O n Christmas Eve, 1997, we suffered one of the fiercest gales in living memory. Thousands of trees were ripped up by the roots and the awesome hurricane gusts sweeping through the city streets forced many a last-minute Christmas shopper to seek reluctant refuge from the elements in a public hostelry. 'It's all to do with the Ozone Layer' the storm-blitzed survivors muttered over their brandy and porter.

The weather does seem to have got topsy-turvy of late, with miserably cold summers and unnaturally warm winters. But if we look back into the annals of time we find that the Irish weather has always acted in an unpredictable, even bizarre, fashion. The Rev. James White, in his Annals of the City, County and Diocese of Limerick, written in the 18th century, informs us that in 1694 there was such a great frost in Limerick that the ice in the River Shannon was 9 feet thick, allowing people to walk over the river. And on the 6th of December 1705, a terrible storm erupted in the city that started at one o'clock at night and finished at eight in the morning. During that time, the Shannon rose so high that it flowed over the parapets of Thomond Bridge and many parts of town were flooded. In the area around St. Francis' Abbey, and in the lower sections of Irishtown, people had to scramble smartly onto their rooftops to save themselves from drowning.2

But one of the most peculiar climatic events to happen in the Limerick area took place on 20th October 1695 when, according to the White Ms., there fell at Newark about Limerick, and in many parts of the County, a Shower of perfect butter, so as that none could doubt that the Irish weather has always been a troublesome and unsteady one.

Born in 1715, James White attended the Jesuit school in Limerick and came in this lifetime, events that he either recorded in his Annals many of the most important civic and religious events that took place in Limerick during his lifetime, events that he either witnessed or had access to reliable information and documentation concerning them. As such, the White Ms. is an invaluable source of information for students of early Georgian Limerick, as it is one of the few contemporary primary sources we have for the period. For the purposes of this article, I shall concentrate on that section of the manuscript dealing with events that took place in his lifetime because that would be the most accurate and historically reliable portion of the manuscript.

Religious Tensions

As a Catholic cleric and historian, James White was acutely aware of the tensions and rivalries between Catholics and Protestants in Limerick during the Penal period, tensions that often arose from Protestant fears of a Jacobite descent upon Britain or Ireland. In early 1744, for instance, intelligence was received from France that Bonnie Prince Charlie had persuaded the French king to assemble an expeditionary force at Dunkirk, news that had immediate repercussions for the Catholic community in Limerick. According to the White Ms., in February of that year, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland issued a most severe proclamation against 'all the Catholic Clergy in Limerick, as well as in all parts of the Kingdome', forcing them underground. Writing of Limerick, White informs us that:

in this town there were two several searches made after them [priests], and for arms in all Catholick houses ... many scandalous and Ananymous [sic] letters were dropt up and down the streets to the prejudice of Catholicks and even reports propagated that the Catholicks were to massacre all the Protestants on Easter Sunday, which occasion'd guards of Soldiers to patrol all that day about town.3

Catholics in Ireland laboured under a number of economic disabilities in the early 18th century, disabilities which were only gradually relaxed by the Irish Parliament in the latter half of the century, when the threat of a Jacobite/Catholic rebellion receded and the Protestant Ascendancy felt more secure. For instance, up until about the 1760s, Catholic tradesmen were obliged to pay to the Protestant-controlled trade guilds and corporations a quarterly fee known as 'Quarterage' if they wished to remain in business. Those who refused to pay faced fines, closure of their shops, seizure of goods and even imprisonment in the debtors' prison. Despite paying quarterage, Catholics were not allowed to become freemen of the corporate towns and were denied all the privileges and benefits of citizenship, including the right to vote for parliamentary representatives and municipal officers. In Limerick, the physical expression of this exclusion from the civic life of the city was that Catholic tradesmen were confined outside the city walls in the Francisca Abbey area.

However, not all Catholics were downcast, and in February 1759, the court gave judgement against the Mayor, a decision seen at the time as a significant victory by the Catholic middle classes throughout Ireland, and in the words of James White: 'This proceeding encouraged the rest of the Roman Catholic tradesmen of the Kingdom to refuse paying quarterage, and the respective Corporations of their trades, and every one follow'd their callings without becoming quarter brothers, or freemen of said trades; and the like, the Catholic tradesmen have done in Limerick, many of them quitted the Abbey, and set up their trades in the City.5

There is an impression that the Penal Laws were a period of unrelied gloom for Catholics, with no one being allowed to stick their noses above the gutter. However, not all Catholics were downcast subjects of the Crown. There was a prospering Catholic merchant class in Ireland during the 18th century which played a vital role in the country's economy. One of the main objectives of the Penal Laws was to prevent the resurgence of a Catholic landed class, but they did not hinder men of ambition from turning to trade. As evidence of this, the Rev. James White, writing in 1760, states that the trade of Limerick, both by land and sea, has up to that point in time been carried on mostly by Catholics. However, White was anxious for the future of that Catholic merchant class, as he complained bitterly that many of the city's merchants, out of avarice, were employing Protestant and Presbyterian apprentices for the sake

by David Lee
of the large apprentice fees, apprentices who, after serving their time, would set up businesses in competition with the Catholics. So infuriated was White with this non-sectarian attitude that he wrote, out of plique:

I shall here insert the names of these Catholic merchants, who in opposition to all advice are guilty of these errors of taking Protestant apprentices, in order that hereafter their own children and posterity may know them and condemn them - viz. Mr. Stephen Roche John took one, Evers who afterwards settled facing him in the same business; at present has one Wallis serving him. Mr. James Brown took one Wm. Harteny, who is now settled in the same business...  

and so the list goes on.

The Corrupt Corporation

Up to 1762, the Protestant-controlled Corporation of Limerick carried out a policy of quartering soldiers on Catholic houses, and also on those citizens the Corporation had taken a dislike to, without making any payment to the householder to cover the cost of food and lodging - this was despite the fact that the government allowed quartering payments to be made. A committee of enquiry appointed by the Irish Parliament to look into the corrupt practices of Limerick Corporation issued a report in December 1761 which found, among other things, that 'there has been great partiality and oppression for several years past' in quartering soldiers and officers upon the inhabitants. The committee cited as an example the following typical case:

that Aldn. Arthur Roche, when Mayor, illegally and arbitrarily committed Patrick Sexton to gaol for refusing to pay a sum of money for the quarters of two serjeants at a time when he was only a logger, and had but one room.

It has to be stressed, however, that Catholics were not the sole victims of the corrupt practices of the clique that ran Limerick Corporation. The 1761 Parliamentary enquiry cited above arose out of a petition signed by some 500 persons from both city and county, none of whom were Catholics, which complained bitterly of misappropriation of local taxes and public lands by members of the Corporation; the partial administration of justice by the city magistrates; vote rigging and a host of other sins and misdemeanours, including not cleaning the city streets and leaving them in a foul and dirty condition. Up to that time, the city of Limerick consisted mainly of the walled districts of English-town and Irish-town, and over this area the Corporation controlled the administration, trade and justice as if it were a medieval fiefdom. Especially injurious to the prosperity and the economic development of the middle classes was the policy of the Corporation in exacting customs and tolls at the city gates at a rate twice that which the laws allowed. Tolls were even being charged on goods that were liable for customs duties, and the tolls in the market were triple that which a parliamentary schedule allowed for. White's manuscript is of especial interest to local historians as he details the economic and political grievances of the oppressed citizens and tracks the political struggle that took place between them and the corrupt Corporation. Those opposed to the Corporation were known as 'The Independents' and they were enthusiastic supporters of Edmund Sexton Pery, who, in the late 1760s, proposed the establishment of a Georgian New Town on that part of his landed estate that lay to the south of the old medieval city. This involved the building of what was virtually a new city based on a grid of wide streets and blocks of terraced houses, a dream that subsequently became a reality with the building of Newtown Pery.

The attraction of this New Town for the mercantile and middle classes was that it lay outside the rapacious jurisdiction of the Corporation. Limerick's merchants and traders deserted the dirty, mean streets of the Old Town for the more spacious and healthy streets and houses of Newtown Pery.

James White died in 1768, but he lived long enough to witness and chronicle the birth of this new city, and for this the White Ms. proves a very useful source for architectural historians. One of the key dates in Limerick's architectural history is 1760, when the government formally declared that Limerick was no longer to be regarded as a fortress city, a decision that allowed the citizens to throw down the old town walls if it answered their convenience. White writes that Edmund Sexton Pery was the first to take advantage of the government's decree, for he:

began by throwing down forty yards of the Irish town walls near the derril's battery in order to make a road from Munghrett road to his new Square John's [Square] back of St. John's Church.

Pery's enterprising initiative was followed by the inhabitants of St. Francis Abbey, and so much progress was made in knocking down the old medieval walls that, in 1760, White observed that mercantile class that was benefiting significantly from the mid-18th century onwards from an expanding provisions trade with Britain. Limerick was struggling to throw off the shadow of the past, but it was to be many years later before the corrupt, malign and sectarian Corporation was finally abolished.

From this brief survey of just some of the events and political issues recorded by Fr. White, it can be seen that his Manuscript offers the student of Limerick's history a rich mine of information. As a primary source, especially for the early Georgian period, it is one of the literary treasures of Limerick. Of course, like every other historian and chronicler that ever lived, Fr. White has his biases, both witting and unwitting, and there are many aspects of Limerick's social, political and religious life that he does not throw light on. What a historian or annalist leaves out of his account is just as important and significant as what he leaves in. He was, after all, a Catholic cleric, living in a time when Catholics were facing many and various forms of discrimination. But when we take factors such as bias and editorial selection into consideration, we have, in the White manuscript, a document that illuminates a very dark period in Limerick's history.

James White holds the distinction of being Limerick's first prose historian, and in his ground-breaking footsteps have walked John Ferrar, Maurice Lenihan, Kevin Hannan and Jim Kemmy. There is no more fitting memorial to the Rev. James White than the following passage which was written into the pages of the White manuscript following the author's death in the spring of 1768:

February the Seventh between the hours of Ten and Eleven in the forenoon died the Revd. James White the Compiler of this M.S. He was a Gentleman of a very regular conduct, punctual to his duty, curious in his researches, esteemed for his acquaintance, which made his death universally regretted. To him the curious are indebted, for his elegant and elaborate discription not only of this City, but of the Counties of Limerick and Clare. In a word he was a Good Priest who flattered none and did justice to all. Requiescat in pace. Amen.

REFERENCES

The page numbers are those in the copy by Maurice Lenihan, British Library Add, Ms. 31,886.

1. White Ms. p. 74
2. ibid. p. 76
3. ibid. p. 74
4. ibid. p. 113-4
5. ibid. p. 190
6. ibid. p. 169-70
7. ibid. p. 172
8. ibid. p. 174
9. ibid. p. 174
10. ibid. p. 169
11. ibid. p. 171
12. ibid. p. 193