

By MARTIN BYRNES

# Remember Limerick's President of France

A DESCENDANT of a Thomond king and grandson of a Dooradoyle landowner was elected President of France 120 years ago—on May 24, 1873—and died just a century ago this year.

This year, in turn, his descendant—the present Duke of Magenta—was accorded an honorary doctorate by the University of Limerick; the highest honour which Limerick's intellectual community can bestow.

Now, a book, which I recommend almost without reservation, has been produced on the life and times of the great man. Written by Noël MacMahon, a kinsman, the book is based on a volume produced in French for the Paris market in 1894, but it is brilliantly developed.

"Here I am, here I stay!", by Noël M MacMahon, is published by Ballinakella Press, Whitegate, Co Clare (pp172, price £15.99p.)

By 1873, Marie-Edme-Armand-Patrice de MacMahon, Marshal of France and Duke of Magenta, was already world-famous as a military tactician. He took the presidency to save France from a constitutional crisis—for the creation of which crisis he himself was not entirely blameless. His was a long and never un-controversial career.

His great grandfather, Patrick McMahon of Torodile (Dooradoyle), and his wife, Margaret O'Sullivan, had been prosperous enough to afford to send their sons to college on the Continent. One of these, Jean Baptiste, studied medicine at Rheims, and settled in France, the family quickly acquiring the title "comte".

Having risen to Major-General rank by the age of 44, the man who was to become president already commanded entire divisions of the armies of the Second Empire of Louis Napoléon (Napoléon III). Notable among his exploits was his part in the Crimean war.

He sat as a senator also from 1856.

Following the Battle of Magenta in the Italian campaign against the Austrian Empire (1859), he was accorded the baton of marshal, and was given the title of Duc de Magenta.

He spent a spell as Governor General of Algeria.

But both the downfall and the resurgence of MacMahon's fortunes are attributable to the Franco-German (Prussian) war of 1870/71, and its aftermath.

If this book has a fault, it is that it fails somewhat to give the necessary detailed background to this period, and to its various effects. For example, the Franco-Prussian war began at a time in which France was yet far from stabilised,



At the launch of Noël MacMahon's book on the life of Marshal MacMahon were M Defay, cultural counsellor at the French Embassy; the author, and Hugh Weir of Ballinakella Press, publisher.

despite an economic buoyancy, and Germany was yet to achieve unification. This period is not dealt with in Germain Bapst's 1894 text (it ends at 1859).

Bapst himself says that the later years might be written by a later historian. Perhaps he was wise, for his was a time (1894) when the French memory of a humiliating and total defeat by the German armies was still very much a sore point, and one to be handled with sensitivity.

It is left, therefore, to Noël MacMahon to fill in the last 34 years of his illustrious kinsman's life and the surrounding events, which he does reasonably well. But because these were the years of greatest achievement, of most influence and of sharpest crisis, one might have hoped that they would have been given a more commensurate weight.

Particularly the Franco-

## Prussian War

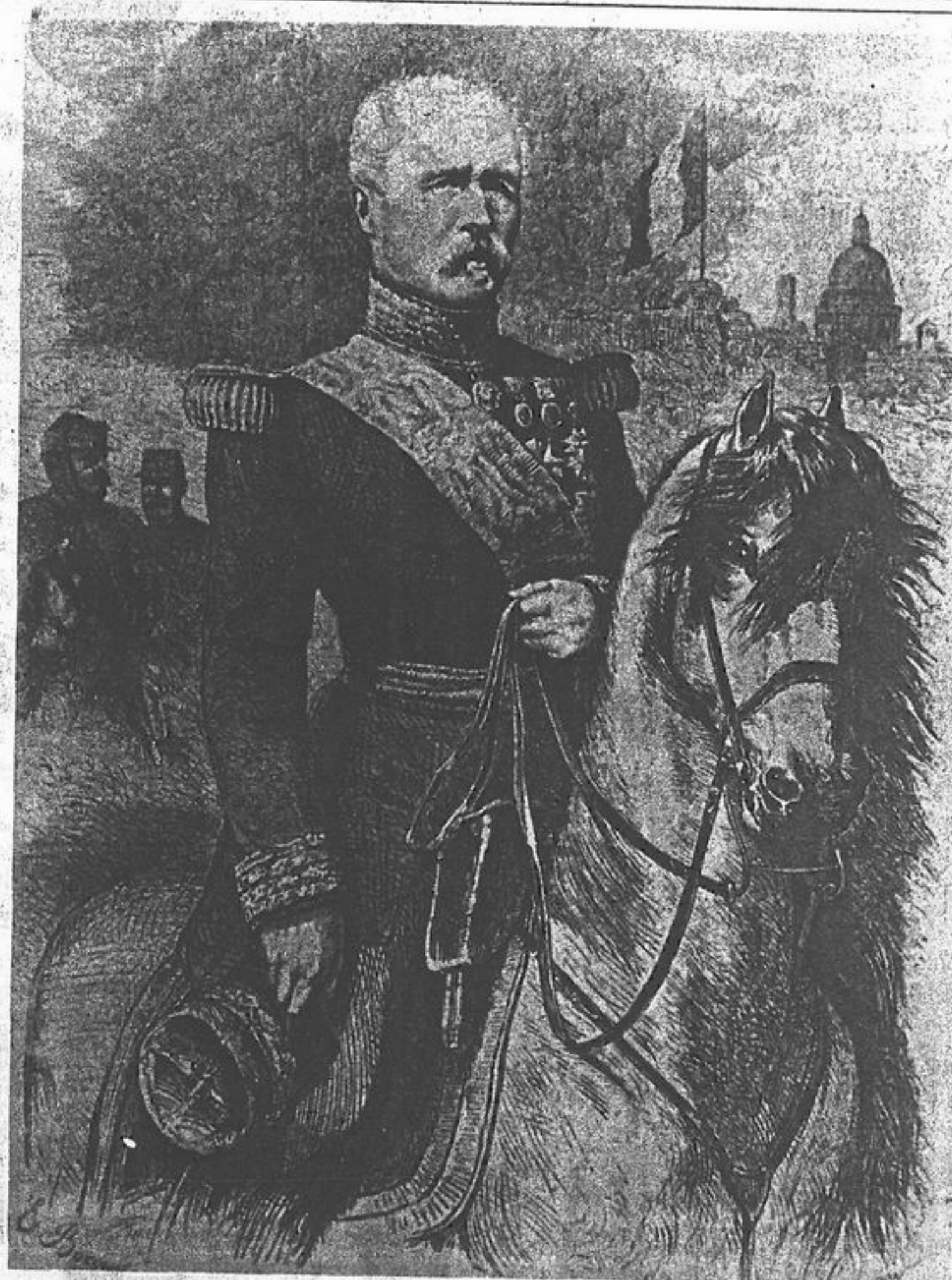
The remote cause of this war was the move to give the Spanish throne to Prince Leopold—a Hohenzollern, a member of the ruling family at Potsdam (the Prussian capital just outside Berlin). This was unthinkable to Emperor Louis Napoléon (and, more tellingly, to the domineering Empress Eugénie) who saw France becoming hemmed in by Prussian influence on all sides. Even when Leopold himself turned down the Spanish throne, France still demanded that Prussia issue a ban on the idea ever being revived. That was refused, and war began, with confidence high among the French.

But the French armies, despite all assurances from ministers, were in rag order, while the Prussians quickly mobilised and furnished their forces with awesome Teutonic efficiency. And Otto von Bismark ensured support from the entire

North German Confederation, of which he was chancellor, and from the southern German states as well. France was to be outnumbered in the field of battle by 500,000 efficient troops to 300,000 mediocre recruits.

In a final tragic miscalculation, Count Pilakao, Minister of War at Paris ordered MacMahon to the Belgian border to relieve a few towns in that area—unnecessarily exposing a flank in the East and undertaking an enterprise for which MacMahon had neither the time, the men nor the equipment. Pilako's order should have been to fall back on Paris and defend the capital.

Instead, MacMahon was surrounded and numerically overwhelmed at Sedan on September 1; MacMahon, himself wounded, handed over charge, and it was Louis Napoléon who surrendered both his army and



Dooradoyle pride: Le Marechal de MacMahon.

the fortified town to save lives.

Fifty generals, 5,000 other officers, and 84,000 privates were taken as prisoner of war—among them (to the amazement of even some of the French) the French Emperor himself. Louis Napoléon sent the following letter of capitulation to Wilhelm:

"My Brother

"Having been unable to die at the head of my troops, nothing remains but to place my sword in the hands of Your Majesty.

"Napoléon"

The French Empire collapsed immediately, and the Third Republic was proclaimed in Paris on September 4th.

The Prussians later took Paris itself after a siege, and, in the great Hall of Mirrors, the great state room of the captured Louis Napoléon at Versailles, Prussia's King Wilhelm was proclaimed German Emperor (Kaiser) by von Bismark and by his nobles on the campaign.

On his release, MacMahon was appointed military commander at Versailles, and had the duty of suppressing a civil war as well as ensuring the implementation of the various war reparations which the Germans visited on the French. But he managed to heal the wounds of civil war, and managed also to revitalise and unify the army—even to the point of getting the Prussian occupying force to allow him to organise a military review of 120,000 men at Longchamps which did much to buoy up the new French administration. The

dignity of France, even in defeat, had been restored, and MacMahon was a national hero once more.

The crisis which propelled MacMahon to the presidency came in May 1873. A monarchist restoration intrigue destabilised the government, effectively voted Thiers out of office and approached MacMahon to take the leadership of the nation. MacMahon was initially horrified, as he himself had had no knowledge of the affair, and took the position only as part of a patriotic duty and because the alternative would be a constitutional crisis in which would be many of the seeds of another civil war. Next day, the National Assembly ratified him by 390 votes to nil, with two abstentions. He saw France through a period in which there were two alternative monarchs, should the monarchy be restored—the descendants of the two branches of the Bourbons. Eventually one emerged by agreement, and a constitutional monarchy was about to be put in place when the king-designate declared that he would not allow the beloved tricolor as national flag.

President MacMahon declared that he would not be responsible for the military consequences should the white Bourbon flag be raised over Paris. That was the end of a monarchy in France to this day.

In his six years as president, he supervised the withdrawal of German troops from French soil, and was a strong unifying force.

But, when he was 71, a new Senate put a government in place which pro-

posed to retire a number of generals—a move requiring presidential sanction. MacMahon resigned, and spent his declining years working for the relief of disabled soldiers.

On October 17, 1893, aged 85, he died quietly at his château; in addition to his French honours (Grand Cross of the Légion d'Honneur and Military Medal), he had been accorded: Chavalier of the Golden Fleece (Spain), Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath (Great Britain and Ireland), Grand Collar of the Annunciation (Italy), Grand Cross of the order of St Etienne (Austria), Grand Cross of Leopold (Belgium), Grand Cross of the Elephant (Denmark), Grand Cross of the Tower and Sword (Portugal), Grand Cross of the Black Eagle (Prussia), Grand Cross of St Andrew (Russia), Grand Cross of the Seraphims (Sweden), Grand Cross of the Osman Empire (Turkey), of Saints Maurice and Lazarus (Italy) and with commemorative medals of the Crimea, Italy and Sardinia.

This is not an academic history, yet it satisfies the rigours of most historical enquiry. The index is quite comprehensive, and the select bibliography is impressive.

The choice of illustrations are inspired, and the overall composition is readable and manageable.

It is strongly bound in hard card.

It is among the best books of its kind to emerge from this region in many a year.

A very recommended Christmas read.

## Coming clean about disc parking extension

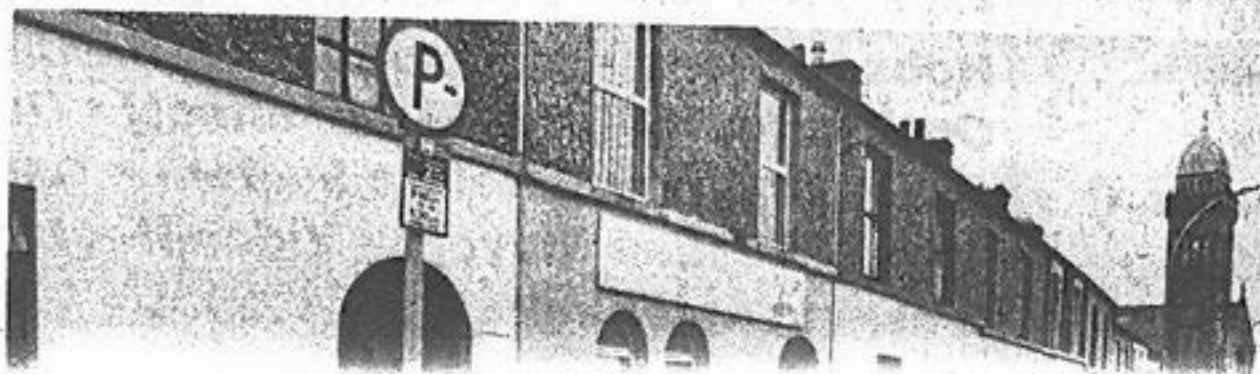
WHY cannot City Hall spokespersons be frank with the general public?

From your paper I learn that they are planning to extend the area requiring motorists to use discs.

viable peace process.

Albert Reynolds has taken a historic step in that he is the first Dublin Government Taoiseach to take a positive position on creating a process which could end the conflict in Ireland.

In an interview on the



This is not so much because of its urban content but because of its accompanying "Focloir", which is an invaluable addendum to its well researched items.

Quite a number of our potential Irish speakers

Ireland's chances in the World Cup as Michael J. Kirby (Limerick Leader, 4/12/93).

He writes of stifling weather, old players, and danger to our fans.

I would remind Michael