

The Brazen Head

Limerick is a city of legends. The stories of Shawn-a-Scoob, the Curse of St. Munchin, and the Bishop's Lady have already appeared in the pages of **The Old Limerick Journal**.

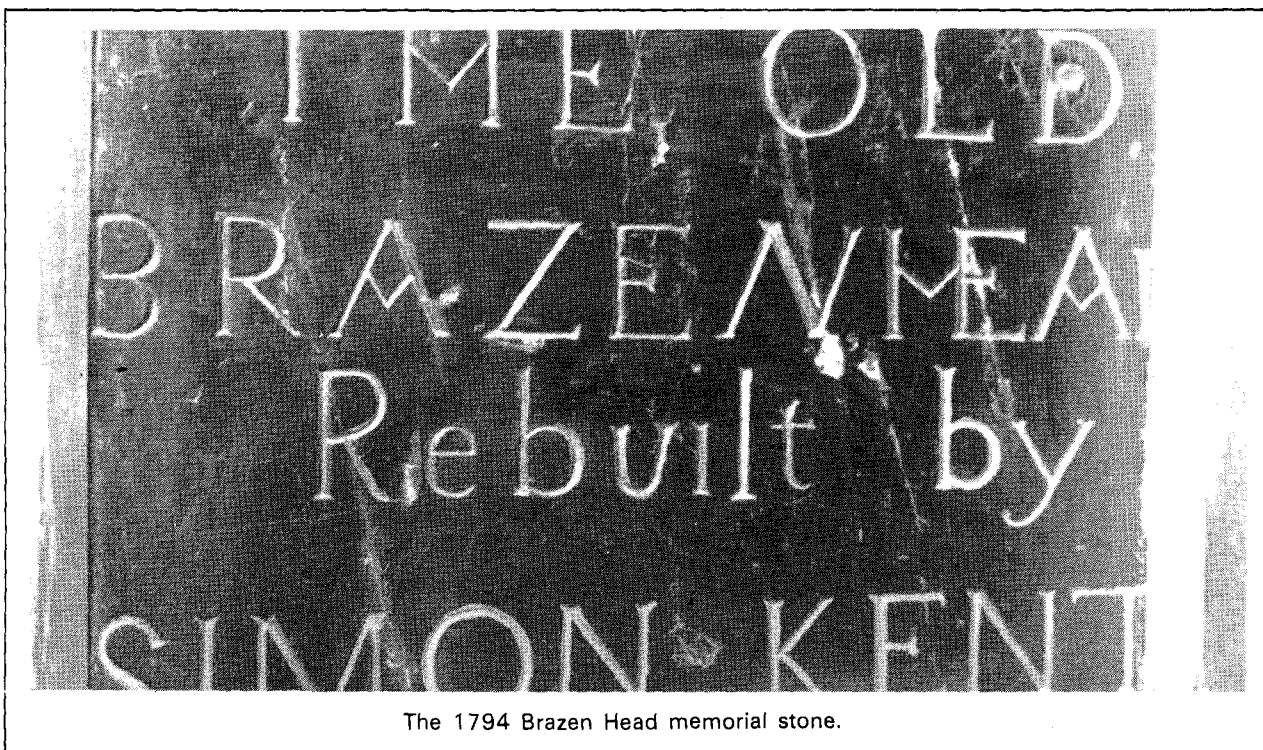
The legend of "The Brazen Head" is also worthy of revival, especially for the benefit of our younger readers.

The story of this Limerick lady dates back to that autumn evening of August 26, 1690, during the Siege by William III, when 4,000 of his finest troops, consisting of the crack Brandenburgers, Saxon and Dutch mercenaries, were blown to bits during the massed assault on the Black Battery, at the eastern end of the Walls of Garryowen, where St. John's Hospital now stands.

By W.W. Gleeson

500 of William's troops died in John's Mount (John Street) - not a single one having escaped. The sight of the carnage forced William to raise the siege - not the swollen Shannon which threatened to separate him from his forces in King's Island, or the superior numbers of the Irish", as the King averred.

Harris concludes: "William was so sickened and humiliated at the crushing defeat at the hands of the Defenders of Limerick that his victory at the Boyne a



The 1794 Brazen Head memorial stone.

Scarcely had the reverberations and rumblings ceased when, through smoke and grime, grape and shot, William's forces poured through the breach and reached a point near Baal's Bridge - a distance of about 400 metres - but no sooner had they done so when the Irish defenders closed the breach and the bloodiest street battle ensued, in which no quarter was asked or given.

Here it was that the women of Limerick fought side by side with their husbands, sons and brothers, using every conceivable weapon they could lay hands on.

Harris, copyist of Storey, who wrote the **Life of William III**, has written: "Not a few of the fair forms of those heroines to whom all William's historians attribute the success of the repulse, lay stretched in death, their pure features smiling in the rigid stillness of the grave, on the victory they had aided in winning".

One of these heroines, a red-head of 20 summers, who, having fought bravely at the head of her menfolk, died in the fight, after which she was beheaded as if to strike terror into other female defenders.

The "Brazen Head" was the name given to the beheaded woman.

Harris the historian goes on to say: "No fewer than 2,-

month earlier paled into insignificance". And so well it might.

There is, however, another version of the legend.

The story goes that while the women from the Abbey and the Irishtown were joining with the hard pressed garrison in repelling the Williamites who had entered the city through the breach in the south wall near the Citadel, a young red-haired woman was content to watch the battle from one of the top windows of the principal inn in John Street, then the great street.

While the local amazons were too busy to notice the bold indifference of the onlooker, a missile fired from the direction of the breach took her head clean away.

The inn was afterwards known as "The Brazen Head".

Even when the building was taken down and rebuilt in 1794 by Simon Kent, a tablet commemorating the occasion was set into the facade midway between the first floor windows.

In the 1960s the stone was taken from its site at 23 John Street and built into the front of the then newly restored and renamed "Brazen Head" building in O'Connell Street, where it rests to this day.