

A simple stone recalls 330 years of history . . .

The Augustinians in Limerick

A precious relic of the past restored

THE passing years, when looked at like the stilled action of a huge painting, can bring only one surging response in the heart of the average man and woman. The hard and dark shadows of sorrow scattered here and there serve only to heighten the glowing shades of kindness, the vigorous colours of love and loyalty enlighten the muted background of endurance and integrity.

Yes, there is only one true emotion which can include all the experiences of the past when contemplated in their total effect, and it rises from the heart in a soft, deep tide of gratitude which says "thank you" to the good God and to the good neighbours who helped along the way.

Some incident may cause you to pause and reflect, a joyful marriage, a sad funeral or a faded photograph from the past. For me it was a stone, a worn, grey stone with its birth certificate carved upon it.

Three and a half centuries ago a young Irishman, Father Dermot McGrath, joined the Augustinian Order in Salamanca, where he had completed his studies, and returned to Ireland to begin a revival of the Augustinians in Munster.

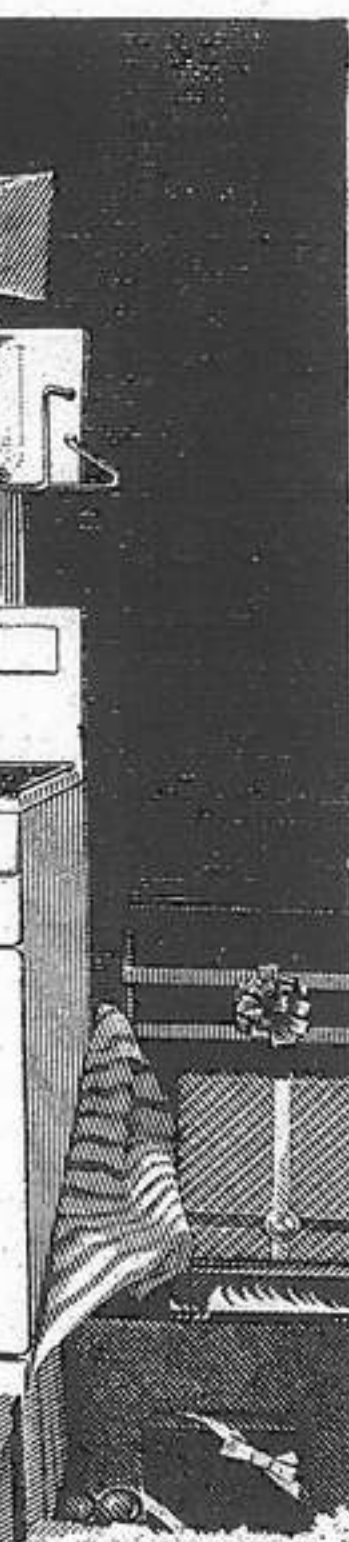
He must have been a brave young man, not just because of the difficult times which all shared, but because he was almost alone with no fellow members of the Order to share house and hardship.

He took the task bravely in hand and encouraged other young men from the Irish Colleges in Europe to join him. In sixteen years (1613-1629) their numbers had so increased in Kerry and Cork that contact with the Fathers working in Galway and Mayo was the next natural step.

Everything pointed to Limerick City. It would make an excellent resting place for Fathers travelling from one province to the other, and since all our work at that time was in the nature of a secret mission, the missionaries often changed places.

Limerick harbour had ships frequently from the continent and this was a much-needed service by priests and students. Our monastery in Adare was by now in a very bad condition and if the Fathers returned to Adare they would be easy prey for the priest-hunters.

The city offered greater security and greater advantages. But an almost insuperable obstacle confronted them. By a recent decree from Rome, no religious order could establish a house in Irish cities and towns unless it had a claim going back before the Reformation. We did not have such a claim in Limerick city.



come true!

WORLD 43 HUI COOKER (Illustrated above)
 £4.8.0 down (with 2 cylinders of gas), and 24 monthly payments of £2.0.0. Total Hire Purchase Price (excl. Gas) £50.3.0. Or £44.0.0. cash.

WORLD 43 HUI COOKER (Illustrated above)
 £3.15.0 down (with 2 cylinders of gas), and 24 monthly payments of £1.7.0. Total Hire Purchase Price (excl. Gas) £29.11.0. Or £22.5.0. cash, fitted.

WORLD 43 HUI COOKER (Illustrated above)
 £1.18.0 down (with 1 cylinder of gas), and 24 monthly payments of £1.1.0. Total Hire Purchase Price (excl. Gas) £17.11.0. Or £11.10.0. cash.

TIME OF ESTABLISHMENT

This may come as a surprise to those who read the well-known histories of Limerick where it is often stated that we were established in the city before the seventeenth century. The mistake is understandable because the Canon Regulars of St. Augustine and the Crossed Friars were in the city before us and were generally known as Augustinians. You might call them first cousins of ours, provided no one objects.

To add to the confusion the manner of our coming seemed to identify us with them, as you will see later on. The Crossed Friars were brought to Limerick early in the thirteenth century by Simon Minor. Their hospital and monastery were near Sir Harry's Mall, bordering Fish Lane. It was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, St. Edward the Martyr and the Holy Cross.

This triple title has also led some into supposing that these names represented more than one monastery. They were what we might call a nursing order, a very unpleasant and difficult task in those days, and I am sure the people of Limerick were generous to them. So outstanding was their service to the city that their prior was given the privilege and right to cast the first vote in the election of the Mayor and to have the place of honour on the days of election. And the Priors used this privilege right up to the Reformation. Then came the storm. The Friars were turned out, their property confiscated and given in 1537 to Edmund Sexton and heirs, Earls of Limerick. Soon afterwards the Order of the Crossed Friars was crushed out of existence in Ireland.

A MISSION TO ROME

Almost 100 years later we challenged the confiscation. A little diplomacy in church affairs often achieves wonders. Two Augustinian Fathers, Fr. Maurice O'Connell and Fr. Patrick Comerford, decided to ask Pope Urban VIII to transfer from Rome the rights of the Crossed Friars at Limerick to the Augustinians. Fr. O'Connell was from that same family which later gave us Daniel O'Connell. Fr. Comerford became Bishop of Waterford.

In 1629, Fr. O'Connell set out for Rome and received much help from the famous Franciscan Fr. Luke Wadding, a cousin and friend of Bishop Comerford.

It was a delicate task and took some time. At last, on October 13, 1632, Pope Urban issued a brief from Castelgandolfo transferring the rights of the Crossed Friars at Limerick to the Augustinians. This Papal document gave us our charter for Limerick City and both by ecclesiastical and civil law of that time was truly effective, just as the confiscation was illegal according to the same laws.

I can well imagine Fr. O'Connell, although anxious to return to Ireland, tarrying a little to settle many small affairs and rejoice with his friends over the success of his mission, which was carried through with patience, tact and skill.

He was returning as Provincial and would naturally have some business on the way.

It must then, at the very earliest, have been some time in January of the new year, 1633, before he appointed the first priests to Limerick and instructed them how to proceed with caution in claiming our inheritance.

THE FIRST HOUSE

So it was that 1633 was the year of our first house in Limerick. The Fathers rented a house and opened an Oratory very close to the old monastery of the Crossed Friars, serving the people with the Bishop and clergy, until a suitable time for establishing themselves more fully should arrive. Nine years later that time came.

The rebellion of 1641 and the taking of Limerick Castle in 1642 restored the Catholics to power and the Friars were once more able to appear in public in their religious habits.

Our Fathers now pressed their claim in accordance with the Papal document but the people who had rented the old church and monastic buildings were, naturally, insisting on their right to remain. The case was sent to the Supreme Council at Kilkenny and it was decreed that the buildings should be handed over to us.

On March 25, 1646, the people of Limerick joyfully gathered to attend Mass celebrated once more

BRIEF, HOPEFUL YEARS

During these brief hopeful years I feel sure the Fathers placed the stone over one of the doors of the old church when they were restoring the building. Our first known Prior of Limerick was in office there in 1648; his name, Father Maurice Lacy. But the dread of Cromwell soon spread through the country. After the surrender of Limerick in 1651, Father Lacy and his community went into hiding. It was only for a short time because the Catholics were again allowed to practise their religion after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660.

The Fathers returned and continued public worship in the old church which had to be somewhat repaired. Within 30 years came the defeat of James II at the Battle of the Boyne, and the Siege of Limerick.

With the success of William's armies the law in Ireland changed once more. The secular, or civil, law was replaced by the religious orders were the first to suffer and a certain William Lyssaght had little difficulty in claiming the property we were using as a Priory. The Penal Days settled down a gloom and silence fell on everything for the next 40 years.



THE FATHERS RETURN

When the first bad period of persecution was over, two of our Fathers returned to Limerick, Fr. Nicholas Durcan and Fr. Edward O'Brien. From the stones of the derelict church they built a new small chapel within a few yards of the old one and placed the stone once more over the door. It was 1733, exactly one hundred years from our first coming to the city.

This little Chapel was now situated in Fish Lane proper. If today you walk over Baal's Bridge, you will see that Sir Harry's Mall and Fish Lane run together like a narrow V-sign. The old monastery and church of the Crossed Friars was mainly on the arm of the V near the river. Our new Chapel in Fish Lane was only a few yards from the point of intersection.

In those long drawn out disturbances of the previous years many citizens had died, priests had been murdered or betrayed, documents and archives destroyed. Few remained who could tell you the exact state of affairs before the siege. It is not strange then that in this struggle for survival, our right to have a house in Limerick was challenged by other religious orders, especially since we erected our little Chapel very close to the new Dominican Church, recently built in Fish Lane.

Bishop O'Keefe gave us 20 days to leave the city, but we appealed to higher authority. The Primate of Armagh gave his decision in our favour but this did not satisfy so the case went to Rome.

There, in 1737, confirmation of the Papal document given to Fr. Maurice O'Connell in 1632 was found in the archives of Propaganda Fide. So ended a dispute which must have caused some scandal and confusion and it was forever settled that we came to Limerick in 1633, by the direct permission of Pope Urban VIII, with the full civil and religious rights of the Crossed Friars.



THE NEW CHURCH

But the people of Limerick soon showed how generous they could be. One of our notable priests of the Fish Lane community was Fr. Thomas Walsh. At the request of the Bishop he served for many years with the secular clergy as a curate in St. Mary's Parish. He was a favourite with all the Diocesan clergy especially with fellow curate and historian, Fr. James White.

When he became Provincial of the Order, he showed great foresight in anticipating the Relief Act of 1778 in purchasing a plot of ground between Little and Great Creagh Lane where he began to build a new church and priory. The Mayor, Walter Widenham, laid the foundation stone of the priory on March 28, 1778.

The Relief Act was passed in June, and the new church was officially opened on Sunday, December 6, 1778. It was a vaulted structure and for its time was a very fine church. He also installed the first organ in any Catholic Chapel in Limerick.

A young baker's apprentice who served Mass in Creagh Lane was given a completely new life when Fr. Walsh organised a scholarship to send him to Italy to study painting. Timothy Collopy later gave to Fr. Walsh his painting of the Ascension which was placed over the High Altar in Creagh Lane. Fr. Walsh, however, was so occupied in improving our lot that he did not even think, as was natural, of bringing the 1633 stone, the great relic of the past, with him when the community left the small building in Fish Lane in 1778. So the stone remained embedded over the door of the little chapel. The new owners filled in some of the openings with the loose stones lying around and converted it to a kind of store, and thus it remained from 1780 to 1933.

THE END OF OPPRESSION

In the meantime, the happy relations between the diocesan clergy and by Father Walsh continued to flourish and at least two of our

STONE WAS FORGOTTEN

All this while, silent and forgotten, the long, grey stone lay firmly secure in the old buildings in Fish Lane.

In 1888, the property passed from James Russell to the Skehan family. John O'Doherty married Anna Maria Skehan and the buildings passed into the careful hands of the O'Doherty family, who are stone-cutters by trade.

As boy and man, John O'Doherty knew the history of the place, and knew that the main structure was just the same as we left it in 1778. From the grandmother on the Skehan side the living testimony was handed down to the O'Doherty family that the stone in their property was the Augustinian stone, still untouched in the same old Augustinian Fish Lane Church, and this goes back to within a decade of our leaving the place.

John O'Doherty passed on this same tradition to his son. And so it remained until 1933, when the old buildings which had stood for 200 years were taken down to make way for the new houses in O'Doherty Terrace. It was then that the Lintel Stone was removed to their stone-cutting yard at Matthew Bridge. John O'Doherty had earnestly asked his son to preserve this stone. Mr. Christopher O'Doherty carried out his father's wish but for the sake of convenient storage he cut it down to the central piece.

When we were building our new church in 1939, we were told about the stone, but when the war came and Fr. Hennessey died, everyone seems to have forgotten about it. Two keen enthusiasts of Limerick history, the brothers Mr. Frank and Arthur McNamara, recently turned our attention to the stone and made me envious of their pride in Limerick City and their knowledge of its ruins.

One more name must be mentioned in connection with these two

Right Rev. Monsignor M. Moloney, P.P., V.F., blessing the stone at the Augustinian Church on Sunday, also in picture are (left to right): Chevalier P. J. Sheahan, Rev. J. J. Phelan, O.S.A.; Very Rev. P. J. Lyons, Adm.; and Very Rev. L. V. Lyons, O.S.A., Prior.

THE NEW CHURCH

The new "Theatre" Church served its purpose well for about one hundred and forty years (1823-1942). During those years the Arch-Confraternity of the Circure which was begun in Creagh Lane, multiplied in numbers. A copy of the printed regulations issued by the Prior of Creagh Lane can be seen in the museum section of the Limerick City Library.

There are men alive to-day who will probably remember two great men of the Augustinian community during the "troubled times," Fr. Joseph Hennessey and Dr. Columba Murphy. Fr. Hennessey was a commanding figure, every inch a leader, a man of convictions, piety and decision. Dr. Murphy, a scholar and musician. Yet they were fearless in combining their political convictions with their exemplary priestly lives.

Fr. Hennessey planned our new church in O'Connell Street on the same site but much larger than the "Theatre" Church. For years he had collected money to erect a building which would give honour to God, contain the growing numbers of devout Catholics, and express our full liberty and freedom. On March 15, 1939, seven months before the outbreak of world war, he cast the first shovel of cement into the foundations. The first half of the church was officially opened on March 26, 1941. He came out of hospital to be present at the opening and died two days later. The entire church was completed and officially opened on December 20, 1942, by Bishop Keane, the preacher being the celebrated Capuchin, Dr. James, of Cork University.

One more name must be mentioned in connection with these two

Right Rev. Monsignor M. Moloney, P.P., V.F., blessing the stone at the Augustinian Church on Sunday, also in picture are (left to right): Chevalier P. J. Sheahan, Rev. J. J. Phelan, O.S.A.; Very Rev. P. J. Lyons, Adm.; and Very Rev. L. V. Lyons, O.S.A., Prior.

When we were building our new church in 1939, we were told about the stone, but when the war came and Fr. Hennessey died, everyone seems to have forgotten about it. Two keen enthusiasts of Limerick history, the brothers Mr. Frank and Arthur McNamara, recently turned our attention to the stone and made me envious of their pride in Limerick City and their knowledge of its ruins.

One more name must be mentioned in connection with these two

Right Rev. Monsignor M. Moloney, P.P., V.F., blessing the stone at the Augustinian Church on Sunday, also in picture are (left to right): Chevalier P. J. Sheahan, Rev. J. J. Phelan, O.S.A.; Very Rev. P. J. Lyons, Adm.; and Very Rev. L. V. Lyons, O.S.A., Prior.

A FADED PHOTOGRAPH

And so I looked upon it as one of the faded photographs of the past. Marked with the date 1633, the letters L.H.S. with a little cross over the H and the symbol of a heart underneath. The date is out, the place is ours, the symbol of the heart is ours, and it has remained there undisturbed until 1933, waiting. Three hundred and thirty years of history!

I felt this mute relic should say something of those passing years, this stone should tell the past to the present by taking a special place in the front wall of our new church.

Our Prior, Very Rev. L. V. Lyons, O.S.A., has already this year given new life to Collopy's name of the Ascension. He invited Fr. Lyons, O.S.A., to transfer the stone to the new church and to place it in the hall of the Priory.

He, too, it was who with a great stone should be recovered and given a place of honour in the new church, on to generations after us, a reminder of the past and a symbol of our achievements and our hopes for the future.

Words of St. Augustine that seem to mind the passing years, the stone should tell the past to the present by taking a special place in the front wall of our new church.

The history of the stone was read and told by Father White. But now, while the stone is being moved, it is being moved to the new church.

Yes, indeed, for those passing years we were living through in the night.

Taylor-Keith
 SOFT DRINKS
 MAKE THE PARTY COMPLETE
 FAMILY FLAGON 11"

Dan Ryan Car Rentals
 New Cars • No Mileage Charge • No Extras
 19 O'CONNELL'S LIMERICK PHONE 4-55-66