SOCIAL LIFE IN THE CITY

BY RICHARD AHERN

Of Limerick in the late 17th century, Thomas Dineley wrote: '... its name Limerick is sayd to take its Orignall from the Gueldings leap, being in the vulgar tongue (Irish) leame aneagh. Verbatim ye leap of the Guelding, from a Water which runs through the town, part of the Shannon, where a Guelding made a leap over it, with a man mounted thereon; which word by corrupcon of time is speeched into Limerick'. While this activity may have been a tradition in the city in the 1690s, there is no other historical or literary evidence to support it.

Limerick at this time was a prosperous and, in some ways, a civilised city. But its prosperity was founded on too narrow a base, and was too greatly dependant on the support of the English government. It was the second largest city in a predominantly Catholic country, but its administration was exclusively Protestant, and Catholics were a small minority among its merchant and professional classes. It owed its prosperity to the close links between its leading citizens and the ruling classes of Ireland and England.

These links were broken when the government of Charles II and Ormonde was replaced by the policy of James II and the active hostility of Richard Talbot, the Duke of Tyrconnell. It was to be a short period of control for the leading Catholic citizens. In 1690, John Power was the mayor of the city and James Arthur and Nicholas Morrough served as sheriffs, but they were to be replaced with Protestants in the following year.

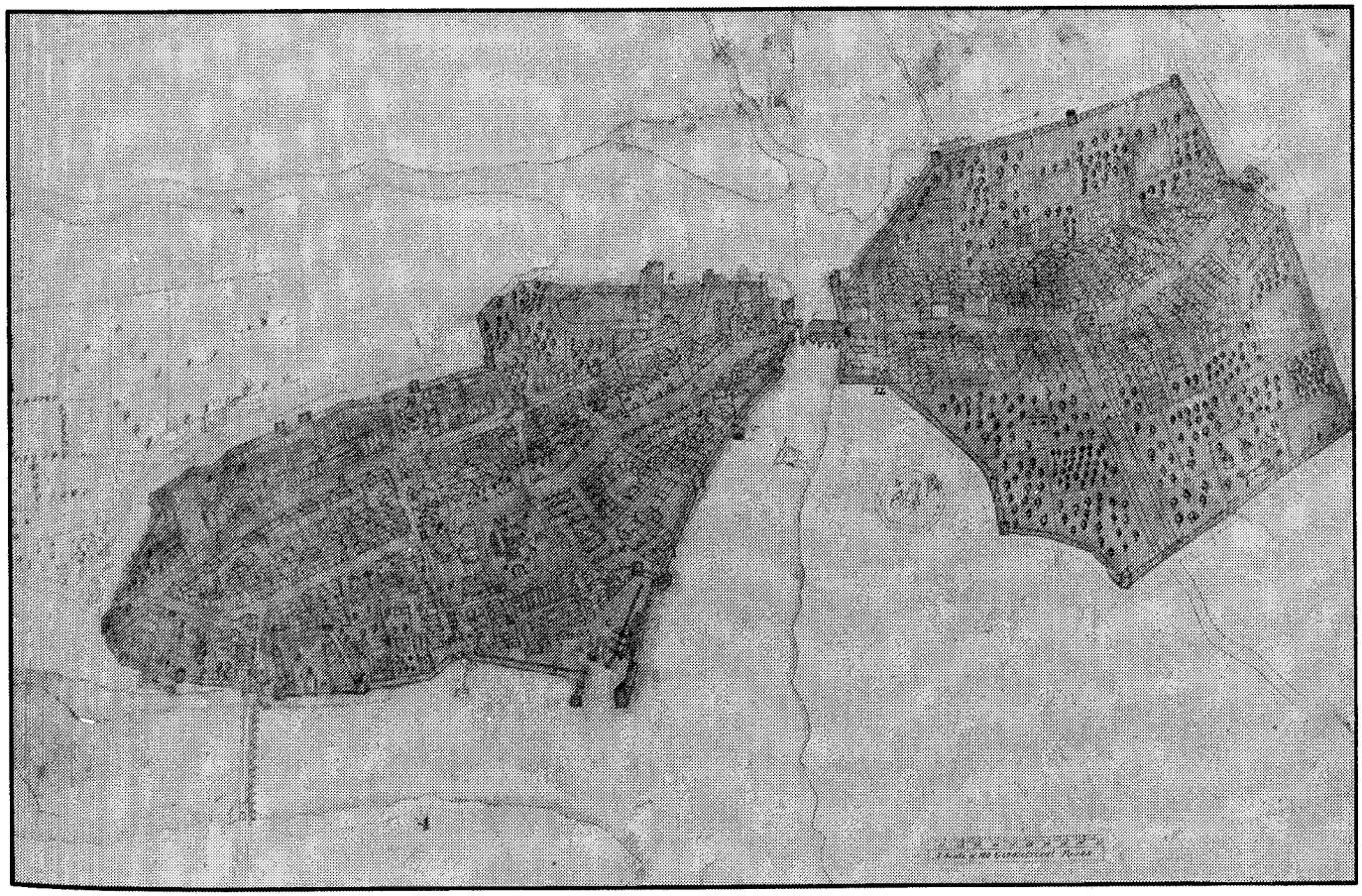
Quarries of black marble are in such plenty about the town, the castle, citadel, walls, bridges, houses, other buildings, are formed therewith, and it serves for pavement to the streets. *(Thomas Dineley, 1680)*

Many of the houses were well built, streets were very regular and and people were as fashionable as anywhere. Some houses had gardens and the standard of cultivation was good. The surnames of some of the owners and occupiers of these houses were: Adkins, Allerton, Blunden, Bowes, Cusack, Enniss, Gosadge, Hurrue, Ire, Lightfoot, O'Bryn, Price, Torenhill, Wheitroe and Woolfe.

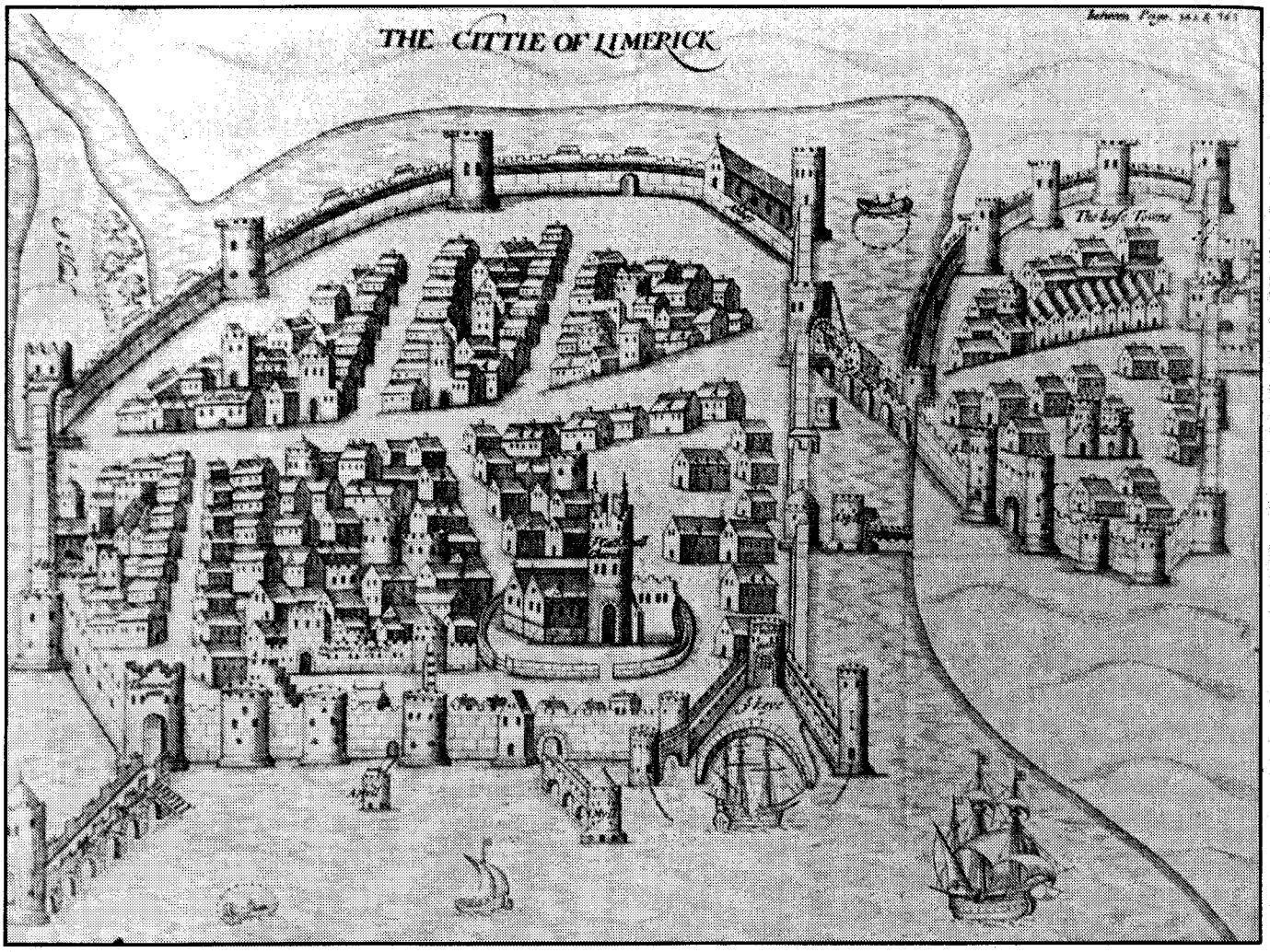
The houses [of] most of this city are tall, built with black unpolished marble, with partition walls some of 5 foot thick, and have battlements on the top, and the best cellars, for so many, of any city in England or Ireland. *(Thomas Dineley, 1680).*

Outside the old walled city, in such townlands as Meelick, smaller cottages or cabins, about 5 or 6 feet in height, were to be found. They were thatched with straw and leafs, but were without chimneys. There was little furniture and the floor was covered with rushes in summer and straw in winter. These coverings also served as beds. About these habitations were small flocks of sheep and a few cattle.

Immediately outside the Island Gate, which formed part of the defence of the northern section of the English Town on King's Island, stood a house of entertainment, with a bowling green, a pleasant grassy area and a common walk for the people. Most of the patrons had their own carriages and those who could not afford such a luxury travelled by



An 1850 copy by Mr. Barrington of a map of Limerick, c. 1590, TCD Hardiman Ms 1209/57.



Bird's-eye view of Limerick, from Thomas Stafford's 'Pacata Hibernia', first published in 1633.

hackney cars in order to avoid the dirt of the streets. There were other types of 'sport', which were enjoyed by all classes, such as bull-baiting. A 15 foot length of rope was tied to the horns of a bull or ox, and the other end secured to an iron ring fixed to a stake in the ground. The participants stood around holding their dogs by the ears. Then one dog was let loose and he tried with all speed to get under the bull in order to sieze him by the face or neck. The bull would attempt to throw the dog in the air in an effort to break his back with the fall, or, as it was described by one observer, '... puts him in danger of a damnable squelch when he comes down'. If the dog succeeded in getting his teeth into the beast, then the only way to release him was for some men to hold the bull while others thrust staves into the dog's mouth and forced it open. Cock-fighting matches between teams of cocks, representing different counties, were often arranged, and sometimes lasted 3 or 4 days.

The selection of food was varied and included such items as asparagus, bacon, barley-bread, baked in cakes over a fire, beef, brandy, butter, buttermilk, cabbage, cheese, corn, eggs, fish, milk which was generally preferred when sour, mutton, poultry, rabbits and wine.

When paying-guests or visitors arrived at the homes of the well-off, the woman of the house, or a maid, would bring a jug of ale to the table, pour some into a glass and drink it. This custom was to remove any suspicion of there being poison in the liquor. For the most part, ale was of a poor quality, but the Irish *aqua vitae* or *uisce beatha* (whiskey) was thought to be among the best in the world.

They all smoke, women as well as men, and a pipe an inch long serves the whole family several years and though never so black or foul is never suffered to be burnt. Seven or eight will gather to the smoking of a pipe and each taking two or three whiffs gives it to his neighbour, commonly holding his mouth full of smoke till the pipe comes about to him again. They are also much given to taking of snuff. *(John Stevens, 1690).*

The poor ate little bread and a lot of potatoes. They would never kill a cow unless it was old and yielding no milk; however, in times of hunger they would open one of its veins and drink some blood but not enough to weaken the animal. They ground barley and peas between two stones and cooked it over a fire, and this concoction was eaten with buttermilk and an unpleasant type of cheese. They also consumed beef-broth mixed with milk. Poor people, mostly Catholics, were entirely without education, as were the poorer protestants. Their footwear was quite plain and sewed with thongs. The leather was not curried and, when worn, grew as hard as a board and so many people kept them wet. Those that could afford it greased the footwear often.

In the better sort of cabins there is commonly one flock bed, seldom more, feathers being too costly; this serves the man and his wife, the rest all lie on straw, some with one sheet and blanket, others only their clothes and blanket to cover them. The cabins have seldom any floor but the earth, or rarely so much as a loft, some have windows, others none. *(John Stevens, 1690).*

A small assortment of the trades and professions were: booksellers, feltmakers, hucksters, locksmiths, painter-stainers, brewers, watchcase-makers, vinegar-makers, button-makers and lawyers, such as Sir Theobald Butler, who was involved in structuring the Articles of the Treaty of Limerick.

Some commodities were sold for the following amounts: carcass of beef 8/- to 12/-; brandy 12d per bottle; geese 6d to 8d each; ale 3d quart; pair of shoes and buckles 3/9d, and a hat and hatband 2/-.

Craftsmen were moderate in their charges, as this decorator's bill shows: '... colouring the door in the diningroom and the balcony door, 6/-; colouring the cornice in the drawing-room, two doors and the bottom board, 14/-; whitening the diningroom ceiling, the drawing-room and parlour ceilings and the stairs, 9/-'. Rates of pay in the army were 10/- per day for a major or captain; corporal 1/-; private 6½d and drummer 4d.

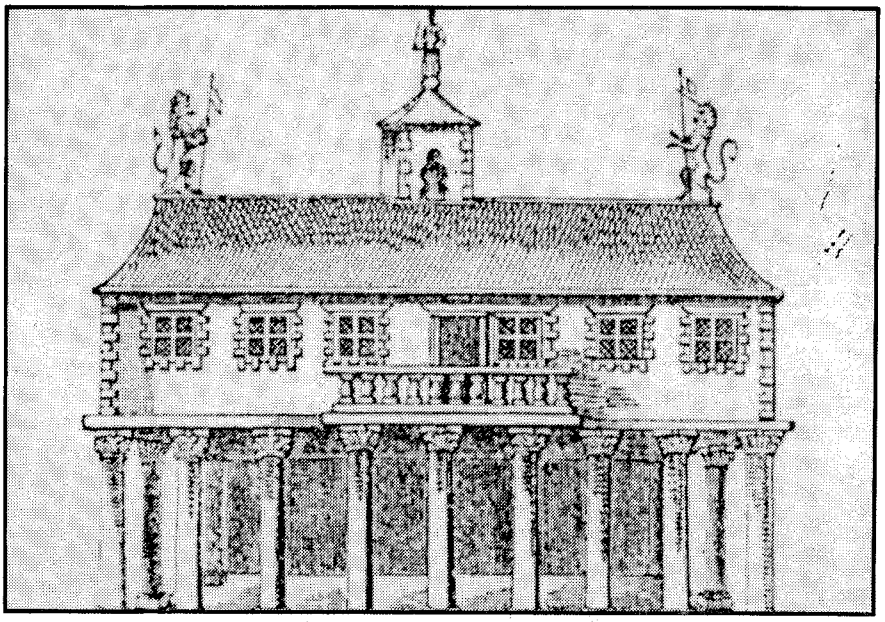
Cures for some of the many diseases and illnesses were innumerable. For instance, those suffering from ague (acute fever) were given this preparation: one ounce of cortex (the sap of the bark of certain types of trees), one dram (⅛th oz./4 grams) of powder of snake-weed and one dram of powder of nutmegs. These were made into a mixture, with a quantity of syrup of lemons. Then the patient had to 'take the bigness of a chestnut of it 3 to 4 times in 24 hours'. It was helped down with a glass of warm claret mixed with brandy and sugar. Those afflicted with 'extreme flux' (dysentery) took cinnamon in burnt claret wine, with syrup of sloes, well boiled, and sugar.

The personal habits of the citizens were described in detail by some visitors to this country. By today's standards, some of the descriptions are highly amusing, for example Fynes Moryson wrote of 'a great Lord who was credibly reported to have put away his wife of a good family ... only for a fault as light as wind, but I dare not name it (the fault) lest I offend the perfumed senses of some ...'

Wakes were considered a source of entertainment and an unusual feature of life at the time was the association of dancing and preparing of the body for burial at wakes. Indeed, the abuses connected with wakes were more serious than the mere indecorum of merry-making on a solemn occasion; the behaviour was frequently not of an innocent kind, as it involved not only excessive drinking but also practices which were bawdy and very often promiscuous. A deal of evidence of this has been collected in print, all pointing in the same direction, that is, of the participants involving themselves in what were reported as orgies.

That they have no locks to their doors is not because there are not thieves but because there is nothing to steal. Poverty with neatness seems somewhat the more tolerable, but here nastiness is in perfection, if perfection can be in vice, and the great cause of it, laziness, is most predominant. (John Stevens, 1690).

There were allegations that pilgrimages were occasions for popular outings and that they took place in locations of great natural beauty and involved much physical hardship on the pilgrims, who completed the journey over a stoney path at the edge of a precipice on their naked knees, 'their devotions done they return shod and merry, no longer concerned for the sins that were the cause of that so severe penance but as if they now having paid the score longed to go on in them again, they return with speed to a certain green spot of ground and here fall to dancing and carousing; for ale sellers in great numbers on these days have their booths as in a fair and bagpipe players were also in attendance. Thus in lewd and obscene dances with excess of drinking the day of their devotion is ended, so as now one who should see them would think they had been celebrating a feast of Bacchus'.



The Tholsel (City Hall) by Thomas Dineley, 1680.

Prostitution was widespread in Limerick. Prostitutes were sometimes referred to as 'strolling courteous ladies of the town', and some were depicted as being idle lazy housewives, a few well-known harlots were tavern-keepers. Indeed, it was rare to find a tavern without a 'strumpet' (prostitute). They 'enticed men to lewdness and carried not the least face of modesty'. Of course, not all people were lascivious, yet some poor people did not scruple at prostituting their daughters to their landlord's sons. Occasionally, some of the 'strolling courteous ladies of the town' were punished by being stripped to the waist and the cat-o'-nine-tails applied.

Travellers who afterwards wrote about their experiences often told stories that were considered pornographic. These were usually written as a result of some minor incident to which they applied an active imagination. Fynes Moryson and William Moffett enjoyed composing such material, which found a ready market in England. In fact, many of the books went into several editions, including some with an anti-Irish flavour. One such story began:

> *'It was now near time to return home, and having paid our reckoning we took the coach and came back a different way from that we went, where we found a place called the Warren House, because it stands near a warren of rabbits. Here we met with an Irish girl with hair and eyes black as sloe, ruddy cheeks and a very white skin, the company considered her as a very agreeable and charming piece of flesh, and for my part I thought I had never seen anything more pleasing. I fancied the rustic dress she wore of coarse linen and ordinary frieze was a great addition to her unadulterated charms ...*

But other visitors to Limerick in 1690, notably George Story and John Stevens, have left less fanciful accounts of the social life and customs of its citizens. (For a more detailed treatment of life in Limerick at the time of the siege this article should be read in conjunction with the author's 'Limerick in 1689', published in *Old Limerick Journal*, No. 26, Winter, 1989, pp. 8-17.)

SOURCES

1. *Irish Life in the 17th Century* by Edward McLysaght, 1939.
2. *Journal of John Stevens, 1689 to 1691* by Robert H. Murray, 1912.
3. *The Orrery Papers*, Countess of Cork and Orrery, Vol. 1, 1903.
4. *History of Limerick* by Maurice Lenihan, 1866.
5. *Thomas Dineley's MSS*, 1680.
6. *Civil Survey*, 1654-1656.
7. 'Dublin in 1585', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. xiv, No. 55, Mar., 1965.
8. *Limerick Leader*, 14, Jan. 1933, 'Clare Searchlights' by P.J. Crimmins.
9. 'The Diary of Gédéon Bonnivert' by Robert H. Murray, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. XXX, Sect. C, No. 13, 11 Jan., 1913.