

Viscount Fitzgibbon: Limerick hero

John Charles Henry, Viscount Fitzgibbon, was born in Mountshannon House in the parish of Castleconnell, on May 22, 1829. All through his short life he was popular with all classes. He was commissioned in the Royal Irish Hussars, and on the outbreak of the Crimean war, volunteered, much against the wishes of his family and friends, for service in that dreadful conflict.

In the famous charge of the Light Brigade, at Ballaclava, he took the place of Capt. Lockwood, Lord Cardigan's aide-de-camp, and bravely led his troop into the 'valley of death'. His batmen, Trumpet Major Grey and Quartermaster Sergeant-Major Heffernon were close to him when, early in the charge, he was struck in the chest by two bullets. They rushed to his assistance but found that he was on the point of death. With his dying breath he exhorted them to go on. Returning after the charge they searched for his body but could not find it. This circumstance afterwards gave rise to rumours that Fitzgibbon had not died in the charge.

Twenty three years later a story was circulating in England that Fitzgibbon had been seen and positively recognised by a number of people. One of the more imaginative of those even contended that the young officer had recovered from his wounds and had been taken prisoner, and, for insulting a Russian officer, sent to Siberia. He was said to have visited Hounslow barracks where his regiment, the 8th Hussars, was stationed.

The rumours however, did not stand up in the face of the testimony of those who saw him die. Lieutenant Harrison, of Hounslow, also testified that no such person had visited

the barracks. Again, fifteen years later, a report in the English press described an incident in northern India where an elderly man, having a cast in one eye (by the way, young Fitzgibbon had a cast in his left eye) came into the mess-room of the 8th Hussars and held a short conversation with some of the officers.

These latter were amazed at the stranger's knowledge of the regiment and the habits and peculiarities of its everyday regulation. After a short time the stranger stood up and left and was seen no more. From descriptions given by those who spoke to him it was concluded that the visitor was none other than Viscount Fitzgibbon. This conclusion almost corroborated the old story of his appearance in 1878 at Hounslow. While both stories lent a little romance to the sad episode they were dismissed in official circles as baseless rumours.

Even before the erection of the beautiful monument to Viscount Fitzgibbon in Limerick the seeds of hate and bitterness were blowing in the wind. At a meeting of the Corporation in 1855, the Mayor, Henry O'Shea, proposed that a memorial to Viscount Fitzgibbon be erected in the Crescent. At the same time he announced that a sum of £1,040 had been collected for the project. This proposal caused quite a stir among the council members, for it was inconceivable to many of them that a grandson of the infamous "Black Jack", Earl of Clare, and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, and forever held to engage our attention as the architect of the Act of Union, should be commemorated in Limerick,

while another Corporation sub-committee had been long engaged preparing plans for the erection of a memorial to O'Connell, though no probable site had been mentioned.

The meeting adjourned without a decision having been taken, but at a subsequent meeting it was decided to give O'Connell, who was a "Catholic, and a champion of the people," permanent residence in the Crescent. In the meantime the Fitzgibbon Memorial Committee commissioned the renowned London sculptor, Patrick McDowell, to execute the monument to their hero. The statue, a life size bronze of the young Hussar, was delivered in a remarkably short time and set up on a granite pedestal on the Wellesley Bridge (now the Sarsfield Bridge), Limerick's finest structure, the foundation stone of which was laid by the Viscount's uncle, the 2nd Earl of Clare.

The following inscription was engraved at the front of the pedestal: "To commemorate the bravery of Viscount Fitzgibbon, 8th Royal Irish Hussars; and his gallant companions in arms, natives of the county and city of Limerick, who gloriously fell in the Crimean War, 1855."

Bass reliefs, in bronze, set into the front and sides of the pedestal depicted the famous battles of Balaclava, Inkerman and Alma. Afterwards the Government gave two massive field pieces which had been captured from the Russians at the Crimea; these were placed at each side of the monument, and lent an air of grim reality to the tragedy of the young Limerick hero.

The latent hatred came to the surface in 1870 when the statue was vandalised. A report in the "Limerick Chronicle" of that time goes

on: "... On Sunday morning the splendid monument to Viscount Fitzgibbon, one of the most handsome and attractive works of art in the country, was discovered to be broken and disfigured in a most wanton manner. An attempt was made to break the sword which was drawn in a fighting attitude, but failing in this the ruffian succeeded in twisting it over the arm. The spurs were completely broken off, and the chest and one of the arms defaced."

Loving hands restored the damage and for sixty years it was to remain as the city's most eye-catching and dramatic monument, though an attempt was made to destroy it by the novel method of mooring a loaded sand barge to the statue at high tide in the belief that the receding tide would cause the weight of the heavily laden vessel to dislodge the statue from its pedestal. This effort was a total failure. However, in June 1930, the pent-up hatred, jealousy and bitterness of 130 years came to the surface once more to give the final rap on the knuckles to "Black Jack" — the beautiful monument to his grandson was destroyed by explosives.

The memorial was never re-erected for the memory of the alleged misdeeds of the 1st Earl of Clare weighed too heavily against all the virtuous acts of his children and grandchildren. Today a memorial to the heroes of 1916 occupies the site.

The young Limerick hero is not entirely forgotten; he is remembered in his little parish church of All Saints, at Stradbally, Castleconnell, where a very beautiful memorial in Carrera marble is erected near the chancel, at the gospel side of the church.