

The White Manuscript

Though it is widely believed that John Ferrar wrote the earliest history of Limerick, this belief does not accord with fact. Nor is it true to say that Ferrar's work was the first such history to appear in print.

In the year 1764 James White published a short account of Limerick city and county. Two years later he had a description of County Clare printed. He also compiled a more extended history of Limerick which has never been published. This work has since been known as the White Manuscript.

James White was born into an old Limerick family in 1715. He received a classical education from the Jesuits at their Jail Lane school, and later completed his studies at Salamanca in Spain. He was ordained a priest on December 25, 1738, and spent most of his life in St. Mary's parish.

Father White devoted much of his spare time to literary and historical pursuits and recorded, in his own hand, the story of his native place. His Manuscript shows the corrections made by its author and some further additions and corrections by Bishop Young.

All the subsequent histories of Limerick have drawn heavily on the White Manuscript. In the preface to his enlarged edition of 1787 John Ferrar acknowledged his indebtedness to the work. Ferrar describes how the Manuscript had been "preserved with great care for a long series of years" by the priest's family before being passed on to Dr MacMahon the Bishop of Killaloe.

Maurice Lenihan had the work in his possession when writing his History in 1866. It is sad to relate that when Lenihan fell on hard times towards the end of his life he was forced to sell a copy of the Manuscript, which he had made, for the sum of £3 to the Royal Irish Academy.

The original work was acquired by Dr Young and has remained in the diocesan library to this day. It holds an honoured place in the literary treasures of Thomond.

Father White died on February 7, 1768, but the pioneering papers in which he documented the history of Limerick have won for him a permanent place in the memory of his fellow-citizens.