

Reputations: Nineteenth-Century Monuments in Limerick

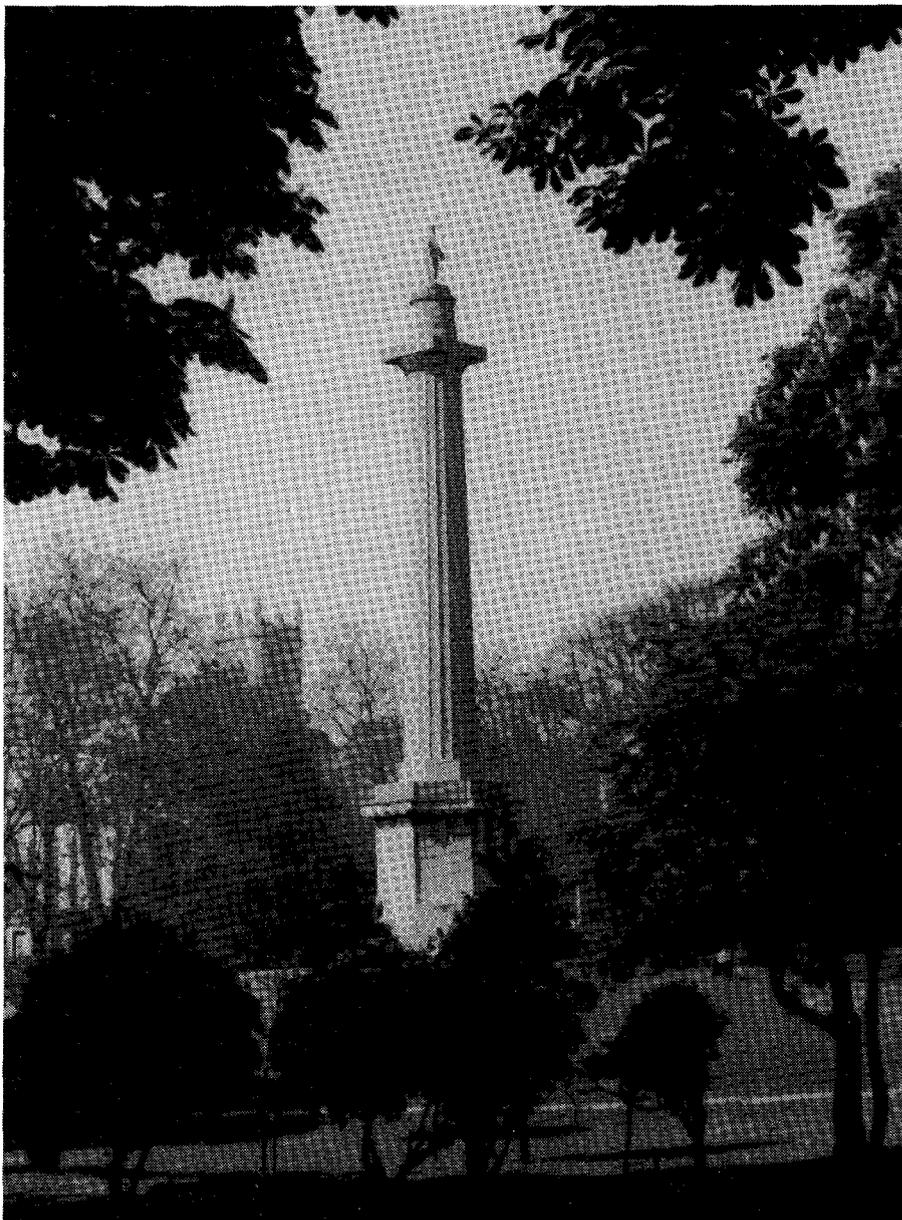
by Judith Hill

Monuments were to the nineteenth-century city what corporate identity is to the modern business; they projected an image that spoke of specific character, unity and confidence. Is this just the impression gained in retrospect by the image-conscious late twentieth century or is this what they were intended to do? One of the fascinating characteristics of monuments is the way that, once erected, they take on a life of their own. So, although today Limerick's nineteenth-century monuments are frequently used in civic publicity, business logos and on postcards, not all the monuments are represented equally: the Treaty Stone is pre-eminent; Patrick Sarsfield is quite popular; Daniel O'Connell and Thomas Spring Rice are mainly confined to postcards; and Fitzgibbon, who was thrown into the Shannon in the early hours of a June morning in 1931 and later replaced by a memorial to 1916, can only be seen in archival photographs. Just as this ordering reflects contemporary values distilled from tradition, aesthetic awareness and political allegiance, so the first appearance of the monuments reflected current values. A study of the nineteenth-century monuments - many of which were erected through public subscription and all of which were allocated sites through negotiation with the Limerick Corporation or official bodies - can tell us much about political attitudes and power structures. Such a study of the monuments collected in one place provides an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which they were intended to be ambassadors for that place, and how they have acted subsequently.

Thomas Spring Rice (1791-1866) was the first figure to be celebrated in Limerick when, in 1829, a Doric column 79 feet high, resting on a large octagonal base, topped by his comparatively diminutive statue, was erected. It was placed at the edge of the expanding Newtown Pery in New Square, an as yet undeveloped open square, situated on a projected road leading from the main street of the new town, George's (now O'Connell) Street, to the Boherbuoy Road.⁽¹⁾ Although small in comparison to Nelson's Pillar, (erected in Dublin in 1808), the Spring Rice column must have appeared as a grand statement in

Limerick, in keeping with the four-storey Georgian terraces that were accumulating each year. A map of 1827 suggests that the column would have been isolated; a pointer to the direction in which the new town might expand, and in the centre of which the column would stand magnificently.

Optimism surrounded the project from its inception. Spring Rice, only in his late thirties when the statue was erected, was the young, Independent MP for the city, first elected in 1820. This had been a triumph for the merchant interest, whose money and enthusiasm were responsible for the burgeoning city, and who, as the Commissioners of the Parish of St. Michael, had defied the Corporation by setting up their own administration to maintain the streets of the new town. The



The Thomas Spring Rice memorial in the People's Park.



The chairing of Thomas Spring Rice by William Turner de Lond. From the Limerick Chamber of Commerce Collection.

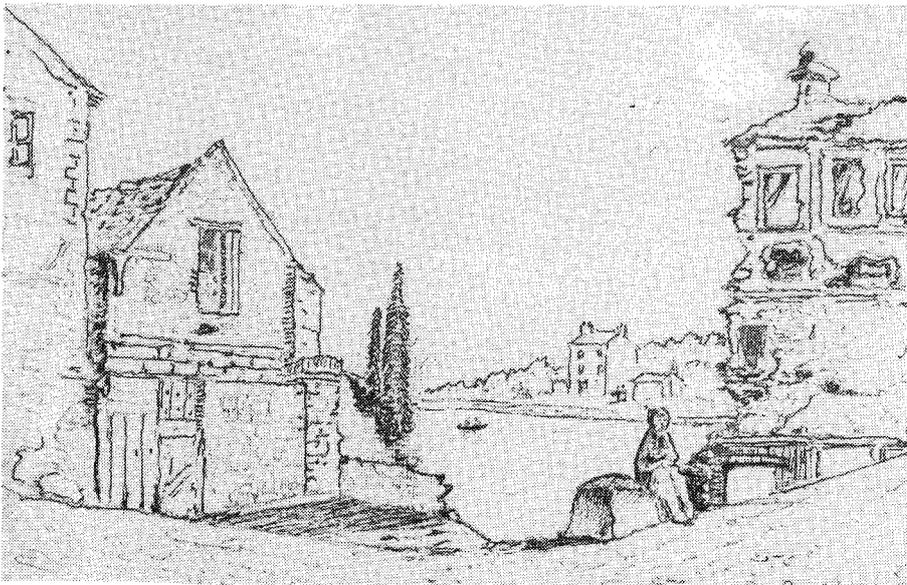
election of Spring Rice had involved the breaking of the well-established conservative oligarchy that had dominated politics in Limerick for many years. On his return from Dublin on 24 July, 1820, Spring Rice had been carried in triumph through the streets. Later, William Turner de Lond painted *The Chairing of Thomas Spring Rice* for the Chamber of Commerce in which he showed Spring Rice standing on a platform high above the crowd, under a canopy, while a shower of flags, decorated with the emblems of the city

guilds, descend from the windows of the Commercial Buildings. Spring Rice had become a symbol for the new town. Thus, when Matthew Barrington was considering erecting a monument in Newtown Pery, Spring Rice, and not Edmund Sexton Pery, on whose land the new town was being built, was his choice.⁽²⁾

The classical style of the monument and its formal placing at the centre of an open square, reflected the style of the architecture of the new town. This

followed contemporary taste. The monument, too, had its antecedents in Ireland. Used to celebrate Nelson in Dublin, Wellington in Trim, Cumberland in Birr, the column was the accepted way to create a monument and to elevate its subject to the status of a hero. The architect was the not very significant Henry Baker⁽³⁾, but the sculptor was Thomas Kirk (1781-1845), who had carved Nelson for Dublin and Wellington for Trim, and had an appreciation of the use of a classical cloak and a proud gesture to give the right gloss to the figure.

Despite its fashionable appearance and grandiose scale, the monument was the statement of only one group in Limerick, which, although powerful and ebullient, did not control the Corporation. By 1840 the square had been enclosed, planted with trees, and laced with paths. A terrace of six houses had been built on one side, and the square was only accessible to the residents. This Tontine terrace would be the last Georgian domestic building to be built in Limerick. In 1853 the Second Limerick Corporation Reform Act was passed; the Commissioners of St Michael's Parish were abolished and Newtown Pery was brought under a new Reformed Corporation. The Spring Rice monument, enclosed and marginal, took its place in the wider city. With the enlarging of Pery Square and its conversion in 1877 (with bandstand and fountain) to the People's Park, and with the building of a library and museum in its



Drawing of the Treaty Stone, 8 April, 1842.

grounds,⁽⁴⁾ the monument was further redefined: it had become associated with civic leisure.

On 17 May, 1855, two monuments were discussed at a Corporation meeting.⁽⁵⁾ An announcement had been made that £1,040 had been collected for a statue to be erected in Limerick to Lord Viscount Fitzgibbon, who had died at the battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War, and the mayor, who was chairing the proceedings, had suggested that it be given a site at the centre of The Crescent. Several of those present had, since 1852, been involved in organising the funding of a monument to Daniel O'Connell. They had earmarked this prominent location - the highest and widest point in George's Street - for the monument, and they argued that the Town Council would have to be consulted. The O'Connell monument committee was galvanised into action; meetings were held; a sculptor contacted; a further appeal was launched for subscriptions. The *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator* argued forcefully for the O'Connell monument and at a subsequent meeting the Council voted to adopt The Crescent site for the O'Connell monument.

The controversy reflected two different political camps within the Corporation - the older interest, Protestant, landed, Unionist - and the group left in the wake of O'Connell's political advance, Catholic and nationalist. In Limerick Corporation this latter group was represented by men such as Maurice Lenihan, who supported initiatives to establish a Catholic university in Ireland and dis-establish the Church of Ireland, and who had voted for Repeal. Lenihan promoted nationalist ideas in his newspaper, *The Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, and he was a city

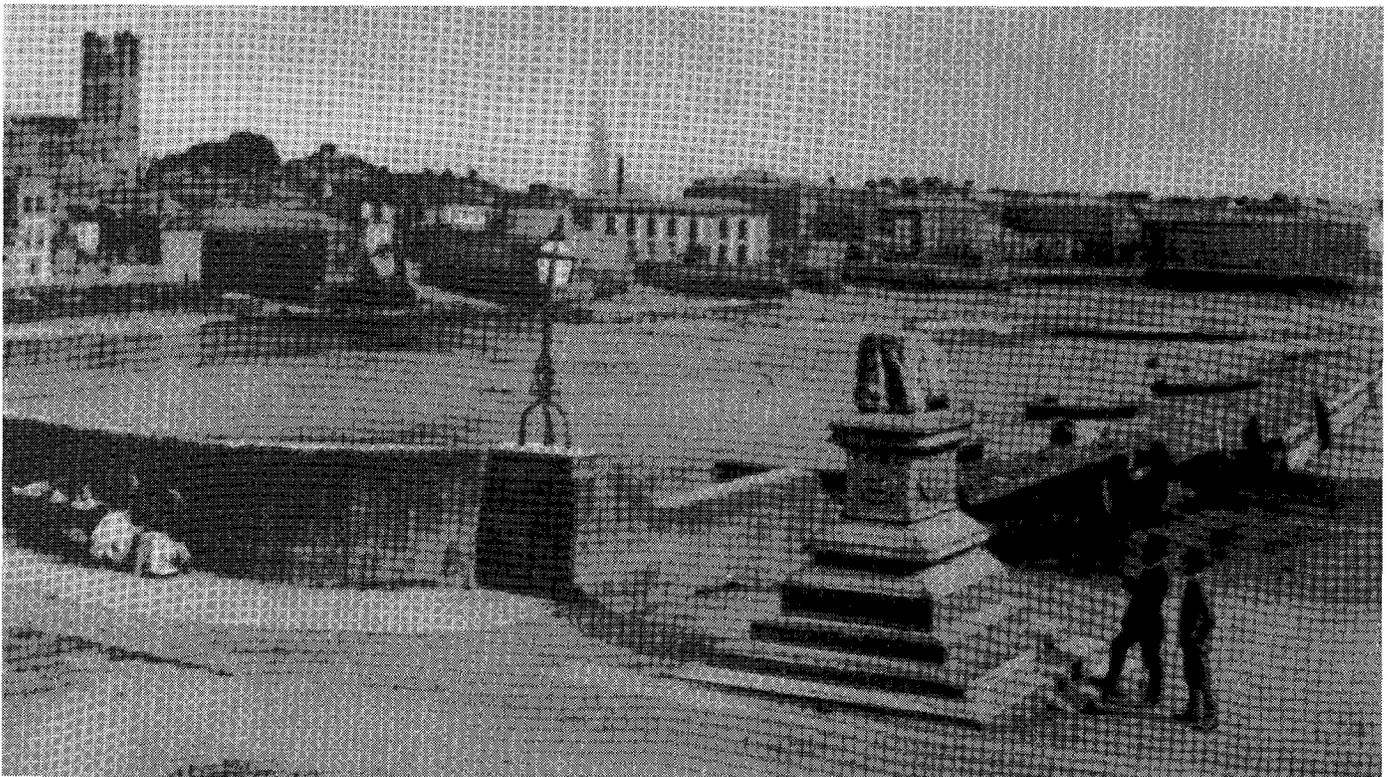


The Fitzgibbon memorial on Sarsfield Bridge before its destruction.

councillor. He had proposed the O'Connell monument.

Neither O'Connell nor Fitzgibbon had more than a tenuous connection with Limerick. O'Connell had held 'monster meetings' in the vicinity of the city and visited it several times, but it was as MP of Clare, elected in the old courthouse in Ennis, that he first sat in parliament.⁽⁶⁾ Fitzgibbon was the son of the third Earl of Clare, whose family lived at Mount Shannon, near Limerick. The statues of these figures were not erected primarily to represent the city. Instead the act of their erection was intended to demonstrate the city's credentials. Lenihan wrote in his *History of Limerick*: 'There being no appearance of the national monument in Dublin, the propriety of renewed local exertion was mooted to commemorate the fame of the illustrious chieftain in "the city of the violated treaty".'⁽⁷⁾ Limerick was the second city to erect a monument to O'Connell. (In August, 1846, a ten feet high statue of O'Connell had been erected at Dublin's City Hall, but the national testimonial in Dublin was not proposed until 1862.) Fitzgibbon was a war hero. The Crimean War was more often recognised by the display of captured cannon; Limerick also demonstrated keenness in its desire to erect a statue.

The contest between two statues for one site suggests that monument-building was a common phenomenon in Ireland at this time. This was not the case. The *Nation*, a nationalist newspaper, had called for more statues of Irishmen in Dublin in 1843, but by 1855 only one statue was being prepared - a monument to the popular poet, Thomas Moore. A group in Limerick had advertised for sculptors to submit models for a monument to Patrick Sarsfield in 1845, but Joseph Robinson



The Treaty Stone and the River Shannon at the turn of the century.

Kirk's model had been turned down and the project dropped.⁽⁸⁾

Different political affiliations in Limerick in 1855 did not translate into different styles. Instead, both monuments were examples of the mid-Victorian way of celebrating Great Men that was popular in Britain. Portrait statues were erected on moderately-sized plinths so that the viewer could appreciate the details of the sculptured figure - the clothes, the expression, the pose - each designed to elicit admiration and provide an example. There were differences, however, deriving from the artists commissioned. John Hogan (1800-58), a sculptor who had spent much of his life in Rome, and who had carved the marble statue of O'Connell for the City Hall in Dublin in 1846, was an exponent of the neo-classical style. He made a bronze figure of O'Connell for Limerick in which O'Connell, sheathed in a Roman toga and holding a text of the Act of Catholic Emancipation, was presented as the dignified elder statesman. Hogan did for O'Connell in Limerick what he had done for him in Dublin: he made an Irish leader into a classical hero and thus elevated his subject in the vocabulary of neo-classicism. '... It is my opinion', he said, "that the classic draperies, which have been so long used, raise the artistic character of the work and the dignity of the subject".⁽⁹⁾ Patrick MacDowell (1799-1870),⁽¹⁰⁾ on the other hand, presented Fitzgibbon as a dashing young army officer in the act of unsheathing his sword; another idealisation but not as dependent on classical style and accoutrements as Hogan's.

The statue of Fitzgibbon was erected on Wellesley Bridge, which joined the city to County Clare; its presence there marked the landed interest that had promoted the building of the bridge in the 1820s. Meanwhile, the presence of the figure of O'Connell can be read as part of the redefining of the character of Newtown Pery through the building of national schools, Catholic churches and other institutions associated with a democratising of politics in the nineteenth century. The older interest remained but it could feel threatened; the wife of John Russell, Quaker industrialist, merchant and speculator, refused to open the blinds of the windows in her Crescent house for fear of encountering the masterful gaze of O'Connell.

When the O'Connell monument was unveiled in 1857 it was O'Connell's role in securing the Act of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 that was emphasised. The MP for the city, Sergeant O'Brien, made a speech in which he painted Irish Catholic history in a few sweeping strokes which also put Limerick at the centre:

Here was the Capitulation and the Treaty, so honourable to the Irish Catholics, so disgraceful to our rulers by whom the provisions of that Treaty were shamefully and unhesitatingly violated. By their perfidious conduct we then lost that religious freedom which after nearly



The Patrick Sarsfield memorial at Cathedral Place.

150 years was again recovered under the guidance of O'Connell. It is right therefore that Limerick should be foremost in paying this homage to his memory.⁽¹¹⁾

The signing of the Treaty in Limerick in 1691 had concluded the wars of the seventeenth century and heralded what might be described as the Protestant peace, the period when British authority was secured through the re-organisation of government and the successful establishment of Protestant landowning families. The Treaty had promised rights to Catholics but, with the subsequent passing of the Penal Laws, Catholics lost much of their political power and many of their civil rights. The table on which the

treaty had been signed was reputed to be a stone and Limerick claimed to know where it was. Travellers in the late-eighteenth century were returning with tales of the Treaty Stone - John Harden of Cork recorded the tradition of the signing of the treaty in his diary in 1797, and in 1810 Bishop Milner was shown the stone by his friend Bishop Young of Limerick. Lenihan, who was sceptical of the tradition, tells us that the stone was originally situated on the north side of Thomond Bridge, an ordinary lump of limestone used by country people for mounting horses when leaving Limerick by the old Ennis mail coach road. In 1865 the stone was moved to the other side of the bridge, given a cut stone pedestal decorated with the city's coat of arms and

motto, and made into a monument. The Treaty Stone became a symbol of the city.

Two years later, in 1867, three Fenians were hanged in Manchester. Immediately the Manchester Martyrs, as they were known, became a cause for nationalists, and mock funerals were organised. Limerick, too, had a public procession and the newly elevated Treaty Stone was covered with a pall and decorated with the shamrocks, rosettes (green, with a small black knot at the centre) and laurels which the processionists were themselves wearing and carrying. There was some debate about how the Treaty Stone was to be interpreted: did it represent the violated treaty and thus invite scorn? (One organiser suggested that people should spit on the stone as they passed). Or did it symbolise the Catholic rights that the treaty had promised? Dressed in mourning and passed respectfully, it was the latter interpretation that won out. Equally, it seemed to be a symbol of the city which had put on mourning for this event.⁽¹²⁾

The proposal in 1845 to erect a monument to Patrick Sarsfield, the general who, in 1690 and '91, had bravely defended the city until it was finally overwhelmed by the troops of William of Orange, also emanated from Limerick's preoccupation with its national role at the end of the seventeenth century. Another influence may have been the suggestion by Thomas Davis, a poet and writer on Irish culture, that Irish subject matter should be used in Irish art. Davis had published a list of subjects in *The Nation* in the 1840s and articulated a nationalist purpose: 'When we speak of high art, we mean art used to instruct and ennoble men; to teach them great deeds, whether historical, religious, or romantic; to awaken their piety, their pride, their justice, and their valour ...'⁽¹³⁾

It was Ambrose Hall, a land and insurance agent, who formed the committee to erect a monument to Patrick Sarsfield. Hall's idea was to erect a triumphal arch on the city side of Thomond Bridge to be decorated with relief sculptures depicting episodes in the life of Sarsfield - the defense of Limerick, the blowing up of the guns at Ballyneety and the Black Battery, his death on the field of Landen - and on top there would be a statue of Sarsfield, sword in hand, defending the breach in the city walls, stones from the Black Battery behind him.⁽¹⁴⁾ Unfortunately, this richly dramatic monument was not realised. Instead a figure of Sarsfield 'in the picturesque costume of a general of the period, sword in hand, and pointing to the enemy in the distance' was sketched by a local artist, Henry O'Shea.⁽¹⁵⁾ In 1875, when the subscription list was re-opened, this sketch was sent to John Lawlor (1820-1901), a prominent sculptor, born in Dublin and trained at the Royal Dublin Society's Schools. He was then working in London where he had received the commission to carve the figures representing Engineering on the Albert Memorial. Lawlor's statue of Sarsfield, one of the



The Manchester Martyrs' memorial at St Laurence Cemetery.

most attractive of the period in the land, shows the hero pointing to the enemy, sword in hand; dramatic and romantic. Lawlor obviously enjoyed the flamboyant details of seventeenth-century costume, exaggerating the details - the knee-high boots with their buckles and wide tops, the great cuffs, the length of fastenings on his flying coat, the ringletted hair.

There was intense discussion about the siting of the monument. Ambrose Hall wanted it to have a prominent site in

Newtown Pery; the corner of Mallow Street and George's Street was requested. The Corporation refused. They offered Bank Place, then an impoverished area of the city. Hall wrote a letter to the *Limerick Chronicle*: 'I ask what would the Dublin people think of their Corporation if they refused a site unless at Patrick's Close or the Coombe - the Cork people if offered one on Coal Quay - the Londoners if offered at Seven Dials or Billingsgate?'⁽¹⁶⁾ The Corporation were intransigent. Hall,



The Fitzgibbon memorial, with the Limerick Boat Club and the Shannon in the background.

elderly, determined and disillusioned, finally by-passed the Corporation, negotiated with the Catholic bishop, and a place was found in the grounds of St John's Cathedral. Detractors argued that this cast a sectarian shadow over the project, but Hall contended that it was near the site of the ancient walls that Sarsfield had so bravely defended. The site was, and remains, peripheral to the main areas of the city. This may have prevented this vigorous sculpture from shouldering the symbolic burdens that it looks as though it could so easily have carried.

What do the monuments amount to? The People's Park has a column, the main street has a statue, one of the busiest bridges has a monument (Fitzgibbon's plinth, but a memorial erected in 1956), all sited according to the principles of classical urban design. An MP, a nationalist politician and two references to the siege and treaty of 1691 survive. In Dublin, nineteenth century monuments included two memorials to Napoleonic War heroes (Nelson and Wellington), statues commemorating a poet (Thomas Moore), a playwright (Oliver Goldsmith), and a philosopher (Edmund Burke), a statue to a local politician (John Gray), two monuments to nationalist political figures (O'Connell and William Smith O'Brien), a statue of an eighteenth century politician (Grattan), a viceroy (Earl of Carlisle), a commander in the British Army (Lord Gough), a member of the royal family (Prince Albert) and two philanthropists

(William Dargan and Benjamin Lee Guinness). In Cork only one monument was erected, to Father Mathew, a local friar who had a national reputation as the leader of the temperance movement. In Galway, too, there was only one monument, to Lord Dunkellin, a local figure active in the administration of the British Empire. Dublin was, of course, pre-eminent and it would be expected that the major nationalist, unionist, administrative and cultural figures would be celebrated there. According to the standards set by Cork and Galway, Limerick might have been expected to produce the contemporary locally-resident figures - Spring Rice and Fitzgibbon. Unusual was the responsibility taken to commemorate O'Connell. Exceptional was the engagement with the siege and the treaty, with Patrick Sarsfield and the Treaty Stone. Arising from a collective identification with the siege and its immediate aftermath, these monuments have also helped to perpetuate this image of Limerick, and perhaps contributed to the twentieth century perception of the city as a difficult, occasionally violent, and sometimes uncompromising place.

NOTES

1. See map of Limerick, 1827, in Judith Hill, *The Building of Limerick*, 1991, p. 141.
2. See M.O. hEochaidh, *Modhscoil Luimnigh 1855-1986*, 1986, p.50-1.
3. Drawing RIBA, London.

4. Now the art gallery, erected in 1906.
5. Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick Its Histories and Antiquities*, 1867, p. 513.
6. In 1865 a column topped by a statue of O'Connell was erected on the site of the old courthouse in Ennis.
7. Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 511.
8. Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 505.
9. *The Limerick Chronicle*, 19 August, 1857.
10. A Belfast-born sculptor who was working in London, MacDowell made monuments to the Marchioness of Donegall and statues of the Earl of Belfast for his native city, and of the Earl of Eglinton and Winton for Dublin.
11. *The Limerick Chronicle*, 19 August, 1857.
12. Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, 'Mourning the Martyrs', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, IX-X 1967, pp. 173-205.
13. From Davis, 'National Art' in Essays, quoted in Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past the Celtic Revival 1830-1930*, p. 30.
14. *The Limerick Chronicle*, 26 July, 1881.
15. See *The Limerick Chronicle*, July and August, 1881, for the debate about Henry O'Shea's role in the design of the statue, and the controversy about the siting of the monument.
16. *The Limerick Chronicle*, 19 July, 1881.

Judith Hill's book, *A History of Public Sculpture in Ireland*, will be published by Four Courts Press in Autumn, 1997.