

# The Life and Times of Eyre Massy, First Baron Clarina of Elm Park (1719-1804)

by Matthew Potter

*"Nor yet blessed city is that worth no more,  
Which first in fighting fields thy sons did  
claim,  
Lo! Coote's strong arm controls the Indian  
shore,  
And Niagara roars thy Massy's name."  
(An Address to Limerick)*

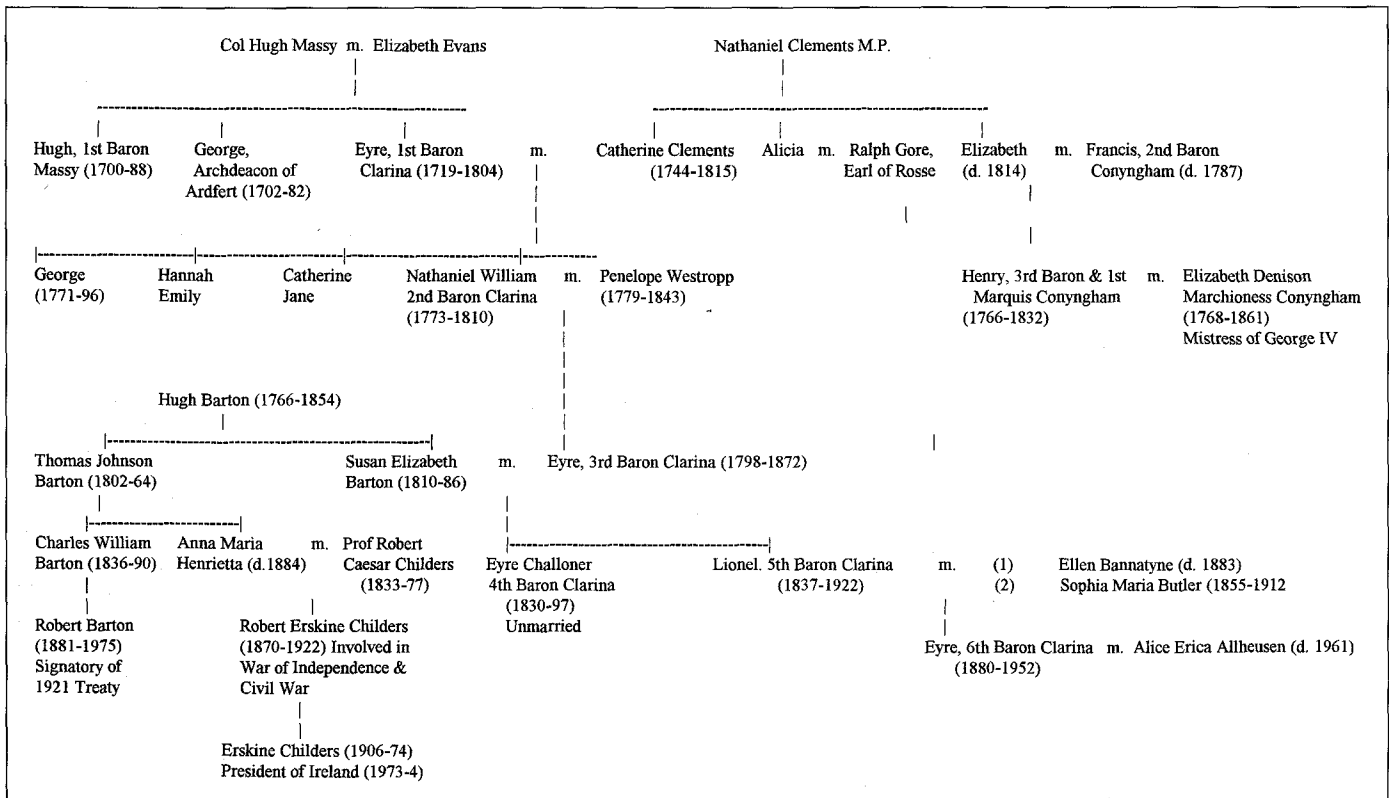
**T**hese stirring words, penned in the 1760s by the Limerick poet, Daniel Hayes, refer to one of the most remarkable figures ever produced by County Limerick, General Eyre Massy, later the first Lord Clarina, whose gallant and distinguished military career marked him out as one of the most colourful men of his day.

The Massys were one of the most prominent of the great landed families that dominated Clarina and the surrounding area in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They first came

into possession of the Elm Park Estate in 1757, and it remained in the family until 1923. They were a remarkable family for two reasons: firstly, they were a prominent military dynasty, and three of their number (the first, second and fourth Barons Clarina) rose to the rank of General in the British Army; secondly, they were closely related to individuals who played a prominent role in the history of both Britain and Ireland. The first and second Barons Clarina were related to Elizabeth, Marchioness Conyngham (1768-1861), a very famous and long-lived mistress of King George IV. In startling contrast to this connection is the kinship of the fourth, fifth and sixth Barons Clarina to prominent figures in the Irish National Movement. These figures were

Erskine Childers (1870-1922), who played a prominent role in the War of Independence and Civil War, his son Erskine H. Childers (1906-1974), who held several ministries in Fianna Fáil governments and was President of Ireland from 1973 to 1974, and Robert Barton (1881-1975), a signatory of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, who later became Chairman of the Agricultural Credit Corporation from 1934 to 1954. The present article is concerned with the most interesting figure that the family produced, Eyre Massy, first Baron Clarina, but first it is necessary to examine the history of the family before they took up residence in Clarina.

The Massys, an English family of Norman descent, arrived in Ireland in 1641 in the person of one General Hugh Massy. He came over from England to fight the Irish Rebels who had taken up arms that year. Hugh Massy claimed descent from Hamo De Massy, a



Genealogical chart showing the relationship of the Barons Clarina with various historical personages.



**Eyre Massy, later first Lord Clarina.**

*Photo courtesy of the Knight of Glin.*

Companion-In-Arms of William the Conqueror. After the Rebellion was finally crushed, General Massy acquired about 1,800 acres in Co. Limerick during the Cromwellian Plantation. He settled at Duntryleague near Galbally in East Limerick, and prospered. He was married five times, and on his death was succeeded by his son and heir, Hugh Massy. This gentleman married Amy Benson and on his death was succeeded by his son, Colonel Hugh Massy. The latter married Elizabeth Evans, and they had a family of six sons and four daughters. Three of the sons were to be associated with Clarina. The eldest, Hugh, later the first Baron Massy (1700-88), resided at Duntryleague, but in 1757 he inherited the estate at Elm Park, Clarina. He never resided there, and the property came into the possession of his brother, George (1702-82), a Church of Ireland Clergyman. He enjoyed a successful career in the Church, and eventually became Archdeacon of the Diocese of Ardferd (Kerry).

Like many Anglican clergymen of this time, he was not a particularly pious man. He was an enthusiastic huntsman, and kept a pack of hounds at Elm Park. He was jovial and hospitable and enjoyed life to the full. He married a Miss Jane Purdon, but they had no family, and on his death from apoplexy in 1782, his brother, Eyre, succeeded to the Clarina estate.

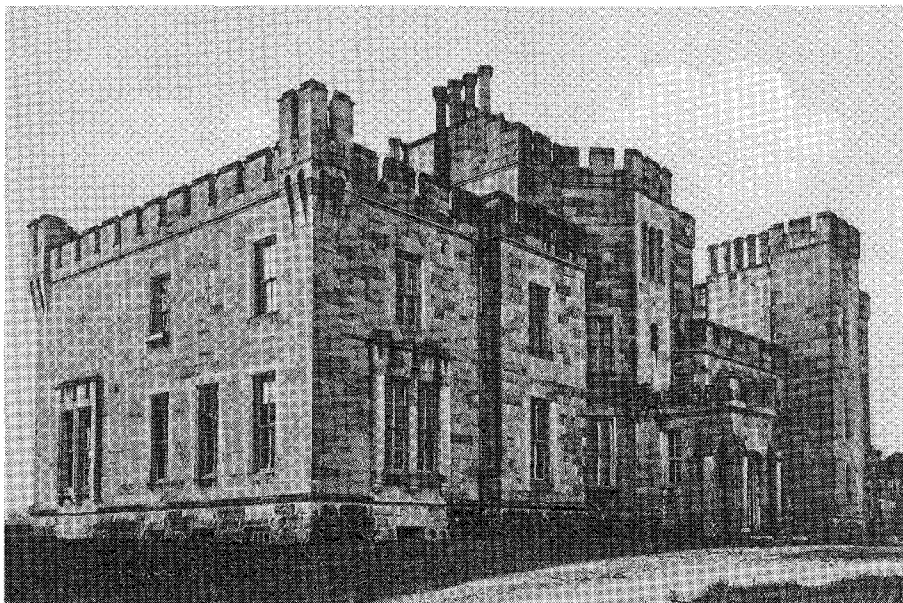
Eyre Massy was already a man of sixty-three when he inherited the Elm Park estate. Like his brothers, Lord Massy and Archdeacon Massy, he was destined to live to a ripe and vigorous old age. He was born on 24th May, 1719, and spent his childhood at his father's estate at Duntryleague. It was, perhaps, inevitable that he should take up a military career, because he was the sixth and youngest son and had virtually no chance of inheriting the Duntryleague estate. A military career was also considered a fitting one for a scion of the gentry, and Massy was not the only Limerickman to achieve fame as a soldier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His contem-

porary, General Sir Eyre Coote (1726-83), a native of Kilmallock, won fame for his victory at Porto Novo in India in 1781, while Field Marshall Lord Gough (1779-1869), who was born in Lisnagry, just outside Limerick City, conquered the Punjab for Britain in the 1840s. Eyre Massy purchased a commission in the army in 1739, and thus began a military career that lasted for over sixty years. He joined the 27th Foot, known as the Enniskillings, and became a Lieutenant of the Grenadiers.

Massy had no sooner received his commission than he found himself on active service in war time. The year 1739 saw the outbreak of war between Britain and Spain. This conflict was known as the War of Jenkins Ear. It soon merged into a major war involving most of the European powers. It was but one of a series of wars which had begun in 1689, and were to continue until 1815. This second "Hundred Years War" was essentially a struggle for world domination between Britain and France, but various conflicts between the powers of continental Europe were also bound up in it. The stakes were very high - at issue was the future of North America, India and other parts of the world where the two great powers and their allies were opposed. The titanic struggle ended in 1815 and resulted in vast areas of the globe coming under the sway of the Anglo-Saxon powers.

Massy saw action in two of the most important of these struggles, the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the Seven Years War (1756-63). These were in the nature of world wars, with fighting in North America, the West Indies and India, as well as in Europe. In 1739, the British Government intended to attack and conquer large parts of the Spanish-American Empire. To this end, a fleet commanded by Admiral Edward Vernon set out for the Caribbean. In November 1739, Vernon and his forces captured the important city of Portobello in Panama. The 27th Foot, including Massy, played an important role in this battle, which was regarded as a great victory for the British forces. Massy and the other survivors returned to Britain in December 1740. In 1745-6, he served with his regiment in Scotland. Prince Charles Edward Stuart, better known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, had raised the Jacobites in rebellion, and the British Government sent a strong army to Scotland to crush the threat. This force was commanded by William, Duke of Cumberland, a son of George II. Cumberland's army decisively defeated the Jacobites at the Battle of Culloden in 1746, and the rebellion collapsed. Massy was wounded in the battle. His bravery attracted the attention of the Duke, who became his patron. In 1747, Cumberland promoted Massy to the rank of Captain-Lieutenant and it was due to the Duke's influence that he became Captain in 1751 and Major in 1755.

In 1756, the Seven Years War broke out. The most important theatre of war in the early stages of this conflict was North



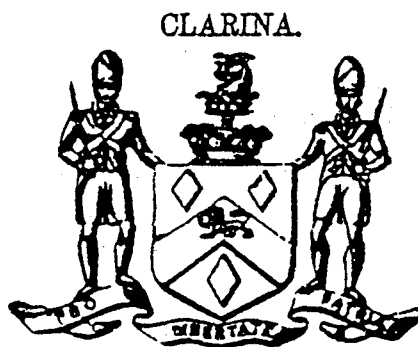
Clarina Castle (Elm Park), postcard by L.E. Ruttle, Post Office, Clarina.

Limerick Museum.

America, and Massy was sent there in 1757 as a Major in the 46th Foot. In 1758, he became Lieutenant-Colonel of this regiment. The following year was the decisive one in the North American campaign. The British invaded New France (Canada), the main French colony in North America, in force. An army commanded by General Wolfe captured Quebec, the largest city in Canada. A second force, commanded by Major-General Jeffrey Amherst, was sent to capture Fort Niagara, near the famous Niagara Falls. This move was intended to cut off Canada from the France's other great American colony, Louisiana. Massy was in command of the 46th Regiment, which formed part of Amherst's army.

His role in the decisive battle of La Beue Famille, fought near Fort Niagara on 24th July 1759, is a matter of some conjecture. His own account of this crucial episode in his career is set forth in the far from modest "Memorial of his Services", which is a very subjective account of his military career. He claims that he commanded the British forces and their allies in this battle and masterminded the victory against the French. The British army consisted of a force of 500 men from the 46th Regiment plus some Indians. The French army was much larger, consisting of 1,800 French and French-Canadians, and 500 Indians. The battle was hard fought, but the British emerged victorious, capturing all of the French officers except one, who managed to make good his escape. Fort Niagara surrendered soon after, and the whole of the Upper Ohio fell into British hands.

Massy claimed that this was the first engagement since the outbreak of the war in which the Indians were defeated. However, the standard accounts of the battle do not credit Massy with the victory. The actual commander of the army and architect of its success was another Irishman, Sir William Johnson. Shortly after the fall of Fort Niagara, Massy requested a transfer back to his old



**Arms of the Barons Clarina.**  
The supporters are two Grenadier soldiers in the uniform of the 27th Foot Regiment, recalling the first Baron's long association with this Regiment. The motto "Pro Libertate Patriae translates "For the Liberty of my Country".

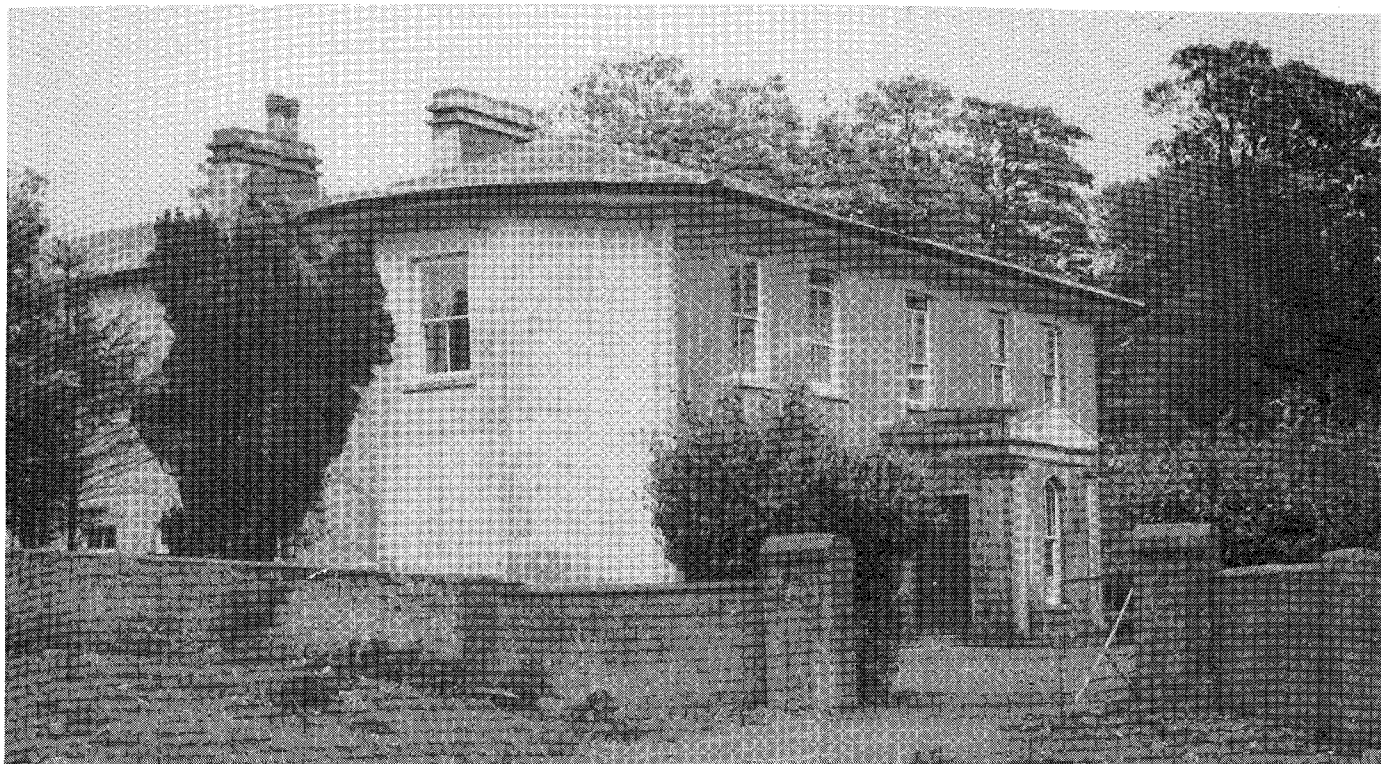
regiment, the 27th Foot. During the campaign of 1760, he commanded the grenadiers. His superior, General Amherst, led the British forces out of Oswego, New York, and sailed down the St Lawrence River to capture Montreal. Blocking the way was the French stronghold of Fort Levis (now Chimney Island, New York). There the Battle of the Thousand Islands was fought, resulting in another British victory. Massy took part in this last battle fought by the French in defence of New France.

Having brought the North American campaign to a successful conclusion, the British now turned to the French colonies in the West Indies. In February, 1762, a huge British force, numbering 14,000 men commanded by Major-General Robert Moncton, attacked the wealthy French sugar island of Martinique. Massy was again in command of a battalion of grenadiers during this invasion, which resulted in a French defeat. In the meantime, Spain had entered the war as an ally of France. In August 1762, the British struck hard at the Spanish Empire.

A strong force invaded Cuba and captured Havana, the capital, which was the centre of Spain's Caribbean possessions. Here Massy, again in command of the grenadiers, was severely wounded. The following year saw the end of the war, with Britain supreme in North America and poised to establish supremacy in India.

The coming of peace in 1763 brought a close to the most exciting phase in Massy's career. Although he remained a military officer, he was not destined to be involved in battle again. He commanded the 27th Foot at New York and Quebec from 1763 to 1769, and witnessed the early stages of the dispute between Britain and the American Colonies. He returned to Ireland in 1769, and was appointed Colonel of the regiment in 1773. He was promoted to Major-General in 1776, and from that year to 1780, he commanded the troops at Halifax, capital of Nova Scotia in Canada. The American War of Independence had begun in 1775, and France and Spain had allied themselves with the American Rebels. In 1780, Massy was posted to Cork, where he commanded for some time. While there, he drew up a plan for the defence of the city against a possible French invasion. This plan is now in the British Library in London. In 1782, Massy was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel, but he was unemployed for over a decade thereafter. This was extremely vexing for someone who had been actively employed for over forty years. In 1793, war broke out yet again between Britain and France. Massy was bitterly disappointed at not receiving a command and complained to his friend, General Sir John Vaughan, that "popish children" had received cadetships in his old regiment, the 27th Foot. "Indeed, my brother Grenadier, my heart is broke", he wrote. In 1794, the British again captured Martinique, and the French standards taken there were carried in state into St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Massy, recalling his part in the earlier capture of the island, was furious. "We had no such honours paid to our noble and brave Commander, General Moncton", he complained. Massy had become a cranky, retired old soldier, apparently destined to spend the rest of his days in discontented obscurity.

Later in 1794, he was rescued from this fate when he was appointed to his old command in Cork. The old gentleman was delighted to be once again of service to King and Country. His period in charge at Cork, from 1794 to 1796, was a difficult one. Britain and Ireland lived under the fear of a French invasion, and the Government hurriedly drafted large numbers of new recruits into the army. These young soldiers, raw and undisciplined, resented the strict regime of the army. In 1795, 2,000 of them stationed on Spike Island mutinied, but Massy put down the rebellion with firmness. As a reward for his services, the 77 year old veteran was promoted to the rank of full General in 1796. This was the second highest rank in the army (the highest was Field-Marshal). In 1797, he was made



Massy Lodge, summer residence of the Massys in the Galtees near Anglesborough, built c. 1800, now partly demolished.

Limerick Museum.

Governor of Limerick, and soon after was appointed Governor of the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, at that time a home for retired servicemen. He was also created a Marshal of the Army in Ireland. Massy held these posts until his death.

General Massy's military career was a very long and successful one. However, there were other sides to the man. He became a member of the Irish Parliament, and sat for the Borough of Swords from 1790 to 1797. His private life also deserves attention. He married Catherine Clements (1744-1815) on 27th December 1767. She was the third daughter of Nathaniel Clements MP, and her brother was later raised to the peerage as the First Earl of Leitrim. Massy was 48 at the time of his marriage and Catherine was 23. Despite, or possibly because of the great difference in their ages, they were very happy together, and enjoyed 37 years of wedded bliss. In 1798, over 30 years after his marriage, Massy wrote to Lord Camden, Viceroy of Ireland, describing Catherine as "a very virtuous good wife, and a most excellent mother ... whom I adore". They had four children, two sons and two daughters. They were greatly saddened by the death of their eldest son, George, in 1796, at the tender age of 25.

At the end of the 18th century, General Massy began to agitate for a peerage to be conferred on his beloved wife. In 1798, he asked Lord Camden to raise her to the peerage, with the title of Lady Niagara, in honour of his victory of 1759. Nothing came of this, and besides, Catherine declared that she could neither spell nor pronounce the word "Niagara"! In November 1800, Camden's successor, the Marquis Cornwallis, wrote to the Duke of Portland, the Home Secretary, stating that Massy had "most strongly urged" that his

wife should be raised to the peerage as a reward for his "long and faithful service as a soldier, and his zealous loyalty as a subject". In view of Massy's persistence and his long service, the Government decided to grant his request, but the title was given to him and not to his wife. On 27th December 1800, Massy was raised to the Peerage of Ireland under the title of Baron Clarina of Elm Park. This was one of nine peerages conferred just four days before the Act of Union came into operation and was one of twenty-six peerages created in 1800. At the time of his elevation, Massy was 81 years old. It was inevitable that he should not enjoy his new status for very long.

In 1804, the old gentleman travelled to England to visit the fashionable resort town of Bath, and there on 17th May he died. He was interred in Bath Abbey. He was succeeded as Lord Clarina by his second son, Nathaniel William, who, like his father, was a soldier, and who died on active service in the West Indies in 1810. The first baron's widow survived until 1815, and at her death was buried with her husband in Bath Abbey.

Lord Clarina was a remarkable man. He was a soldier for 60 years, and was intimately involved in some of the most dramatic events of the century. In his late 70s, he was still able to crush a formidable mutiny. His exaggerated claims of military greatness, while silly, were not unusual in a period notable for its extravagant vainglorious public figures, such as Pitt the Elder, Wolfe and Nelson. His political views were those of the vast majority of the Anglo-Irish upper classes of his time. He saw Ireland as being an essential part of the British Empire, and abhorred the Republicanism of the United Irishmen. He believed in the greatness of the British

Empire, and regarded the French with fear and dislike. He was a religious bigot and political reactionary, but in these was fairly typical of his class and period. He was devoted to his regiment and to the army. In private life, he was a kind and devoted husband. Along with the first Baron Emly, he is probably the most prominent figure in the history of Clarina. The crowning irony of his career was that he had no need to exaggerate his exploits, as they were sufficiently remarkable in reality to make him one of the most gallant soldiers of his day.

He founded a dynasty that endured and that dominated Clarina and its hinterland for over a century. The Elm Park Estate passed out of the family in 1923, and the sixth and last Baron Clarina died in 1952. The first Baron never lived in that great Gothic structure, Clarina Castle, for it was not built until after his death.

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