The Reverend Foster Archer's Visit to Limerick and Clare, 1801

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Among what are known as the Hardwicke Papers (Additional MSS. 35920) in the British Museum is a manuscript of 27 folio pages written in a clear hand (only the occasional word is indecipherable) by the Reverend Foster Archer, Inspector General of the Prisons in Ireland, who set out from Dublin on the 2nd of July, 1801, and returned there on the 7th October, thus terminating "a journey of 562 Irish miles, performed on horse-back, and an absence from home of three months and five days". From Dublin he travelled through Kildare, Carlow and Kilkenny, then on to Clonmel, Cork and into Kerry. From thence to Limerick, Clare, Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Longford, Westmeath and back to Dublin.

The MSS has, what we can call for convenience, two titles. Written horizontally, the first page reads:

> Observations on a Tour made Through
> Leinster Munster & Connaught
> by the Revd. F. Archer Inspector General of the Prisons of Ireland.

The more detailed title written diagonally along the head of the second page reads as follows:

> A Journal containing a Report on the State of Prisons, County Hospitals, Charter Schools etc. as attained in a Tour thro' the Provinces of Leinster, Munster and Connaught began July 2nd. 1801, by Revd. F. Archer, Inspector General of the Prisons in Ireland.

It is, in fact, a report of a Castle Official to Lord Hardwicke, then the Viceroy of Ireland.

It is a fascinating and curious document, containing besides his official report on the prisons, hospitals and Charter Schools, first-hand observations, often tantalising in their brevity it is true, on a wide range of subjects: farming, hurling, illicit whiskey and scenery, to mention but a few. Curiously punctuated, it contains several unfinished sentences, many miss-spellings, and a paucity of paragraphs, while his over-liberal use of capitals all through is amusing and sometimes irritating. Why, one wonders, is he so ready at the drop of a hat to dignify not only ordinary nouns with a capital letter, but verbs, adjectives and even adverbs as well?

Unfortunately he tells us very little about himself. We do not know where he stayed or with whom while on tour. The social contacts he must have made are unrecorded. True, we find him at Oranmore "in free conversation over a bowl of Punch with his host", and he must have sampled the illicit whiskey on the road between Ennis and Gort as he says that it possessed "a fiery new Taste", but there is no reference to a Big House or a Gentleman's Residence anywhere.

One forms the impression that he was a rather straight-laced official, a conscientious clergyman who did his duty, and who was not afraid to tell the truth about the appaling conditions in many of the gaols and Charter Schools he visited. While he

may not have made many sweeping changes, he certainly ameliorated the lot of some convicts. Accustomed as he was to seeing the miserable conditions existing in these gaols, and generally accepting their necessity, he could on occasion be moved to recommend clemency. Although Charter Schools were regarded as one of the most effective means of converting the Irish natives to Protestantism, he never hesitates to criticise the way in which many were run.

He must have been an unwelcome and unpopular visitor. He did his job conscientiously. He tasted the soup; he examined the bed clothes; he was nearly suffocated in Kilkenny gaol prying into the conditions of prisoners in a dungeon there. In the course of his inspection he certainly opened a few windows which, one suspects, were not closed again in a hurry.

From internal evidence it would appear that the Revd. Mr. Archer entered County Limerick, possibly through Tarbert, on the 12th of September, 1801, reached the city on the 14th, and left for Clare on the 17th, thus spending six days in Limerick County and city. As he has not given dates for his tour of Clare it is not possible to ascertain how long he spent there.

The following is the revelant extract, three and a half pages of the manuscript. unaltered in any way.

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The course of Husbandry and Land appear to considerable Advantage entering This County from Kerry where much cannot be Said of its Rural Economy or Mode of Agriculture, The Western Part of the County Limerick is Rich, Luxuriant and Beautiful, from a High Hill called Knock Patrick is one of the finest Prospects in this or any Kingdom. You may unassisted by Glasses see the Entire Reach of the River Shannon from Limerick to the Island of Scattery which is near 50 Miles. This Mountain stands near Shanna Goulden the Neighbourhood of which was lately Disturbed by a Capt. Slasher who amused himself by whipping and tormenting such Persons in the Vicinity as were Objects of his Rapine or Dislike. He was Happily arrested in his favourite amusement by Doctor Warner belonging to Captain Massey's Corp of Yeomanry tried by a Court Martial and received such a whipping at the Fair of Shanna Goulden as He will long Remember and afterwards Transported. Since his Punishment the County has been tolerably quite. In this Part of the County the Palatines[1] happily Inhabit. Those men were refugees from Germany driven thence at a persecuting Season by the Empress Therese. They Introduced Habits of Industry and some excellent Modes of Farming Particularly the Drill Husbandry of Potatoes which is generally now practiced in this District. Those Palatines are Numerous, Brave and

[1] Eight hundred Palatine families, mostly refugees from about the German towns of Heidelberg, Mannheim, Spires and Worms, were originally settled in Ireland in 1709. By 1712, however, most of these had left the country. About 200 families, *i.e.* circa 1,200 persons, remained, concentrated on the estate of Sir Thomas Southwell near Rathkeale. For the best account of the Palatines in Co. Limerick see R. Hayes, *N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 1 (1936-39), 45-53.

Loyal. Rode through a Pleasant Country to Shannon Grove. Visited the Charter Schools.[2] John Hurst Master of that for boys. 49 were said to be on the foundation Eight of whom were ill in Fevers including those I could find but 33 in the House who were Miserably Deficient in Catechism in Reading and Writing. Examined the meat in the Pot for Dinner (for it was Sunday) it was coarse and very indifferent. Children were Ragged & Barefooted and had not been at Church, Catechist had not Visited since the 13th. August. In fine Negligence in Education & Clothing & Great Frugality in Diet was Manifest. The Physician had not Visited the Sick since the Preceding Thursday. The front of the house is falling. Visited the Nursery Adjoining. Cath. Kerr Mistress. 100 Children are contained therein of Whom 20 were ill. House was very clean and appeared to be well Conducted. No person Visited since June 13th. Inspected the Gaols at Limerick both are in such a Decayed state it would be an useless Expenditure to Attempt to repair them. A New Gaol[3] is Building for the County, which I examined. The Cells are small and very Badly ventilated. Shewed the Architect a Plan for Remedying this great Defect which He Promised to adopt without Delay, also fixed a Site for an Hospital for the Gaol which was Strangely left out of the Plan. Architects Generally know how to Build Private Houses & Churches but I have scarcely met one in Ireland that knew how to Build an Healthy Safe or Convenient Prison. In the Old County Gaol was a fellow named Broe who had been convicted of the Murder of the Bolands. Why he was Respited from Execution cannot say. He was a Desperate Villian and Affected Sickness to avoid Transportation. I had him sent off. He is now at Cork well on board ship for Botany

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[2] In 1733 the Protestant laity, under the auspices of Archbishop Boulter, founded industrial schools under a royal charter in different parts of the country, where the children of the poorer Roman Catholics were (in theory) taught, fed, clothed and apprenticed to a trade. It was hoped that this system would make Protestants of "the young of the Papists". Once a Catholic child was admitted, all communication between itself and its parents were severed, and it was housed as far away from home as possible. But the scheme quickly deteriorated. Official visitors found the children ill-fed, sickly, pale and miserable, and generally ill-instructed in their Protestant Catechism. John Howard, a prison reformer, who visited many of these establishments in 1788, in his evidence before a Committee of Inquiry stated: "The state of most of the schools which I visited was so deplorable as to disgrace Protestantism and to encourage Popery in Ireland rather than the contrary". In many schools, he continued, "the children are not allowed sufficient food, clothing or other necessaries . . . in many of these schools they were half-starved, half-naked and covered with cutaneous disorders . . .".

There are many such reports, all unfavourable. At length, in 1825 a Royal Commission was appointed to enquire into them. The Commission condemned them, recommending the discontinuation of Parliamentary grants as the shortest road to their closure. They disappeared in 1832 when their subsidies finally ceased.

[3] According to Maurice Lenihan's *Limerick; Its History and Antiquities* (Dublin 1866), a gaol was erected in 1750 in the middle of Mary Street (p. 341), but in 1810, as it has become a public nuisance, the Grand Jury presented a sum of £6,023 4s. 3d. for the erection of a new gaol on the Dean's Close, in Bow Lane near St. Mary's Cathedral (p. 428). This new gaol, with a stage in front for the execution of criminals, was completed in November 1813 (p. 430). The County Gaol, on the Cork Road, was started in 1817 and finished, at a cost of £23,000, in 1821 (pp. 447-448). Lenihan makes no reference to the "New Gaol" which Revd. Mr. Archer says was being built for the county in 1801, unless it might possibly have been the earlier County Gaol which had been "anciently adjoining the present City Prison, with an entrance from Crosby Row" (p. 448, fn. 1).

Bay. Visited the House of Industry[4] Where an Inhuman Practice Prevails of Putting Chains and Heavy Logs on Vargants Sick and Well Industrious or Idle, Orderly or Riotous. I had those chains removed from the Diseased the Industrious and Well Behaved. This Indiscriminate Practice of Changing Human creatures is very Reprehensible. It Covers an Oppressive System of Making the Wretched Beings Pay the Beadle for taking them off. Visited the County Hospital which was Extremely crowded. The House notwithstanding was clean and Regular.

Rode thro' the Corleach Mountains[5] into the County of Clare. Saw a vast Deal of Oats & Potatoes in the Valleys. Rural Husbandry better Practiced in this than in either the Counties of Kerry or Limerick. Conversed much with People of every Class and perceived no Visible signs of Disaffection. Peasantry appeared to be very Industrious. Considerable Quantities of Coarse Linen Yarn Manufactured in Several Parts of the County. I had indeed Heard that many Private Stills were at work on the Banks of the Shannon & in the Northern parts of the County towards the County of Galway & I give credit to this information because along the Road to Gort Whiskey was openly sold in many Cabins without Licence. Visited the Charter School at Newmarket. 35 Boys were in it all Regular at School. Examined them in Reading Writing & Catechism in which they were tolerably Proficient Especially in the latter was not surprised at this House Exceeding all I had seen (except the Foundling Hospital at Cork which I believe to be the Best Regulated in the Kingdom) When informed that the Revd. Mr. Weldon Rector of the Parish Superintended its Management. The House was Extremely Clean. The Children all Healthy. At my Coming from the Charter School met the Wretched Convicts 3 women & 2 men on their Route to Cork. One man appeared to have some Terrible Affection. I ordered him some Stimulating Beverage which in the space of an Hour relieved him so He Proceeded. Inspected the Gaol at Ennis[6] which as every other Public Institution under the Care of the Revd. Mr. Weldon I found as Usual Clean & Regular. A Fever has subsisted here for the past four Months but by the Removal of Convicts & the [word indecipherable] of the Hospital, the Attention of the Medical Assistant and great Attention to Cleanliness and Ventilation it was before I left Ennis nearly subdued. One Convict named James Ryan found Guilty of Picking Pocketts in the Year 95 Could not be sent off. I think his Long Imprisonment and Heavy Sickness should go in Mitigation of his Sentence. Visited the Hospital which is Conducted on a very Narrow Scale 5 Intern Patients being all that will be admitted. Those I saw were such as Required the Attention of a Surgeon. The Medical Attendant Doctor Finnucane is not a Surgeon & it has been Questioned whether He be a Regular Physician. Surgical Cases are Generally the Prevailing ones in County Hospitals.

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[4] The foundation stone of the House of Industry, a building on the North Strand, opposite the present courthouse, was laid in 1774. *The History of Limerick* (Limerick 1787), by John Ferrar, contains a fine line-drawing of its elevation. Sir John Carr also visited this house in 1805 and found it "a gloomy abode of mingled want, disease, vice and malady, where lunatics were logged with heavy chains and fallen women were ironed and logged." In 1863 Elizabeth Fry and her brother visited it and, surprisingly enough, found it ". . . a useful institution" with which they were much pleased.

[5] The Cratloe Hills.

[6] The gaol stood where the Old Ground Hotel is at present—for a history of the gaol in Ennis see T. Kelly, *N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 16 (1973-74), 66-69.

I preached this day at Ennis Church[7] to a Large and Respectable Congregation. My Subject was the Love of our Country. very reasonable when founded on our Attachment to Our Excellent King & unrivalled Constitution. The Road from Ennis to Cusheen[8] (a Small Village Distant 8 Miles) is rugged and Mountainous the Country not well Inhabited the few Cabins adjoining the road had a Naggin and Glass Exhibited as a sign that Whiskey was there to be sold. The Same Signal was Exhibited along the Road to Galway & as it was sold Considerably under the Rate it is in Licensed Houses and besides possessing a fiery new Taste it is certain that it was a Recent Manufacture. Indeed it was told as no secret that some Gentlemen about Gort had private Stills & were extensively engaged in Malting & Making Spirits between Ennis and Gort. Oats Barley & Potatoes were Plentiful.

[7] In 1871 the Church of Ireland opened the present church in Bindon Street. Previous to that date services were held in the old Franciscan Friary in Abbey Street.

[8] Crusheen.