

NOTES

The Mystery of the William Fitzgerald Memorial

Alderman William Fitzgerald, who died at the age of thirty-four years on 26 October 1860, is the youngest mayor of Limerick city to have died in office since the reform of the Corporation in 1840.¹ His death, at his residence 116 George (now O'Connell) Street, was due to apoplexy resulting from a severed blood vessel in his brain.² The son of David Fitzgerald, a Limerick stockbroker and agent,³ William had been elected to the Limerick County Borough Council, as alderman for the Dock Ward on 23 May 1856, replacing Richard Russell, a member of the prominent merchant family.⁴ He was chosen as 'First Citizen of the Treaty City'⁵ on 1 December 1859 following an acrimonious contest, when he defeated his rival, Councillor Daniel Cullen by twenty votes to seventeen,⁶ and assumed office one month later, being sworn in on 2 January 1860.⁷

During his short period as mayor he was instrumental in establishing a fuel fund to assist the poor of the city during the winter months, as well as becoming involved in efforts to keep in operation the band of the Royal County Limerick Regiment, which was about to be dissolved. He believed that it could be the basis for the creation 'of a first class band in Limerick', the need for which had 'been so much felt in the last few of years in this city'.⁸ He also was keen to have a memorial erected to honour Patrick Sarsfield. He been one of the two joint secretaries elected to the Sarsfield Memorial committee at a meeting in 1858⁹ and as Mayor he had pledged that 'there would be no relaxation of effort until the project had reached its realization'.¹⁰ In the event, it was to be another twenty-three years before this was to be finally achieved.

His funeral on 29 October to St. Munchin's Church of Ireland churchyard, where he was interred in the family vault, was attended by a procession of immense proportions, which included the officials and fellow members of the Borough Council, members of the Congregated Trades of Limerick and over eighty carriages consisting of members of the gentry, merchants and professional class.¹¹ There was no church service as the late mayor was a member of a religious group known as 'Separatists'.

¹ *L.C.*, 27 October 1860.

² He had at the time of the seizure been preparing to attend the funeral of a fellow member of the Borough Council, Alderman William Sheehy of the Irishtown Ward who had been murdered a short time previously. *Munster News* (hereafter *M.N.*) 27 October 1860.

³ *Limerick Chronicle* (hereafter *L.C.*) 21 May 1863 & National Archives Ireland. MFGS 41/036. Limerick District Registry of Wills, 17 February 1858-1875. Copy Will of David Fitzgerald, 29 March 1863. David Fitzgerald was an agent of the West of England Insurance Company, general land agent, and stock broker. He died at his residence, Richmond, Courtbrack, Limerick on 20 May 1863 at the age of 75 years.

⁴ Matthew Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty City: The Mayors and Mayoralty of Limerick 1197-2007* (Limerick, 2007) p. 121.

⁵ Phrase from the title of Dr. Matthew Potter's book on the Mayors of Limerick.

⁶ See *M.N.*, 8 December 1859 for a full account of the debate leading up to his election.

⁷ County Borough Council Minutes, Limerick City Council Archives, 2 January 1860 & *M.N.*, 4 January 1860.

⁸ *L.C.*, 25 February 1860. His commitment to this was such that he contributed £10 to the fund, which was established for this purpose. *L.C.*, 18 August 1860.

⁹ *L.C.*, 5 May 1858, the other secretary elected was John Ellard.

¹⁰ *L.C.*, 19 May 1860.

This sect, sometimes also called 'Walkerites', was founded in 1804 by a Church of Ireland clergyman and fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, Rev. John Walker (1768-1833). Walker and his followers adopted an extreme form of Calvinism, rejected ordination and an appointed ministry. Their meetings consisted largely of scripture reading and sermons but both prayers and hymns were excluded on the basis that the prayers of those not predestined for salvation were an abomination to the Lord. A communion service, which they called 'the Breaking of Bread' was held on Sundays. The name 'Separatists' arose from their belief that they must separate both from the world and from all other Christians who they regarded as being in error.¹² The sect, which fragmented early on, had followers in some other Irish cities, apart from Dublin, and in England. It is of interest that some existed in Limerick at this time¹³ and also apparently in Portlaw, Co. Waterford. One of their number from Dublin, John Bagot, delivered a eulogy at the funeral.¹⁴

Due to Fitzgerald's sudden and untimely death there was an outpouring of sympathy to his widow, children and father, which led to resolutions and calls for a memorial fund to be established in his honour. These came from bodies such as the South West Agricultural Society, the Limerick Board of Guardians, the Limerick Athenaeum and the Borough Council,¹⁵ although it took the latter almost a month to pass a vote of condolence.¹⁶ The Bard of Thomond, Michael Hogan, noted for his vitriolic condemnation of local politicians and businessmen among others¹⁷ wrote a commiserative ode entitled 'Lament For William Fitzgerald Esq. Mayor Of Limerick', consisting of eight verses, which was published in the *Munster News*.¹⁸ Two letter writers to the *Limerick Chronicle*, signing themselves 'H' and 'A Citizen' suggested that a memorial in the form of a drinking fountain be erected either at Baker Place, Bank Place, the Old Market House in Broad Street or some principal location in the city and that it be named 'The Fitzgerald Fountain'.¹⁹

The Limerick Athenaeum, which Fitzgerald was involved with from its inception as secretary and as president at the time of his death, went a step further, indicating that they were prepared to act with other public bodies to erect a public memorial and donated the sum of twenty-five pounds with that purpose in mind.²⁰ The Borough Council donated

¹¹ *M.N.*, 31 October 1860. Among these were the Earl of Limerick, Wm. Monsell, M.P., Major Gavin, M.P., Richard Russell, J.P., Eugene O'Callaghan, J.P., Dr. Kane, J.P., James Bannatyne, Pierce Shannon and John R. Tinsley, J.P. The secretary of the Congregated Trades of Ennis, Co. Clare, Mr. Michael Considine, also attended out of respect for Fitzgerald, who chaired the Limerick meeting when the Clare Monument to Daniel O'Connell was promoted in Limerick.

¹² James McGuire & James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, 2009) pp 701-2; Grayson Carter, *Anglican evangelicals: Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850* (Oxford, 2001) p. 218.

¹³ A newspaper correspondent described them as people 'who adopt no recognised ministry, and hold peculiar religious doctrines', *M.N.*, 31 October 1860.

¹⁴ *L.C.*, 31 October 1860. William Fitzgerald's brother-in-law, William H. White, from Limerick was also a member of the Separatists. No information survives about any other members of this religious sect locally or the location of their meeting place. The other members of this group in attendance at the funeral were John Milo Bagot, William Walker, T.C., Dr. Parkinson, Mr. Heffernan, Mr. Booker all from Dublin and Dr. Martin from Portlaw, Co Waterford. *M.N.*, 31 October 1860.

¹⁵ *L.C.*, 27 October 1860, *M.N.*, 7 November 1860, David Fitzgerald was later on to donate a very generous sum of money to the South West Agricultural Society with the proviso that a trophy to be named the Fitzgerald Cup be procured and tendered as an award to be competed for three times. *L.C.*, 5 January 1861.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 31 October 1860. Although the Council had expressed sympathy with the family of the deceased mayor at its meeting held on Saturday 27 October, it was decided to appoint a committee to draft a document of condolence, which was passed unanimously at a special meeting of the Council on Thursday 22 November 1860. *L.C.*, 12 December 1860.

¹⁷ Jim Kemmy 'The Bard Hogan' in David Lee (ed.), *Remembering Limerick* (Limerick, 1997) pp 156-8.

¹⁸ *M.N.*, 31 October 1860. A year later he had again put pen to paper with a ten-verse composition entitled 'The Anniversary Of The Death Of William Fitzgerald, Esq. Late Mayor of Limerick'. *M.N.*, 30 October 1861.

¹⁹ *L.C.*, 31 October 1860.

²⁰ *L.C.*, 27 October 1860. William Fitzgerald had donated twenty pounds towards the foundation of the Athenaeum, *L.C.*, 13 July 1853.

fifty pounds but this was not without some controversy. When a majority of the council passed a vote in favour of doing so, the legality of the move was questioned by Councillor Zachary Myles, who voted against it.²¹ The Limerick Savings Bank, of which William Fitzgerald was a trustee, sought to subscribe twenty-five pounds and requested permission from the Commissioners for the Reduction of the National Debt to deduct the money from 'a separate surplus fund',²² it apparently was not granted as there is no reference to a donation in the lists of subscribers published later on.

With such high profile organisations indicating their willingness to assist with the establishment of a memorial or testimonial fund, a public meeting with this objective in mind was held on Friday 3 November 1860, attended by members of the merchant and professional classes and his colleagues from the Borough Council. At this meeting it was decided to institute the 'Fitzgerald Memorial Committee, consisting of members of the Town Council ex-officio, the members of the committees of other public bodies who have subscribed to the memorial, and the other gentlemen present at the meeting', and they resolved that 'it will not be decided in what shape the memorial will be carried out until the subscription list will be finally closed, and then a general meeting will be called to decide thereon'. Also appointed were three secretaries, Robert Anglim,²³ William Lysaght²⁴ and John McKern,²⁵ who along with Alderman William Lane Joynt²⁶ and Alderman Thaddeus McDonnell the mayor,²⁷ were also to be joint trustees.²⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the meeting a subscription list was inaugurated, with funds amounting to £354. 1s 0d, collected.²⁹ Donations ranged from £1 to £10 from individuals. Organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Committee of Barrington's Hospital Improvement Fund gave £25 and £20 respectively.³⁰ Alderman Laurence Quinlivan,³¹ explained the reason for the latter donation:

That committee would have to their credit...a sum of £1,400 which would have been mainly owing to the exertions of their esteemed Mayor in getting up the lottery for that valuable charity, and he believed it was one of these arduo[u]s and severe labours that led to the premature close of his valuable life, and the committee at once voted a sum of £20 out of their funds for the purpose of erecting a suitable memorial to his memory'.³²

²¹ *M.N.*, 3 November 1860. That his objection was purely based on the legal issue is shown by the fact that Myles later made a donation as an individual to the fund, *L.C.*, 7 November 1860.

²² *M.N.*, 3 November 1860. Although a report in the *Limerick Chronicle* stated that the Savings Bank had indeed subscribed to the fund, *L.C.*, 3 November 1860.

²³ Anglim was secretary of the South-West Agricultural Society in 1853, *L.C.*, 1 June 1853.

²⁴ Secretary of the Limerick Athenaeum and the South-West Agricultural Society, *M.N.*, 7 November 1860.

²⁵ John McKern served on the council of the Limerick Athenaeum and was also a trustee of the Limerick Savings Bank., *L.C.*, 27 October 1860.

²⁶ Potter, *Mayors and Mayoralty of Limerick*, p. 123. William Lane Joynt was a solicitor by profession and a founder member and president of the Limerick Athenaeum. He was to become mayor of the city in 1862.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113. Thadeus McDonnell, was a corn merchant who had previously served as mayor in 1851.

²⁸ *L.C.*, 3 November 1860 & *M.N.*, 3 November 1860.

²⁹ *M.N.*, 3 November 1860. However, the *Limerick Chronicle* reported that £344. 1s. 0d had been collected. *L.C.*, 7 November 1860.

³⁰ *M.N.*, 3 November 1860. The Limerick Club and Limerick Market Trustees also contributed £25 each. *M.N.*, 3 November 1860 & *L.C.*, 22 December 1860.

³¹ Potter, *Mayors and Mayoralty of Limerick*, pp 112-13. Lawrence Quinlivan was a successful businessman, the proprietor of a hotel, and later a corn merchant. He served as mayor in 1849 & 1850.

³² *M.N.*, 7 November 1860.

Subscriptions to the fund came in quickly, the majority during the month of November, and £704. 5s. 0d had been collected by January 1861.³³ Nothing further seems to have happened until the following July when a meeting of subscribers to the fund was held in the Town Hall, where a decision to be made on how best to apply the fund.³⁴ No account of this meeting or its outcome was published in the newspapers nor is there any subsequent record of what happened to the fund. Certainly there is no evidence of any public memorial such as a drinking fountain erected in honour of William Fitzgerald in any part of the city. It may of course be that it was decided to give the money collected to the late mayor's widow³⁵ and young family³⁶ but then this is mere speculation. The mystery of the William Fitzgerald Memorial remains unanswered.

Tadhg Moloney

³³ *L.C.*, 10, 14, 17 & 24 November 1860, 22 December 1860, 9 January 1861.

³⁴ *M.N.*, 6 July 1861 & *L.C.*, 10 July 1861. The meeting was held on Saturday 13 July.

³⁵ His widow, Caroline Fitzgerald, died on 12 December 1884 at 21, Lower Beechwood Avenue, Rathmines, Dublin, *L.C.*, 13 December 1884.

³⁶ William Fitzgerald had three children, David, William and Anne. David, his eldest son, died at Maryborough (Portlaoise) on 29 May 1886, aged 27 years, *L.C.*, 29 May 1886 & National Archives Ireland. MFGS 41/036. Limerick District Registry of Wills, 17 February 1858-1875, copy Will of David Fitzgerald, 29 March 1863.