A Frenchman's Impressions of Limerick, Town and People, in 1791.

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The destruction of privilege which was one of the most notable achievements of the French Assembly in 1789 brought with it the abolition of countless well-paid offices, many of them mere sinecures. Amongst those deprived of their occupation as a result of the reform was a "Conseiller Correcteur à la cour des Comptes," named Charles Etienne Coquebert de Montbret. Coquebert being a man of ability and experience, unlike some of his fellow-functionaires, did not, however, remain long unemployed but was sent, almost immediately, to Ireland as "Agent Général de la Marine et du Commerce à Dublin."

Only a revolution could have made possible the appointment of such a remarkable man to such an unimportant position. At eighteen years of age he had been attached to the "Bureau des Consulats" at Versailles; one year later, he obtained the appointment of "Commissaire de la Marine" at Hamburg and, there, acquitted himself so well that he was made Consul General of the Hansa towns. In 1786 he returned to France to take over his father's office at the 'Cour des Comptes' and, when that office ceased to exist, he proceeded to Ireland, where he remained until September, 1791. (1a)

Coquebert's most important work is a treatise on the geography, statistics and commerce of Europe, (1) but far more interesting to us in Ireland are four note-books never published, (2) and never intended for publication, which are at present in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Nouv. Acq. XXIII). These rough jottings give a Frenchman's candid impressions of various Irish towns in 1790 and 1791. Intended for no eye other than the author's, they give us also an intimate insight into the mind of a typical intellectual of eighteenth century France possessed of all the virtues and failings of his time and country, a man whose interests covered the whole field of contemporary thought and speculation. On languages, ancient and modern; natural science, economics, mathematics, antiquities, and much else, he is something of an authority and he combines a sincere sympathy for suffering humanity with a shrewd understanding of his fellow-men, a keen sense of humour and a shocking contempt for all dogmas; as witness the following comment on religious affairs in Ireland:—"C'est peut-être un avantage d'avoir 2 religions, une speculative pour les gens comme le faut et une sensible pour le peuple."

Later in life Coquebert contributed to many learned journals; edited the "Journal des Mines" 1793-1794; carried out experiments on the manufacture of gun-powder; taught Geology, History and Economics in Paris, helped to introduce the new system of weights and measures and, besides acting as consul in Holland and England, was entrusted with delicate negotiations in regard to navigation on the Rhine, the re-patriation of prisoners-of-war, etc. Under Napoleon he became a member of the "Légion d'honneur" and was given the title of baron, and he was Secretary General to the Ministry of Commerce.

It is not surprising that the private note-books of such a man should make interesting reading: Unfortunately, they are very difficult to decipher with certainty in places, due to careless scribbling and the writer's disconcert-
ing habit of changing his language without warning using, with ease, Latin, Greek, German, Irish and English, the main text being, of course, in French. We know that he undertook to edit a Chinese dictionary at home.(4) Apart from the text, there is a difficulty about presenting Coquembert's information because his remarks are so disconcerted, often amusingly so, as on page 16 (20.099), "Ankett, la femme de Mr. Roche la 3- lea euen 23 enfants, mauvais fermiers dans le comté sont très rares."

The following observations on Limerick do not appear as continuous narrative in the original. The numbers in brackets, from 171, are intended as a guide to those interested in the manuscript. They represent the pages from which the preceding extracts are taken. Even from this short section of the work, a reader can hardly fail to be struck by the foreign visitor's grasp of things Irish, including the Irish language, an amazing achievement consider-
in that he spent, in all, less than two years in Ireland.

"Having passed the hills, one catches sight of Limerick and the mountains of Clare beyond. The approach to Limerick is by a fairly long suburb. Taylor's inn, the only good one, is on the left, near St. John's Church: in a street called The Square.

The Irish cabins, even in this rich county, are like the mud huts which beggars build on our highways, or those which the charcoal-burners make for themselves in the woods. It is hard to distinguish them from the surrounding heaps of crops. Very few have windows, in some there are one or two holes which are stuffed, at night, with a wisp of straw. Less frequently still, have they chimneys and, when there is one, it is made of boards or bundles of sticks. The roofs are often weighed with stones and even with pieces of wood, as protection against the wind. The entrance is generally the dirtiest place on the main road. Cleanliness becomes a matter of painful interest because, to all appearances, it is non-existent. Extreme misery turning men's minds to more pressing needs, relegates cleanliness to the realm of superfluous refinements. Every cabin, at this season, has a heap of turf outside it, covered with a little straw, the turf of this district being very black. It is the ordinary fuel of Lime-
rick. Approaching Limerick, the cabins have some cabbages in the gardens which I noticed because this is not usual.

In spite of the obvious poverty of the dwellings, one seldom meets beg-
gars, and children do not annoy one asking for charity, as often happens in our villages. If there are individuals who beg, they are always worn-out old men. An Irishman is content with little; he says, like la Fontaine, "food and clothing, what more can man need?" and, for food, his requirements are confined to the viands of the Golden Age. In spite of this, he is surprisingly energetic worker. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that their manner of existence is too deficient in all those things which we have come to regard as necessary to happiness to coincide with our idea of the joys of rural life.

There is nothing remarkable about the dress of the Irish of both sexes. It is the garb of destitution. The men wear dark frieze riding coats with sleeves, but generally worn like cloaks, long and buttoned to the end.(171)

Limerick is not as big as Cork but, in general, better built. The majority of the houses are of brick and in the Dublin style. There are footpaths and pretty shops. The quays are very fine. Broad Street passes through Irishtown,(3) which is on the eastern side of the river, later, one crosses Ball's Bridge,(4) which is built upon on the left side and one enters the, even better, English-
town, the principle streets of which are called Mary Street and Nicolas Street. It is there that the Bourse, the Post, and the Prison are to be found. In a street named Bridge Street, running diagonally, which leads to the new Bridge, there is a very good café supported by subscription, where all the papers are to be had.

On the eastern quay are the Play-House, the Bank and, at the end, the Custom’s House, which is a fine building. Limerick has three papers, Chronicle, Herald, and. M. Conway, Bishop of Limerick, and M. McMahon, Bishop of Killaloe, live in Limerick. The river, at the bridges, is smaller than the branch at the Petit Pont in Paris but at the Custom’s House, it is as wide as the Seine in front of the Arsenal.

The permission given in 1762 to import Irish food into England, particularly butter, has forced up prices and reduced exports to Germany—fresh butter costs 15/-

Canal from here to Killaloe, one mile completed, thirty thousand pounds expended upon it about 1767. It will be finished in three years and will be useful to permit sailing boats to navigate on Lough Derg. The canal will be eight foot deep and will encourage agriculture in the counties of the Up. Shannon which confine themselves to-day to raising cattle. Then, these counties will produce pork and butter, being able to send them, at small cost, to Limerick. Coal will be brought from Leitrim at 12/- a ton. Finally, in time of war, the troops destined for England will come there in order to escape the corsairs who cruise near Cape Clear and will be transported by this canal, and by the Dublin canal, to Birr and to Dublin.(172)

Ball’s Bridge fell down some years ago. A row of houses has been rebuilt there.(3) The Park, a district near the canal, is inhabited by a number of Mac Namas.

There are on the Shannon five weirs belonging to the Corporation, where 8 to 1,600 salmon are taken every day during the season. They go up the river in July, the males first. The peasants catch them at night.

The people (of Limerick) are rather turbulent. When they wished to have Sir Henry Hartstonge, the Government sent Mr. Waller. There was a great uproar.(7)

Dinner at Mr. Stephen Roche’s home with Mr. O’Halloran and Mr. Ousley.

Curiosities in Capt. Ousley’s include various spearheads and other copper articles. There I saw the only antiques which I have yet seen, these having been found at Clonmacnoise. They are a kind of buckles and a small figure carried . . . . All these probably come from Carthage.

There is no good map or description of Limerick county. A rather poor history of the town(6) has earned the bookseller, who is also the author, a Mr. Ferrar, about 150£ and a nice letter from the Pope, in which he offers him help from the Vatican for a history of Ireland.

O’Halloran published in 1774 a treatise on the antiquities of Ireland, une revue vindicta, in reply to Leland and Whitaker, printed in Dublin by Ewing, who got the author to remove his name so that he might not become embroiled with his colleague.(6) (173)

Mr. Roche has his domain two miles from Askeyton, near the Shannon. It is called Moyabhainin, i.e., my little wife. His second wife was an O’Brien.
The great ships of war and Indian merchantmen come up almost as far as this, seven leagues from Limerick. In 1779, 12 Indian ships entered the Shannon waiting for a convoy which was sent for them.(174)

The gentlemen of the neighbourhood, to maintain the price of their cattle and to prevent Cork having a monopoly, have for sometime granted a premium of 10 sh. to Limerick merchants who buy a bullock weighing 500 k. or more. In this way they have achieved their object. The exchange which used to be 13 or 14, less often 11, is at present 1 to 1½ above par, a proof that Ireland is flourishing and that her total exports exceed her imports.

There was a meeting of the Canal Company on the fourth at the café. Mr. Arthur, for whom I had a letter, and who is a member, having arrived there I gave him this letter and left with him immediately for his place, Blemara, about five miles from here in the mountains of Co. Clare, almost the same distance from Killaloe. His wife (sister of the Chevalier O'Brien, Lucius), his married daughter and his son Therence were far from expecting a visitor, at this season, especially a Frenchman.

In winter, particularly after Christmas, 25 or 30 are received in the same house, each having 4 horses with 3 or 4 mounted servants and, sometimes, led horses, all these being housed and entertained. Everything is to be had on the premises. One kills, as required, a bullock, some sheep, a number of fowl. There is game of every kind in the season, woodcock and wild-duck so tame that they would come as far as the walks under the windows. Within 12 or 15 miles of Dublin horses and people begin to be sent to inn's, but not here. Mr. Arthur has about 300 acres with his house. The houses are of petrosilex or sandstone.(175)

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur have been 4 years at St. Germain for the education of their children. Chevalier O'Brien has a Mr. MacAnalli (for long a merchant in Bordeaux) to teach his children.

Back in Limerick where Mrs. Arthur wished to visit Mrs. Barclay, we passed in front of the weirs and Mr. Quinn's house. These weirs, leased by the town, give sometimes 1,100, according to others 1,800, salmon per day. They are sold at present for 6d. up to 12d. per pound. Those that are salted for export are the unsaleable ones, which are to be had for a penny. Some forty tons are exported, partly to Italy. Rape-seed is cultivated, 30,000 tons exported in 1787. This grain grows very well in dried bog-lands. A little oil is also extracted from it.

Limerick receives a hundred ships every year but has neither a creamery nor a sugar-refinery. It is proposed to establish a malt-house in the spring. Before the permission to import into England butter was 24s. and of poor quality, in large casks 2 guineas, 28½. The need to satisfy the London market has improved it and the price has more than doubled, land rents in proportion.(10) Limerick has been able to kill this year 2,500 bullocks and as many cows, Cork 1,300 of each.

Two-thirds of Ireland's lands have never been made use of and only need to be cultivated to prosper. The rich plains and the beautiful bays of Ireland are deserts while the marshes of Holland are covered with superb towns.(175)

The people live entirely on potatoes. They cost 1 Jan. 1791 9sh. a barrel of 8 bushels or 48 stone. They are not rich enough to feed on oat-en bread.
That costs 9d., a stone of 14lbs., exactly four times as much, and supposing it is more nourishing, it is at least double.

The Limerick people are more given to drink than the inhabitants of Cork. The use of whiskey is general and extends even to the women.\(^{181}\)

For three years the city has had no light, the Act of Parliament not having been renewed for the tax on the inhabitants. Those of Newtown Pery wish to be exempted from the city charges, there is a dispute going on about the matter.

There is a windmill at the end of Newtown Pery. This calls for comment, as they are rare in Ireland. There is plenty of running water, and, as a result, wind is little needed.

Almost all the small traders live on Dublin spirits, wine and especially sugar, as there is no refinery in Limerick and about a dozen in Dublin. Transport by land costs 3sh. in summer, 4 in winter. To avoid a mountain the road no longer goes by Knockaderry, where the mines are, but by O’Brien’s Bridge, Castle Connell and Nenagh.\(^{182}\)

Saw, on the 8th, the plan of the new prison by the waterside, two buildings separated by a yard, the one behind for criminals, the first for debtors (county and city separated). Mr. Smyth the architect.\(^{187}\)

The price of beef in Limerick is 2d.\(^{1}\), in Dublin 3d., hares 2 English shillings, rabbits 5d. for the flesh, 8d. the skin. Rabbit skins are very dear, formerly they cost only 4d.

Philip Roche had only one son, who left young children under age; a daughter, married to a Mr. Ryan, who has been a long time in Limerick; Stephen Roche John, i.e., a son of John; his mother is 80 and had 81 children and grandchildren. He himself had 14 by one wife, 9 by another.

The Irish people marry very young, the boys at 18, or 20, the girls sometimes from 13.\(^{187}\)

Serge for lining is made at Limerick and dyed and dressed in Dublin, also rather nice carpets and striped cloth for mattresses and sailors. The potatoes are excellent, the women pretty and the streets dirty.\(^{188}\)

If Ireland were not dominated in all things by England, the more important towns would not be situated as they are, on the side of the St. George’s Channel where the ports in general are bad and difficult of approach. The most flourishing would probably be those of the West or South, which are deeper and better situated for commerce with America, Spain and Portugal. Galway and Limerick especially, with their fertile lands and navigable bays are better destined to become capitals than Dublin or even Cork.”

This last extract, taken from the notes on Galway (20.098, p.44), gives, perhaps, the measure of the author’s feeling for Limerick. Reading through the whole work one gets the impression of a sincere affection for Ireland, but more especially for Shannonside. Indeed, in the last years of the eighteenth century, Limerick must have been a remarkable town, seeing that Coquebert met so many kindred spirits there. His experiences are a fine illustration of the intellectual ties then existing between Ireland and France. The O’Hallorans, the Ousleys and the Arthurs were as much at home in St. Germain as in Newtown Pery and, amongst them, the French savant no longer felt himself a stranger in a strange land.
(a) Notice in Annales Maritime, 1846.

1a. According to Mr. Ryan, Coquebert was appointed Consul in Ireland in Jan., 1789, but the Biog. Univ. states that he was sent to Ireland "la place de Conseiller Correcteur ayant été supprimé."

1. Quite a good account of Coquebert's career is given in the Nouvelle Biographie, which states that the above treatise never appeared in print but, since that notice was written, most of his work has been published.

2. Some lines from the Ms. are appended to an article on the author by F. W. Ryan which appeared in the R.I.A.I. Journal, 1881.


4. Ball's Bridge should be called Bald Bridge, which is translated from the Irish name Drochid-maal (?) having had no parapet at one time. One uses the word maal (?) for a cow without barns or a bald man. Note in MS.

5. Blank in manuscript. Actually it was The Limerick Journal (ed.)


7. Coquebert remarks later than "Sir Henry Haristonge is the idol of the people, and his wife even more so."

8. Ferrar was opposed to France and French ideas. He writes in his history of "our natural enemies, the French."

9. In the copy at present in the National Library, Dublin, the printers name has been torn out. The Limerick Library copy gives J. Murray of London as the printers, and the date 1772 (ed.)

10. Figures quoted by Prof. G. O'Brien from Newenham and Dublin Custom House books give butter exports for 1760 as 207,246 cwt; for 1790 300,669 cwt.

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Author's Note in Press.

From the "brevet" of Jan., 1789, mentioned by Ryan, it would appear that the position of "Conseiller Correcteur" held by de Montberet was abolished during the first efforts at reform, some months before the official abolition of such posts by the States General.