The Limerick War Memorial

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The decision to erect a memorial in Pery Square to the Limerick men who died in the Great War is discussed with particular reference to the varying attitudes to that conflict in the 1920s. The speech made on the occasion of its unveiling in 1929 is reproduced in full and analysed. The subsequent fate of this monument and its replacement are also discussed.

Eleven years after the end of the First World War 1914-18, in which at least 3,000 officers, N.C.O.'s, and men from Limerick City and County died, a memorial in their honour and a place where the ex-servicemen and people of Limerick could come to pay homage was unveiled. For the first five years after the war, the only remembrance ceremony that took place was a Church of Ireland one, in St. Mary's Cathedral.¹ The disturbed conditions and violence of the War of Independence, followed by the Civil War meant that it was only in 1924 that for the first time, Roman Catholic ex-servicemen held a service of remembrance at St. Joseph's Church. They continued to use this church until 1927, when the ceremony was transferred to St. John's Cathedral.²

By the time that Remembrance Day came in 1925, a memorial had been unveiled in St. Mary's Cathedral to the 'Men of Thomond' who died in the Great War and a poppy wreath laid, however, because this had been erected in a Protestant church the attendance of Roman Catholic ex-servicemen was precluded.³ Three years later in 1928 another memorial was unveiled, this time in the Presbyterian Church, Lower Mallow Street, where a poppy wreath was also laid.⁴ Memorials to those who died from their parishes were also erected in St Michael's Church, Pery Square, St Nicholas's Church, Adare and All Saints Church, Castleconnell while a memorial plaque was also placed in the L.P.Y.M.A building on O'Connell St, Limerick.

In addition to these general ones, individual memorials had been erected by families to their sons who died in the war, most notably in St Mary's Cathedral. Memorials to Captain Gordon Thompson Shaw, aged 25, Royal Munster Fusiliers, son of Sir Alexander William Shaw, N.C.R., owner of the bacon factory, killed in action on 28 August 1918 (buried in St Martin Calvaire British cemetery, St Martin Sur-Cojeul, France) and Captain Edmond Pery, Viscount Glentworth, aged 23, Royal Air Force, eldest son of 4th Earl of Limerick, died 18 May 1918 (buried in Vin-En-Artois British cemetery, Haucourt, France) were dedicated on 19 January 1923 by the Bishop Of Limerick, Dr White.⁵ A memorial was erected by his mother to Captain Aubrey Ulick Marshall O'Brien, aged 32, Royal Field Artillery, son of Julia and the late Edward O'Brien of Cahirmorey, who died 1 November 1914 at the first battle of Ypres. As he

¹ Limerick Chronicle (L.C.), 11 Nov. 1919, 11 Nov. 1920, 12 Nov. 1921, 11 Nov. 1922, 13 Nov. 1923.
² L.C., 11 Nov. 1924, 10 Nov. 1925, 9 Nov. 1926, 8 Nov. 1927.
³ L.C., 11 Nov. 1924.
⁴ L.C., 13 Nov. 1928. This memorial is now in the United Methodist and Presbyterian, Christ Church on O'Connell St, having been moved there with other memorials in 1978 on the closure of the Mallow St church.
⁵ Limerick Leader (L.L.), 20 Jan. 1923.
had no known grave, this grandson of William Smith O’Brien, is commemorated on the Menin Gate. Two cousins are commemorated in a stained glass window and marble tablet, Major James Fitzgerald Bannatyne, aged 32, 11th Hussars and 23rd Manchester Regiment, son of Emily and the late James Bannatyne, Fanningstown Castle, died 14 May 1916 (buried in Merville Communal Cemetery, Nord, France) and Lieutenant Edgar James Bannatyne, aged 26, 19th Hussars and Royal Flying Corps, son of Alexander and Alice Bannatyne, Glenbevan, Croom, died 11 September 1917 (buried All Saints Churchyard, North Cerney, Gloucestershire, England). Edgar Bannatyne is also remembered in a plaque in Croom Church of Ireland church.

The only memorial in Limerick city or county to a Roman Catholic killed in the Great War is in St. Munchin’s Church on Clancy Strand. This is in the form of a baptistery and was donated by Sir Vincent and Agnes Lady Nash to the memory of their son, Lieutenant James Haran Nash, aged 20, Irish Guards, killed in action on 27 March 1918 (buried in Bucquoy Rd cemetery, Pas de Calais, France). There is also a memorial in the Methodist Church in Ballingrane to Lance Corporal Christopher George Shier, aged 29, Royal Irish Regiment, son of Esther and the late Joseph Shier, Barrigone, killed in action 30 November 1917 (buried in Croisilles British Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France).

Limerick however still lacked a public monument where people irrespective of religious persuasion could commemorate their war dead. In early June 1928 the case for permission to erect such a memorial was made before the Limerick Corporation Improvement Committee by two members of the Limerick Branch of the Legion of ex-Servicemen, Captain David Tidmarsh and Captain Eric R. Shaw. Shaw was also a member of the Corporation and almost certainly a key figure in getting the proposal through to the whole house committee of the Corporation on 7 June 1928 where, by twenty-two votes to four, permission was granted to erect the memorial in Pery Square. Councillor C. Gilligan abstained, stating that he was ‘opposed to the memorial on national grounds’, ignoring as so many at the time did, the fact that many nationalists had fought and died in the war. Another Councillor, P. O’Callaghan, threatened to have it pulled down when it was erected. The other opponents of the proposal were against its location in Pery Square and wanted it situated instead in the People’s Park claiming that it would interfere with traffic and ‘especially in view of the fact that the line of railway to the docks will run through this thoroughfare’ and that the square was not ‘wide enough, and apart from that it is a very fine thoroughfare’. While this might have been a genuine concern, there may also have been an underlying motive to have it placed in a less prominent location in the People’s Park, keeping it ‘out of sight, out of mind’ and where the public would not have had access to it after the gates of the park were closed. The argument was nullified when a report from the Borough Surveyor, J.J.

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6 I am grateful to the hon. editor for information on Viscount Glentworth and Captain O’Brien.
7 www.cwgc.org/search/casualty-details (CWGC).
8 CWGC gives his address as The Grange, Castle Connell but the memorial tablet states Glenbevan which is also the address for the family in the 1911 census.
9 The tablet is underneath a stained glass window erected by Emily Gertrude Bannatyne, the mother of James, and also commemorates her deceased husband and two infant sons, M.J. Talbot, The Monuments of St Mary’s Cathedral (Limerick, 1976) pp 10-11: CWGC.
10 I am grateful to Mrs Ann Ashton for this information.
11 Tidmarsh was a son of the Chairman of Cannock & Company Ltd and Shaw was the son of Alexander W. Shaw, the Bacon Merchant and a brother of Captain Gordon Thompson Shaw.
12 Gilligan and O’Callaghan had been elected in June 1925 on what was termed the Republican label, see L.L., 24 June 1925 and L.C., 27 June 1925.
13 There had been discussions underway regarding the laying of a railway line from the railway terminus in Parnell Street to Limerick docks for quite some time but the project never materialised.
Peacocks was read out stating that 'the proposed memorial would in no way impede traffic passing through Pery Square. At either side of the site of the memorial there would be twenty five feet of roadway, which was more than sufficient for the traffic passing through that area'.14

Confirmation that the proposal was going ahead came at an Armistice dinner held at the British Legion Hall, Lower Hartstone Street on 14 November 1928 when the Chairman of the Irish Legion Mr. A. P. Connolly declared that 'they were at last to have their war memorial in Limerick, a fact that reflected honour on the generous people of that city and county. Such a memorial would keep the grand ideal for which the men had fallen before them, and be an inspiration to them in the future'.15

The first tangible evidence that matters were well advanced for the erection of the monument came a year later. On 2 November 1929 two advertisements were published in the Limerick Chronicle one, declaring that the war memorial was 'in the form of the “Cross of Sacrifice”, which stands in nearly every War Graves Cemetery throughout the World', and that public subscriptions small or large were most welcome. The other indicated that the ceremony of unveiling the Limerick War Memorial was to take place on 10 November 1929.16 On 9 November another advertisement gave the format for the parade that was to take place from St. John's Cathedral. It also published the first subscribers' list showing that £357.10s.0d. had been contributed towards the amount required of £550.17 The willingness of people to subscribe is shown by a further list, published a month later, showing that the amount contributed had risen to £469.1s.0d., leaving only an outstanding debt, of £80.19s.0d.18 Of the one hundred and fifty seven subscribers named many had had relatives killed in the war or had served during the conflict or just subscribed because they thought that the erection of such a memorial was a worthy cause. The individual amounts subscribed were not disclosed, signifying that the subscriptions paid whether small or large were of equal importance. Although no further lists were published, it is safe to assume that the remainder was donated and the debt paid in full.

The memorial was in the form of a granite cross with a bronze sword on its shaft, a version of the 'Cross of Sacrifice' designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield which were erected in nearly every Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery throughout the world. Set on an octagonal base, the memorial, twenty feet in height, was constructed by Harrison and Sons, a Dublin firm. (Fig. 1). The finely chiselled white Irish granite, of which one of the parts is mica, was chosen as a material that would sparkle in the sun or artificial light. It bore the following inscription:

To the glory of God, and to the memory of 3,000 officers, N.C.O.'s, and men of Limerick City and County who fell in the Great War, 1914-18. They died in every quarter of the earth and on its seas, and their names have with reverence and love been inscribed on our rolls of honour. Most of them lie buried in the lands of our Allies, who have set aside their resting place in honour for ever.

15 L.C., 15 Nov. 1928.
16 L.C. 2 Nov. 1929.
17 L.C., 9 Nov. 1929.
18 L.C., 7 Dec. 1929.
On Sunday 10 November 1929, the day of the unveiling, both Catholic and Protestant ex-servicemen held separate services as was the case in previous years, after which they marched to the memorial. The Protestant service was held in St. Mary’s Cathedral where ‘the sacred edifice had been filled to overflowing by a congregation representing all Protestant denominations in [the] city and county’ many of whom were ex-Servicemen, wearing their medals and decorations and a wreath on behalf of the Limerick Branch of the British Legion was laid at the Thomond War Memorial by Major-General Sir George Franks, K.C.B. who is described as ‘a distinguished County Limerick soldier.’ The memorial Mass was held in St John’s Cathedral where the celebrant, Rev. T. J. McNamara, noted that Marshal Foch ‘an exemplary Catholic, who had saved the Allied cause...made it a practice to keep the Crucifix close to him.’ After Mass at least six hundred ex-Servicemen, preceded by the Sarsfield Fife and Drum Band marched from John’s Square to Pery Square via William Street and Glentworth Street where a large assembly of people had gathered, many of whom were women wearing their deceased husband’s, father’s or brother’s medals and decorations.

Following the playing of the ‘Last Post’ and two minutes silence, Major-General Sir William Hickie, K.C.B., President of the British Legion in the Free State who had commanded the 16th Irish Division in France during the Great War and was therefore well known to and respected by the general body of the ex-Servicemen present, stood on the steps at the pedestal and unveiled the Cross which had been covered with a purple drape, which symbolized the sacrifice of the men that the memorial commemorated. (Fig. 2).

19 This is situated on the rear wall of the cathedral, just inside the doorway.
20 L.C. 12 Nov. 1929.
21 Ibid.
22 Major-General Sir William Bernard Hickie, K.C.B., came from Slevoyre, Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary. Educated at Oscott College and Sandhurst, he was commissioned into his father’s regiment, the Royal Fusiliers, rose rapidly to attain the rank of Major-General and took command of the 16th Irish Division before it left for France in 1915. He was a member of Seanad Éireann 1925-36. He died at the age of 85 on 3 Nov. 1950, Irish Independent 4 Nov. 1950 & Terence Denman, Ireland’s Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War (Dublin, 1992) p. 57.
In his address he stressed that the sacrifice of the men to whom the memorial was erected was made for the highest motives and he made particular mention of the defence of Belgium. He also insisted that the basic motivation of the Allies in going to war had been honourable and made a plea for tolerance and understanding of differing points of view which he noted were absent in contemporary Ireland but which the occasion showed existed, as they always had, in Limerick:

I am most grateful for the high honour which has been done me to-day by the representatives of my comrades, the ex-Servicemen of Limerick, in asking me to come here to-day and to unveil your beautiful memorial. It is most fitting that this ancient city should have within its boundaries a monument which will not only stand to the glorious memory of those of her gallant sons who gave their lives in the cause of freedom and justice in the Great War, but will also serve to remind everyone, both citizens and visitors alike, of the great number of men from the County of Limerick, and from this its capital city, who took a distinguished part in the campaign of the Great War, and of the exemplary and gallant manner in which they carried out their self imposed duties. I congratulate you on the choice of this simple and dignified design. I congratulate everyone who has been connected with this undertaking – the sculptor and his assistants, the committee,
and all of those whose sympathy and support have enabled this work to be carried to so successful a conclusion: and on my own behalf, and in the name of the ex-Servicemen, whom I represent, especially do I thank the City Fathers for their choice and the donation of this site. What we want most in Ireland to-day is that brotherly spirit which will recognise that we are all Irishmen of one great family, who are striving according to our lights, to do our best for the country which we love. Opinions and methods may differ, but nothing is to be gained by unkind criticism, by harsh words, or by wilful misunderstanding. Limerick has always set an example of that broadmindedness and of that kindly spirit which are also, so noticeably absent at times from our public life. This monument has been erected to three thousand Limerick men who fell in the Great War, as I have said, in the cause of right and justice. I know it is frequently said that it was not for these causes that the Allies entered the war. Personally, I believe that it was, and that if the Central Powers had respected the neutrality of Belgium that France and Russia would have stood alone. But even if I were prepared to concede that there were other causes which induced some of the Allies to take to the field, I emphatically assert that the men of Ireland, who fought with them, did so soley for the cause of right and justice, and for the integrity of Belgium. The cross now takes its place with the three crosses of Irish granite which stand respectively at Wytschaete in Flanders, at Guillemont and on the Somme in France and on the Serbian heights above Lake Doiran, as lasting memorials to those fifty thousand of our comrades who went out and who did not come back. To the Glory of God, to the honour of Ireland, in all reverence, I have unveiled this memorial to those gallant soldiers and to their supreme sacrifice.

In his reply to a vote of thanks Hickie noted that ‘the position of the Irish ex-Servicemen was different now to what it was five or six years ago. Now they were not excluded from employment because they were ex-Servicemen’. Wreaths were then laid by the President, Vice-Presidents, Area Council, the Limerick, Nenagh, Ennis and Croom Branches of the British Legion, the bishop, clergy and the people of the Church of Ireland, various regimental ex-Servicemen’s associations such as the Leinster Regiment, Irish Guards, Royal Army Medical Corps, South Irish Horse, Navy ex-Servicemen and individuals who had relatives who died in the war. While no wreath was laid on behalf of the Catholic Church quite a number of clergy were present at the ceremony, some of whom had been army chaplains during the war. The reveille was sounded after the wreath laying ceremony was concluded and the ex-Servicemen paraded to the Legion Hall in Lower Hartstonge Street where they were dismissed.

The British Legion sent a formal invitation to members of the City Council to attend the ceremony. When the letter was read at the Council meeting on 7 November there was a formal proposal that it be accepted followed by a counter-proposal against attending. When a vote was taken, four were for rejection, seven for acceptance while the other seven members abstained. The Mayor declared it to be ‘abortive’ and the matter was dropped. There was, therefore, no official representation by the City Council at the ceremony, although a member of the Council, Alderman P. O’Flynn, did
attend in a private capacity. The mayor, Councillor Michael Keyes, who had attended a Legion dinner the previous year at which he said that "he felt it his duty to be present at that gathering of Limerick men, because as Mayor he recognised he was not Mayor of any section or class. His function was to help to advance the interest of the citizens without distinction" was noticeable by his absence. The attendance of the mayor and Council in an official capacity at such a ceremony was obviously considered a step too far in the context of 1920s Limerick.28

The ex-Servicemen now had a place to go to pay homage to their comrades who died during the war. Each year following its unveiling, with the exception of the years 1939-45 the ex-Servicemen assembled at the Cross on the nearest Sunday to the eleventh day of November, the date of the end of the war. After the Second World War a plaque was added to the memorial to commemorate the men from Limerick City and County who were killed in action serving with the Allies during that conflict.29

Not everyone agreed with what the memorial symbolised or the sentiments expressed on it and during the early hours of Wednesday morning 7 August 1957 it was destroyed by an explosion.30 On the following day the Limerick Chronicle published a disclaimer it had received from what it termed 'the local secretary of a proscribed organisation' stating that the organisation was not responsible and "that no member of the Republican Movement was involved".31 No group or individuals ever took responsibility for this action but its occurrence during the IRA border campaign pointed to the most likely source, though it may have been an unauthorised action. The death of Limerick man Sean Sabhat the previous January may also be a relevant factor. John Ring, secretary of the Limerick branch of the British Legion, pointed out that the memorial 'had no political significance and was merely there to commemorate our Limerick men who were killed in the First World War and also in the Second World War. That was the only purpose of it.'32

The British Legion subsequently claimed damages for the destruction of the memorial. Initially the claim was for £3,000 but this was later reduced to £535. Limerick Corporation opposed this claim and the matter came before Limerick Circuit Court on 31 January 1958. Two issues had to be determined. For the claim to be successful it had to be regarded as malicious damage. The judge, Mr Barra O Briain, ruled that it clearly was an act of malice even though it had not been established who was responsible or what the exact motive was. The second issue was the liability of the Corporation. It was argued that the British Legion were not the owners of the monument as it had been erected by public subscription and were therefore not entitled to compensation. The judge ruled that they were in effect the owners as the site had been granted to them and they had maintained it over the years. He therefore granted them the full amount of £535.33 Awards for damage, amounting in total to £1,200, were also made to property owners and residents of the area.34

27 L.C., 15 Nov. 1928.
28 It was not until 1991 that the mayor, Alderman Jim Kenney, attended the ceremony at the memorial and laid a wreath on behalf of the City Council, thereby establishing a precedent, which has continued to this day.
29 L.C., 1 Feb 1958.
30 L.L., 7 Aug 1957.
31 L.C., 8 August 1957.
32 L.L., 7 August 1957. Ring had been the Regimental Sergeant Major of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, during WW1 and up to its disbandment in 1922. He is listed as one of the donors for the erection of the memorial in 1929, L.C., 7 December 1929.
33 L.C., 1 Feb 1958.
34 L.L., 1 Feb 1958.
As a result, like the phoenix rising from the ashes, a new memorial was erected symbolically using part of the granite base of the old one. This is a relatively simple cross, made of limestone with carved Celtic-style knotwork decoration on the shaft, set on an octagonal-plan limestone faced base. It was designed by Limerick architect, Ronald J. Hickey in 1960.\(^{35}\) It is smaller in size than its predecessor and the inscriptions on the front and rear are simpler:

In Memory of
Limerick men
who died in
both world wars
1914-18
1939-45

In 1992 a small plaque was placed on the northern face of the base to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the disbandment of the Irish regiments of the British army in 1922.\(^{36}\) Both the earlier and present structures are frequently and incorrectly described as a cenotaph.\(^{37}\) This word applies to a tomb like structure, honouring a soldier who is buried elsewhere, from its original Greek derivation of kenos (empty) and taphos (tomb) and is not an accurate term for the limestone memorial cross that now honours the dead of both world wars in Pery Square.

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35 Information supplied by Mr Hickey, who is a long-time member of the Thomond Archaeological Society.