

William Roche (1775-1850)

Limerick Man, Banker and Statesman

William Roche is best remembered today for the gardens which he constructed at the rear of his commercial premises at 99 George Street (O'Connell Street) Limerick in 1808. The gardens, which were compared to Gardens at Babylon, became eponymously known as Roche's Hanging Gardens.

In a previous edition of this journal Jim Kemmy gave a brief account of some aspects of Roche's life¹ including family background in the banking business and a short insight into his political life.² Apart from his banking career he was involved in the Repeal movement and in 1832 he was elected Limerick's first Catholic Member of Parliament (M.P.) since the repeal of the Penal Laws.

William Roche was born into a prominent merchant family in Limerick city in 1775.³ His ancestors originated in County Cork and the family played a significant role in the commercial development of Limerick city in the early Eighteenth century.⁴ The Roche family was held in high esteem within Limerick society and consequently Roche's Street was named in their honour.⁵ John Roche, William's grandfather, was a merchant in Limerick city and when he died in 1760 it appears that he left a substantial amount of property.⁶ Two of John Roche's sons Stephen and Philip were grain and provision exporters. It is believed that Stephen Roche John (William's father) was one of the main butter exporters in Munster in 1764.⁷ Two of Stephen Roche's sons by his first marriage were merchants;

by *Betty Walsh*

John was a merchant based in Dublin and George was a wine exporter based in Bordeaux. During the Eighteenth century Catholic children were denied an education in Ireland through the Penal Laws and very often children of wealthy people were sent to Europe to be educated. This gave them the opportunity to make lifelong contacts which would stand to them in future business dealings. It is known that William Roche's older brother James received part of his education at the Catholic College in Saintes, France and it is probable that William was also educated abroad.⁸

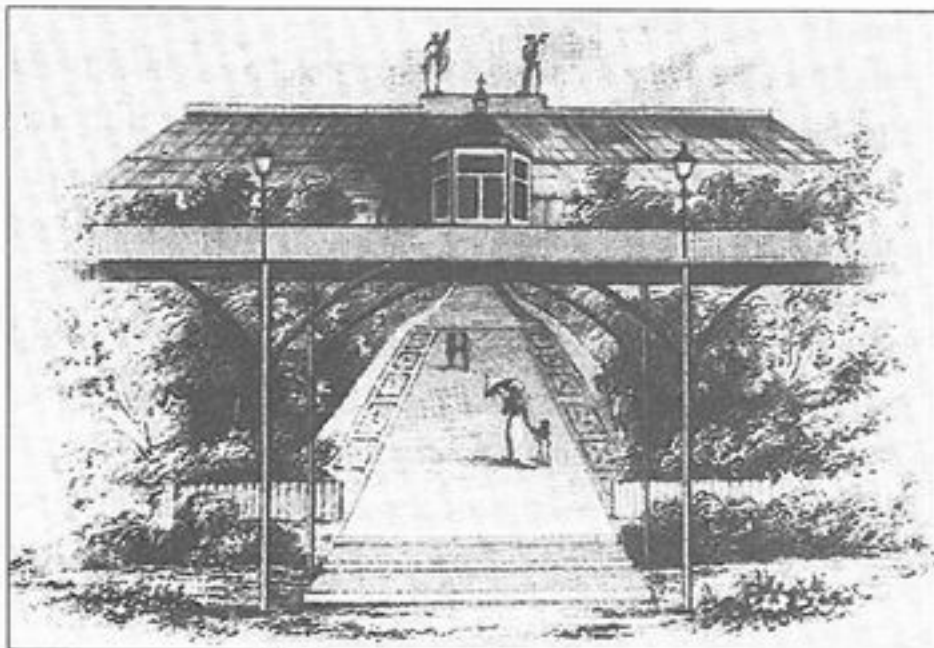
It is not clear when William first got involved in business but it is known that in 1799 Thomas and William Roche took over the family business in Dominick Street, Limerick.⁹ Among the goods which they imported were Seville oranges and china.¹⁰

In 1801 the Roche brothers sold their business in Dominick Street and opened a bank in Charlotte Quay, in September of that year. The business expanded rapidly and in 1804 they bought a house at 99, George Street, Limerick from Robert Ferguson John, and in 1806 they moved their banking business there.¹¹ The business continued to expand and the Roches became well respected and by 1809 Roche's Bank was gradually making inroads into the business of Maunsell's Bank which was the leading bank in Limerick at the time. By 1820 banks began to run into

difficulties and many of them closed down. Among the banks that closed were Bank of Limerick and Bruce's Bank. Despite the financial pressure on Roche's Bank it survived. William Roche began to realise that the days of the small independent banks were at an end. The Roche brothers gradually closed down the business and in 1825 the remainder of the accounts were sold to the new Provincial Bank and Thomas Roche was appointed a director of this bank.

With the closure of Roche's Bank William was now able to concentrate fully on the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, a cause he showed interested in since the early 1800s. On 22 December 1809 he chaired a meeting of prominent Roman Catholics in Limerick city which was held in the Commercial Buildings. The purpose of this meeting was to pass a resolution to highlight the status of Catholics in Ireland. Roche and other prominent Catholic citizens wanted equal rights to those enjoyed by their Protestant counterparts within the British Empire.¹²

It seems likely that when William Roche refused a knighthood from the then Viceroy to Ireland, the Duke of Richmond, in 1809, it was a form of protest against the treatment of Catholics in Ireland.¹³ In 1813, Roche was also involved in a meeting of prominent Catholics from both the county and the city of Limerick seeking a repeal of the Penal Laws, when it was decided to present an address to the Prince Regent and petition both houses of Parliament.¹⁴ William chaired another meeting of prom-



Mr Roche's, Garden, Limerick

Image taken from Rev P. Fitzgerald and J.J. McGregor, *The History, Topography and Antiquities of the County and City of Limerick*, (1827) Vol 2



Remains of building which housed Roche's hanging gardens

inent Limerick Catholics on 5 September 1814, when it was decided to petition the British Government for full Catholic Emancipation. During the course of this meeting he and three other people were selected to sit on a special committee which had powers to prepare a petition on behalf of the Catholics of Limerick city and county.¹⁵ In 1819 the names of both William Roche and his brother Thomas appeared at the top of a list of signatories of local prominent Catholics calling for full rights for Catholics.¹⁶

There were some curious anomalies in the application of the Penal Laws in Ireland. For example, Catholics in Ireland were not allowed to hold public office, yet William Roche was appointed a magistrate by a special Act of Parliament which was enacted in order to remedy abuses within Limerick Corporation¹⁷ and he was one of the magistrates who presided over a courtcase in January 1825.¹⁸ While William Roche was calling for Catholic Emancipation, it seems unlikely that he wanted an independent Ireland. At the public meeting, organised at the end of December 1822, in the Limerick City Courthouse, the people of the city, including William Roche, expressed their concerns in regard to the attack on the Viceroy in Dublin.¹⁹ The Viceroy was the King's representative in Ireland and an attack on the Viceroy was for William Roche an attack on the King and the Empire. This respect for the Empire is borne out again in August 1833 when William Roche accepted a personal invitation to meet King William IV on the occasion of the Queen Adelaide's birthday.²⁰

William Roche's political career was helped by his association with Daniel O'Connell. In 1833 O'Connell claimed to have known William Roche for almost thirty years. The mutual admiration of both men is borne out in the writings of William's brother James Roche.²¹ On 24 March 1829 legislation was finally enacted to allow Catholic Emancipation, after a protracted campaign. However, the Act did not legislate for a Parliament in Ireland and Roche continued to press for change when he was elected to Parliament in December 1832.²² He was elected ahead of his colleague David Roche with 1,648 votes.²³

William Roche was very concerned about bribery and corruption in Borough Councils. An example of the corruption which he was attempting to eradicate can be seen in a claim made by Lord King in the House of Lords on 21 April 1826 when he stated that magistrates in Ireland were taking bribes for granting bail.²⁴ On 16 April 1833 Roche tabled a debate in the House of Commons regarding a complaint against the Irish government and more particularly against Major Vokes (who was the chief magistrate of the police at the time) for interfering in the election process in Limerick city. He made it clear that the interference was not against him but against his fellow member David Roche.²⁵ On 1 March 1833, he presented a petition to Parliament, from the Chamber of Commerce in Limerick, for the Reform of the

Limerick Corporation.²⁶ On 4 March 1833 he wrote to the Chamber of Commerce and informed them that he had presented the petition on their behalf.²⁷ These issues of corruption were finally dealt with in 1840.²⁸ On 19 March 1834 Roche presented a petition to Parliament for the repeal of the Penal Laws.²⁹

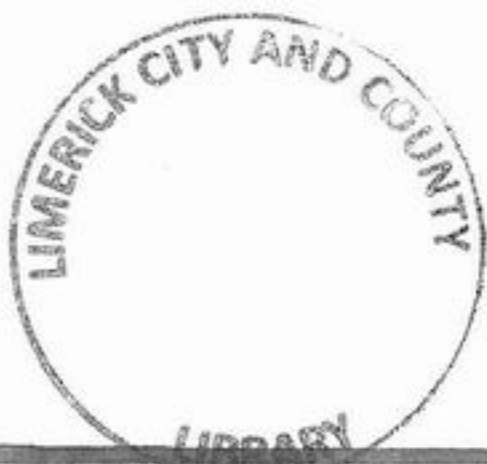
Despite the fact that Ireland had won Catholic Emancipation Roche still wanted Ireland to have its own Parliament. Roche was also concerned for the economic development of Limerick city and he presented a petition to the House of Commons on 2 June 1835 for the reduction of the duty on glass.³⁰ His petition against tolls on the road between Limerick and Dublin was presented to the House of Commons on 5 December 1837.³¹ On 7 July 1840 he presented a petition to the House of Commons on behalf of the Medical Practitioners of Limerick for remuneration for professional attendance at Courts of Justice. On 14 February 1840 Roche accompanied a deputation of Irish distillers to a meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the malt drawback.³² In December 1840 he accompanied a deputation of flour millers of Ireland to a meeting with the President of the Board of Trade to discuss the importation of foreign flour into Ireland.³³ On 23 June 1841 Parliament was dissolved and William did not seek re-election to the subsequent Parliament.³⁴

Apart from William Roche's involvement in banking and politics he was also involved with social issues concerning his native city of Limerick. This was evident from early in his career. On 1 May 1822 he was elected treasurer of a fund to raise money at a meeting of prominent wealthy citizens who were concerned about the plight of the poor in Limerick.³⁵ Roche was involved with a number of different committees in Limerick city and these included The Lunatic Asylum, Commissioner for St. Michael's parish, Limerick Harbour Commissioners, President of the Limerick Institution, City of Limerick Dispensary and Superintendent of the Board of Limerick city goal. He was also Clerk of the Peace and Clerk of the Crown.³⁶ William Roche died on 27 April 1850 and he is buried in the Stackpoole vault in Limerick Cathedral.³⁷ There were many written tributes paid to him after his death and he was described as being 'a man of upright conduct and sterling independence.'³⁸

REFERENCES

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- 2 There is a description of the gardens and the warehouses in A. J. O'Halloran, *The Glamour of Limerick* (Dublin and Cork, 1928), pp 89-90. See also: Adrian McLoughlin, *Streets of Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), p. 67 and Andy Wall, 'Roche's Folly', in *Limerick Association Year Book* (1992), pp 58-59.
- 3 William Roche's Baptismal record shows that he was Baptised on 21 May 1775, [Accessed, 4/5/2011], available www.rootsireland.ie

- 4 Eoin O'Kelly, *The Old Private Banks and Bankers of Munster*, p. 84.
- 5 Gerry Joyce *Limerick City Street Names* (Limerick, 1995), p. 47.
- 6 Eoin O'Kelly, *The Old Private Banks and Bankers of Munster*, p. 84.
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- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 120.
- 10 *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 April 1799.
- 11 Eoin O'Kelly, *The Old Private Banks and Bankers of Munster*, p. 121.
- 12 *Freeman's Journal*, 30 December 1809.
- 13 *ibid.*, 6 October 1809.
- 14 *ibid.*, 17 February 1813.
- 15 *ibid.*, 14 September 1813.
- 16 *ibid.*, 13 February 1819.
- 17 *ibid.*, 21 April 1826.
- 18 *ibid.*, 29 January 1825.
- 19 *ibid.*, 31 December 1822. In Dublin, Orangemen rose up in what became known as the 'Bottle Riots'. A violent wing of the Irish Protestant movement attacked the Viceroy of Ireland.
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- 26 Minutes, [c 2], H.C. 1 March 1833 vol. 16.
- 27 Limerick City Council Archives, letter book with copies of letters received by Limerick Chamber of Commerce 18 September 1820-19 July 1833, letter from William Roche to the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, 4 March 1833.
- 28 For further information on the reform of Limerick Corporation see Matthew Potter, *The Government and the People of Limerick: The History of Limerick Corporation/City Council 1197-2006* (Limerick, 2006), pp 249-282.
- 29 Minutes, [c 437], H.C. 19 March 1834 vol. 22.
- 30 Preamble [c 368], H.C. 2 June 1835 vol. 28.
- 31 Minutes, [c 599], H.C. 5 Dec. 1837 vol. 39.
- 32 *Freeman's Journal*, 14 February 1840.
- 33 *ibid.* 18 February 1840.
- 34 *Limerick Chronicle*, 26 June 1841.
- 35 *Freeman's Journal*, 3 May 1822.
- 36 *Thom's directory 1850* (Dublin 1850), p. 598.
- 37 *Limerick Chronicle*, 27 April 1850. *Nenagh Guardian*, 1 May 1850.
- 38 J. Bernard Burke, *The St. James's magazine, and heraldic and historical register* (vol. II) (London, 1850), p. 64. *The Annual Register, or a view of the History and Politics of the year 1850* (London, 1851), p. 225.



Ref to West side

	AR P
James Gubbins Esq	4 3 11
Church & Chapel	0 3 6
The Flemming	1 0 0
The Lodge plot	0 0 7
Collaghan Russel	2 2 5
Barrack plot	0 5 15
Honora Grady	0 3 1
The Fitz Gibbon	0 0 2
James Gubbins Esq	1 4 0
Wm Gubbins Esq	3 1 3
Francis Gafney	15 1 15
The Woods	7 0 35
Dennis Woods	1 0 19
Mich ^d Carroll	0 2 25
West side	41 1 42
East side	7 1 32
Total	48 3 14

Ref to east side

1 Mich ^d Argent	0 1 2
2 Mich ^d O'Brien	0 2 1
3 Curran & English	2 0 0
4 Widow Grace	0 1 0
5 Daniel Grady	0 1 2
6 Denis Keefe	0 1 0
7 James Nealon	0 1 0
8 Francis Gafney	0 1 3
9 James Gubbins Esq	0 1 0
10 Tho ^s Madony	0 1 0
11 Pat ^r Quiry	0 1 0
12 Pat ^r Ralphy	0 1 0
13 Honora Woods	0 1 0
14 Tho ^s O'Neil	0 1 0
15 M ^r Micky	0 1 0
16 Johanna Woods	0 1 0
17 Mary Madden	0 1 0
18 Dennis Keefe	0 1 0
19 M ^r Micky	0 1 0
20 M ^r Crofts	0 1 0
21 Dennis Carroll	0 1 0
22 Tho ^s Argent	0 1 0
23 Tim Downs	0 1 0
24 Dennis Carroll	0 1 0
25 M ^r Micky	0 1 0

A MAP
 and Survey of the Town and lots of Hospital part of the Estate of the
Right Hon. VALENTINE Earl Kenmare
 by order of Christopher Galwey Esq^r taken in June 1836
 by *Dan^l O'Donnell*
 Scale 10² to 1 inch