lived, or never died".⁽⁴⁾ The cholera epidemics of 1821 and 1832 had also been devastating. Limerick Workhouse was one of 130 that were built between 1839 and 1847 under the Irish Poor Law Relief Act passed in 1838.⁽⁵⁾ The whole operation, organised by central government, based on an English system and built on experience gained in implementing that system, was frighteningly efficient and in many ways presaged government reactions to the calamity of the famine. Within months of the passing of the Relief Act which divided Ireland into 100 notional unions, each of which was to receive a workhouse to accommodate a notional 1000 people, George Nicholls had been appointed as architect and had set up an office in Dublin. Existing provision for the destitute poor was inspected and found to be completely insufficient so that only 5 structures were re-used. In Limerick, the House of Industry, built in 1774, with 16 large rooms, a few cells and an infirmary and which seemed to accommodate 88 people without undue strain in 1787, housed 567 in a slightly expanded building in 1840.⁽⁶⁾ Apart from the appalling overcrowding, this institution, which relied on the Grand Jury and private donations, was £700 in debt.

The Poor Law architects set to work drawing up standardised plans for the buildings, and the Commissioners



The Limerick Savings Bank, built in 1840.

inspected prospective sites and issued adverts for contracts. The workhouses were not intended to be appealing; they were to provide a standard of living no better than that of a working labourer. The government's comprehensive approach to the country was made possible by keeping the costs of each building to the minimum. This was reflected in the style, as the 1839 Report noted: "The style of building is intended to be of the cheapest description, compatible with durability; and effect is aimed at by harmony of proportion and simplicity of arrangement, all mere decoration being studiously excluded". Thomas and Kearns Deane of Cork, who were the architects and contractor for the Limerick Workhouse, responded to this brief with a simplified Tudor Revival structure which, with its long low rambling front resembles nothing so much as a country house. Local materials were used and the limestone facade of the Limerick Workhouse is a fine example of the utilitarian architecture of the period. It relied essentially on the skill of stone masons in producing both the beautifully cut and finished blocks which were detailed specifically for lintels, eaves and string courses and the split-faced, irregular-shaped stonework with which the walls were constructed and which contrasted well with the dressed stones. Although the Limerick Workhouse was completed in 1841, the project as a whole continued into the famine years, by which time additional buildings were needed in many places throughout the country.

When the "Act for the Erection of a Bridge across the River Shannon and of a Floating Dock to accommodate sharp vessels frequenting the Port of Limerick" was passed in 1823 it was landowning interests that were uppermost. This was

reflected in the impressive list of names of the Commissioners of the Bridge. They were granted the right to levy rates and duties on imports and exports to supplement the money that the government had granted to the Commissioners of Public Works for the project. Ten years later, the bridge, a particularly elegant structure designed by Alexander Nimmo, was nearing completion whereas the dock was still only a pipedream. The maritime interest began to agitate; it was their taxes which were being collected and they had not yet benefitted. A civil engineer, Thomas Rhodes, was appointed and proposed a dam at Kelly's Quay within which to form the floating dock, a dockyard and two tidal mills.⁽⁷⁾ An act of 1834, recognising that trade had doubled since the previous act, made financial and legal provision for this scheme. However, once work was started it was discovered that the bed of the river was unsuitable for a dam and there was speculation that flooding might be a danger if the scheme was completed.

This setback seemed to induce a lethargy in the Bridge Commissioners, who not only did little to advance the dock scheme for the next ten years but also prevented the construction of private quays and neglected the navigation of the river. The payment of the debt on Wellesley Bridge, which finally opened in 1835, was perhaps one reason for their inaction. However, they did decide to locate the dock further downstream and had purchased the land, a fact noted by Captain Washington in his report for the Tidal Harbour Commissioners in 1846.⁽⁸⁾ Encouraged by his support for a dock at Limerick, and aware perhaps, now that the famine was in its second winter, that the government was contemplating public



Barrington Street.

works schemes as famine relief, the commissioners submitted a petition to parliament for finance for a scheme which they had already costed. To support their application they stressed that the expenditure of this sum; "will not only be a means of increasing the security for the repayment of sums already advanced by vastly adding to the revenues of the Port, but what is a most desirable object at the moment - it will afford employment to a large and needy population". They were successful and a new act was passed in July, 1847.

However, work was still delayed. In September, 1848, the Harbour Commissioners, as the Bridge Commissioners had now become, resorted to a resolution: the dock works *must* commence soon, "first to give employment to a great number of Labourers who are in destitution", and duly second, interestingly, to appease the merchants. But, three months later, the *Limerick Reporter* carried an article observing: "It is melancholy to contemplate the numbers of our citizens and labourers walking about the streets idle in these dismal times, when the greater number of them might be employed in the

progress of these works, so entirely concerning the shipping interests of our city". In February, 1849, the Board of Works agreed to start.

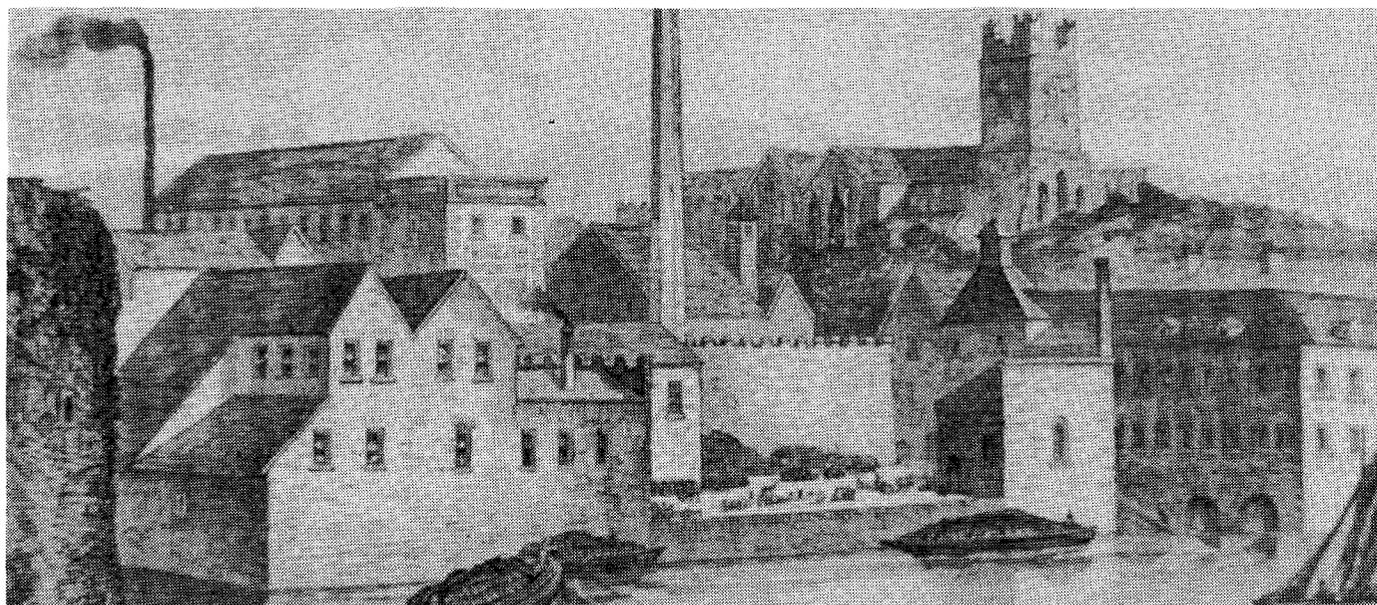
Agitation for the commencement of work had not only come from the press and the Harbour Commissioners. The Guild of Masons, only too aware that its members were often out of work and unpaid during the inclement winter months, was keen that such a large scale project should get under way.⁽⁹⁾ It appealed to the mayor to put pressure on the Board of Works. However, when work did start the Board employed what the guild referred to as 'labouring men' for the construction of dry stone walls. It is likely that at least some of these men were drawn from the pool of labour referred to in the *Limerick Reporter*. When the Guild of Masons complained, arriving at the site in a deputation with the mayor and indulging in a little intimidation by kicking down a yard or so of 'dry work', they were told that their own rates were too high. The *Limerick Reporter*, not appreciating perhaps that it was impossible to support both the masons and the labourers, wrote in favour of the masons, partly for the

political conclusions that could be drawn from the board's mistreatment of them. "And [there is] nothing more wantonly gratuitous than the calamity by which these English officials attempted to justify their tyranny", it opined.

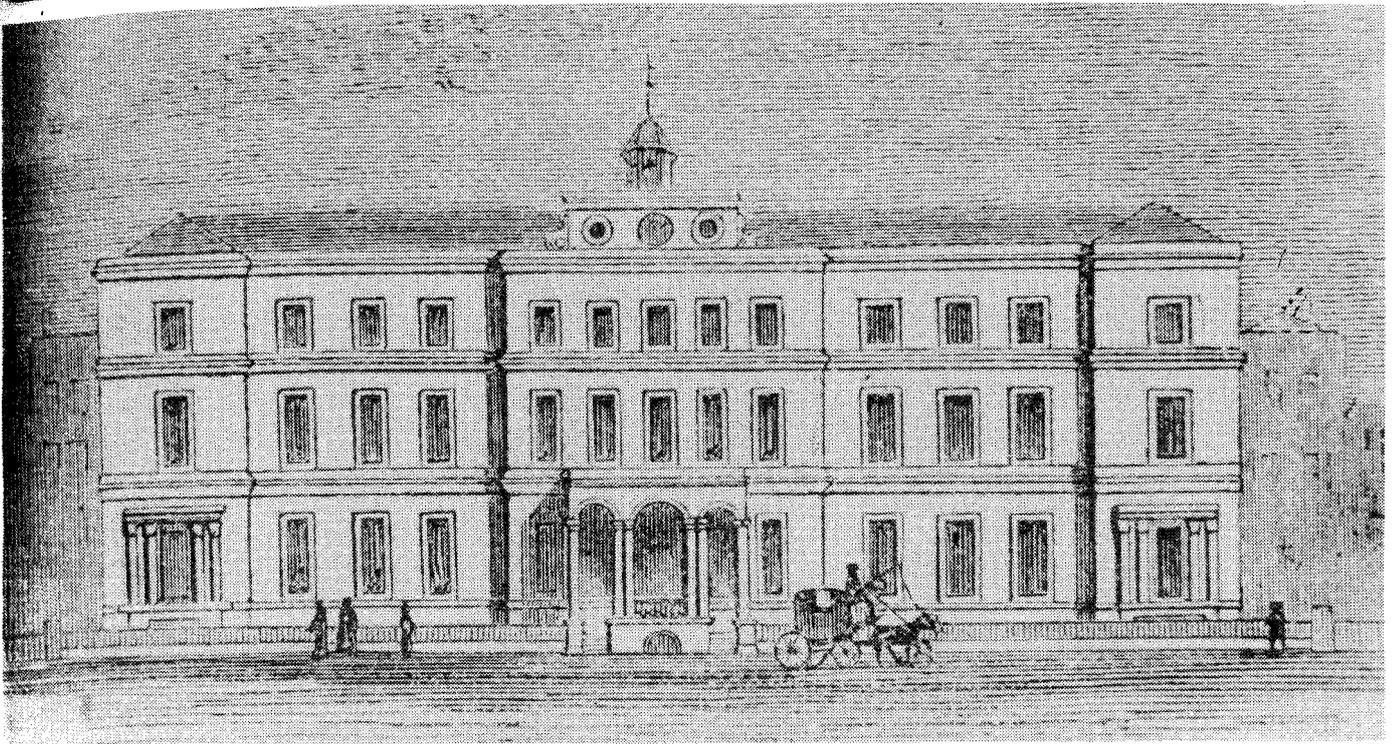
The foundation stone for the docks was finally laid in July of the same year by the mayor.⁽¹⁰⁾ The various speakers aired the issues that had already arisen and tried to set the tone for a peaceful contract. The Board of Works representative stressed their honourable intentions; "Masons, stone-cutters, carpenters, and labourers, are the men we will chiefly require. The Board of Works are anxious ... to allow them fair remuneration for their services", while adding that the Board was and had always been, "anxious ... to reward merit". The Roman Catholic Bishop, John Ryan, gave a homily on class distinctions: "The poor should respect the rich; no one should indulge in Eutopian (*sic*) ideas ... there must be different classes of society, else if this were not so, away with all power". The Harbour Commissioners' representative put this more straightforwardly saying that "he trusted nothing would occur to retard the operations of a work of such paramount importance to all classes, and that those employed would forbear from combination". The mayor summed up by saying "I feel convinced ... [the docks] will increase trade and commerce, and give employment to the working classes". The working classes and the unemployed had managed to dominate the occasion, although they were still a long way from being fairly dealt with. The docks were opened by the Lord Lieutenant on 26 September, 1853.

In 1848, the Corporation and the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods and Forests financed the construction of a path on the bank which circumvented King's Island "for the recreation of the citizens". It is possible that this public work formed part of the programme of famine relief.

New churches appeared in Limerick throughout the nineteenth century. Most



Mid-19th century picture of Newgate Brewery and St. Mary's Cathedral.



Barrington's Hospital in the 1840s.

of the Church of Ireland churches were built before the famine. The parish church of St. Michael had been an extended project which reached completion in 1844. St. Munchin's church was built in 1827 under the aegis of the Board of First Fruits, which had been set up in 1712 specifically to build or assist the building of churches for the established church. James Pain, the First Fruits architect for Munster, designed St. Munchin's in the recognised style of the board: simple hall, west tower, "discreetly Gothic".⁽¹¹⁾ The Board of The First Fruits was disbanded in 1834 and was succeeded by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, whose architect was Joseph Welland. He designed St. John's Church in the Romanesque style. The foundation stone was laid in 1851 and the church was completed in the following year.

The story of the building of Catholic churches is quite different and here it is likely that the famine did have a role to play in delaying their construction until the 1850s. Lacking the institutional and financial power of the established church in the earlier part of the 19th century, the Roman Catholic Church had to proceed cautiously; it relied on the enthusiasm and pockets of its parishioners. This certainly seems to have been the case with St. John's Cathedral.⁽¹²⁾ In 1843, a plan was floated to renovate the Chapel of St. John's. The Register of Baptisms records that the parish was divided into 23 districts and collectors appointed to each. An organ was installed in June, 1843, the cost of £120 being paid for by half-penny contributions from the parishioners. No further collections are recorded until after the famine. Activity started again in 1851 when the Redemptorists preached a mission in the parish, which was concluded with the erection of a mission

cross. A new high altar followed. In 1856, there was a proposal for a new church building which was quickly succeeded by the proposal to make it a cathedral. The momentum thus started would last to the end of the century and into the next.

Apart from the schemes financed by the government was there much speculative building in Limerick during the famine years? The trade directories suggest that businesses associated with building were not, at least, immediately hit by the economic depression associated with the famine, for the number of such businesses rose from 52 in 1824 to 93 in 1846. Newtown Pery, the Georgian suburb of Limerick, and an area for which records exist in both pre-and post-famine years, had run out of momentum by the early 1840s, just before the famine. For example, in the six years from 1838-1844 only four houses were built in Barrington Street, one of the last streets to be laid down. The three that were constructed over the next seven years represent a reduction in building in that part of the city. However, it was at about this time that the trend for suburban houses built on larger plots beyond the new town to the south and over the river in the area of the North Circular Road was being established and research into the building in these areas would need to be carried out to obtain a full picture. Two storeys instead of four, dormers, with Gothic detailing, and bay windows characterised the new style and, interestingly, the few houses in Barrington Street, built between 1844 and 1851 also reflect these trends.

The general trend away from the paternalistic charities of the 18th and early 19th centuries and towards centrally funded projects seems not to have been adversely affected by the famine and indeed may have been reinforced by the

public schemes that were instigated as famine relief. The port project may have been given a fillip by the crisis of the famine. Once the crisis was over, the government could proceed with measures to provide for the poor and the working classes with national schools, parks, housing and public libraries. However, during the famine the economic depression may have had an effect on speculative house building; it certainly seems to have retarded the building of Catholic churches because of a significant reliance on the financial contributions of the poor.

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Irish Tourist or the People and the Provinces of Ireland*, London, 1835, p. 146.
2. "The Origins and Early Years of Barrington's Hospital", Mark Tierney, *Old Limerick Journal*, 24, Winter 1988, pp. 33-40.
3. "The Mont de Piété", *OLJ*, *op cit*, pp. 51-54.
4. Quoted in R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1988, p. 318.
5. "Building the Workhouses", P.J. Meghen, *OLJ*, 7.
6. "The House of Industry", Paddy Lysaght, *OLJ*, 4, 1980.
7. "The Wellesley Bridge", Phil Lovett, *OLJ*, 9, Autumn 1981.
8. "The Development of the Port of Limerick in the Nineteenth Century", Phil Lovett, *OLJ*, Spring, 1982.
9. *Limerick Reporter*, 2 Feb., 1849, and 6 Feb., 1849.
10. *The Limerick Chronicle*, Sat. 7 July, 1849.
11. Maurice Craig, *The Architecture of Ireland from the Earliest Times to 1880*, Batsford, London, 1982, p. 216.
12. John Fleming, *St. John's Cathedral*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1987, p. 40.