

Fr. Wolfe's Description of Limerick City, 1574

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Fr. David Wolfe, S.J., is well known as an agent of the Counter Reformation in Ireland. A Limerick-born Jesuit, he was appointed papal legate in Ireland in 1560 and, apart from a period of imprisonment, followed by a period of continental exile in the 1570s, he spent the last eighteen years of his life, until his death in 1578, actively promoting the Counter Reformation in Ireland.¹ His description of Limerick forms part of a "Description of Ireland" which he wrote for the information of the Spanish Government in 1574 in the course of his enforced absence from Ireland. The work was probably written originally in Latin but is now known only in an Italian version which is in the Vatican Library. It was brought to the attention of Irish historians by Archdeacon Begley who published it as an appendix to the second volume of his *History of the Diocese of Limerick* in 1927.²

The account of his native city included by Fr. Wolfe in the "Description" is brief but it has special claims to scholarly attention. It is probably the earliest account surviving which describes in any detail the city as it was in late medieval times, and certainly the earliest such description by a native of the city itself. For this reason it deserves more extended commentary than Begley could provide in the course of his survey of two hundred years of diocesan history. That is what is attempted here. The commentary is preceded by an English translation.

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Translation of Fr. Wolfe's 'Della citta di Limerico'

Limerick is the mightiest and most beautiful of all the cities of Ireland. Fortified by great walls of vivid marble, the city forms an island in the fast-flowing River Shannon and is only accessible by two stone bridges, one of fourteen arches, the other of eight. It is some sixty miles from the ocean but ships of 400 tons come up as far as the city.

For the most part the houses are made of quadrangular blocks of black marble and built in the style of towers or fortresses. The boundary (borough) of the city is better fortified than the city itself. Its walls are ten feet thick and in some places 140 [sic] feet high. They are ringed by ten turrets or bulwarks, very handsome and strong, that prevent approach to the walls.

The city has about eight or nine hundred households, Catholic all, except for seven or eight young men who embrace the Lutheran leprosy more to please the Lady Elizabeth than for any other reason.

The city has a castle built by John, son of King Henry II. It has been unoccupied

¹ *The Directory of National Biography* provides a biographical summary of Fr. Wolfe's career. The most detailed source on him is to be found in John Begley, *History of the Diocese of Limerick*, vol. II, Dublin 1927, *passim*. See also Robert Herbert, *Worthies of Thomond*, 3rd ser., Limerick 1946, pp. 54-56.

² Begley, *op. cit.*, pp. 494-515. For a fairly full summary of the document see *Calender State Papers, Rome*, ii, no. 293.

for many years. The houses and roof of the castle are in decay and part of the wall has already fallen down. However, it could be renovated at moderate cost. The castle is beautifully situated, towering above the city so as to keep it permanently under control, though, indeed, the citizens have always been loyal to their English sovereign. The city of Limerick has little in the way of artillery, apart from two small pieces, and has no other military equipment except for a few arquebuses, bows and crossbows. And I can state positively that there is not half a pipe of powder in the whole city to fire the artillery pieces.

The city is located in a beautiful spot between Desmond and Thomond,³ the regions which the great River Shannon divides. Except in time of war the city abounds in grain, meat, dairy produce and fresh-water fish.

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Discussion

The Marble City

In commenting on Fr. Wolfe's account the first point to emphasize is that the city he describes is the medieval one, situated on the King's Island, now comprising St. Mary's parish. He knew nothing, of course, of the Georgian city which did not begin to be built for two hundred years after he wrote. Nor does he mention the Irish Town—the adjunct which developed on the mainland side of Baal's Bridge in the late medieval period—though he acknowledges its existence implicitly by distinguishing between the city walls and the boundary or borough walls which were extended in the fourteenth century to include the Irish Town. Wolfe's ignoring of the Irish Town may reflect the kind of ethnic snobbery that was abundantly present in both of the historic communities of Ireland, the Gaelic community and those who claimed descent from the Anglo-Normans of the twelfth century. We shall have occasion to comment on the political relations between the two communities later.

The question that immediately springs to the sceptical mind of the historian is how reliable a witness Fr. Wolfe is. Certainly, he knew the city intimately since he was born and bred in the vicinity, and ministered in the locality later as a priest. On the other hand, it must be asked whether his enthusiastic praise of the city can be taken at its face value. Did this native son allow a natural affection to cloud his judgment? Perhaps some allowance must be made for civic piety. On the other hand there is a balancing factor to be taken into account. When he wrote, Fr. Wolfe was a mature, well educated and much travelled man. He had seen many of the leading cities of France, Spain, Portugal and Italy. He had spent seven years in Rome just as the Renaissance transformation of that city was nearing completion. It is reasonable to assume that all of this served to heighten his aesthetic appreciation and to sharpen his critical judgment. The result is to give added weight to his aesthetic

³ Interestingly, in the Italian version of Fr. Wolfe's text, that word is rendered "Tuomonia". This preserves the 'u' sound of the first syllable of the word and accords with the common pronunciation found today among the inhabitants of the old city area, a pronunciation which derives ultimately of course, from the Irish *Tuadh Mumhan*. The more posh 'o' sound ("Thoemond") is to be avoided as a polite nonsense: it has no validity except as a means of distinguishing the social tuppence ha'pennies from the tuppences. This possibly pedantic but important point is, I believe, something with which Dr. Edward MacLysaght firmly agrees, and it is with much pleasure that I dedicate this article in his honour.

evaluation of Limerick.

In any case, other witnesses of undoubted impartiality can be brought forward to testify to the beauty of sixteenth century Limerick. One such is William Body, an Englishman sent to Ireland on a special government commission in 1536. Naturally, Body would assess Limerick in the light of English cities and towns, and indeed the comparison that sprang to his mind was London. Reaching Limerick, the last point on a tour through Leinster and Munster, he reported to his chief in England "Limerick is a wondrous proper city, and strong . . . and it may be called Little London for the situation and the plenty".⁴ An echo of Wolfe, about a decade after he wrote, can be discerned in Richard Stanyhurst, a Dubliner, well known for his contributions on Irish history and topography to *Holinshed's Chronicles*. He described Limerick as the "fairest city in Munster".⁵

So much for the value-judgment. What about matters of fact? One obvious instance in which scepticism might seem the proper response is where Wolfe describes the city walls as made of "stones of vivid marble" and the houses as constructed from "quadrangular blocks of black marble". Was this a flight of fancy? Interestingly, forty years earlier we find as sober a group as the Irish Council, in an 'on the spot' report from O'Brien's Bridge—which they were endeavouring to demolish—describing an O'Brien castle there as built of "hewn marble".⁶ More to the point, the Englishman, Thomas Dinely, on a tour of Ireland in 1681, noted in his journal on the occasion of his visit to Limerick, "Quarries of black marble are in such plenty about the town that castle, citadel, walls, bridges, houses and other buildings are formed therewith, and it serves for pavement to the streets".⁷ Clearly, then, Wolfe was not engaging in a flight of fancy. The modern reader tends to be confused because we think of marble as the highly polished crystallised limestone used for sculpture and the embellishment of the interiors of buildings. That is not what is meant here. Rather it is the unpolished blue limestone quarried locally and utilised extensively for building purposes up to quite recently.

If this realisation makes Fr. Wolfe's marble city a more credible prospect perhaps it also makes it a less spectacular one. His "great walls of stone of vivid marble" may not seem especially exciting in their last crumbling remnants, those tottering bits of masonry which we find scattered here and there in the older part of the city. The special quality of the stone can easily be missed as a result of discoloration from weathering, but more especially from the increasingly virulent forms of industrial pollution which the city has experienced in the last century or so. However, an impression of the limestone city as Fr. Wolfe saw it, in all its glistening, effulgent beauty, can be gained from a visit to the old Catholic Alms Houses in Nicholas Street. There, the late seventeenth century façade has been miraculously restored by a group of dedicated volunteers. The sight will surely be sufficient to convince the visitor that Georgian red-brick comes only a distinguished second to blue limestone and, incidentally, that the two can make an exquisite combination.

What of the houses? The renovated Alms Houses do not represent the type known to Fr. Wolfe. Their special interest is that they represent a type of city architecture

⁴ Calendar Carew MSS, i, no. 105.

⁵ Noted in E. P. Shirley, "Extracts from the Journal of Thomas Dinely", *Ir. Archae. Jour.*, 2nd ser., 8 (1864-66), 425, fn. 2.

⁶ *State Papers, Henry VIII*, ii, p. 351.

⁷ Shirley, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

later than the medieval and earlier than the Georgian. According to Fr. Wolfe's description, the tower-house was the typical dwelling in late medieval Limerick. It was still typical when Dineley visited a century later. He describes them as "tall built with black unpolished marble, with partition walls, some of five feet thick, and have battlements on the top, and the best cellars, for so many, of any city in England or Ireland".⁸ The historian of Limerick, Lenihan, glossing Dineley, comments that these dwellings caused Limerick to be styled "a city of castles".⁹ Sadly, only the remnants of two survive today. Known as Fanning's Castle and O'Brien's Castle, both are located adjacent to the junction of Nicholas Street and Athlunkard Street. Both have suffered substantial destruction and continue to moulder unregarded, though Fanning's Castle has been designated a National Monument. Galway has done better than Limerick in this respect. One of its medieval tower-houses, the well-known Lynch's Castle, still stands in a fine state of preservation, and may serve as an example of the style of domestic architecture characteristic of Limerick.¹⁰

One final feature which characterised the beauty of his native city for Fr. Wolfe is worthy of note. This was its island setting. In this respect, also, the native was in agreement with contemporary visitors to the city. We saw that William Body declared it to be "a little London for the situation and the plenty". Another Englishman, John Hooker, writing in *Holinshed's Chronicles* in 1587, nicely sums up the consensus: "It [Limerick] standeth upon the famous and noble river of Shannon which goeth round about it, the same being as it were, an Island. The seat of it is such as none can be more fair or more stately".¹¹

The Reformation

Fr. Wolfe's assertion that the Reformation found little support in Limerick at the time of writing is amply substantiated by evidence from other sources. Indeed, by the 1570s when he wrote, it seems clear that the attitude of the Anglo-Irish community as a whole was firmly fixed in recusancy. However, it is not generally realised that this attitude took some time to emerge.

The rather scrappy evidence of the response in Limerick to the pre-Elizabethan phases of the Reformation suggests ambivalence, or perhaps bewilderment, on the part of the citizens. In the course of a visit to the city in 1538, Lord Deputy Gray administered the oath upholding the royal ecclesiastical supremacy to the bishop, the mayor and the aldermen, and made arrangements to have the citizens generally sworn in the same formal manner. He reported that he found ready compliance "without stop or grudge".¹² On the other hand, there is also evidence of staunch adherence to the papacy. Record remains of a friar in Limerick who was imprisoned for preaching against Henry VIII.¹³ There was also John Arthur's rueful experience. This Limerick merchant attempted to secure a death-bed repentance from an adherent of the royal supremacy, a fellow merchant from Wexford who took ill while staying at Arthur's house. The story came to light when the sick man recovered and repaid

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 444.

¹⁰ I wish to thank the Hon. Editor for reminding me of this comparison and also for other helpful comments on the original typescript.

¹¹ *Holinshed's Chronicles*, vol. VI, London 1808, p. 161.

¹² *State Papers, Henry VIII*, iii, p. 57.

¹³ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, xvi, no. 304 (8).

Arthur's hospitality and spiritual solicitude by denouncing him to the government.¹⁴

If the evidence can be taken at face value, the introduction of a more protestant form of Reformation under Edward VI did not unduly disturb the citizens of Limerick. In 1551, the *First Book of Common Prayer*, which replaced the Mass with a Communion Service in English, was introduced in the city. Lord Deputy St. Leger reported on that occasion that the citizens took easily to the change, though the bishop resolutely opposed it. However, it is not at all clear that the citizens realised what was happening. The new Communion Service followed quite closely the structure of the Mass, and it seems that St. Leger had the service translated back into Latin in order to minimise the appearance of innovation.¹⁵

Parliament provides a good barometer of the rising feeling against the Reformation that developed throughout the Anglo-Irish community on the re-introduction of the religious changes under Elizabeth. In the Irish Reformation Parliament under Henry VIII in 1536-37 the royal supremacy legislation enjoyed an easy passage. In contrast, the proceedings of the Irish parliament of 1560, convened to re-enact the Reformation, are shrouded in mystery and suspicion. The little that is known indicates that the measures were pushed through only by untoward interference with the parliamentary process.¹⁶ This was ominous for the success of the Reformation as a popular movement, and as the reign progressed its failure to take root within the Anglo-Irish community became increasingly evident.

The rout suffered by the Reformation in Ireland under Elizabeth has yet to be satisfactorily explained. Although the subject needs much more research, it seems clear that in Ireland as in England—though in quite a different way—the brief Catholic restoration under Mary Tudor, 1553-58, was crucial. This had a steadying influence on the community generally, and provided the opportunity for the Counter Reformation to establish itself. The momentum thus gained was never lost, despite the accession of Elizabeth in 1559 and the reintroduction of the Reformation.

This brings us back to Limerick and to Fr. Wolfe. The city was in the vanguard of the Counter Reformation movement in the crucial initial phase, and it produced two of the outstanding leaders in this period. One was Archbishop Richard Creagh. He returned to his native Limerick from a period spent at continental universities in 1557, and threw himself wholeheartedly into the work of school-teaching, one of the most effective weapons in the armoury of the Counter Reformation in Ireland.¹⁷ The other leader was, of course, David Wolfe. He had served as rector of the Jesuit community at Modena in the 1550s, but was sent back to Ireland as papal legate in 1560. On him, therefore, devolved primary responsibility for maintaining the impetus of the Counter Reformation movement in Ireland during the first phase of its confrontation with the Elizabethan government. Fr. Wolfe, it was, who brought the calibre of his fellow citizen, Fr. Richard Creagh, to the notice of the Roman

¹⁴ Public Record Office, London, S.P. 60/11, no. 39.

¹⁵ Public Record Office, London, S.P. 61/3, no. 3. This interpretation of the episode is argued in my M.A. thesis, "George Browne, First Reformation Archbishop of Dublin", University College, Dublin, 1966.

¹⁶ See my "The Beginnings of Modern Ireland" in Brian Farrell (ed.), *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition*, Dublin 1973, pp. 72 and 80.

¹⁷ Creagh is noticed in *The Dictionary of National Biography*. See also R. D. Edwards, *Church and State in Tudor Ireland*, Dublin 1935, pp. 229-233. His educational apostolate is briefly noted in J. J. Silke, "The Irish Abroad, 1534-1691" in T. W. Moody et al. (eds.), *New History of Ireland*, vol. III, Oxford 1976, p. 618.

authorities which resulted in the elevation of the latter to the primatial see of Armagh.¹⁸ Both men were to live out their lives in circumstances of extreme wretchedness and to die in obscurity. As much by the spirit in which their suffering were borne as by their active apostolates they each made a major contribution to the success of the Counter Reformation in Ireland and in their native city.

The Castle, the Citizens, and the Natives

Evidently King John's Castle was as dilapidated in the sixteenth century as it is today. Here, also, Fr. Wolfe is corroborated by William Body, the English commissioner who visited the city in 1536. Having remarked on the elegance of the city he added that "the castle hath need of reparation".¹⁹ Indeed, enough evidence exists to show that the castle was in a state of neglect throughout the preceding two centuries. It is worthwhile pondering the significance of this situation.

The castle belonged to the English crown, not to the city. Its purpose was to serve as a strategic military base. Its neglect suggests, therefore, a lack of interest on the part of English government in military operations in Ireland. This was, in fact, the case. France proved a more attractive theatre of war to the English in the late medieval period, partly for reasons of prestige and partly because the pickings were better, while the Kingdom of Scotland was the major preoccupation from the point of view of security.²⁰

The other aspect of this question is the political relationship between the two racial communities within Ireland. Sometimes Irish history is presented as an unending struggle between the two races, the native Gaels and the invaders and their descendants from the time of Strongbow in the twelfth century. That is a gross distortion. In fact the two races learned to live together. Although the Anglo-Irish retained a strong sense of their racial distinctiveness, a process of cultural acclimatisation occurred—to the extent of *ipsis Hibernicis Hiberniores* in many cases—as well as a process of alienation from the English. In any case, co-operation made economic sense. Here Limerick provides a good example. The prosperity of the Anglo-Irish city depended on its predominantly Gaelic hinterland. From there came the footstuffs which Fr. Wolfe tells us were so abundantly available to the citizens. From there also came the commodities on which the export trade of the city merchants depended—animal hides and such luxury items as furs, goshawks and ponies, as well, presumably, as the yarn for the famous "Limerick mantle".²¹ In turn, the Gaelic hinterland looked to the city and port as an outlet for its produce and as the source which supplied such important imports as salt, wine and iron. All of this made for good working relations. That is not to say that racial animosities were non-existent. There was quite a lot of snobbery and prejudice on both sides, such as might exist today between city 'slickers' and country 'mugs'. Further, in a less socially disciplined age tensions

¹⁸ Edwards, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ *Calendar Carew MSS*, 1, no. 105.

²⁰ James Lydon, *The Lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages*, Dublin 1972, pp. 241-278.

²¹ On Irish luxury exports in the late medieval period see the letter of John Alen, Archbishop of Dublin, to Thomas Cromwell (19 March 1531) promising to send him the following year "one hobby, one hawk and one Limerick mantle which three things have been all the commodities for a gentleman's pleasure in these parts", *State Papers, Henry VIII*, ii, p. 158. A good general account of the way in which the Anglo-Irish towns meshed economically with their Gaelic hinterlands is in Nicholas Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland*, Sussex 1976, pp. 4-10. Cf. D. B. Quinn and K. W. Nicholls, "Ireland in 1534" in Moody *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

thus generated could more easily erupt in violence. However, it would be a mistake to regard any of this as evidence of political fragmentation along racial lines. Indeed, the citizens of Limerick are found in the 1530s insisting on their right to continue normal trading relations with the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic communities in their hinterland irrespective of whatever quarrels the Dublin government wished to pursue there.²² Fr. Wolfe's account of the ballistic resources of the city in the 1570s—scarcely enough to fire a respectable salute to a visiting dignitary—sufficiently indicates how far the Anglo-Irish citizens were from considering themselves to be at war with their Gaelic neighbours.

Thus, King John's Castle was Limerick's medieval white elephant. It had not been garrisoned for centuries, and as often as not the caretaker was an absentee who got the job by pulling strings in Dublin or London and who pocketed his allowance without ever setting foot in Limerick.²³

This happy situation was in the process of changing when Fr. Wolfe wrote. Indeed, his "Description of Ireland" was in itself an ominous sign. It was written as an intelligence report for the benefit of a projected Spanish expedition to Ireland to champion the Catholic cause against the protestant English. In the following century Limerick was to endure three major sieges. Much of its medieval architecture would be destroyed in the process. The cruel irony is that the castle enjoyed a new lease of life, renovated and adapted for modern warfare.

²² *State Papers, Henry VIII*, iii, pp. 105 and 108. *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, xiv(i), no. 994.

²³ For instance, Andrew Wise, a native of Waterford who occupied the post of assistant to the vice-treasurer in the Dublin administration, was constable of the castle of Limerick in the 1540s and 1550s (see *Calendar of Patent and Close Rolls Ireland, Henry VIII-Elizabeth*, p. 235).