

# Words spoken at the grave of Jim Kemmy

Mount Saint Lawrence Cemetery, Limerick,  
29 September, 1997



We have come here today to take our leave of a man whose life, though sadly cut short too soon, was lived to the full. A man of many talents and varied accomplishments, Jim Kemmy's life was yet all of a piece. Stonemason and socialist, trade unionist and political activist, writer and historian, parliamentarian and humanist, Jim Kemmy was, by any standards, a big man. Big in heart and big in frame, he was a towering presence in the life of Limerick for more than three decades, and, to many others elsewhere in Ireland and beyond, he was very often the voice of Limerick; in the sense that not only the cadences of accent and idiom but the very recounting of the city's proud history and the right of its people to fair play - in the Dail and in the media - assumed a compelling force and authenticity when spoken by Jim. In this context it is only right to remark on the widespread feelings of pride that attached to his election - after a long wait - as Mayor of Limerick.

In the days that have passed since Jim's death many tributes have been paid to his significant contributions to Irish political life, and in particular to the warm and humane dimension he gave to any cause that he championed. These tributes have been genuine and just. Others, more qualified than I, have spoken of his political 'witness', as it were, in Ireland, for almost three decades of unprecedented change in Irish society. Many indeed were the causes championed and battles fought in those decades, as those whose views he challenged and those whose views he changed can well testify. Frequently engaged in bruising controversy, his steady commitment to a socialist and libertarian view of human fulfilment and dignity never slackened or wavered throughout a political career that was never routine, never complacent, never opportunist. I feel very honoured that Jim should have indicated a wish before he died that I should add a few words at his graveside to the many tributes that have already been paid to his memory by political and other friends and colleagues. I think he would have expected me to speak of him as an historian and as a very remarkable Limerick man, and it is in these terms that I will speak of him for a few moments before we depart from this

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by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh

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grave. Jim Kemmy had an insatiable interest in history of this city, and an inexhaustible energy for researching, reclaiming and sharing with his own, and with the wider, public, his knowledge of and his enthusiasm for local history. And, of course, this interest and knowledge and enthusiasm was rooted in a boundless affection for his native place. He knew every path and pavement, every lane and court, every row, bow and alleyway of this city (and he knew well also 'Limerick in exile' - in Kilkee). The time and dedication he gave to researching, understanding, preserving and publishing the history of his native city and its people constitutes a truly heroic service. The work which he performed on the many committees and societies on which he served (or the cultural initiatives which he frequently launched) - relating to labour history, literary and artistic events, the preservation of historic monuments and buildings, the theatre, and many other examples - this work has undoubtedly left its mark on the life of the city.

It was the Welsh scholar, E. Estyn Evans, who first suggested that the 'personality' of any place was principally constituted by three main elements: habitat, heritage and history. So far as this city is concerned, it is hard for me to think of another in this, or indeed in any earlier, generation, who gave such devotion to researching and understanding these elements of the personality of Limerick, or who scrutinised that personality with such unsparing candour and celebrated it with such unashamed pride as did Jim Kemmy. In short, he was steeped in the habitat, heritage and history of Limerick.

Jim Kemmy was an historian *engagé*. He held his own views firmly and he expressed them clearly, not to say trenchantly. But it was neither necessary, nor was it always the case, that one had to agree with his views in order to recognise in him (as other historians did) that stubborn refusal to defer to received wisdom, to the official rhetoric of 'authority', or to any dogma (whatever its ideological origins) which failed to take account of the frailty, the longings, the complexities and the contradictions of

ordinary human beings, buffeted by history and circumstance, by their own hopes, fears and desires. He showed an uncompromising scruple for evidence in support of any and all historical claims.

It is in his publications on history that we come closest, I believe, to the core of that passion, idealism and energy that kept the mighty engine of enquiry pumping away over the decades. The *Old Limerick Journal*, which he edited, the many individual contributions that were his own (including the study of the Limerick Soviet and numerous essays in the *Journal*), and the wonderful *Limerick Anthology* published at Christmas 1996 - these will surely be an enduring monument to Jim Kemmy, the historian and writer.

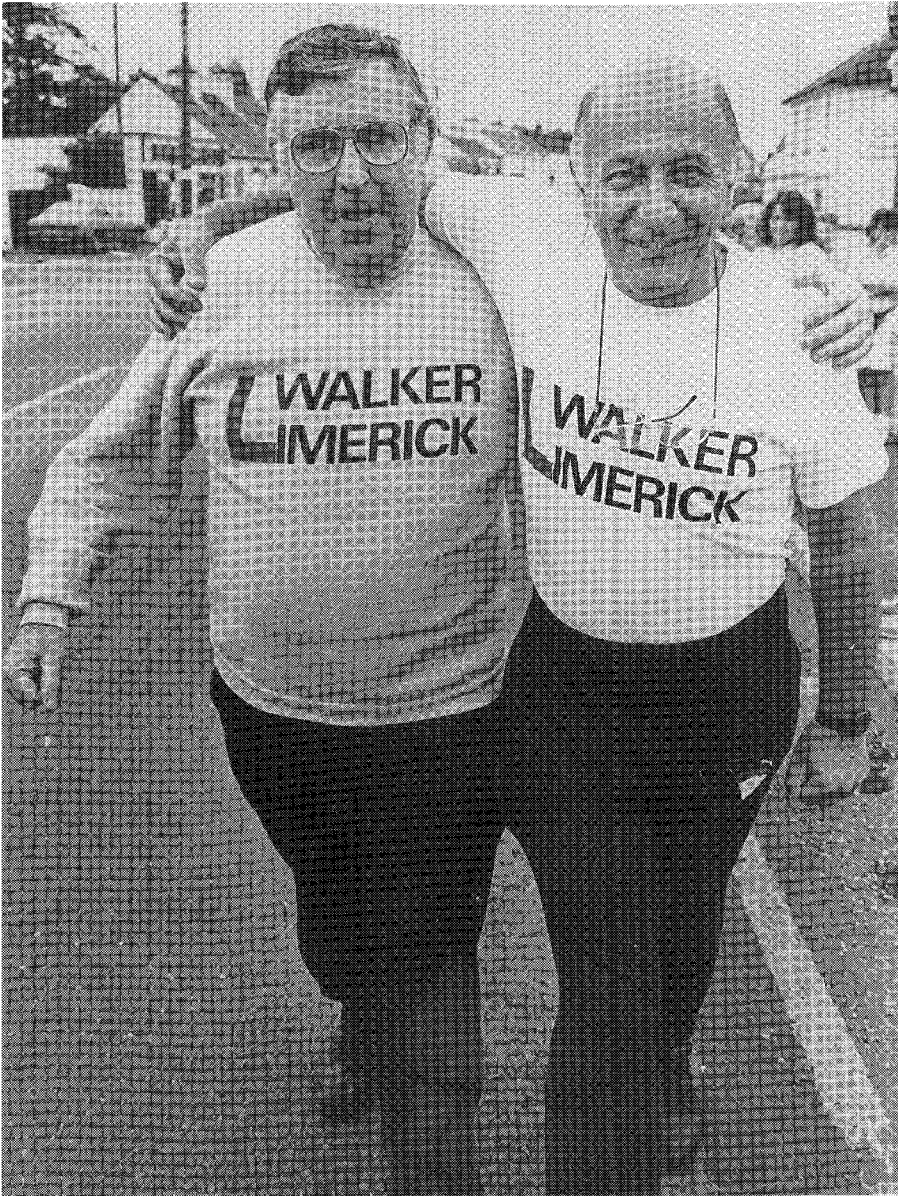
May I, very briefly, illustrate his characteristic style, by referring to one or two exemplary excerpts from his writings. Here is his editorial in the summer 1982 edition of the *Old Limerick Journal*; it is entitled, In Praise of Local History:

*"For most people, once they leave school, local history is the most common and popular form of history they come into contact with. The reason is easily explainable. Local history can often be more interesting and more personal than other varieties. And readers will be immediately familiar with the names of people, places and buildings in their own locality.*

*Local history can serve other important functions. The broad canvas of man's historical development could well be described as a gigantic jigsaw. The documentation of history can be likened to the piecing together of a series of the small parts that go to make up the whole seamless picture. So the efforts of local historians can be a valuable source of materials for the general historian.*

*A relatively small number of dedicated enthusiasts, throughout the country, have given generously of their time and energies in the cause of local history. Their work of documenting and interpreting the story of their own people and places has added much to our understanding of history. Their quiet labours among forgotten records have brought clarity and light to hitherto dark and obscure corners of the past. ...*

*... Recent years have brought an*



With Bishop Darling raising funds for the restoration of St. Mary's Cathedral.

*increased awareness and appreciation of what local history should be all about. While it must take account of the passing parade of prelates, merchant princes and landlords across the centuries, local history should chronicle the world of the common man - the story of the countless hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who struggled for survival and left little wealth or glory behind them."*

This is a good example of what I've referred to: firm views plainly stated, the enthusiasm for knowledge, and the commitment to investigating and presenting the evidence, and letting readers reach their own conclusions. A further example of this characteristic style can be found in Jim's Preface to the Limerick Anthology:

*"In his preface to his History, John Ferrar gives this attractive description of the vocation of the historian:  
"To the love of literary pursuits the world is indebted for the preservation of its antiquities, so pleasing to an enlightened mind. The honest desire of rescuing our*

*History from oblivion, of transmitting remarkable events to posterity, supports the historian in his undertaking, renders him superior to every difficulty, and repays the toll of reading and collating a number of manuscripts and old books."*

This summarises succinctly the essence of the commitment that inspired not only the Anthology but the entire life's work in history and writing. But it seems to me that it does even more. The tone and vocabulary - 'the common bond of enthusiasm and tolerance' that he recognised in John Ferrar and in Kate O'Brien; the sense of moral purpose conveyed by the word 'toil', in this context of historical research: these seem to me to be especially revealing. They place Jim Kemmy within a particular radical, dissenting tradition of the broad labour movement of the 19th century, especially but not exclusively in Britain. It is the tradition of Keir Hardie and the Durham miners, of working men's reading societies and mechanics institutes, of William Thompson and the early leaders of the Irish trade union and labour movement.

Among contemporary historians, it is the company of E.P. Thompson and of Ralph Samuel, and others, determined to rescue the story and struggles of the common people from the terrible condescension of posterity.

In a certain sense, though utterly unsympathetic to cant or slack sentimentality, Jim Kemmy was a Labour 'romantic'; he felt part of the romance of the historic project of working-class emancipation, with its strong 19th century idealistic strain. He spoke and wrote often (as in his moving 'The Death of a Cabin Boy' in the Anthology) of the need to record and respect 'the short and simple annals of the poor.' But it wasn't only the still, sad music of humanity that moved him, but also its more joyous, celebratory note. Indeed, when I spoke in my opening remarks of his full and fulfilling life being all of a piece, what I had in mind was the sense that in all the political ups and downs, the battles lost and battles won, what sustained Jim Kemmy throughout was probably a profound conviction that, whatever the immediate clamour, he could hear and was in step with the deep, insistent rhythm of the march of the common man towards liberty, dignity and a place in the sun.

May the memory of his towering and combative presence remain with those who knew him; and when they too have passed on, may the record of his achievement continue to excite admiration and respect, and to offer inspiration to others. Or, as Jim himself might have put it, let the record stand.

And, as for Jim, I am sure that I am not alone in thinking that for many a year to come I will see him in O'Mahony's on a Saturday afternoon, browsing through books, the bundle of proofs of his latest project tucked under his arm, his head slightly thrown back, ready for chat or challenge with whoever came the way. Indeed, his presence will be felt for a very long time in many different parts of this city. As John Francis O'Donnell once wrote in his poem evoking memories of historic Limerick (which Jim published in the Journal):

*And, as I pace each still and storied street,  
The pageants of forgotten days arise;  
I feel the tumult and the gathering heat,  
I hear the measured fall of warrior feet,  
I see the banners in the narrow skies.  
Cries and rejoicings burthen the warm air -  
Some foe has perished, some good deed been done,  
Some toil has borrowed comfort of the sun,  
And poured a moment's light upon despair.*

Jim Kemmy's toil has richly earned the comfort of the sun.

Atque in perptuum, frater, ave atque vale.

And, let us go in peace from this place.