



J. Ferrar, Citizen of Limerick

John Ferrar, the first major historian of Limerick was born in 1743. His father was a bookseller and bookbinder in Limerick from 1729 to 1754. His grandfather, Captain William Ferrar, served with the Williamite army in Ireland in 1689-1691, and married Marie Lloyd of Drumsallagh, Co. Limerick. The Ferrars came from Huntington, England, where the family was engaged in the bookbinding trade.

In addition to being a bookseller and printer, John Ferrar edited the Limerick Chronicle, which he also printed, from 1768 until 1781, when the paper was taken over by Andrew Watson. Ferrar's History of Limerick appeared in two editions, the first in 1767, and the second in a much enlarged volume in 1787.

In his Recollections John O'Keeffe, the actor and dramatist, gives the following description of the historian:

His little shop was at the corner of Quay Lane. Ferrar was very deaf, yet had a cheeful animated countenance; thin and of middle size.

Ferrar was a political and religious ecumenist long before his time. In the preface to his History, completed on Christmas Day, 1786, he wrote:

Controversy in religious matters is of all others the most unedifying, most unentertaining if not not handled with charity and politeness. The heaps of books on this subject on the continent in the last century, contributed to deluge several parts of Europe with blood, were a disgrace to humanity. What! shall we quarrel with an honest man, because he differs from us in his manner of worshipping the Supreme Being?... The Author, therefore, in writing the following pages, was extremely anxious to unite his fellow-citizens, and, as far as lay in his power, to lessen the little jealousies which have divided men living in the same land under the same roof... Toleration is the basis of all public peace.

A.J. O'Halloran in his book The Glamour of Limerick re-creates an attractive image of the historian at work:

You can picture him in his home on Sir Harry's Mall poring over dusty tomes by candle-light, rejoicing when he discovered some new fact redounding to Limerick's credit; or in fancy you may see him, horn-rimmed spectacles on nose, peering into some dusty corner of Saint Mary's Cathedral in the hope of alighting on some ancient inscription that might help him in his labours; or you can think of him clad in his suit of sober brown, white stockings, buckled shoes and cocked hat, trotting nimbly off to invite Doctor O'Halloran's aid in elucidating some knotty point.

When he began to write his History Ferrar admits that "he was then little acquainted what a respectable figure this city makes in the history of Ireland". A year after his first work was published he was made Freeman of his native city on September 21, 1768.

John Ferrar moved to Dublin some time before 1802 and died there. There is no record of the time or place of his death and his grave is unknown.

Though Maurice Lenihan in his 1866 History takes issue with Ferrar on a number of points, his work is a worthy effort. Written "amidst the avocations of a laborious employment and the duties of a citizen", the book has won for Ferrar a permanent place in the memory of his fellow-citizens.

Perhaps some enterprising publisher would consider republishing this history, written by the man who simply describes himself on the title-page of his book as

"J. Ferrar, Citizen of Limerick"