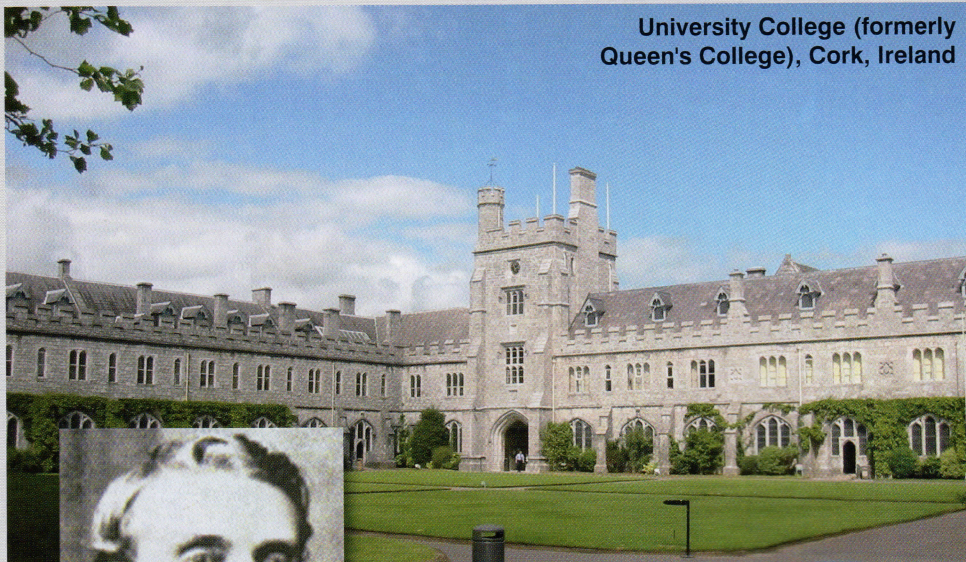
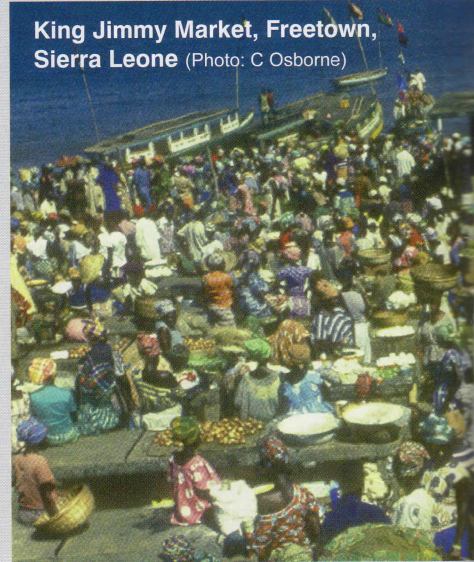


University College (formerly Queen's College), Cork, Ireland



King Jimmy Market, Freetown, Sierra Leone (Photo: C Osborne)



John Pope Hennessy,
1834 - 1891

A friend of the people The Pope of H

Living and working in Sierra Leone some years ago, I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat intrigued to find that there was a Hennessy Street in its capital, Freetown. Could there be an Irish connection? There was and a little research revealed the fascinating story of John Pope Hennessy.

Born at number 4, Mount Vernon Terrace in Cork City on August 8, 1834, he was the son of John Hennessy and Elizabeth Casey. Cork was the chief centre of the butter trade in Ireland at that time, and the Hennessys were actively involved in that trade.

In the 1700s some of the Hennessys had left Ireland. They settled in the French town of Cognac, making a brandy fortune. The link between Cork and Cognac held strong and, in adulthood, John went to stay with the French branch of the Hennessys.

EARLY AMBITION

The Cork family referred to themselves as the Hennessys of Ballyhennessy, which is a now derelict estate near Ballybunion in Kerry. Believing they were descended from landed gentry, evicted from their estates in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, John had instilled in him, from an early age, a strong sense of being deprived of his birthright.

John's grandson, James Pope Hennessy, wrote in 1964, "Whether the Cork Hennessys had indeed 'sunk', as they themselves would surely have termed it, down

into the commercial middle-class, or whether they had risen up into it from some yet obscure sphere, it is no longer possible to ascertain."

As a young boy, John saw firsthand the effects of the famine of 1845, as he watched corpses of men, women and children, who had died during the night, being collected each morning by a municipal cart. These experiences, and his belief that he had lost his birthright, instilled in the boy a sense that he was destined to restore the family fortune.

Finishing his basic education at home with a tutor, John proceeded to Queen's College, Cork. Mindful of their straitened financial circumstances, his family encouraged him to study medicine. After graduating with first class honours, he was recommended for the Indian Army medical service. On May 18, 1855, John, aged twenty-one, set out for London.

In London, he attended lectures in midwifery at Charing Cross Hospital. However, his heart was not in medicine and he viewed his Indian Army recommendation as little more than an escape route from Cork. He began reading for a law degree.

OPPORTUNITY AND TRAGEDY

Interested in politics, he stood as an Irish Nationalist Conservative in the general election in 1859. He was returned at the head of the poll. A Member of Parliament at the young age of twenty-three, his political career



Honk Kong Skyline (Photo: T Hugger)



ennessy Street

Helen Fallon

came to an abrupt end in 1865, chiefly because of financial problems.

The opportunity to take up a governorship abroad presented itself. Eager to get away from his creditors and still holding his vision of restoring the family fortune, John agreed, in 1867, to become Governor of Labuan, an island located off the coast of East Malaysia.

Ever impetuous, within ten weeks of his arrival, he married Kitty Low, the daughter of the Colonial Treasurer. He was thirty-four, she was seventeen. Kitty's mother had died when she was a child and she had been sent, with her brother, back to England to be educated. Returning to Labuan a young lady, the island may have seemed quite a dull place.

The arrival of the lively new Governor must have brightened up her life. The marriage, however, was fairly tempestuous, with Kitty leaving him on a number of occasions to return to her father's house. Her father, after initial cordial relations with John, came to dislike him.

In 1872, John was appointed Governor of the West African Settlements and, with Kitty, their son Johnnie and an Irish nursemaid he set sail for Freetown, the headquarters of the West African Settlements (and now the capital of Sierra Leone). Within a month of their arrival, three-year-old Johnnie contracted dysentery and died. He was buried in the chapel of a small local convent. Both parents were naturally grief-stricken.

THE REMEMBERED GOVERNOR

Although Pope Hennessy's time as Governor in Freetown was brief, this energetic and unconventional man achieved much and was very highly regarded by the people. These were, at the time, mainly Krio, descendants of freed slaves.

The new Governor urged the Colonial Office to appoint Krios to important administrative posts, a very radical idea for the time. He also abolished a number of taxes. A few children of wealthy Africans went to school in Europe. Pope Hennessy felt that university education should be provided locally.

There were major sanitation problems and malaria was rife in Freetown which had a population of twenty-one thousand. Each day at dawn, John and his wife took a brisk walk up Leicester Hill. Conscious of the improved quality of the air in Leicester, he proposed that the administrative capital should be moved to Leicester.

For many years after his departure, a Pope Hennessy Day was celebrated annually in Sierra Leone. Hennessy Street continues to bear his name.

John Pope Hennessy went on to become, in succession, Governor of Barbados, Hong Kong and Mauritius. He died in 1891 at the relatively young age of fifty-seven. ■

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