An Ecumenical Rescue

by Darragh Greaney

A n 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 1880 Rev J Lee and Mr S E Lee saved a boy who was struggling in the River Bourke, a 20-year-old student of Maynooth College, when he was washed ashore by a strong tide at the mouth of the River Bourke. The following is an excerpt from the society’s committee meeting held in London, on October 15 1880:

“The Mayor, Mr 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 Rev J. Lee, B.A., and his brother, Mr S. E. Lee, of the city. Envious 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. Mr Lee, seeing the perilous and helpless position, gallantly, and at great risk to himself, 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 gentleman 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 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 AFFECTED MENTAL MEMORY OF SAMUEL E. LEE, J.P.
FOR 47 YEARS CHURCHWARDEN OF ST. MARY’S CATHEDRAL.
HE GAVE HIS VALUE WORK TO FIVE SUCCESSIVE DEANS
AND PASSED TO REST 22nd JUNE 1916, AGED 71.

Rev Joseph William Lee was born on 12 January 1828 and was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin. He was ordained in 1866, and served as curate of Lickmulassy, Co. Galway until 1896. 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 Clonmel in Killale Cathedral. Canon Lee died on 10 December 1923, in Dún 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 crick 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.

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SOURCES

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.