

James McMahan of Mount Mungret - A Timber Merchant

by Morgan McCloskey

James McMahan died on 17 December 1899 at the age of 47. He had been chairman of the company, James McMahan Ltd., timber importers and timber and hardware merchants. The firm styled itself 'McMahons of Limerick', a brand still to be seen on cast-iron ranges in the kitchens of some houses. Limerick was, and still is, the headquarters of the company, with the main office and works, until recent years, in St. Alphonsus Street. In 1894 the company had a branch in Clonmel and now branches of the business are to be found in Cork, Tralee, Portarlington and Drogheda. The company also acquired the business of Francis Spaight & Sons Ltd. The familiarity of the name to most Limerick people might make it difficult to realise that the 'James' part of it died one hundred years ago. He was born in 1852, the son of Morgan McMahan (1812-1884) and his wife, Mary, one of the Skehans of the Morroe area of County Limerick. 'Old' Morgan, to differentiate between him and his grandson who was also a timber merchant, died when James was 32 and when he took control of the business that had been started by his grandfather. Eight years later, in 1892, *Slater's Directory* carried the following description of the business:

'Mr. McMahan's large and finely equipped establishment forms one of the chief industrial centres of Limerick, affording employment to about one hundred and turning out a variety of manufactures. The business has been carried on by the family for over a century, having been founded by the grandfather, and continued by the father of the present enterprising owner. The premises cover a large space of ground and include saw mills, turning shops, cooperage, wheel and carriage works, all furnished with the newest labour-saving machinery, together with very extensive timber yards well supplied with home and foreign logs and trees. The fine modern plant for every species of sawing, turning, cooperage and packing case



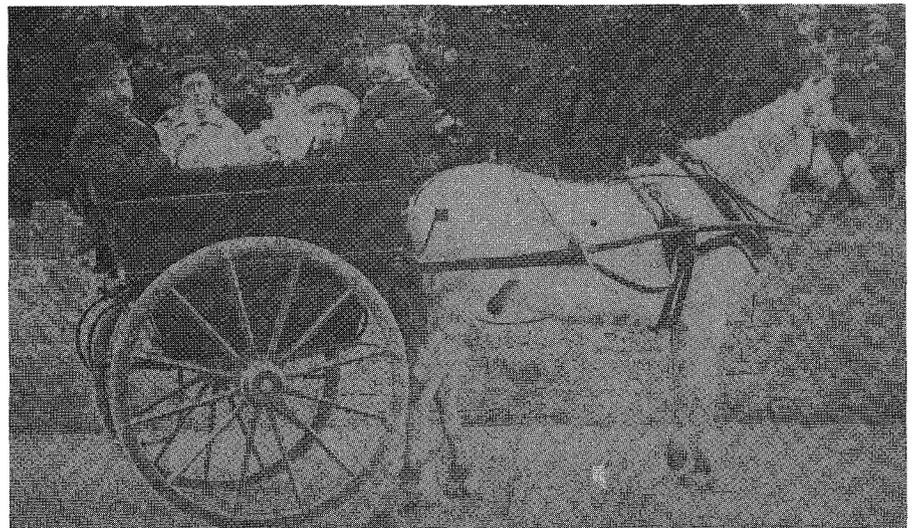
Morgan McMahan (1812-1884),
father of James McMahan.

operations is the remarkable feature of the place and indicates the progressive spirit and enterprise of the proprietor. The cooperage factory turns out a great variety of articles for trade, house and farm purposes and for the provision and butter factories, and does a large



James McMahan (1852-1899).

business in the supply of tubs, firkins and boxes for the butter trade. The saw mills are equal to log, band and circular sawing of all descriptions and the turning department to everything in the line from a ladder pin to a mangle roller, not to speak of builders' turnery.



Castleconnell 1892. Picture taken outside Col. Vansittart's house. The driver (extreme left) is James McMahan and next to him is probably his wife Nora. The boy wearing the large sun hat is presumed to be Morgan and the just visible head would be the two year old Ellen. The name of the other two passengers are not known.

Photo courtesy Dr. Ann Tierney.



Picture taken around 1914 of the office staff of James McMahon Ltd. Hugh McMahon is seated Centre of the front row and on his left is probably Tom Loughrey who, in 1905, married a sister of Hugh's. Standing on the extreme left in the trendy suit is Morgan, a step brother of Hugh. He later started his own business.

Photo courtesy Dr. Ann Tierney.

The coach and van factory is the latest development, and has given a good account of its capacity, but is the natural outcome of an original department all along engaged in wheelwright work. Altogether the concern is one of the most complete and self-contained to be found anywhere, and its old-established position and high reputation do great credit to the skill and go-ahead spirit for which the industrial circles of Limerick have been famous. We may add that power is supplied by a fine steam engine of 40hp and that Mr. McMahon, apart from his business qualifications, is an expert in the trades represented and the soul of the enterprise.'

While that account may be rather fulsome, it is not untrue and helps to throw some light on the activities in which the McMahon firm was engaged. The saw mills which the article mentions were known as Garryowen Saw Mills, and other activities were located in William Street and Sexton Street. An old name-board bearing the name 'Morgan McMahon' could still be seen in Sexton Street up to the time of the extension of the Presentation Convent. The late Kevin Hannan said that it had originally been the site of the City Theatre.

At some point James gave the company his own name and this has caused some difficulty in the acceptance of the claim that the business was founded in 1830. This was 22 years before James was born, so the foundation of the business must, as suggested in the *Slater's Directory* article,

surely be attributed to his grandfather, since his father was only 18 years old in 1830. James, born on 1 November 1852, was the eldest son of five children born to his parents. The others were Patrick (29.5.1854), Ann (20.1.1856), Morgan (14.2.1857) and Michael (5.2.1860). At the age of 32 it is probably safe to assume that James had been engaged in the family business and had, therefore, sufficient experience to assume control. It is known that Patrick became a Jesuit. Morgan worked for his father for some time before going to America where, it is said, he died in a gunfight. No other information, apocryphal or otherwise, appears to be available about Ann and Michael.

James married twice. His first wife was a Miss Bridget Edwards from Limerick. Their second child, their first son, was named Hugh and was destined to become chairman of the company known as James McMahon Limited. Following the death of his first wife, James married Miss Nora McElligott from Ballysteen, near Ardfer, Co. Kerry. One of her brothers was J.J. McElligott, who became a senior civil servant and was appointed Governor of the newly-created Central Bank of the new Irish Free State. This second marriage produced another five children: Morgan Paul (1887), Ellen (1890), Nora (1894), Bridget (1896) and Margaret, ever afterwards called 'Baby', who was born in 1898.

By this time James and his new family were settled in Mount Mungret, where he began to breed cattle and became interested in local activities. It also provided a suitable place where he could

extend hospitality to friends and business colleagues. Whiskey was not kept in bottles in Mount Mungret, but in a 4½ gallon keg. What else would a cooper use!

The house was a glebe house built in 1832 and occupied originally by the rector of the Church of Ireland church in Mungret, which had been built in 1822. Previously the main building in Mungret Abbey had been used for Protestant worship. Not far away at a farm in Island Duane there was a relative of James's, a Mrs Hayes who, before her marriage to Michael Hayes had been a Malone from Gilloge. The relationship was through James's mother, who was related to the Malones. Every Sunday it was the custom of James to drive to Gilloge to visit the Malones.

Cooperage obviously continued to be an important activity of the McMahon company and at the Royal Dublin Agricultural Society's show of 1883 their cooperage exhibit was awarded a gold medal. In 1887 the company won first prize for cooperage at the Limerick Agricultural Show. In the 1890s James is reported in *Modern Ireland Directory* to have travelled to Denmark, Sweden and Holland to study butter packing techniques. A 56lb. wooden box became the standard bulk pack for butter. The base of the box was smaller than the top (sometimes called a pyramid pack) so that the block of butter encased in greaseproof paper slid out quite easily when the box was upended. The blocks of butter were displayed on shop counters where prospective buyers were given to taking



A class at Mungret College about 1897. The boy in the light coloured suit in the centre row is Morgan McMahon who would be living at Mount Mungret at that time.

Photo courtesy Dr. Ann Tierney.

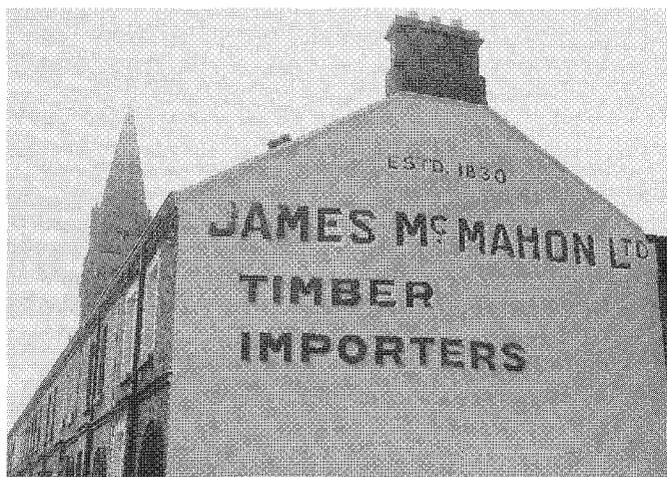
samples on their thumb nails to taste. Glass screens in front of the butter put an end to this practice. The required quantity of butter was taken from the block by the use of a butter spade, also called a 'scotch' hand, a wooden spatula like a small square paddle, smooth on one side and grooved on the other. The grooves prevented the butter sticking. The piece of butter was weighed and formed into a square shape with the spades and finally wrapped in greaseproof paper, called butter paper, bearing the seller's name. In the *Limerick Chronicle* of 27 October 1894 in a report on the Irish Dairy Association Show praise is given to the 'fine exhibition of butter packages of every variety shown by Mr. James McMahon of Alphonsus Street.'

However, the business path was not completely smooth. In April 1894, there was a strike by coopers, some of whom were arrested on charges of intimidating a man who continued to work. James McMahon attended the court proceedings and appealed for leniency towards the accused men saying that they had suffered by being on strike. The dispute probably arose out of the use of machinery in the making of casks and the McMahon company was making use of such machinery. Improvements in the saw mill were also being made. In 1898 Mr. Joseph O'Malley BE was advertising for carpenters and builders to erect a saw mill at the Alphonsus Street premises of James McMahon. This was probably a replace-

ment for the one destroyed in a fire at the timber yard the previous year.

James McMahon was a governor of Barrington's Hospital, and Kevin Hannan told of another connection with the Barrington family. Some time around 1851 'Old' Morgan had loaned the sum of £500 to Matthew Barrington of Glenstal. If this was so it shows that the 39-year-old Morgan was financially sound, since the sum involved was considerable for those times. In February 1851 he had been married in Morroe parish church, which is near Glenstal, and since his wife came from that area one can only speculate as to what influences were at work here.

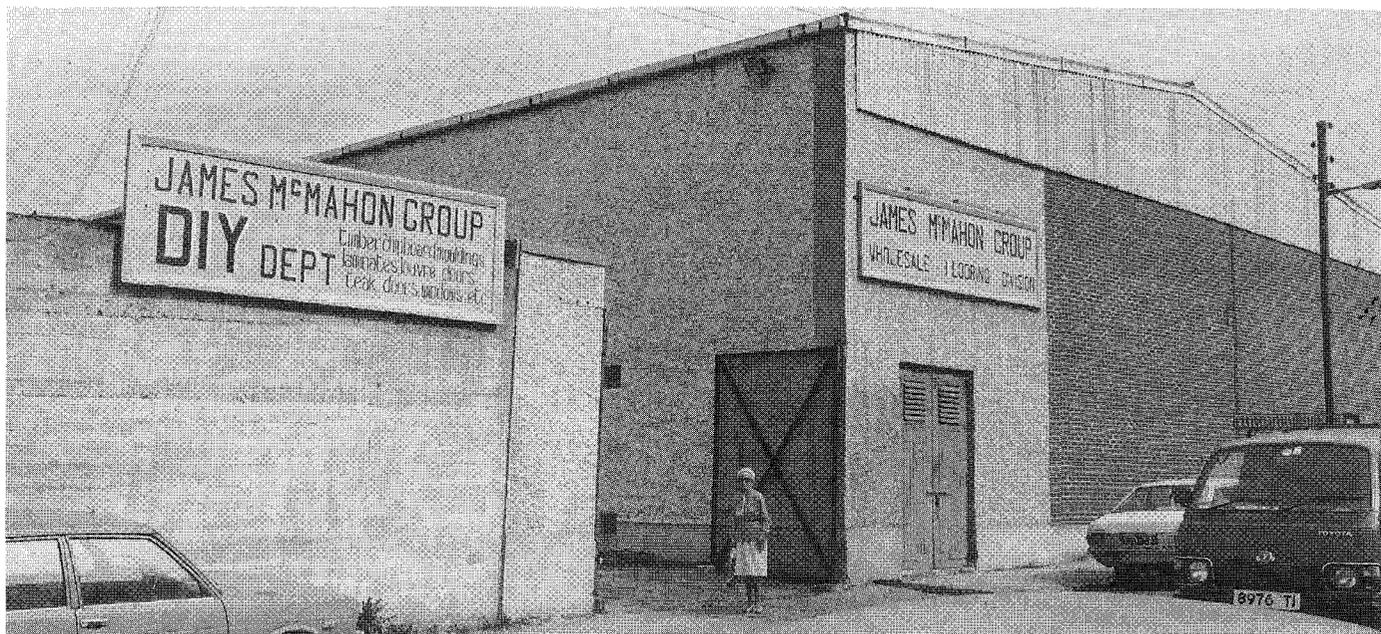
There can be no doubt that James



This sign could be seen at the top of St. Alphonsus Street. In the background is the spire of the Redemptorist's Church.



The Alphonsus Street premises.



Part of the premises in Alphonsus Street. The lady standing in the gateway is James McMahon's daughter, Ellen, mother of the author.

McMahon was a well respected member of the Limerick business community and there can be no better evidence of this than the tributes paid to him following his death and the report of his funeral in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 19 December 1899, which merited a ten inch column. The chief mourners were Hugh McMahon, who was then aged 24, his step-brother Morgan Paul, who was 12, and Richard McElligott, father-in-law to James. Two of the Malones from Gilloge and three of the Maddens, all cousins, attended, together with T.J. Dunphy, a member of James McMahon Ltd. staff who was married to a daughter of James. Two brothers-in-law, Richard McElligott Junior and T. Costelloe, completed the group of relatives. The saw mill and cooperage staff were represented by their manager, Mr. W. Bourke. Also represented were Lord Clarina, Deputy Lieutenant J. O'G. Delmege, Mr. J.S. Cooper of Cooper Hill, Mrs. O'Brien of South Hill, Ald. Stephen O'Mara, Mr. T.J. Ferguson of Francis Spaight & Sons, Mr. S. Dowling and Mr. W. Ebrill. Amongst the very many names listed in the report Mrs. O'Brien was the sole female - perhaps a sign of those times! One of those who attended and also sent a wreath was Michael Hayes of Mungret, whose wife, as already mentioned, was a Malone from Gilloge.

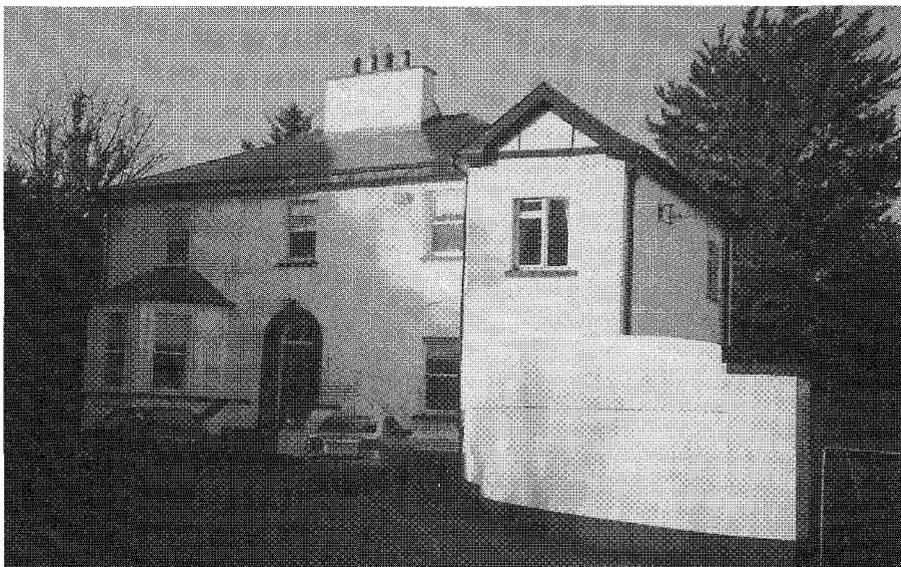
Finally, there remains one question:

why was Ellen Malone buried in the James McMahon plot in Mt. St. Lawrence cemetery? I offer a possible explanation. The relationship between James McMahon and the Malones of Gilloge and his regular visits there has been established. On the death of James's first wife (in 1885?), there were four children ranging in age from 12 to 3 years. At that time Ellen was aged 49 and unmarried. Who better to take care of

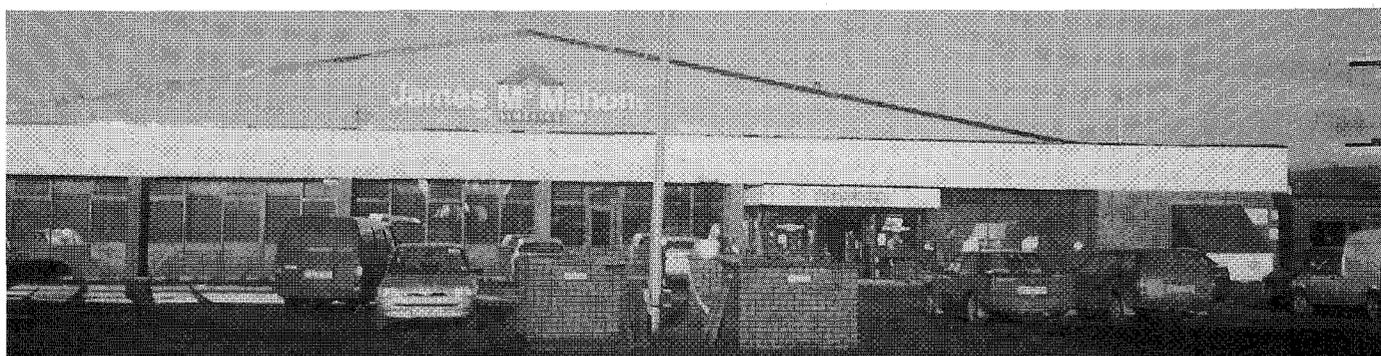
the four children, allowing James to re-marry in 1886? Perhaps Ellen had already been governess / nursemaid to the children? Were the children living at Gilloge? She died in 1894 aged 58.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Mount Mungret, Co. Limerick, home of James McMahon and his second wife and their family.



The McMahon premises in the Dock Road Industrial Estate in Limerick.