



# William Levers: Old Scenes Revisited

by Richard Reid

**L**ike many a traveller before him, William Levers Senior of Mount Levers, Royal Parade, Melbourne, was unimpressed with Belfast. On Sunday, 8th June, 1890, he confided in his diary. 'Arrived in Belfast on Sunday morning, put up at the Royal Avenue Hotel, good house; but Belfast is an awful gloomy place on Sunday. Seems more puritan than even Scotland. Rained very hard all day.'

Maybe, this being the first time he had stood on Irish soil since leaving it in 1855, at the age of 37 years, for goldrush Melbourne with his wife and family, he really yearned for the sight of home and for a long awaited reunion with his relatives in the Levers country of Co. Limerick and Co. Clare. But *who* was this returning emigrant?

*The Australian Dictionary of Biography* reveals something of the man and his achievements. He was born of a religiously mixed marriage in Limerick City on 22nd December, 1818, and was the son of Hawkins Levers of

Mount Levers, County Clare and Margaret, nee O'Shaughnessy. William eventually became a Roman Catholic, following his mother's religion. He joined the Navy when aged eighteen years, and followed a nautical career until 1848, when he settled in Dublin to take up the less dangerous post of merchant.

By the mid-1850s, Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria, came increasingly under the influence of gold, transforming itself in the process into 'marvellous' Melbourne. Thousands of Irish men and women had already been lured south by the prospects of this rapidly expanding colony. Levers decided to follow them, obtaining a position as purser on the *Rienze*, he reached Melbourne with his wife Mary and six children on 22nd April, 1855. *Table Talk* of 14th February, 1890, describes the family's first encounter with Australia:

*Probably the first night on Australian soil was as uncomfortable a one as*

*the hero ever spent, for it was spent on the wharf. Landing late in the day, no lodging of any kind was obtainable, and Mr. Levers, always equal to the occasion, quickly arranged his luggage into three walls and roofed them in with quilts, and then in sailor parlance, "stowed away" the wife and younger children amid plenty of bedding and blankets. They were quite snug, but not so the husband and eldest son, who acted during the night as sentinels, for the weather was chilly with a slight rain falling. A kind hearted watchman discovered the family in the early morning and brought them hot coffee, and one of Mr. Levers' greatest regrets is that though he often enquired for that man afterwards, he could not find him; he had disappeared, melted into thin air and vanished without a trace, as people do in Australia.*

Like many a carefree observer of the colonial economic scene, Levers soon realised that there were more solid opportunities in urban Melbourne than in chancing his luck for alluvial gold in Ballarat or Bendigo. After working in-



Melbourne: Tom Roberts' impressionistic painting of Bourke Street, c. 1890.



Mount Ievers, Royal Park, Melbourne, Victoria, the residence of William Ievers, 1890.

tially as a storeman and packer, he opened his own real estate agency in 1859. By the 1870s, the firm of Ievers had become one of the largest in the city. Civic and commercial honours soon followed, as William became a J.P., a city councillor and a founder and director of the Colonial Permanent Building Society. In addition, he supported both the cause of Irish Home Rule and the development of the Roman Catholic Church in Victoria. When he died in 1901, the Galway-born Archbishop Thomas Carr of Melbourne officiated at his funeral. Although few people in Melbourne today have any knowledge of William Ievers, his memory survives in the shape of a statue erected in his honour by his son over a drinking fountain in Argyll Place, Carlton, and in the name Ievers Street: solid monuments to a solid, fairly unromantic Irish Australian.

However, William Ievers also deserves to be remembered for his unwitting contribution to local history in the province of Munster and, more especially, in the counties of Limerick and Clare, the home of his ancestors. In 1890, at the age of 72, following a farewell banquet given for him and his eldest son William, at Melbourne Town Hall on 12th February, 1890, he set off, accompanied by William, on the ship *Oroya*, on an extensive world tour, the centrepiece of which was a visit to Ireland between 7th June and 2nd September. Although he covered many other places which he had visited as a young seaman – the Pyramids, the Holy Land, the European and North American continents – it was his native land which essentially drew him, as was illustrated by the book he wrote based on his diary, *Fifty Years After; or,*

**Old Scenes Revisited.** The Limerick/Clare segments of this book provide some interesting insights into the reactions of a successful emigrant brought face to face with scenes of long ago, and who finds that 'All, all is changed'. Let us return to Limerick with him on 4th July, 1890:

*We arrived in Limerick in due time, and put up at Cruise's Hotel, an old and respected hostelry, and after dinner strolled down through the Irish town, and across Baal's Bridge, through the English town, round by St. Mary's Church and over the bridge back to the hotel. Well, the scene was quite changed. I went up William Street, past my father's former house, and that looked in fair order. We then turned down High Street towards Mungret Street – all is now changed, not the same bustle and activity as when I knew it first. Saw our old house (the house in which Willie was born) – no improvements; so passed on to the old Milk Market, that fine old memorial of ancient Limerick, the old Sallyport Gate, that stood there since the famous siege (where the women fought so bravely) till my day, was removed, I suppose, for so-called improvement – but God forgive their vandalism, I say, for it was in on one's way. We wandered down Broad Street, and crossed the bridge into the English town, where there is room for much improvement. Lots of houses pulled down, the remainder occupied by, apparently, poor people. St. Mary's Cathedral Church seems improved, but the neighbourhood had not grown in like manner. Saw the old ruinous house, where, it is said, Ireton died of the plague. As we are pas-*

*sing up through Mary Street some spiteful individual tossed a poor cat out of one of the upstairs windows, and, with the proverbial story of a cat's nine lives in my mind, the poor brute quietly walked back by a side passage and again entered the house.*

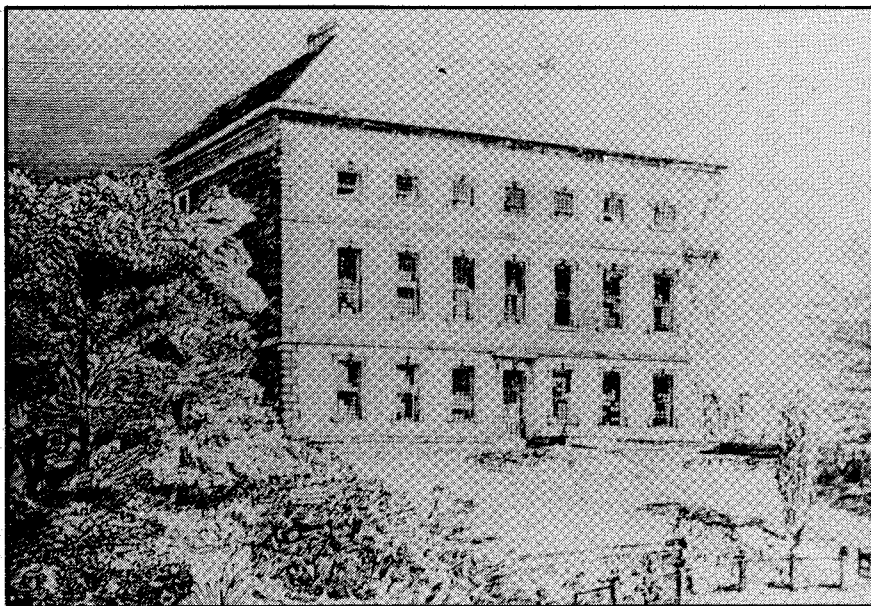
From that day until he left Munster two months later Ievers kept up a taxing schedule of visits, social calls and sightseeing trips.

### Sunday, 6th July: To the 'End of the World'.

William spent the day at Castleconnell at the county home of Limerick merchant, Mr. Lavertine. In the evening they had 'a nice walk to the "End of the World" – a lovely spot much resorted to by the citizens of Limerick'. They also visited Lady de Burgh's island residence, where William met the gardener, John Walsh of Carlton, Melbourne. Meeting with local people who had Australian relatives and friends was to become a common occurrence for William over the next two months.

### Monday, 7th July: Family Genealogy

Tracing family history through baptismal records is an Irish growth industry as evidenced by the proliferation of county heritage centres. As it rained all day on 7th July, 1890, William occupied himself by inspecting the baptismal records of the Ievers family at St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church in Limerick.



Mount Ievers, Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, the old family home of the Ievers family.

**Tuesday, 8th July:  
The Treaty Stone**

A visit to King John's Castle revealed it to be maintained in good order with soldiers and artillerymen. The Treaty Stone was at that time 'surrounded by iron railings to protect it from vandals who are eternally chipping bits off'. (No such protection exists today. On a recent visit to Limerick the writer witnessed a busload of American football tourists clambering all over the Stone in order to have their photograph taken!)

**Wednesday, 9th July:  
St. Mary's Cathedral**

The church and grounds were found to be in excellent order, as were the tombs and graves of the old families, notably Donagh O'Brien's from the 11th century. Also on display were the old 'chain cannon balls' fired into the city during the Williamite sieges.

At the Town Hall, William and his son met Mayor W.T. O'Donnell, who proposed they be admitted as Freemen of the City 'by birthright, also in recognition of former services rendered by our family officially as members of the Corporation'.

**Thursday, 10th July:  
Mount Ievers**

William's own description of his return, after sixty years, to the old family home near Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, speaks for itself:

*Sixty years since I had last seen it,  
and, oh, how changed everything!  
and how changed myself! Old*

*friends dead, and of course strange faces to be seen. Mrs. Eyre Ievers and Miss Ievers gave us a warm welcome in a truly Irish manner. The house has an arched basement-storey underground, and three storeys underground, with seventeenth century*

*windows and very thick walls, approached by wide stone steps into a large hall, tiled and furnished in the old style, with emblems of the chase, and old arms, and old-style furniture. We were taken to our apartment on the first floor, through a large reception room, and up old oak stairs with the family coat-of-arms cut in oak on the first landing, and the stairs so wide that a horseman could easily go up them. There is a corridor some thirty by twenty-five feet with old-fashioned rooms all round, and stairs leading up to the next storey. Our room was spacious and high, very ancient, looking over the front lawn and distant hills of Clare. The furniture is so very old - not of this century. Then the Bedstead! - I wondered how many generations of the Ievers's had been born and died there; and I at once recollected the old stories I had heard in childhood from the lips of an old retainer of the family - Jack Mackey - who had accompanied Colonel Ievers in the American and Dutch wars; he used to tell how, on wild nights, the colonel, at the head of a phantom troop of dragoons, used to parade in front of the house and then dismount, and in heavy jack-boots enter the door and*



Father and son. The two Ievers pictured during their visit to Ireland in 1890.





O'Connell Street, Limerick, at the turn of the century.

Mr. P.F. Ryan, 'an old Melbourne man', and in the afternoon he drove out to Clonlara, Co. Clare, to see Mr. Molony, Mrs. Neylon's brother, 'who could not do half enough to make us comfortable, and show kindness to any of his sisters' friends'. Because of the cost and distance involved in the journey from Clare to Melbourne, he was unlikely to see his sister again.

### Wednesday, 16th July: Freeman of Limerick

This day was to be one of the most memorable of the tour, when the father and son were accorded the highest honour that William's native city could bestow - they were admitted as Freemen of Limerick:

*The Right Worshipful, the Mayor, Mr. O'Donnell, spoke most kindly of our family and its connections with the city in days of old; also a Mr. Stuart and other gentlemen. We were admitted formally. Self and Willie spoke and thanked the Mayor and citizens for their kind expressions as regards ourselves and our ancestors. We invited his Worship and all the meeting up to Cruise's Hotel, where we spent a couple of hours most pleasantly, champagne and other*

*refreshments being served, and many speeches of a complimentary nature delivered. Gave the mayor twenty-five pounds for distribution amongst the poor. Afterwards attended a meeting of the Sarsfield Testimonial; Willie made a good speech, and was well received. I was elected to the second chair, and the meeting passed a nice vote of thanks to "Australian Visitors", and the mayor and Dr. Prendergast made neat speeches. Dr. Prendergast and a South Australian gentleman each subscribed two guineas towards the fund. Started from Limerick by evening...*

They travelled southwards and spent from Thursday, 17th July, to Monday, 28th July, visiting and sightseeing in Co. Cork and Co. Kerry.

### Tuesday, 29th July: No Known Grave

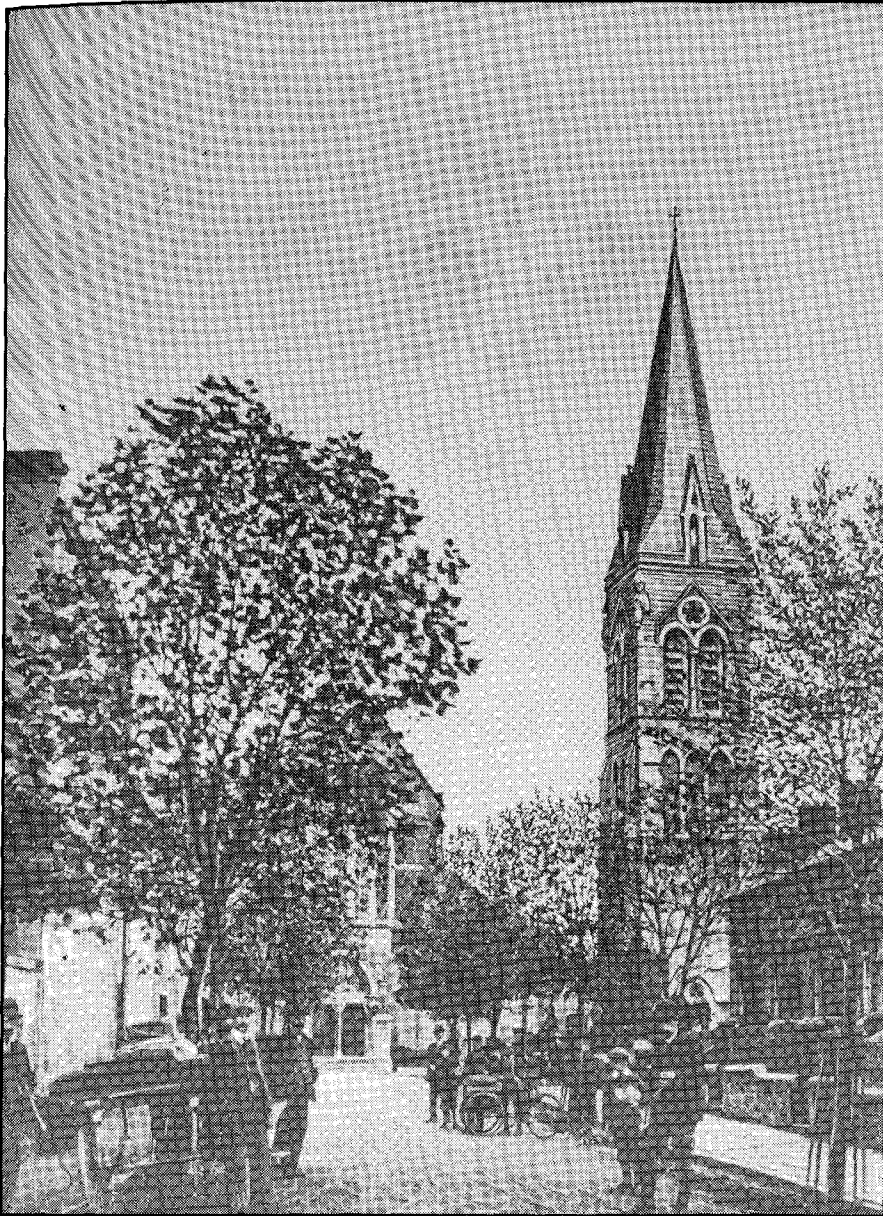
'Here I was standing in the graveyard of my father and mother, and yet no living person could give me any intelligence of where there graves were situated ...' So wrote William on his second failed attempt to find the grave of his father, Hawkins levers, in the Killaloe, Co.

Clare, Church of Ireland graveyard. His intention had been to erect a monument to their memory - something that many an emigrant has sought to do...

### Friday, 1st August: Journey to Scariff, Co. Clare

Rain is the ancient enemy of tourism in Ireland. It was no different one hundred years ago:

*Off to Killaloe to make further enquiries at the church, also to see Mr. Boland, of Scariff. Went from Killaloe by the **Lady of the Lake** steamer, via Lough Derg and Mount Shannon. Scenery most charming, but rain came on very heavy - such a downpour I never experienced. Captain, steersman, engineer, and crew all rushed into the little cabin to escape being drowned, I suppose. The engineer stopped the engine and let the steamer drift. No danger, I suspect, but never saw the like of it before. The vessel took care of herself. Had a good laugh over the incident. Got to Scariff at five o'clock p.m.; disappointed at so long a trip. Found Mr. Boland had gone to see some sick friend near Killaloe; had a chat with Mrs. Boland, dined at Duggan's Hotel, then started back by car,*



*The Redemptorist Church and Quin Street, Limerick.*

*obtained all over the country, including, of course, Cratloe Wood, famous in old times for its oaks.*

**Thursday, 14th August: Foynes**

Perhaps the area in Co. Limerick with the strongest Australian connection is the Foynes/Shanagolden region. In the 1840s and 1850s Lord Monteagle of Mount Trenchard and his wife helped many people who lived on his estates to emigrate as 'assisted emigrants' to Melbourne. Having travelled from Limerick by train, William was driven round Foynes by cabman Mick Fitzgerald, who had 'driven Mr. Michael Sheahan about when he was at home'. The Sheahans of Melbourne seem to have been connected to the Sheahans, Sullivans, McMahaons, Kellys and Bourkes of Foynes. At Shanid Castle, William met Thomas Bourke, a relative of the Bourkes of Parkemham, Victoria. While many Irish people today have relations in Australia these strong inter-connections with specific local areas are a thing of the past.

**Saturday, 16th August -  
Wednesday 20th August:  
'All Limerick seems to be here'**

In the 1890s, (as in the 1980s), Kilkee was the seaside watering-place for the Limerick middle classes. William took a delightful trip by steamer down the Shannon, passing Bunratty, Cratloe, Carrig-O'Guinnell, Beigh Castle, Foynes, and Glin Castle, disembarking 'at old Kilrush, close to Scatterry Island and its famous round towers and churches'. Then a large side-car 'hurled us off th Kilkee', where the levers put up at the West End Hotel, 'a nice place close to the sea-beach'.

On Monday, 18th August, the Mayor of Limerick organised a trip to Loop Head. It turned into a typical carefree tourist's day at the seaside:

*We started for Loop Head in a well-appointed carriage and pair, with some hampers well supplied with eatables and drinkables. Along the coast the view was simply magnificent, with the high cliffs, 80 or 100 feet high, and small detached islands close to the mainland, and in many cases sheep were grazing on them, but how they got there or how they will be brought on shore again is a mystery to me. Old ruinous castles frowning on the sea were occasionally to be seen, and some natural bridges with the ocean rushing in, and such awful depths and underground passages worn out by the incessant action of the sea for cen-*

*as we had an appointment to meet Mr. levers, of Croom, next day at the hotel. On our way back met Mr. Boland on the road, it raining heavily, who regretted not being at home; of course it was a mere inadvertence, and could not be helped. Rained heavily all the way, and got back to Killaloe drenched. Stopped at Mrs. Conway's Hotel (Hurley's), good house, and well treated.*

**Sunday, 3rd August:  
Return to Limerick**

On a typical Sunday in Limerick City, William met the following local people: Mr. Guinane J.P. (a friend of Mr. Shiels of Melbourne), Mr. Hardiman, the Mayor, Dr. and Mrs. Graham, Fr. Fitzgerald, P.P. of St. Mary's, Fr. Dundon, an Augustinian, and the Rev. Dr. O'Hanlon of St. Michael's.

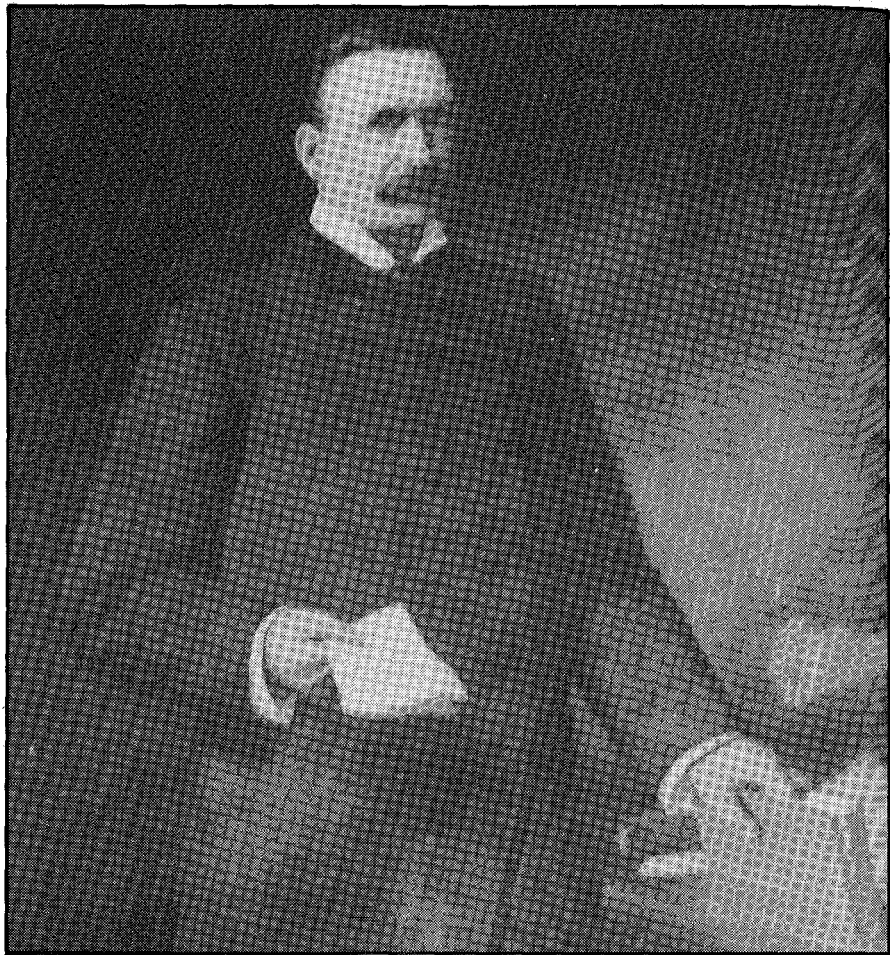
**Monday, 4th August:  
Cratloe and Bunratty**

The levers were related to a branch of the O'Neills', who had, before the Famine, lived in Cratloe Castle, Co. Clare. They had, however, sold out in 1846 and left for Canada, where William hoped to visit them on his way back to Melbourne. On visiting Cratloe Castle he found it '...tenantless, and all the doors and windows bricked up'. Bunratty, however was in a better order:

*Visited Bunratty Castle, the ancient seat of the O'Brien's, a splendid remnant of the old feudal baronial fortress of the first-class order, hundreds of years old. Deep dungeons, also a secret escape passage to the river, spacious chambers, closets, a chapel, stone steps leading to top of castle, from which a noble view is*



turies. We stopped some seven miles from Loop Head, where we had lunch, and enjoyed ourselves for over an hour, sung songs and made speeches, and set up a target to shoot at. A bottle was fixed in the face of the cliff, and a sweepstake of one pound was subscribed for him who would strike it; but after two rounds fired by each man unsuccessfully, the money was handed over to the Rev. Father for charitable purposes amid much hilarity. Strange to say, when a second attempt was made to break the bottle, and no prize attached, Willie smashed it at the first shot. We then took our seats again, and started for Loop Head. Saw Kilcordan and Carrigaholt Castles, famous old strongholds of the days gone by, frowning over the entrance to the Shannon, and where it is said many a bloody deed was perpetrated. We at length reached Loop Head itself, where we found a lot of other tourists. We ascended to the top of the lighthouse and inspected the lighting apparatus. The view from the top is magnificent, and many a poor exile going from or returning to old Ireland has cast a yearning glance on the spot. We descended by a long ladder into a dark subterranean passage, which led us out on to a natural gallery in the face of the cliff, overlooking the ocean, where the eternal surf beats in surges and awful grandeur, the nearest land westward being



A portrait of William Ievers (Jr.) at Mount Ievers, Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare.



Archbishop Thomas J. Carr, who officiated at the funeral of William Ievers (Sr.), addresses a congregation.



*To Miss Levers, Mount Levers  
Sixmile Bridge, Co. Clare Ireland  
from her sincere friend & relative  
William Levers  
The Author*

*Mount Levers  
Royal Park  
Melbourne, Australia  
14th April 1894*

William Levers presented this copy of his book, 'Fifty Years After; or Old Scenes Revisited' to Miss Levers, Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, on 14th April, 1894.

America. To my surprise I found the grass on the very face of the headland thick, and good for cattle and sheep, flocks of which are to be seen about, and after further refreshing ourselves and distributing backsheesh among numerous claimants, a thing I thought was unknown in Ireland, but, under another name, was in full force at this place, we turned homeward by another way and stopped at Kilbaha, where several of the company took a dip in the briny. We then pursued our way home, and the whole company, one and all, kept up such a rattle of singing, reciting, and "speeching", as must have made the occupiers of the solitary huts or cabins that we passed by wonder if we were in our right minds.

**Thursday, 21st August:  
The Sea-divided Gaels**

In Melbourne William Levers was a strong supporter of Irish Home Rule. Many nationalist politicians of the time, notably John Dillon and the Redmond brothers, John and William, visited Australia on fund-raising and morale-boosting exercises. Per capita, Irish Australia contributed more financially to the Nationalist Party than Irish America. On 21st August William attended a local meeting of the National League, at which a motion of thanks was passed to the Australian League. On rising to respond, William was 'met by such a shout of welcome that one seldom hears'.

**Saturday, 23rd August:  
The Home and Cradle of Family**

Sometime during August of 1890, Fr. R.H. Little P.P. of Sixmilebridge, Co.

Clare, convened a meeting of local people. At this meeting, it was resolved to present to William Levers and his son William with a framed and illuminated address of welcome to Ireland. The address was presented by Fr. Little and his parishioners at Mount Levers on 23rd August, 1890:

*To William Levers, Snr., Esq., J.P.,  
"Mount Levers", Royal Park,  
Melbourne, Australia.*

*Respected and Dear Sir, - We the inhabitants of the parishes of Sixmile-Bridge and Kilmurry, take this opportunity presented by your visit to Mount Levers, to approach you with the hearty expression of our welcome and congratulations on your return, even for a short time, to your native country, and to this place, the home and cradle of your family. We are not ignorant of the sentiments towards your native land and its people which have inspired your long, honourable and prosperous life. Those sentiments are not more than consistent with the happy relations which have subsisted during well-nigh three centuries between that family of which you are an honoured representative, and the people of this County. It was with no ordinary gratification that we learned that you have very recently been made the recipient of the coveted honour of the Freedom of the City of Limerick. We would remind you, Sir, that in times long since gone by, a distinguished ancestor of yours held the honourable post of Chief Magistrate of that ancient Corporation, nor have we forgotten that another eminent and illustrious ancestor represented the people of this County in the Irish House of Commons, from 1715 to 1731. We are proud to think that members of your family have attained to eminence and favour in*

*the far-off Australian colony. Permit us to say, Sir, that if it should ever be your pleasure to return and take up your abode once more in this County, in which your forefathers have had their home for ten generations or more, you may rely on receiving a right royal welcome from the people who have ever honoured, and still honour, the old House of Levers. Let us even hope that that which has been may yet be, and, if a suitable opportunity occurs, that your historic native County of Clare may have the honour and advantage of being represented, either by yourself or one of your distinguished sons, in an Irish Parliament on College Green. We will conclude, Sir, by wishing you a safe and happy return, after your world-wide wanderings, to your home in the Antipodes, and we will cherish the fond hope that a kind Providence may long spare you, perhaps, even to return and spend your closing days among a loving and grateful people. Signed on behalf of the Public Meeting R.J. Little, P.P., Chairman Daniel Curry, P.L.G. James Donnellan, P.L.G. James Flynn, Michael Curry.*

*Stephen O'Halloran, Hon. Secretary.*  
On Sunday, 24th August, William went to Mass at Sixmilebridge, where he met Major Walton, a friend of Alderman McMahon of Sydney, and was invited to his house. He also met Mr. P. Slattery, who asked to be kindly remembered to Mr. and Mrs. McMahon. On Sunday, 26th August, he travelled by horse-and-trap to Adare, Co. Limerick, 'to see the old ruins of abbeys, churches, and castles, with which the place abounds', and also 'the Manor House of Lord Dunraven ... and the beautiful River Maigue rushing past the old mansion'.

By now the Levers were on the last few days of the stay in Ireland. On Saturday, 30th August and the following they returned for a last visit to the old family home at Mount Levers, where William 'walked about the old grounds, heard old legends of the family again'.

The Levers finally left Limerick on 1st September, 1890, and embarked from Dublin for Canada on the 2nd. Neither father nor son ever saw Ireland again. They returned to a champagne reception at Finlay's Hotel, Melbourne, on 18th November, 1890, after their ten months' tour.

*Fifty Years After; or, Old Scenes Revisited* was published in Melbourne in 1894. No Irish edition was ever produced. The brief outline of William's visit to Limerick and Clare given here can only hint at the wealth of information available in this most interesting work by one who can truly be called 'An Irish Australian'.