the 12 HISTORICAL JEWELS OF LIMERICK

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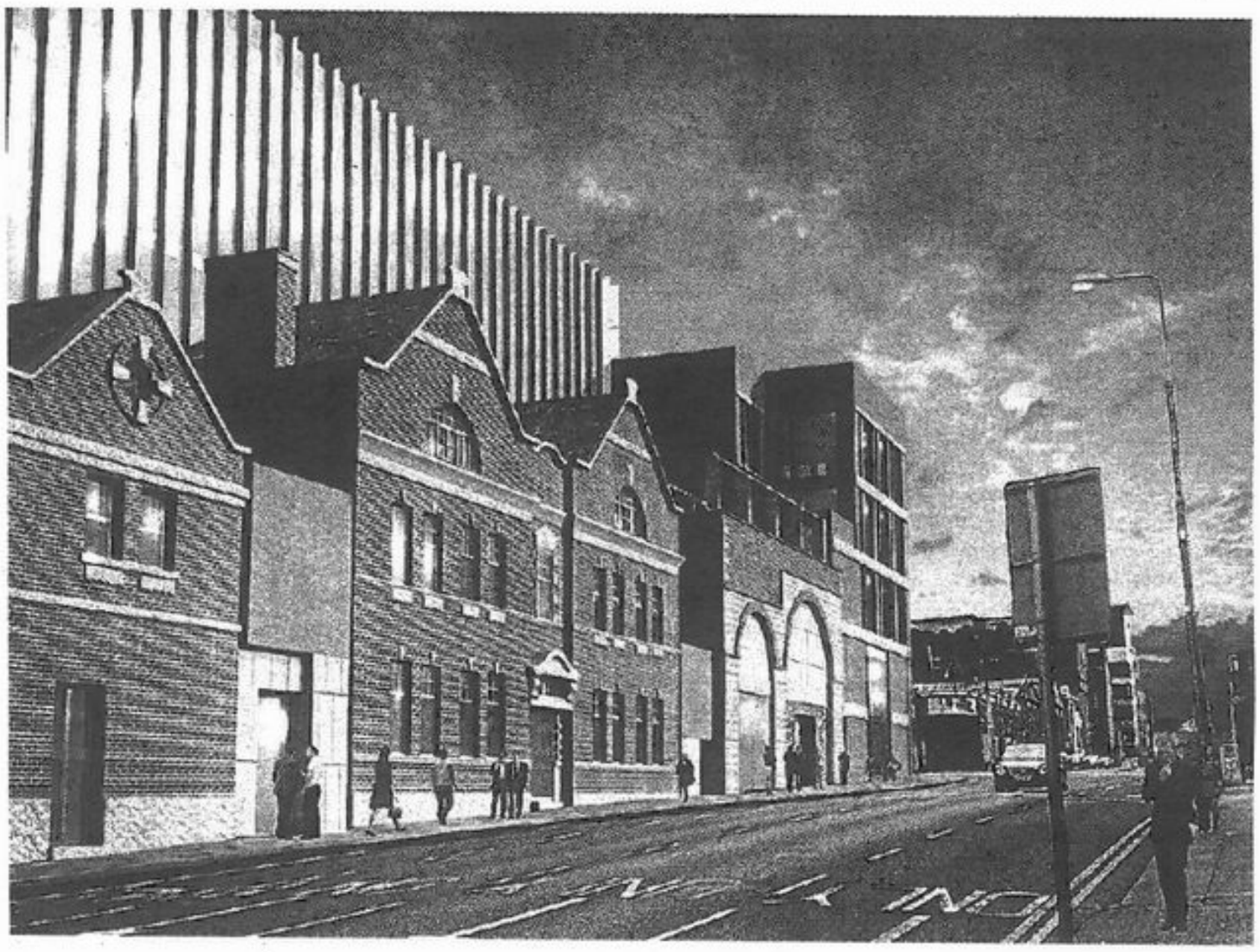
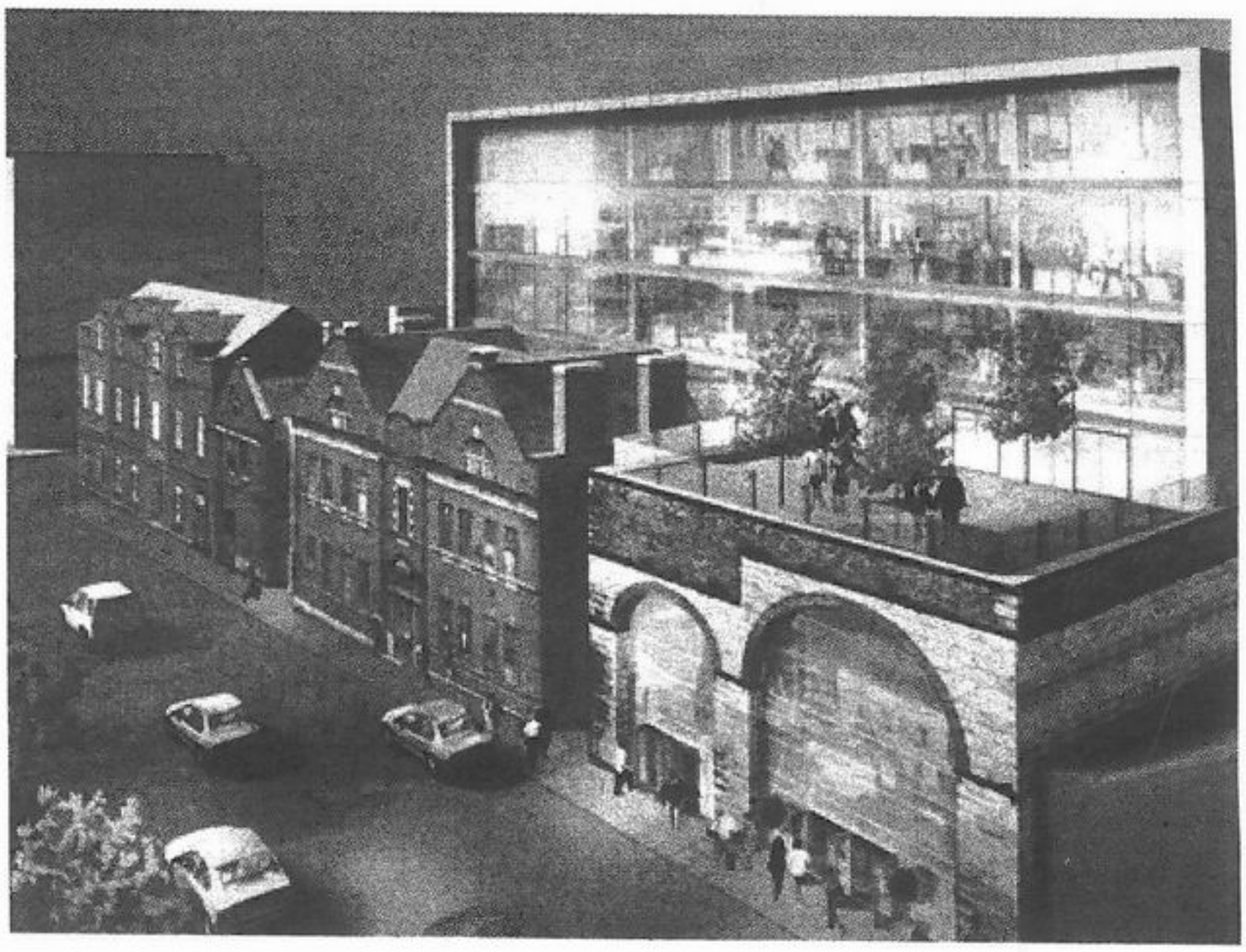


The exotic history of Limerick's Hanging Gardens



RACHAEL KEALY

From our offices on O'Connell Street, the Limerick Life team can hear jack-hammering, drilling and the noisy hum of diesel engines. Work is beginning on the Hanging Gardens development, as modern developers seek to transform the remains of 19th and 20th century structures into a modern commercial building. The space will be used for offices and retail purposes, but one small detail is particularly relevant to the history of the site. The roof terraces will be planted with trees and shrubs, the planners say, in an effort "to provide a unique elevated landscape." The original owner, William Roche, would likely approve.

Mr Roche was once one of Limerick's best-known businessmen; at various times in the early 1800s he was a merchant, a banker, an MP and a fervent supporter of the movement for Catholic emancipation. Born in 1775, he was the youngest of four sons welcomed by Stephen Roche and his second wife, Sarah O'Brien, a wealthy heiress. The Roches were a family of affluent merchants who ran successful import / export operations in Cork, Limerick and Dublin. In 1787 Philip Roche built an enormous warehouse to facilitate their growing trade; it is now known as The Granary. In the latter years of the 18th century, William and his brother Thomas Roche took over the Limerick branch of the family business, basing themselves in a premises on Dominic Street.

The late 1700s saw the beginning of an unprecedented period of prosperity for Ireland, as increased international trade led to a fast-expanding economy. Limerick too was on the rise: according to Matthew Potter and Sharon Slater, the city's shipping tonnage doubled between

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1776 and 1800, and the number of locally-registered ship-owners rose from eight to 40. Merchants were "the elite of the Limerick business community".

Describing Limerick in the early years of the 19th century, historians Fitzgerald and McGregor wrote of a bustling port, teeming with "seamen of different nations, and merchants engaged in the important business of import or export". It was also, according to John Ferrar, a city "in a healthy situation", which attracted wealthy landowners and businessmen, who sought fine homes for their wives and good educational facilities for their children. This resulted in a surge of building activity, as Newtown Pery came into being – by 1822, 2,000 new houses had been created to cater for some 16,000 members of this newly affluent class.

Three major Catholic merchant families were at the forefront of this commercial milieu: Arthur, Comyn and Roche. Mr Potter and Ms Slater cite the Penal Laws as an impetus for these families' successes – precluded from politics and landownership, Catholics were forced to concentrate on trade activities only, and some families became extremely wealthy in the process. This is not to say that grinding poverty did not exist in Georgian Limerick; for the majority of the population, life was extremely difficult, with rampant disease and devastatingly high infant mortality rates.

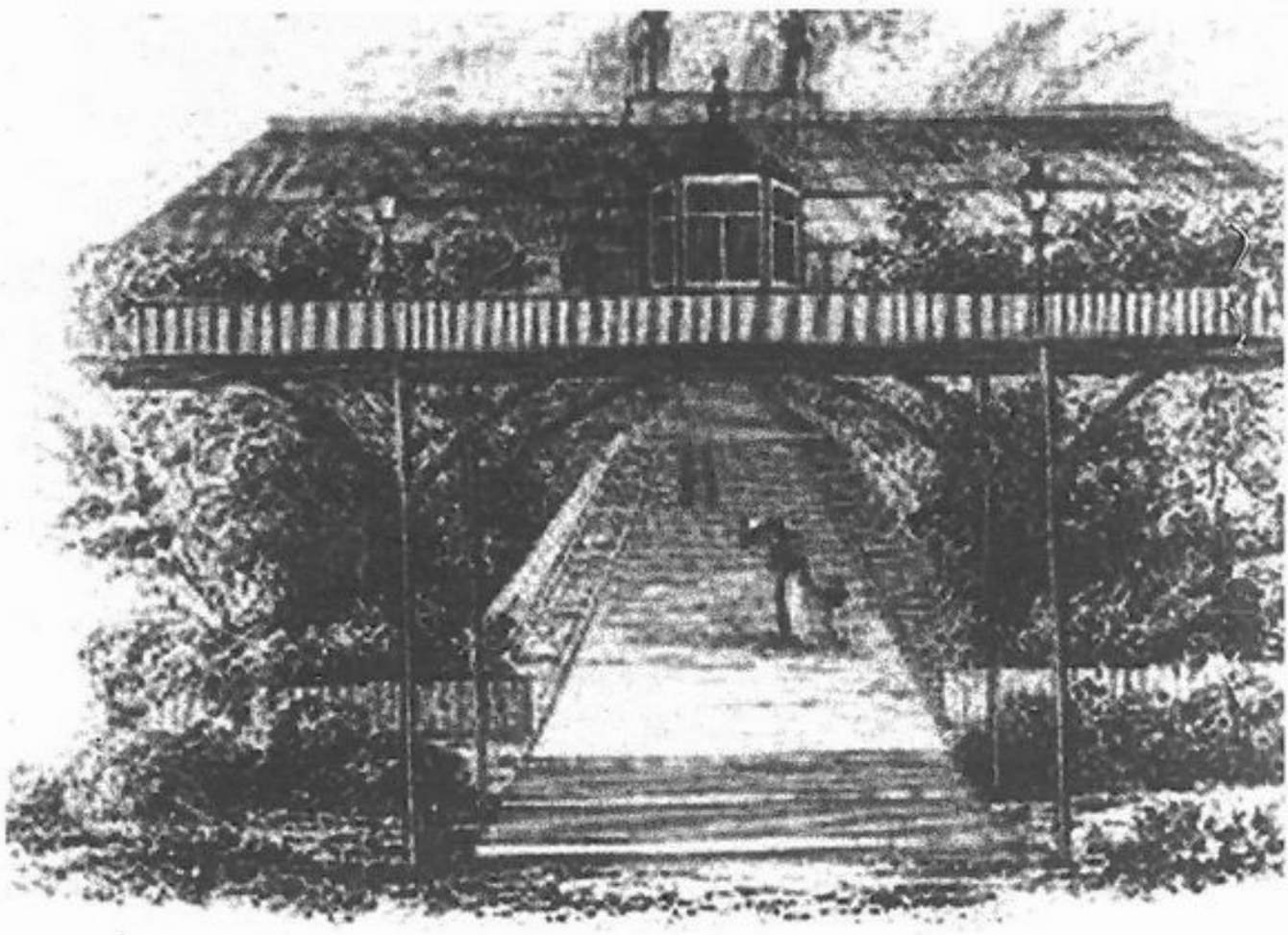
At the turn of the 18th century, the diet for most Irish people revolved around potatoes – the average person consumed some 5lbs a day – with limited access to meat. While this diet was monotonous, it usually presented sufficient nutrients to ensure a relatively healthy countenance. As international trade expanded, there emerged a taste, among the wealthier families at least, for citrus fruits, either imported or grown locally in hothouses. By 1799 the Roche brothers were advertising Seville oranges in the Limerick Chronicle, due to arrive from Lisbon, alongside a consignment of China. Imported fruits were expensive, though, and those with the time and money tried to grow their own by experimenting with greenhouses and force-houses. According to Clarkson and Crawford, the authors of Feast and Famine, this gave rise to a "craze for gardening and growing fruit and vegetables (which) extended well beyond the boundaries of the upper classes."

This may account, in part, for the development of William Roche's famed 'Hanging Gardens'. When he and his brother decided to diversify into banking (more on which later), they bought 99 George's Street (O'Connell Street), now the site of Rooney Auctioneers, and the headquarters of Limerick Life newspaper. In the land directly to the rear, William Roche built vast storage facilities which extended all the way down to the Limerick docks. There he kept wine, spirits, tobacco and various other goods, with sufficient space for "nearly 2000 hog heads".

As a commercial venture, the project was sizeable, but not particularly interesting. What set William Roche apart from other developers of the age was his fascination with horticulture. On the roof of the storage units, he installed a remarkable set of tiered gardens, boasting a range of exotic fruits, flowers and plants, each carefully cultivated and nurtured through a highly-sophisticated irrigation, fertilisation and heating system.

The ambitious enterprise commenced in 1808, took over five years to complete and cost £15,000, the equivalent of some €1.4 million today. Such a large investment inspired locals to refer to the site as 'Roche's Folly'. However, his vision was later justified, as the government rented the stores beneath at a 'fine' of £10,000 and a yearly rent of £300.

Rooney Auctioneers have conducted extensive research into the history of their building, garnering a collection of excerpts from 19th century press in the process. Some of these are from overseas, demonstrating the far-reaching curiosity the development inspired. The Bristol Mercury, for example, described in 1825 "an acre of ground…covered with arches of various heights, the highest forty feet…over these is placed a layer of earth of five feet thickness and planted with choice fruit-trees and flowers." Contemporaneous writers recall seeing grapes, pineapples, lemons, peaches, melons, cucumbers and "flowers of every form, scent and hue." It must have been a remarkable sight for ordinary Limerick people, most of whom would have scarcely hoped to see a pineapple within their lifetime. Visitors were permitted to walk among the ornate gardens, enjoying the bucolic surroundings. The lush plants, flowers, trees and fruits offered a peaceful escape from the rough-and-tumble city environment.



Contemporary drawing of the Hanging Gardens

> *He installed a remarkable set of tiered gardens, boasting a range of exotic fruits, flowers and plants*

As commercial activity increased in Ireland, the need for a banking system became pressing. Merchants often provided ad-hoc financial services in the course of their general import / export businesses. Eventually, they began to put structure around this activity by establishing private banks. In 1789 the 'Bank of Limerick' was founded in Bank Place by the Protestant Maunsell brothers. Soon after, Bruce Evan established his own eponymous bank on Rutland Street.

The Roches enjoyed an excellent reputation in Munster, and were held in high esteem by the business community. This led, in time, to a natural progression into banking; James and Stephen founded a bank in Cork City in 1800. A year later, their two other brothers set up 'The Bank of Thomas and William Roche' in Limerick, first on Charlotte's Quay, and later at 99 O'Connell Street. They were immediately successful in their change of focus: Eoin O'Kelly reports in his book The Old Private Banks and Bankers of Munster that receipts for the first three years of activity for Thomas and William's bank were "considerably larger" than Maunsell's Bank of Limerick and indeed their own brothers' Cork Bank.

At that time, scant legislative framework existed for financial services, so the industry was largely unregulated. Private banks were poorly managed, often failing to ensure that they had sufficient receipts to honour the notes they issued in abundance. These precarious finance houses were susceptible to even the slightest market tremors: several banks collapsed in 1809, and again in 1814. It wasn't until 1820, though, that the industry came under severe pressure, precipitated by the end of the Napoleonic wars and subsequent fall in grain values. The public panicked, and made a series of 'runs' on the banks, resulting in a serious liquidity crisis.

In May 1820 Roche's Bank in Cork failed. While the trustees worked diligently to liquidate the assets, Eoin O'Kelly's research suggests that creditors received what might now be described as 20c in the euro. Within a few months, the financial contagion had spread. Much like in modern times, politicians met to discuss the possibility of extending financial support to the banks. However, it was not sufficient to stem the flow. The runs continued and half of Ireland's banks collapsed. Historians have generally agreed that the banking crisis of 1820 was the worst the country had seen prior to the events of 2008 - 2013.

In Limerick, Maunsell's and Bruce Evan's banks also folded and the future looked grim for Thomas and William Roche. In an inspired move, the brothers published a notice in the local papers. The statement proclaimed that the public should have every confidence in the bank of Thomas and William Roche, and was signed by ninety-seven prominent and influential business leaders. It was not enough to prevent a run on their bank, but it did alleviate some pressure at a crucial time. The brothers appear to have acted prudently, in ensuring sufficient funds were available to withstand the run, as well as generously – on the 3rd June they issued a notice saying that they would endeavour to honour other banks' cheques. This was, according to Mr O'Kelly, an action which was both generous and courageous. Their strong position and local support meant that their bank "was one of the very few to survive the calamitous year of 1820."

The banking crisis had a severe effect on Limerick. The Chamber of Commerce wrote to the Chief Secretary of Ireland in June 1820, requesting relief for the workers of the city: 'The Trades people of this City are in great distress for want of Employment'. Producers – from farmers to manufacturers – struggled with a sharp decline in the value of their commodities and a sudden

How the site looks today

withdrawal of credit. It would take years for the local and national economy to recover. Following their close call, the Roche brothers shrewdly re-evaluated their activities. Over the following years, they slowly withdrew from banking, and their small remaining book was taken over by Provincial Bank in 1825.

William Roche then turned his attention to politics and activism. He was deeply supportive of the cause of Catholic Emancipation, hosting Daniel O'Connell on his visits to Limerick and advising the Bishop of Limerick, Dr Tuohy, on the leadership of his flock.

On the 10th December 1832, he became the first Catholic M.P. for the municipal borough of Limerick, representing the city in three parliaments. According to Sharon Slater, Mr Roche spent his time in government campaigning on behalf of Catholics and Jews and vocally opposing slavery.

> *Visitors were permitted to walk among the ornate gardens, enjoying the bucolic urroundings*

William was appointed a Magistrate for his city and later became the first Roman Catholic in Ireland to serve as a Commissioner of the Peace. Despite visiting London regularly for his parliamentary appearances, he remained equally devoted to local-interest issues. He was President of the Limerick Institution, a Life Commissioner of St. Michael's Parish and an active member of the Limerick Literary Institution.

He retired from politics in 1941 and died, unmarried, at his home on Glentworth Street on the 27th April, 1850. His death notice in The Limerick Chronicle conveys the admiration held by many for one of the city's most industrious citizens. As a politician, he behaved with "undeviating integrity...without a compromise of honour or principle." On one memorable occasion, Daniel O'Connell announced, on the eve of an election, that William Roche was the only man in Ireland from whom he would not demand a pledge. The integrity with which his friend had lived his professional and political life meant that no such guarantee was necessary.

For half a century, the journalist wrote, William Roche had dedicated his life "to the welfare of Limerick... and the best interests of Ireland."