

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CITY

The playwright John O’Keeffe’s “Recollections”, published in 1826, contains the following interesting references to Limerick in the eighteenth century:-

At Limerick I saw Sir Harry Hartstonge, and that in doing, at the hazard of his life, a most generous action. Some of the cabins in the outskirts of the city were on fire, and the poor owners in the greatest distress. I saw Sir Harry clamber over the mud walls, ascend through the burning rafters and save what he could of the miserable, scanty furniture. He seemed to be wrapped in flames; he was himself a very little man, and had spectacles on; his great activity on the occasion had an exemplary effect.

During the Limerick assizes I saw a stuffed glove, about four feet long, hanging out from the top of the Exchange, nearly across the main street; this was the accustomed token that, for a week or a fortnight, whilst the courts were sitting, no debtor could be arrested. Debtor or creditor this was a good thing for the theatres, as during that time the city was thronged.

An ample piazza under the Exchange was a thoroughfare: in the centre stood a pillar about four feet high, upon it a circular plate of copper about three feet in diameter: this was called **The Nail**, and on it was paid the earnest for any commercial bargains made, which was the origin of saying, “Paid down upon the nail”. There was also at Limerick a place of public resort called Altamira. Indeed on both Cork and Limerick I look back with great pleasure and a feeling of gratitude.

By John O’Keeffe

Some of my earliest attempts at the drama came out at these two beautiful cities, and were attended with full success and liberality.

In 1770 I saw Colonel Burke, or DuBourgh, and Massey, and most of the other members of the Castle Connell Club, which was composed of the first persons of rank, fashion and landed property in the country. They were of the prime class of **bon-vivants**, and played high and drank deep. All or most of them having travelled were of the chief order of high accomplishment, interior and exterior. They wore a uniform of scarlet with gilt buttons, green silk waistcoat and breeches, a green ribbon on the breast with three C’s in gold - initials of “Castle Connell Club”. They had each a pretty box close by the Spa, which is very cold, limpid and sparkling.

There were some old ruins of the castle on the banks of the Shannon, six miles from Limerick. I had the pleasure of dining several times with the Club at MacManus’s, I never saw any quarrel amongst the members, which, in those days of claret and swords, must otherwise have often proved fatal. All was harmony and good humour. Colonel John McMahon was a member of it. I knew Mr. Ferrar, of Limerick, a printer, bookseller and author; he wrote an excellent “History of Limerick”, which a few years ago I read with pleasure. His little shop was at the corner of Quay Lane. Ferrar was very deaf, yet had a cheerful, animated countenance, thin and of middle size.



The Exchange: a 1900 copy by Henry O’Shea of an 1820 oil painting.