



a rhyming history

The history of Limerick is well documented. Ferrar, Fitzgerald and MacGregor and Lenihan have written major works about the place and its people. But it is not generally known that an interesting account of Limerick's past is contained in a document called the Davis Manuscript.

Not much is known about this work. It came into the possession of a Robert Davis and has never been printed in its entirety. The document is important because it is the first known effort to record the history of the city in chronological order.

The manuscript is the only historical study to chronicle a series of important Limerick events and the people involved in them — in verse. John Ferrar, who quotes widely from the document in his book, informs us that the verse was written about 300 years ago.

The second extract used by Ferrar tells of the laying of the foundation of the Tholsel in 1449 and how the building was later converted into a jail where prisoners being denied bail were kept.

This year the foundation of the Tholsel's laid,
Where justice in those days was well displayed;
The use diverted, now 'tis the common jail,
Where men do lie, not wanting crimes — but bail.

Another set of rhyming couplets describes how a Scot came here in 1634, to ply a ferry-boat between Limerick and Parteen, but as he demanded money for the project in advance, the city authorities refused to deal with him and instead built a causeway and bridge at Monabraher.

On February 18, 1667, a violent storm broke, and a spring tide, which did not ebb for fourteen hours, rose to the level of the Courthouse in Quay Lane, forced up one of the arches of Baal's Bridge, overflowed shops and houses, carried away buildings and quantities of corn, levelled the banks of the river and wrecked several ships.

The sequel to this freak flood was thus noted in what Maurice Lenihan called "the homely doggeral" of the manuscript:

A drought excessive came, it was so great,
The Shannon from the city did retreat;
The Mayor and many more upon dry ground,
Outside the walls, on foot, did walk around.

Ferrar concludes his extracts from the Davis M.S.S. with fourteen lines on the repurchase of the Lax Weir by the Corporation, for the sum of £2,000 in the year 1677.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the unknown seventeenth century versifier who wrote this history. The simple but lively lines have not only preserved a series of events and dates which would otherwise have perished from memory, but they also contain a variety of critical, humorous and favourable comments on these happenings.

Some questions remain. Who wrote the verse? And what happened to the manuscript? The answers, like much of the contents of the manuscript itself, have not survived the intervening three centuries. But let us be grateful for the parts of the Davis M.S.S. that remain, and appreciate them for what they are — a colourful, poetic fragment in the rich heritage of Limerick history. Above all let us salute that long forgotten writer — our first rhymer/historian.