Some Letters of a Thomond Antiquary.

By Dr. Richard Hayes.

The Chevalier Thomas O'Gorman, though the greater part of his life was spent in France, was the most prominent Irish genealogist of his time. While engaged a year or two ago in writing a short account of his career (1)—a career so full of vicissitudes—I was fortunate in obtaining a loan of a large collection of his letters and manuscripts through the kindness of their owner, Mr. G. McN. Ross, of Marina, Cork. The Chevalier, who was born in 1732 at Castletown, Co. Clare, went for his education to Paris, where he qualified as a physician. He became an officer of the Irish Brigade and, through his marriage into a French noble family, he became owner of extensive vineyards in Burgundy. A native speaker of Irish, he made a special study of genealogies and the antiquarian lore of Ireland. In connection with the wine trade he paid occasional visits to his native land, during which he journeyed particularly through the counties of Clare, Limerick and Tipperary collecting manuscripts and copying inscriptions and crests from the tombstones of old families. During these journeys he always seems to have spent some time in Limerick city, where he had formed friendships with some of the notabilities of the time like Sylvester O'Halloran, the historian; Richard MacElligot, the eminent scholar, and Sir William Ouseley, the orientalist. The Chevalier O'Gorman added considerably to his income by drawing up their pedigrees for expatriated Irishmen in France and Spain (2)—these were helpful, at times essential in obtaining preferment in their profession as soldiers, in securing titles of honour and in gaining admission to Court, while often, too, they were deemed essential for their marriage alliances with the French or Spanish nobility.

Among the Chevalier's letters are a certain number which deal particularly with some old Limerick and Clare families—the MacMahons, O'Briens, De Lacys, Keatings, Hartys, Brownes, etc. There are several letters to him from Colonel Count Henry Shee (O'Shee) of the famous Kilkenny family, who became a Peer of France. (Readers of the Diary of Wolfe Tone will remember Colonel Shee accompanying the Irish patriot in the French expedition to Bantry Bay in 1796, and the intimate friendship between the two). The Shee family, as will be seen, was related by marriage alliances with Limerick families like the Brownes of Camas, the Hartys of Hospital, etc. In 1788 O'Gorman was commissioned by Colonel Shee to compile his genealogy, and on the 14th of June of that year O'Gorman, while on a visit to Dublin, writes to him from the Irish capital:

"My letter to you of 22 April acknowledging the receipt of your favour of the 8th and of 125 guineas... I waited until now the like order for receiving the other 125 guineas you promised to remit. But seeing you have not done it, I took the liberty of drawing on you this day for favour of Mr. Edward Byrne 125 guineas which I flatter myself you'll honour in due course. Though I informed you in my last of the 22 April of my intention of going soon after to Kilkenny and Limerick, yet I found it expedient to remain here until the opening of the circuits... On a general search in the records I found plenty of matter in them relative to the different objects I have in view, and upon due consideration I thought it very material to digest well this matter before my departure for the country in order to be better able to see what may be wanting to me. Besides I am sure of meeting assembled at the country towns the gentlemen I may be under the necessity of meeting."

1. See Studies, December, 1941.
2. He received, for example, one thousand guineas from General Count Alexander O'Reilly of Spain for the O'Reilly pedigree.
On 4 July 1788 O'Gorman writes to Shee in Paris and the letter suggests that differences have arisen between them regarding the fees due to the former for his genealogical researches. The letter runs:

"I received yesterday your extraordinary letter of the 25 June . . . . When you wrote to me the 8 April last with a remittance of 125 guineas and an absolute promise of remitting me a like sum in the course of May, I thought myself well warranted to draw on you the 14 June . . . . All I have to say to you on this head is this, that when you do not fulfill your engagement, which I did not seek, I shall not fulfill mine . . . ."

"Whether I go to Kilkenny or Limerick or not is not material to you. The only thing essential to you is that I should bring you a chain of proofs from record to authenticate your pedigree from the year 1400 . . . . It is not in Kilkenny I can find these proofs; it is in Dublin. The old Irish registers of the O'Shee family I have seen at Sheestown many years ago."

On 30 September Colonel Shee, writing from Paris, promises to forward through La Touche, the Dublin banker, the 125 guineas extra that were in dispute.

"I cannot conceive," he writes, "that my Pedigree will be given in to the College of Arms, hurried through the office and sent to me with the proofs authenticated the very day you receive the money, when at the same time you demand a number of Documents from me which it is not of my power to send you. For my father, now aged 83 years, is in a state of infancy, has lost entirely all recollection of past events and cannot be prevailed upon to talk for two minutes in a regular manner on any subject. All in the world I can do is to send you here annexed my baptismal certificate in due form and the following account I found in old notes of my father's."

"William Shee, grandfather to William Shee, Landrecy (France) came from Low Ormond in the Co. Kilkenny to settle with his wife in the County Limerick. (3) They had issue Martin, Thomas, James and Patrick Shee."

"Martin Shee had issue: William Shee, now living; Thomas Shee, who died two years ago a Captain of Invalids (in French army); Patrick Shee, who died about fifteen years ago, also a Captain of Invalids; and a daughter who married Mr. Harty, whose son is now a Captain of Grenadiers in Berwick's regiment (Irish Brigade). (4)"

"William Shee of Landrecy has issue: Henry Shee, Colonel of Hussars (French Army); Joseph Shee, who died in the West Indies in the (French) King's service; Louisa Shee, married to Colonel Clarke (who had for issue Henri Clarke, now Captain of Hussars). (5)"

"The grandfather of William Shee of Landrecy by the mother's side was Ned Bourke of Ballenagarde, Co. Limerick, son of Toby Burke, and this Edmund Burke had married the above Anne Browne of Camas."

"Martin Shee, father of William Shee of Landrecy, was married to Eleanor Burke, daughter to Edmund Burke of Ballenagarde, who lost his estate at the time of Cromwell. This Martin Shee left Ireland with his three sons, joined Clare's regiment (Irish Brigade) at his landing (in France) in the year 1725, carried arms in said regiment and died in the hospital of Calais in the year 1727 of an epidemical fever that carried off numbers at that time."

"My father had a sister perhaps still living, who could tell more of the matter if yet alive. She may be found by applying and directing thus—To Hugh Brady Esq in Limerick to be forwarded to William Wilkinson Esq at Rivers near Limerick for Margaret Shee."

3. The grandmother of Wm. Shee of Landrecy was Anna Browne of Camas, Co. Limerick, sister to Alick Brown of Camas, son of Joseph Browne of same place. This Joseph was brother to Sir Valentine Browne of Hospital, on whom a peerage was conferred by James II.  

4. This Captain Harty was the famous General Oliver Harty of the Irish Brigade, who played a notable part in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. He was son of John Harty and Margaret Shee, and was born at Knockainy, Knocklong, Co. Limerick, in 1746. He became Baron de Pierrebourg and his descendants still live in France. One of them, Baron Patrice, is at present engaged writing a history of the family.  

5. Henri Clarke, described in this letter as Captain of Hussars, was a nephew of General Oliver Harty. He became War Minister under Napoleon, who created him Duke of Feltre.
"I do not know in whose hands is the original of the Pedigree I sent you. The copy in my hands is certified by Doctor Hoare, Bishop of Limerick, by Jo. Werker, Major Edmund Moroney and Thomas Ewer, sheriffs, and Thomas Westropp, Provost of Limerick.

"There, my dear Sir, are all the explanations it is possible for me to give . . . But once more I must repeat to you that if I do not get my affairs in order immediately so as to be entitled to rank with the French nobility before the 1st December next (as the States-general are to be assembled in January 1789) the whole pedigree will never avail me sixpence. . . ."

Various other letters passed between them, and in December 1789 their correspondence seems to have ended pleasantly with the following from Shree to O'Gorman:—

"Since I had the honour of seeing you last week I have been searching in all my papers and have found the marriage deed of my father, in which mention is made of my grandfather Martin Shee, and of my paternal grandmother, Eleanor Burke. I have also found the marriage contract of my sister with Thomas Clarke. Also the certificate of my father's service in Clare's regiment. . . . I hope you are come back in good health from your excursion to Rouen. You promised me the pleasure of your company with your son to a piece of Beef and a family dinner. I wait for your day with impatience and am sorry the gout will not permit me to go myself and assure you of sincere affection. . . ."

The next series of letters in the Chevalier O'Gorman's papers is with a family of the great house of De Lacy, then residing at Clare Street in Limerick, and with the abbé George de Lacy, who was ordained a priest in France and subsequently became parish priest of Bulgaden, Co. Limerick. Edy de Lacy, living at Clare Street, writes in March, 1785, to O'Gorman regarding the sending of a younger brother William to Trinity College.

"I had William disengaged from Mr. Clarka," he writes, "on receipt of your letter and sent him to Mr. McGrath (b) to be instructed in the old Irish; but he was greatly disappointed to find that venerable gentleman bedridden and incapable of rendering any service. However, I had engaged with one MacMahon in town to instruct him till such time as he was able to go to Dublin. I am informed by this man that he is making a rapid progress in the old Manuscripts. . . ."

"P.S. My mother begs of you, on your arrival in Paris, that you'll please exert yourself to hurry George home to her. 'Tis certain, if he thinks well of coming, his bishop will provide for him shortly after his arrival. At present priests are wanting."

Another letter about the same time from the other brother, John, thanks the Chevalier for procuring a vacancy in the college for William.

"The day after your departure from here," he writes, "he engaged with a proper master near Doonass who understand the old Irish very well, and by what he tells me he is making a rapid progress. I will send him in the beginning of April to the celebrated Andrew McGrath for that month when I think he will be pretty perfect in that language. As to Greek and Latin I daresay he will distinguish himself in both. He has exerted himself to procure the title pages of the old Irish manuscripts but to no purpose. O'Brien told him that he lent them to Sir Hugh Massey's butler, and till such time as he returned from Doonass they could not be seen."

From the same writer comes another letter in October 1785 which, dealing with various matters of interest in Ireland and France, is one of the most interesting of the series. It runs:—

"My dear O'Gorman,

"Your favour of the 27th ult. gives me and my family much pleasure and satisfaction to hear of your success with General D'Alton in favour of William. We have every reason to think from your influence on that gentleman that my brother has a prospect of succeeding."

0. This is the notable Andrias Mac Craith (An Mangaire Súgach), the Maigue poet.
I have been three days in county of Limerick making every enquiry in my power respecting the memorials my uncle made, but to no purpose. I spent one day in Newcastle with Pierce Lacy and his aunt in hopes of obtaining some information from them respecting family affairs, but found myself so much disappointed there as I have been in Ballingarry. The Rev. Dr. Morgan O’Brien, P.P. of Newcastle, told me he would exert his abilities on this occasion and give every information in his power if I could not procure the original papers that my uncle had. I wrote to Dr. Synan of Cork by yesterday’s post respecting this matter in hope of getting some answer from him, having suspected a woman that lived in Ballingarry to take this paper, and if she has the Doctor will exert himself to get it for me. In a letter I had from my brother (theabbé George) dated Paris September 9 he says that he had the honour and pleasure of being introduced to Count Lacy from Spain who was on his return from Russia and Sweden where he was as Ambassador. He told him he would do anything in his power to serve him. The only request he made to the Count was to provide for three younger brothers he had, as their parents had not sufficient means to do so. . . . In another letter dated Paris 2 January 1786 he mentions that he expected something from the Court of France, but all his hopes proved abortive. He also says—"I have received an account lately from Lacy of Germany by the hands of Count de Mercy, the Imperial Ambassador here. He called for the certificates of the General Officers with whom I served in the French army, together with attestations of my life and morals. He also wrote to me for a copy of his genealogy, which he mislaid in America." There is a Dr. Rahilly in Paris who wrote lately to his brother here who says that he saw Abbé de Lacy who is preparing to set off for Germany in consequence of Count Lacy’s order to him. I can give you no further information regarding my brother George. I just found another letter dated Paris 4 February 1784 where he mentions that he wrote a most feeling letter to Count Lacy with regard to the condition he was in when he found he was disappointed of his expectation from the Court of France. . . .

"Our worthy and mutual friend O’Flanagan sets off to-morrow morning in the Limerick stage. . . . He dines this day with O’Halloran.(8) I scarcely get one moment of his company, he is in such demand."

There is another interesting letter from the Chevalier O’Gorman to Lieutenant-General Count D’Alton—it is dated 1 January, 1786. Count D’Alton was a native of Grenanstown, Co. Tipperary. A distinguished officer of the Austrian army, he was killed in action near Dunkirk in 1793 and was the last of a long line of officers of his name in the service of Austria. The letter shows that O’Gorman was a relative of the De Lacy Family through the Macneill family of Castle-Macneill, Co. Limerick.

"Give me leave to remind your Excellency," writes O’Gorman, "of the promise you made me of writing to Marshal De Lacy in favour of Mr. Wm. De Lacy, whom I had the honour to introduce to you when last you were in Dublin. This young gentleman is the only relation of the name fit for service that the Marshal has at present in Ireland.

"In my tour through Munster a year ago he was presented to me as a relation then 19 years of age and an orphan. Finding he had tolerable genius for learning and a more decided one for the military profession, I promised him, on my return to Dublin, a Berth in Trinity College, in order to ripen and enable him to pursue his studies to advantage until such time as I could get an open for him abroad.

"When I was informed last summer that your Excellency was expected soon in Ireland, I waited your arrival with impatience, in order to present him to you, knowing full well the confidence the Marshal had in your discernment. I flatter myself that your far superior judgment will coincide with mine and prevail on the Marshal to patronise so promising a youth. . . . The House of De Lacy of Ballingarry, from the period of King John, became the stock of all the De Lacies of Ireland. . . . The only branch of the House of Ballingarry that now exists in Ireland is that of Limerick in the county of Limerick. Hugo de Lacy, Proprietor of the Seigniory of Bruff, levied for the service of King James II a company of infantry which he incorporated in the regiment then raised by his cousin, Pierce de Lacy of Ballingarry, the father of the late Field-Marshal Pierce de Lacy of Russia. Hugo died of wounds he received.

7. This was General Count Francis de Lacy (son of General Patrick de Lacy who went to France in Sir John’s Fitzgerald’s regiment in 1691 and subsequently entered the Spanish service).

8. This is Sylvester O’Halloran, the historian. O’Flanagan is presumably Theophilus O’Flanagan, a notable Irish scholar of the time.
at the siege of Limerick in 1691. His son David was a lieutenant in his father's company and died about 20 years ago aged 113, leaving issue by his wife, Joanna MacDonnell of Corcomore in the Co. of Limerick, 2 sons—(1) The Revd. John de Lacy, Doctor of Divinity in the University of Salamanca and late rector of the parish of Ballingarry; (2) Francis de Lacy, who died recently at Ballingarry, leaving issue by his wife, Margaret Edmonds, my cousin-german once removed, 5 sons who are all married and in a line of industry, except George De Lacy, a secular priest now in Germany, as I am informed, under the patronage of the Marshal de Lacy, and the postulant Wm. De Lacy.

"Besides this connexion with the family, John De Lacy of Ballingarry Esq. was married to Joanna (daughter of Thomas MacInerney in the Co. of Limerick Esq. by Mary O'Gorman, my great-grand-aunt) and begot on the body of the said Joanna the before-mentioned Colonel Pierce De Lacy of Ballingarry, the father of the late Field-Marshall Pierce De Lacy of Russia."

Early in the following year (1787) the Chevalier is seeking to place two of his own nephews in the Spanish army. He writes in French to General Count Francis De Lacy, the distinguished soldier, to help them by his influence.

"Monseigneur le Comte,

"Voulez-vous bien permettre à un parent assez proche de votre maison, et à un compatriote zélé pour le service de celle de Bourbon, de vous recomander un neveu, brave officier, ci-devant sous-lieutenant des grenadiers du Regiment de Dillon.

"La reconnaissance que tout Irlandais militaire doit, par préférence, à la Maison de Bourbon, m'engage à l'envoyer en Espagne plutôt d'ailleurs. Quoique je n'ai pas l'honneur d'être connu de vous, Monsieur, je me flatte néanmoins que vous n'aurez pas moins d'égards à ma recommandation en faveur de mon neveu, Charles-Malachie Gorman Thompson, que M. le Maréchal de Lacy n'eut, au mois de Mars 1786, à celle que je lui fis d'un parent de son nom de la famille de Bruff (Co. Limerick), neveu de feu Jean de Lacy, Docteur en Théologie, que vous avez connu dans votre jeunesse à l'Université de Salamanche. Il prit sur le champ ce jeune homme sans sa puissante protection . . . .

"Les lettres que je viens de recevoir d'Espagne m'ayant appris que le Regiment d'Illiberia actuellement à la Havanne avait quinze places d'officiers vacantes, j'ose vous suppliant de faire M. Thompson à la première de ces places . . . . En attendant je pourrai vous recomander un second neveu de mon nom, fils de mon frère cadet. Il se trouve actuellement à la tête des Lieutenants en second du Regiment de Walsh (en France) . . . .

"M le Comte D'Alton, Lieutenant-General au service de sa Majesté Royale et Imperiale, m'ayant appris en Irlande en printemps de 1786, qu'on imprima en Allemagne un Dictionnaire Biographique contenant l'origine et les actions celebres de tous les grands hommes qui ont servis l'Empire depuis sa fondation, et qu'amusant de notre Patrie qui ont figurés dans l'Empire desiraient de tenir rang dans cet ouvrage, je lui ai fourni des memoires sur ceux dont je connaisse le famille. J'ai conju, en même tems, le plan d'adresser à M. le Maréchal De Lacy un memoire digne de ses services et de l'ancien lustre de sa Maison . . . . Je dois cet hommage à votre Maison, d'autant plus que la grand-mère maternelle du feu Maréchal De Lacy de Russia, etait Maire O'Gorman, ma grande-grand-tante, Equspe de MacInerney de Castle MacInerney au comté de Limerick, chef des noms et armées de sa Maison et grand-père maternel du dit Maréchal."

The correspondence shows that the abbé George De Lacy returned home to Limerick early in 1790—the following letter from him to the Chevalier O'Gorman is dated 4 April of that year:—

"My most worthy friend,

"I want words to express to you the heartfelt pleasure of my friends on my arrival. Had you been present at the interview, your feeling heart would melt with joy. I paid my duty to his Lordship (Bishop Conway), who received me with pleasure and satisfaction. My friends are striving to keep me in Limerick, as he told me I should go to Glin to enjoy half the parish with a Mr. David Browne. He asked me whether I had any attestations from France. Upon my answering in the negative he seemed a little surprised, and desired I should write for them immediately, as he could do nothing without them. I hope, my worthy friend, you'll do the needful and that you will write immediately to Dr. Walsh and Abbé Kearney (Superiors of the Irish College in Paris) for the attestations for me . . . .

"I remain,

"My worthy friend until death,

"Your affectionate kinsman,

"GEORGE DE LACY."
O’Gorman must have obtained the necessary documents for a month later he received the following letter from the Abbé George:

“How can I repay, my dear and worthy friend, the innumerable and manifold obligations I am under to you for your kind and friendly exertion in my behalf . . . as the Bishop desired the attestations with impatience. He found them satisfactory and desired me to prepare to accompany him to the Chapters which will be held in Adare and Rathkeale, where I will be installed in the parish of Glin. I will be obliged to pay Mr. Browne, the former P.P., the sum of £20 during his life which will not be long . . . . What heartfelt pleasure it would give me to see you in this country before my departure for Glin. I have been joyfully assured these 10 days past by gentlemen of this Town, who told me positively you were in Ennis and that you would be soon in Limerick. I’ll strive to have a collection of Irish melodies for you against your arrival, which I hope will be very soon . . . . Adieu, my dear and worthy friend; may God through His infinite mercy shower down innumerable blessings on you, and may you see the sons of yours to the 3rd and 4th generation is the prayer of your ever affectionate and obliged friend.

GEORGE DE LACY.”

In the correspondence of the Chevalier O’Gorman are some letters which passed between him and a distinguished Limerick man in Spain—Dr. Timothy Scanlan (Don Timotheo O’Scanlon). He belonged to the family of his name long settled at Ballyknockane, Ballingarry. He was a fellow-student of O’Gorman’s at the Irish College in Paris, where both qualified as physicians. Scanlan entered the Spanish service and rose to high rank as consultant physician in the Spanish army. He married Marie Anne De Lacy of Newcastle, niece of Bishop Robert Lacy. In April, 1787, O’Gorman writes to him from Paris addressing him at the Royal Hospital of Ferrol:

“My most ancient and worthy friend,

“Though you have for an age past forgotten all your former acquaintances in Paris, particularly your old brother bruiser, yet I embrace with pleasure this opportunity of renewing our former friendship . . . . My letter will be delivered to you by my nephew, Mr. Thompson, who goes to seek a better fortune in the Spanish service than he enjoyed in that of this country (France). You’ll see his case by his credentials and by the letter I write in his favour to his Excellency, Count De Lacy. I flatter myself you’ll show him every friendship in your power and use all your influence with the superior officers of our Nation in the service of Spain to have him speedily preferred . . . . If you can get him a cheap berth in Ferrol until he gets an answer to my letter from Count De Lacy, I shall be for ever obliged to you . . . .

Some months later the following reply comes from Dr. Scanlan:

“My dear and worthy friend,

Your nephew who arrived here by sea from Bayonne handed me your welcome letter. It is upwards of a month since he arrived, and after about 12 days stay here I advised him to go to Zamora, where Ireland’s regiment is quartered and wrote by him to the Colonel to favour and protect him and admit him at least as a cadet . . . . From Zamora he may go to Madrid, which is very near, and present himself and your letter to General Lacy . . . . I was in Ferrol when he came here and on my arrival showed him as much civility as I was able. I was obliged to return to Ferrol in order to embark my little daughter for Bayonne, where she arrived safe and entered the convent there last month. She went with one Captain Moriarty, the same your nephew came here with from Bayonne. This child and a little boy I have in the college of Toulouse, age 12½, are the only children I have by Molly Lacy, daughter to Jimmy Lacy of Newcastle and niece to Bishop Lacy that was of Limerick formerly . . . .

“You know I left Paris 33 years ago to come here as physician to an Irish regiment called Hibernia, was afterwards named first physician to the Marine department of Ferrol, thence went as medecin consultant des armées to the siege of Gibraltar, where I attended (besides our own Land and Marine troops) the French, as their 3 physicians fell very sick. On which account my refusing a monthly gratification, his Most Christian Majesty sent me the Patent of Medecin Consultant and a pecuniary gratification which were delivered me in Madrid by his Ambassador in the name and by express order of his Majesty. I served also in the war of Portugal, and after my last campaign of Gibraltar I gave up my place in
the Marine, and am now at liberty to live anywhere in Spain with my pension of 3,000 livres a year. I came from Madrid 3 years ago and remained here (Coruna) ever since on account of my children. And as they are now settled in college, perhaps I may return to Madrid, where, I am invited by powerful friends, though my poor state of health and little desire of practising discourage me greatly. Thus you have a short sketch of my life since we parted in Paris, by which you see how little fortune has favoured me."

The only other letter from Dr. Scanlon is dated 31 August, 1789, from Madrid. In it he informs O'Gorman that the latter's cousin, Mr. Thompson, has been made an officer a long time previously in the Regiment Irlanda through his influence and that of Count Lacy. He also mentions that he is "absent from Ireland my native country for 44 years."