

Civic Trust puts Georgiana on Limerick's mind...

By MARTIN BYRNES

NOT very long ago, Limerick's published history was confined to a few publications, notably Ferrar's (1780s), Lenihan's (1866) and Begley's (to 1938), all of which were academically deficient in a number of ways.

There were contemporary newspaper reports to be perused too, notably the Limerick Chronicle, dating from the 1760s, but they merely recited an unfolding story without giving an overview.

Then, with the establishment by Jim Kemmy and Kevin Hannan of the Old Limerick Journal, history suddenly took legs, and printers were kept busy day and night churning out books and booklets until there wasn't a parish or crossroads which had not been immortalised between the covers.

Historical societies sprang up and published, and clubs and societies jumped into print to commemorate this anniversary or that.

And in 1991 we had every excuse to go mad for the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Limerick, and books and pamphlets were never so ubiquitous.

By 1997 we were celebrating the 800th anniversary of the city's first mayoralty. Indeed this year, 2001, is the 900th anniversary of the moving of the capital of the Kingdom of Thomond to beside where St Mary's Cathedral now stands. The first resident king was Murrough O'Brien, grandson of Brian Boru, part of whose palace is assimilated into the fabric of the great cathedral to this day.

The volume of historical volumes multiplied, but it took the establishment of Limerick Civic Trust by Denis Leonard and a few friends to restore focus and continuity to Limerick's approach to its history, tangible and intangible.

The trust, bravely supported from the beginning by Aughinish Alumina as well as by the local authorities, began by addressing the appalling state of the city's built environment.

The city's historic centre was a disgrace and an embarrassment, and the Corporation lacked the resources, the will and the imagination to do very much about it.

Even the Corporation's own offices were shoddy and inappropriate to the receipt of guests or for the efficient conduct of the city's business. All that had been restored before that had been St John's Square, and that had been subsidised as a national project for the European Architectural Heritage Year of 1975.

It fell to the Civic Trust to get things moving again. Beginning with the Bishop's Palace, the trust moved to restore the city's walls, gates, and buildings, to clear dereliction and to improve knowledge.

And the trust cajoled, pleaded, begged and browbeat the authorities into the King John's Castle project and all its spinoffs, and were behind the scenes in the Hunt Museum project, as well as one of the latest projects, the purchase and meticulous restoration of 2, Pery Square, including its Georgian garden.

While this was going on in 1996, the trust published a fine collection of illustrated essays entitled *Georgian Limerick volume 1*. logically, if there is a self-proclaimed 'volume I', it follows that there may be a 'volume II' in preparation. And so there was.

In fact, such was the amount of material garnered for the first book by David Lee and his research team that the skeleton of the second book was already in place and was fleshing out nicely. And now that book has arrived.

It was supported as a FÁS training project and also backed by local community assistance, the State and the EU. In all 23 young people were engaged in research, and they were joined by six others on Summer work.

Nineteen main contributors, some of whom were members of the research group did the actual writing, all under the benign gaze of Mr Lee and his co-editor, French-born Chris-

tine Gonzalez, each of whom are historians with Limerick Civic Trust.

The book is, appropriately enough, prefaced by Desmond FitzGerald, the 29th Knight of Glin, who praises the late Jim Kemmy for "his infectious enthusiasm for his native town", and remarks on the blossoming of research and writing of the city's local history "though sadly less attention has been paid to the county".

The book has a fine index, plenty of side-notes, and a running bibliography throughout. The topics covered are eclectic, but the 50-plus studies are all related to the period 1714 to 1845, and depict a great deal more than just architecture.

The book, in fact, portrays the life of a city, and surrounding counties, taking special pride in describing the pioneering work of the restoration of No 2, Pery Square (which, by the way, is properly pronounced "peery", not "perry", because Pery is the family name of the Earls of Limerick, and that's how they pronounce it).

One would hardly expect to find one essay entitled *Women and Marriage in Jane Austen's Novels*, but there it is in splendid isolation, immediately followed by a treatise on the treatment of the mentally ill in Limerick of the period.

We have a splendid account by Richard Ahern of the visit of Franz Liszt to Limerick, and the fashions of the day are expounded, although without specific reference to Limerick. Limerick Chronicle is quoted liberally through the period, including the "macabre" practice of hanging criminals outside the gate of Mulgrave Street Jail and immediately sending their bodies straight across the street to the County Infirmary (nor Senior College) for dissection.

The illustrations are well selected and very appropriate. The book is highly recommended for perusal both at home and abroad, and is for nothing at £19.95.

But be warned, at close of 450 pages of A4, it is a weighty tome, and not one to skim through on the bus.



• Images of Georgian Limerick: The Exchange, Nicholas Street, top, and, left, St Michael's Church, Pery Square