

# Obituary

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## Colonel Sidney John Watson (1920-1999)

Sidney John Watson had a formidable array of talents and of expertise. He was a soldier, a farmer, a stock-breeder, a conservationist, a diplomat, a locomotive train-driver, an ecumenist, a gardener, a historian and a writer.

Immediately following his graduation from Oxford with a Masters in Modern History, at the outbreak of the War, he joined the Royal Engineers as a sapper, retiring with the rank of Colonel. His final posting was as Military Attache to the last Shah of Iran. He had served all through World War II and with the United Nations forces in Korea, where he was seriously wounded.

He returned to Clonmel to his farm at Ballingarrane in 1964. His home, Ballingarrane House, had been built by a Quaker banker ancestor in 1750.

Colonel Watson was just a short time back in Clonmel when he joined the Clonmel Historical and Archaeological Society. He was twice President of that Society and at the time of his death he was its patron.

He had already written two books on the Napoleonic period of European history: *Corot* (1954) and *By Command of the Emperor* (1957). Back in Clonmel, local history was henceforth to engage much of his attention.

In 1962, with his co-author, M.O'C. Bianconi, he wrote *Bianconi – King of the Irish Roads*. In 1974, to mark European Architectural Year, he wrote, with Dr Elizabeth Shee, *Clonmel – An Architectural Guide*. This has remained the definitive guide to the town's buildings and has been re-published a number of times.

Colonel Watson published the history of his church, Old St Mary's Church of Ireland in 1988, under the title *A Dinner of Herbs*. During this period he also made a study of, and wrote a number of papers on, the 19th century builders and architects, the Tinsleys of Clonmel, who contributed so much to the architecture of town, to South Tipperary and later to the New England States of America.

Inserted in between these publications, he wrote the history of Irish steeple-chasing, and a novel *The Cottage Countess*. His last book, published in 1991, was a study of his mother's family, the Wills of Bristol, *Furnished with Ability*, for which he received an Honorary Doctorate in Law from Bristol University.

S.J. Watson was not just content to write about local history; he also became practically involved in the conservation of Clonmel's heritage of buildings. In the early 1970s, as President of the Historical Society, he led a delegation to the Corporation outlining the urgent necessity for action on the town's historical buildings, many of which were then in a deplorable state of maintenance. The delegation also emphasised the necessity for a planning policy on the town's vernacular architecture.

This led, first, to the restoration of a large section of the western and northern medieval walls and fortifications. The "seed" funding for this work had been obtained by him from the Dulverton Trust, which had been set up by the Wills family. At the time of Colonel Watson's death, much work on restoration had taken place, a planning policy had been enshrined in the Town Plan, and work on the Main Guard is currently in progress.

He returned to use the Dulverton Trust again as a source of initial funding, when a crack in



the bell-tower of Old St Mary's revealed serious structural deterioration of that building. Because of the extent of that deterioration, the church bells could not be rung for several years. Poignantly, they rang again on the occasion of his funeral, a November day in 1999. He was chairman of a committee which had raised very substantial funding for the restoration of Clonmel's oldest church. The work, which is ongoing, uncovered much evidence of the medieval building.

In his lifetime Colonel Watson met many of the people influential in world-affairs, especially in Europe and Africa. He travelled widely, even in the remoter areas of the world, from the Arctic to the silk route in China.

He was essentially a shy man, with a quiet sense of humour and a fund of funny stories. In the midst of a very busy life, he and his wife Diana made a beautiful garden at Ballingarrane, where people were always made welcome. He loved his home-town of Clonmel and was a deeply committed Christian.

Perhaps it was his Quaker ancestors that influenced his personal philosophy: that privileges, abilities and talents are not exclusive personal possessions, but God-given and to be shared in the greatest possible way with other people. In addition to his membership of Clonmel Historical and Archaeological Society, and of the Co. Tipperary Historical Society, he was also a Trustee of the Heritage Trust of Ireland, a member of the National Committee of An Taisce, and served the Church of Ireland in many capacities, as an Episcopal Elector, Honorary Diocesan Treasurer, and a member of the General Synod.

*Margaret Rossiter*