

# An Ecumenical Rescue



An article in the Winter 2010 edition of the Old Limerick Journal, entitled "An Act of Bravery Rewarded", focused on a donation, to the Jim Kemmy Municipal Museum, of the Royal Humane Society's silver medal awarded to Richard Lee, who was pictured on the front cover together with his two brothers. In the months following the article the museum learned from a Lee family member, living in New Zealand, that the two aforementioned brothers had also earned medals from the same society. During the summer of 1889 Rev J Lee and Mr S E Lee saved the life of James Bourke, a 20 year old student of Maynooth College, when he was carried off shore by a strong tide at the beaches of Kilkee. The following is an excerpt from the society's committee meeting held, in London, on October 15 1889:

"Mr Bourke at a very dangerous part (sic) and was carried to sea by a rough and strong ebb tide."

"Messrs Lee were bathing in an adjoining Creek when hearing the cries for help they hastened across to the spot, swam out some distance and reaching Mr Bourke succeeded in bringing him to the rocks."

The brothers were put forward for the medal by the Mayor of Limerick [Francis A O'Keefe], citing Rev Ryan as witness, and, as a result, were each awarded a Bronze Medal and accompanying certificate, on November 1 of the same year. The *Limerick Chronicle* on November 2 1889 records the events as follows:

"The Mayor, M.P., performed a very pleasing duty at the meeting of the Corporation yesterday, when he presented the Gold Medal and certificate of the Royal Humane Society to the Rev J. Lee, B.A., and his brother, Mr S. E. Lee, of this city. This enviable recognition is the result of a heroic act of theirs at Kilkee this summer in saving an ecclesiastical student from drowning, off the Duggerna Rocks. A heavy sea was running, and the gentleman, who had gone out to bathe, was being swept out to sea when the Messrs Lee, seeing his perilous and helpless position, gallantly, and of course at great risk to themselves went to his aid, and saved his life. Such a praiseworthy action could not go unrewarded, and the Mayor, Father O'Shea, and Mr Day, interested themselves in procuring for the gentlemen the medals they had so bravely won. The Mayor presented them yesterday in a very happy speech, and the recipients delivered appropriate and well chosen replies. Three of the Lee family now hold medals for saving people from a watery grave."

It is interesting to note a contradiction in the *Limerick Chronicle's* article, where it

by Darragh Greaney

states that the brothers received the gold medal, when the society's committee had issued them with bronze medals over two weeks beforehand.

At the time it must have been a source of interest that two well known brothers from a Limerick Protestant merchant family rescued a Roman Catholic clerical student. The two rescuers were sons of Harrison Lee who ran a successful iron foundry in Limerick.

Samuel Edward Lee was born at Limerick on 5 February 1845. He served part of his apprenticeship, from 1859 to 1863, in the works of his father's Harrison Lee and Sons, City Foundry and subsequently worked in Dublin. On the death of his father in 1866 he returned to Limerick to take up the management of the works, in conjunction with his brothers, and on the death of his eldest brother in 1869, he became senior partner and manager of the business. He took a deep interest in the question of hydraulics and was a milling expert. He was a Justice of the Peace for Limerick. He died on 22 June 1916, at the age of seventy one. A brass tablet was placed on a centre pillar of St Mary's Cathedral in his honour:

ERECTED BY THE DEAN AND  
SELECT VESTRY  
IN AFFECTIONATE MEMORY OF  
SAMUEL E. LEE, J.P  
FOR 47 YEARS CHURCHWARDEN OF  
ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL.  
HE GAVE HIS VALUED WORK TO FIVE  
SUCCESSIVE DEANS  
AND PASSED TO REST 22nd JUNE 1916,  
AGED 71.

Rev Joseph William Lee was born on 12 January 1853 and was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin. He was ordained in 1886, and served as curate of Lickmolassy, Co. Galway until 1890. He was appointed curate of Nenagh in 1891 and became Rector of Ettagh and Kilcolman, King's County (Offaly) in 1896. In 1911 he was made Canon of Clondegad in Killaloe Cathedral.

Canon Lee died on 10 December 1923, in Dun Laoghaire after a long illness. Like his brothers, Canon Lee was a prominent oarsman and a member of the Limerick Boat Club. In the 1870s he rowed for Limerick Boat Club in a four which defeated a Dublin University Boat Club crack crew, stroked by Mr Justice Samuels. He was predeceased by his two brothers Samuel E and Richard J Lee who died in 1917.

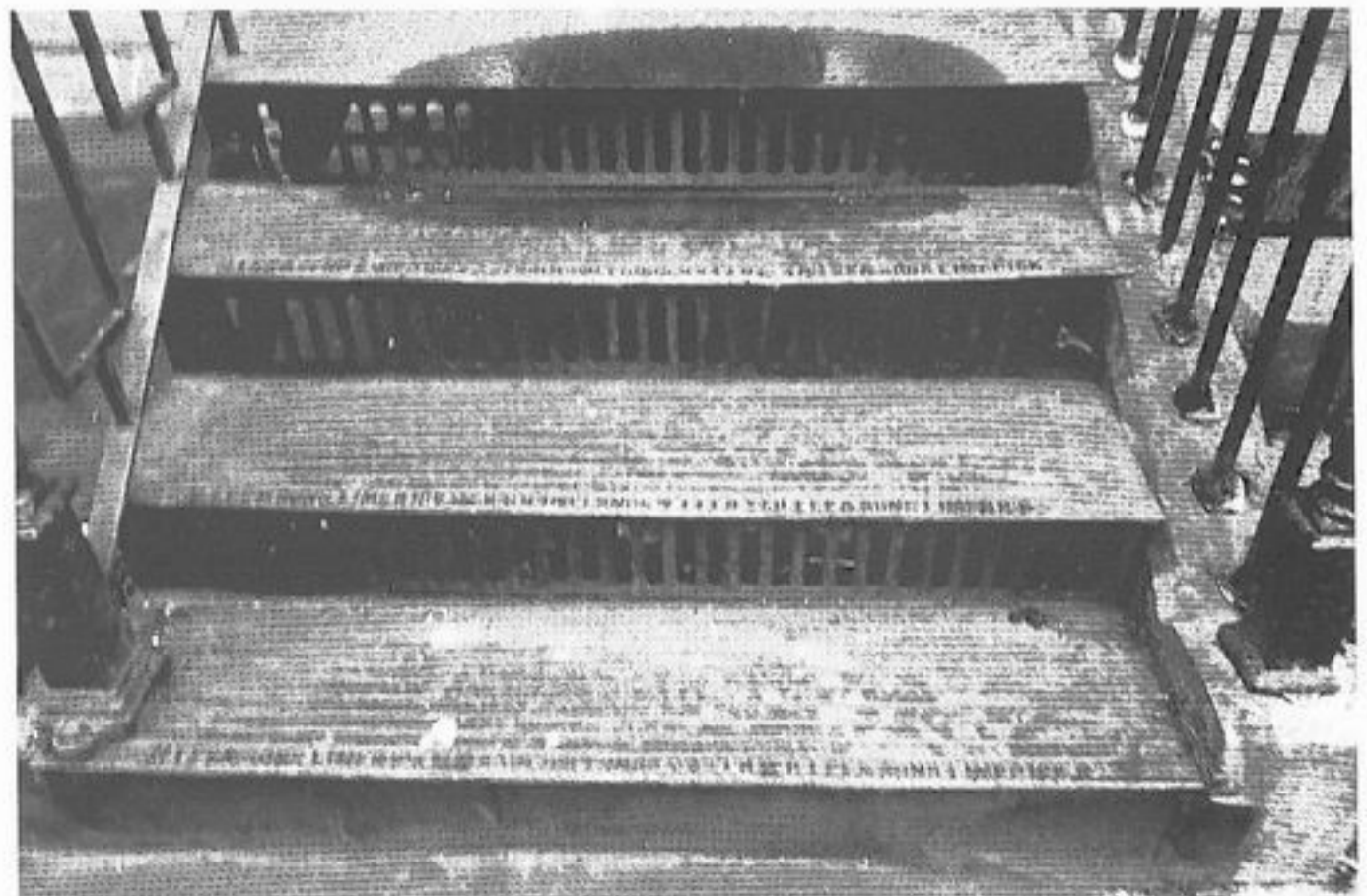
No doubt the prowess of the two brothers at rowing was an advantage, during the rescue of James Burke in Kilkee on that fateful summer day in 1889.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to Brian Hodkinson for help with the research, Mike Maguire of the Limerick City Library for introducing me to the world of microfilm, Paddy Waldron for the additional biographical material and Bob Harrison-Lee, great-grandson of Samuel Edward Lee for making this article possible.

## SOURCES

*Proceedings of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers 1847-1982 (vols 1-196) Volume 91 /1915 pp 895-906 (Sage Publications 1915).*  
Obituary, *Limerick Chronicle* 22 June 1916.  
Obituary, *Limerick Chronicle* 11 January 1917.  
Obituary, *Limerick Chronicle* 13 December 1923.



Iron steps manufactured by Lee Ironworks, located in O'Connell Street, Limerick.