

The past and its people brought to life

■ An important cultural and historical monument, Mount Saint Lawrence's story has been superbly realised in a new hardback book through a collaboration between MIC and Limerick City and County Council, writes **Grainne Keays**

A LARGE crowd turned out at City Hall last Friday for the launch of Dr Matthew Potter's latest book, *City and Cemetery: A History of Mount Saint Lawrence, Limerick*, by Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan.

The book, edited by Limerick City archivist, Jacqui Hayes, is a comprehensive history of one of Ireland's oldest and largest cemeteries and represents an immensely important addition to knowledge of Limerick's social and cultural history.

The publication of this book is the culmination of a long-running, ambitious and highly fruitful collaboration between Limerick City and County Council's Archives, Environment and IT departments and the History and Geography Departments of Mary Immaculate College (MIC).

The project began in 2008. The work included digitizing the records of Mount St Lawrence, compiling a searchable online database of the records, mapping the entire cemetery with GPS coordinates for every grave marker and conducting over 80 oral history interviews with members of the public.

It has been a mammoth task, involving over 500 third-level student volunteers. The project also included a successful conference, *Beyond the Grave*, which was held at the MIC.

City and Cemetery is produced to the highest possible standard, hardback, with many high quality illustrations.

Jacqui Hayes has said that "the book is framed by two overarching themes: firstly, the role of the study of 'death and dying' in Irish society;

of Community, Arts, Culture and the Emergency Services with Limerick City and County Council, spoke of the cemetery's origins in response to the ravages of the Great Famine.

The Mount St. Lawrence site is approximately 18.5 acres and to date has seen the interment of over 75,500 of Limerick's citizens.

At the time it was first opened, it represented the very latest thinking in graveyard design. Ms. Cotter Coughlan said the book would be a major contribution to a greater understanding and appreciation of Limerick's history and heritage.

Prof. Michael A. Hayes, President of MIC, said Dr. Potter's book represented a collaboration between a local authority and a third level institution, something that does not often happen.

He described the venture as a "successful partnership between town and gown". He estimated that 2,500 student hours were spent on the Mount St. Lawrence project overall.

Dr. Helene Bradley Davies of MIC's Geography Department said this book was written from the field and from the archive and not from the armchair and resulted in "active and deep learning" for those involved.

The volunteers, she said, became historians and geographers not just students of history and geography. *City and Cemetery* is a book thoroughly researched and precisely documented.

For Dr Bradley Davies, an important part of this project's achievement has been to make the 75,000 plus people who are buried there visible and knowable again, irrespective of class or status.



Attending the launch were Kieran Lehane, Limerick City and County Council, Josephine Cotter Coughlan, Limerick City and County Council, Mayor of Limerick, Cllr. Michael Sheahan, Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan TD, Dr. Matthew Potter, Author, Jacqui Hayes, Editor, Prof. Michael A Hayes, President, Mary Immaculate College and Ursula Callaghan, Mary Immaculate College

Pictures: Alan Place/FusionShooters



Callie Connolly and Joe Coleman at the book launch in City Hall



Sally Walsh and Paddy Waldron at the book launch in City Hall



Attending the launch were Tom Donovan and Ciaran Crowe



Minister Jan O'Sullivan launched the book in City Hall

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Jacqui Hayes has said that "the book is framed by two overarching themes: firstly, the role of the study of 'death and dying' in Irish society; and secondly, the impact of social change since the late eighteenth century on death and its accompanying cultural practices".

Specifically, the book examines "the Irish way of death", the history and administration of the cemetery, funerals and mourning, the role of grave markers, the cemetery's place in Limerick's social history and also its political role.

The book also features a section-by-section tour of Mount St. Lawrence including maps and details of well-known persons buried in each section.

At the launch, Mayor of Limerick, Cllr. Kevin Sheahan spoke of the significance of Limerick's monuments to the past which help bind the people together.

Mount St. Lawrence, he said, is as important a historical and cultural monument as the Walls of Limerick or St. John's Square.

Mayor Sheahan also spoke of the significance of funeral rites and rituals in honouring the dead and in our cultural identity.

Josephine Cotter Coughlan, Director

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She spoke most poignantly of one lady she met in the course of the work who told her how her twin sister, who died in infancy, was documented simply as Baby X.

Her name is now properly recorded. "Her name was Rosario and she mattered." As Dr Bradley

Davies said, "they all mattered".

Dr Potter, the book's author has said it is fortunate that the records of Mount Saint Lawrence have survived as the history of the cemetery could not otherwise have been written.

"One of the most gratifying aspects of researching this book was the involvement of so many third level students, using the most advanced technology, such as digitisation and GPS mapping, in this significant public history project," he said.

"These techniques, supplemented by a large number of oral history interviews have crystallised what Limerick people have always known instinctively, that Mount St Lawrence is a major cultural resource and hugely important to the history of Limerick."



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Pictures: Alan Place/FusionShooters



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Minister Jan O'Sullivan launched the book in City Hall



John King and Vincent Campbell attended the book launch in City Hall



Paul O'Brien, MIC; Brid O'Callaghan whose family features in the book and Valerie Slattery



Tadhg Kearney and Dr. Matthew Potter, author of the book, at the launch



Attending the launch were Michael and Pauline Lynch



Attending the book launch in City Hall were Claire and Peggy Morrissey, Sr Pauline Campbell and Sr Brid Duggan



Prof. Michael A Hayes, President, Mary Immaculate College, speaks at the launch



Waiting to have their copy of the book signed by the author

He added, "Mount St. Lawrence Cemetery has played a major part in the life of Limerick city for over 150 years."

"Studying all aspects of Mount St. Lawrence through its registers, headstones, oral histories and newspapers leaves one in little doubt that, despite modernisation and social change, death and the cultural practices that accompany it continue to play a central role in Limerick's history."

Minister O'Sullivan noted that City and Cemetery forms the third in a trio of significant works produced by Dr. Potter that explore iconic Limerick institutions, the other two being Ranks Mills: The Industrial Heart of Limerick City and Amazing

Lace: A History of the Limerick Lace Industry.

He has produced "a wide range of scholarship", she said, "that has resonance for the people of Limerick and to whom this book will mean so much".

The Minister was impressed that the dead were being honoured in this way, that every deceased person is regarded as important and that the book showcases very personal stories.

As a former Chairperson of the Cemeteries Committee of the now defunct Limerick City Council, the Minister felt she could speak with some authority on the subject of Limerick's burial places and she commended Flan Haskett, cemeteries

superintendent with Limerick City and County Council, and his team on their continued dedication to the maintenance and preservation of graveyards and memorials.

Our cemeteries are places which bring back sad memories, she said, but also they give great comfort.

Of personal significance to Minister O'Sullivan was her memory of Prof. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh delivering the oration at the funeral of her friend and mentor, the politician and stonemason, Jim Kemmy.

In her role as Minister for Education, she was glad that the project had proved such an exceptional educational experience for the students of MIC.

Ms Hayes, said that Mount St. Lawrence has "intense emotional

associations for generations of local people".

She pointed out that it is workers at their work who feature on the covers of all three of Dr. Potter's books, Ranks Mills, Amazing Lace and on City and Cemetery.

City and Cemetery features a remarkable shot from the 1940s of two gravediggers, Christy Hennessy and Jack Copley.

This is a deliberate tribute to the ordinary people who, along with 45 mayors of Limerick, rest in this beautiful, peaceful and tranquil spot.

City and Cemetery: A History of Mount St Lawrence is available for purchase in O'Mahony's Bookshop, Limerick, priced at €20.



Author Dr Matthew Potter and editor Jacqui Hayes pose in Mt Saint Lawrence with their book on the history of the famous cemetery