

The Fitzgerald and McGregor History

The two best-known histories of Limerick were written by John Ferrar and Maurice Lenihan. A third major history, written by Reverend Patrick Fitzgerald and John James McGregor, has not received the same attention as the other two works.

The History, Topography and Antiquities of the County and City of Limerick, with a view of the History and Antiquities of Ireland was published by the firm of McKerns of Limerick in two volumes in 1826 and 1827. The work was jointly-written by Rev. Patrick Fitzgerald, Vicar of Cahircorney, and John James McGregor, a journalist and topographer. It seems likely that Fitzgerald did most of the research and that McGregor put the work in chronological order and gave it a final polish.

John James McGregor was born in Limerick on 24 February, 1775. He was brought up among the Methodists of Limerick at a time when John Wesley's visits to the city had filled his followers with missionary zeal. McGregor became a devout Methodist and remained so all his life. While still a young man he went to live in Waterford, and later became editor of the *Munster Telegraph*, which was published in that city. He subsequently

by Jim Kemmy

went to Dublin and became editor of the *Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Church Magazine*, a quarterly publication.

From 1816 to 1827 McGregor wrote a *History of the French Revolution* in twelve volumes and also published a variety of other works. He died on 24 August, 1834, and was buried in St. Patrick's Cathedral Graveyard in Dublin. His son, John James MacGregor, wrote a *Memoir of John James MacGregor*, and it was published in Dublin in 1840.

Rev Patrick Fitzgerald, his co-author, was a son of a poor tailor in Bruff and was born in the second half of the 18th century. He secured employment in a minor post in Mr Buckley's Academy in Bruff and showed an aptitude for scholarship. He received further education in return for his work in the Academy. He acted as a tutor for the children of a local landlord who decided to send him to Trinity College to complete his education. As an undergraduate he was awarded a sizarship (a form of scholarship) at Trinity and on his return to Limerick he acted as private tutor to the Crips and other Limerick families.

It is believed that Fitzgerald was born a Catholic and that, at some time or another, probably while at Trinity College, he became a Protestant. Following a period of religious studies he became a clergyman of the Church of Ireland. He was appointed Vicar of Cahirconey in County Limerick, in the Diocese of Emly. He married a Miss Stewart from County Galway but it is not known if the couple had any children. He lived in a two-storey house outside Grange on the road to Raleighstown.

The Fitzgerald and McGregor history provides valuable information on the houses and families of County Limerick. The most quoted reference from the book is contained in the section on the customs and traditions of the city's citizens and gives the following description of the clash on Midsummer Day between the tradesmen from the north and south suburbs:

Many of the customs and amusements of the lower classes have become obsolete, though others are still retained. Bull-baiting, and cock-fighting being scarcely known among them, tippling, dancing, and the music of the fiddle or bag-pipe are their chief enjoyments at fair-time, or on festival days. Amongst the airs



A mid-nineteenth century view of Newtown Pery.

THE
HISTORY,
TOPOGRAPHY, AND ANTIQUITIES,
 OF THE
 COUNTY AND CITY OF
LIMERICK;
 WITH A
PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES
OF IRELAND.
 BY THE REV. P. FITZGERALD,
 VICAR OF CAHIRCORNEY, IN THE DIOCESE OF EMLY,
 AND
 J. J. M'GREGOR,
 AUTHOR OF THE "HISTORY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION," &c.

 VOL. I.

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The title page of the Fitzgerald and McGregor History.

selected upon these occasions, 'Patrick's Day, and 'Garryowen', always hold a distinguished place. Though the magistrates are as attentive to enforce the proper observance of the Sabbath as in most of the great towns in Ireland, yet it is to be lamented that the sacredness of the day is too often profaned in this city and its suburbs. The tradesmen have laid aside the custom of marching on Midsummer-day, when, arranged under their respective leaders, decorated with sashes, ribbons, and flowers, and accompanied with a band of musicians, and the shouts of the delighted populace, they proceeded through the principal streets of the city, while their merry-men played a thousand antic tricks, and the day generally ended in a terrible fight between the Garryowen and Thomond-gate boys, (the tradesmen of the north and south suburbs).

At the time when the authors were writing their history Newtown Pery was taking shape and changing the face of the city. Few writers have given such a picturesque description of this development as Fitzgerald and McGregor:

The ground on which the New Town is built, is rather elevated, and the soil in general gravelly and dry. The streets are spacious, cut each other at right angles, and are occupied by elegant houses and merchant's-stores, constructed of brick and lime stone, for which the neighbouring district supplies the finest materials. A more superb city-view can hardly be presented to the eye, than the range of buildings from the New Bridge to the Crescent, a distance little short of an English mile, including Rutland-street, Patrick-street, George's-street, and the Tontine; and its interest will be greatly heightened, when the line of buildings is continued from the Crescent along the Military Road, and the projected Square built on its left. Shops tastefully laid out and richly furnished line these streets, while others diverge to right and left, which are chiefly occupied by the residences of the gentry.

At every opening to the westward, salubrious breezes from the Shannon, inspire health and vigour, and a walk to the quays is amply compensated by the scenes of busy traffic there presented, and the various enlivening prospects which

meet the eye. Here the packet boat from Kilrush is landing her joyous passengers, whose nerves have been braced, and spirits exhilarated, by some weeks residence on the shores of the Atlantic at Kilkee or Malbay. There turf and fish-boats are discharging their cargoes, which are rapidly conveyed by herculean porters to the dwellings of the consumers, amidst various specimens of Munster wit, sometimes delivered in the native language, and sometimes in Anglo-Irish. Seamen of different nations, and merchants engaged in the important business of import or export, enliven by their activity, this busy scene, the interest of which is much enhanced at present, by the number of workmen employed in constructing the docks, and building Wellesley-bridge at the end of Brunswick-street.

Wearied with this tumult, should the mind wish to contemplate more tranquil objects, retired situations, and gratifying prospects, are not wanted. On the West are seen, the distant towers of Carrigunnel Castle; and the Pool, where the larger ships ride at anchor in perfect security, while many a skiff cuts the blue wave; on the East, appear the mill of Curragour, built in 1672, and its rapid current, which roars and eddies amidst rocks of various shapes and sizes - the bridge of Thomond, hoary with age, and the ivy-mantled turrets of King John's Castle, backed by the mountains of Clare and Tipperary. The view of the North Strand, though not devoid of interest, is less striking than might be expected from its commanding situation, in the vicinity of a rich and populous city. Its only ornaments are a few country-seats, thinly decorated with trees, and the House of Industry, a plain substantial building. But it is likely that the completion of Wellesley Bridge will remedy this defect, and that the fine acclivity which runs along the North side of the river will soon be covered with picturesque cottages, and handsome plantations.

The city contains nearly fifty public edifices, about one half of which stand on the south-west side of the river. At night the streets of the New Town are splendidly lighted with gas, while those of the English town are left with unaccountable negligence in total darkness, except where the brilliancy of some public-house, illumines the gloomy scene. Yet the commission of crime is rare in the streets.

The joint-authors wrote their history 170 years ago. For too long their work has been taken for granted and overshadowed by the histories of Ferrar and Lenihan. A study of Fitzgerald and McGregor will repay the reader by providing much valuable information about Limerick and its people. The year 1997, when the city celebrates the 800th anniversary of the granting of its charter provides a good opportunity for such a study.