



A Family's Contribution

When Barrington's Hospital closed its doors on 31 March, 1988, it brought to an end a long and unique chapter in Limerick history. The closure of the hospital was not only an all-to-real political decision: it was also a symbolic termination of the 300 year Barrington link with the city.

Barringtons have lived, worked and played in Limerick since the 17th century. Francis Barrington, the first member of the family to live in the city, was buried in St. Mary's Cathedral in 1683, where his gravestone can be seen to this day.

Although the last member of the family to live in the county, Florence Barrington, died at Clonshavoy House, Lisnagry, in 1968, the connection with Limerick had been maintained since that time through the regular visits of Sir Fitzwilliam Barrington, who continued to serve as honorary secretary and life governor of the hospital. No matter what else may be said about the affair – and enough has been written and said to fill a few books – it ended the Barrington connection with brutal finality.

The hospital which had served the people of Limerick and the surrounding hinterland for 160 years as an open-door casualty and health care facility, had itself become a casualty of the government's rationalisation of the country's health services. But we live in a world of change, and it would be foolish to believe that expenditure on health care should somehow be immune from government scrutiny. It is also understandable that in every society expensive public equipment and services need to be co-ordinated and centralised as far as possible to ensure efficiency and value for public money.

But, while cold economic arguments and hard political decisions will invariably clash with humanitarian considerations, no civilised society should ever lose its sense of outrage at preventable suffering.

Barrington's Hospital was born out of a sense of outrage at human suffering in the slums of the Irishtown and Englishtown of the Limerick of the 1820s. The building of the hospital was a humanitarian response to this suffering and to the

lack of even elementary health care. The same motives, and the added desire to eliminate economic exploitation, led to the establishment of the Mont de Piété, or charitable pawnshop, beside the hospital, in 1836.

Although the long line of Limerick Barringtons has ended, and their hospital is closed, there will always be a need for society to retain its sense of outrage and its humanitarian response to injustice, inequality and suffering. The current campaign of powerful and influential interests to pull health care from the public to the private and more profitable domain is in total conflict with the generous spirit which motivated the hospital's founding fathers. It is to be hoped that these moves to bring health care outside the realm of public accountability and control, or to create a two-tiered medical system, will be resisted by all democratic-minded people.

But it would be a distortion of history to reduce the Barrington contribution to the provision of a hospital. Barrington's Bridge, Barrington's Pier and Barrington's Street are all tangible testimonials to the family's objective of making Limerick a better and more beautiful place to live in. And there is the old Barrington family home, Glenstal Castle, offered as a gift to the new state in 1925, and still as magnificent as ever on the Murroe landscape.

And, of course, there was the family itself and the outstanding contribution of many of its members to the commercial, legal, philanthropic and sporting life of their native place. A study of the history of any family must go beyond the mere recording of bland facts and the listing of buildings. This Journal is a study of the Barrington contribution, over three centuries of Limerick history, and of the illuminations it provides on many aspects of social and political life in the city and county. Today, all the Barringtons are gone from Limerick, and their estates and wealth are also long since gone, but, by any standards, it cannot be denied that their contribution was a worthy one. Despite this year's hospital closure, it is a contribution to celebrate and savour.