

Gleanings from the Meetings of the Corporation of Limerick, 1809-1823

CHARLOTTE MURPHY

Apparently the only surviving nineteenth century Minute Book of Limerick Corporation is that which covers the period 1809-1823, and is now in the possession of the Limerick City Library, Pery Square, Limerick. The present article is based on a selection of entries from this book, chosen as personal interest dictated.

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There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's capital had gather'd then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men.¹

So goes the opening of Byron's famous poem about the Duke of Richmond's ball, held on a June night, 1815; a ball that has passed into history and literature. This same Duke of Richmond was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1807 to 1813, and during the course of his administration in Dublin he visited Limerick, where on the 25th of September, 1809, it was resolved by the Corporation that upon his arrival he should be presented with an address. The document praised, in lavish terms, his administration of affairs in Ireland; it referred to his *conciliating disposition*² and his *firm tho temperate administration of indiscriminate justice*. The Duke was also assured that *all ranks feel the blessings of our enviable constitution and will cheerfully unite in preserving it*.

One historian has described the Duke of Richmond as someone who at the time "was forty-three years of age, and had gained the reputation of a sportsman. He was a keen cricketer and a patron of the 'noble art' of boxing. In his early years he had distinguished himself in a duel with the Duke of York, and altogether was a typical man of the world, to whom the world was very kind. He was assured that the Government of Ireland was a simple matter—no work to do and plenty of opportunities for cultivating those social arts so dear to him and to his duchess".³ Richmond had furthermore, selected Arthur Wellesley as his Chief Secretary, and he had promised that the laws concerning Catholics would be administered by him "with mildness and good temper".⁴ Arthur Wellesley is, of course, the same who later became the Duke of Wellington, and who, on the day following Richmond's ball (see above) won the Battle of Waterloo.

As a further mark of esteem, the Duke and his party were invited to dinner at Swinburne's Hotel, at the expense of the Corporation, and on the 25th of October,

¹ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Eve of Waterloo*.

² Italics indicate quotations from the Minutes of the Corporation of Limerick, 1809-1823.

³ Charles O'Mahony, *The Viceroys of Ireland*, London 1912, p. 213.

⁴ Elizabeth Longford, *The Years of the Sword*, London 1969, p. 174.

the Committee of Accounts recommended the payment of *the Bile of Mr. Swinburne for the entertainment lately given by the Corporation to his Grace the Duke of Richmond amounting to £183. 9. 9.*

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At the same meeting on the 25th of October, 1809, a committee was appointed consisting of the Mayor, Right Hon. Colonel Vereker, John Prendergast Smyth, Thomas Maunsell, and Rev. Thomas Shepherd. The purpose of the committee was the preparation of an address of congratulation to King George III upon *his happy succession to the fiftieth year of his Reign*. Another task was also given to this committee: in honour of the occasion the sum of one hundred pounds was to be paid by the Corporation for the relief of the poor of the city, and the above named men had to decide in what manner the money was to be spent so that it was *most likely to be of permanent advantage*.

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On 23rd July, 1810, Thomas Arthur of Glenomera and his drivers were attacked, as reported in the Minutes of the 27th of July, 1810, *on the road near Roxboro about One oclock of that day by a numerous and riotous Mob armed with Reaping Hooks and other dangerous Weapons*, while they were returning with cattle which they had seized from Thomas Mulcahy for non-payment of rent for land called Ligadoon *in the South Liberties of the City of Limerick*, and the cattle were, in turn, taken from Arthur and his drivers.

The Council was determined to *suppress such daring outrages* so a reward was offered to anyone who, within six months, could supply information leading to the arrest and conviction of those who took part in the raid. However, a particular attention was paid to the attacker who fired a pistol at Arthur; one hundred pounds was offered as a reward for his capture as compared with fifty pounds offered for the other members of the party. If any member of the party of the attackers, again other than the man who fired the pistol, voluntarily surrendered and caused any other member of the party to be arrested he would get £50 and an application would be made to the Government for a pardon.

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The Duke of York was the second son of George III, and was Commander-in-Chief of the Army. However, on the 27th of January, 1809, a certain Colonel Wardle, with information he had gathered from a former mistress of the Duke, a Mrs. Clarke, rose in the House of Commons to move that:

a Committee be appointed to investigate the conduct of His Royal Highness the Duke of York, in his capacity of Commander-in-Chief, with regard to appointments, promotions, exchanges, the raising of new levies and the general state of the Army.⁵

⁵ Roger Fulford, *Royal Dukes*, revised edition, London and Glasgow 1973, p. 77.

This Mrs. Clarke had been born in Bowl and Pin Alley, off Chancery Lane, London; she had married a stonemason and had then lived with progressively grander people until she had reached the heights of the Royal Family. She considered that she had been treated badly by the Duke, and to obtain revenge she had told Colonel Wardle of how she took bribes to influence promotions in the army through the Duke. An enquiry was held by the full House of Commons and a decision in favour of the Duke, by eighty-two votes, was returned. However, one hundred and ninety-six members had thought him guilty of "personal corruption and connivance at the infamous practices disclosed by Mrs. Clarke",⁶ and he therefore resigned his post as Commander-in-Chief.

However, Frederick, Duke of York, was re-appointed in 1811 and on this occasion the *Corporation of the ancient City of Limerick*, meeting in the month of July, 1811, presented him with the following address:

We his Majesty's loyal subjects, the Mayor, Sheriffs and Citizens of the City of Limerick in Council assembled, humbly beg leave to solicit your Royal Highness's acceptance of our warmest congratulations upon the re-appointment of your Royal Highness to the Chief Command of His Majesty's Forces.

In the same entry the Corporation expressed sorrow for *the greivous malady with which it has pleased God to afflict our gracious Sovereign*—George III had suffered from bouts of madness during his lifetime, but had recovered from them until the summer of 1811 when he went finally mad. He was:

a pathetic figure in his purple dressing-gown with his wild white beard and hair, totally blind, totally deaf, playing to himself on his harpsicord and talking, talking, talking of men and women long since dead.⁷

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The very unsettled state of Ireland is again seen in the entry minuted for the 12th of October, 1812:

Whereas on the night of 4th day of June last Gilbert Keith of the 90th Regiment on duty as Centinel, at the Kings Stores Henry Street, was fired at by some villian whereby his cap was perforated and his head grazed and whereas early in the Morning of the 26th day of September, Rolent Thompson of the 90th Regiment on Duty at said Stores, was fired at, whereby he was wounded so as that he suffered amputation of his left leg. And whereas on the night of 10th Inst., Patrick Loughan of the Galway Regiment, on duty at the Commissariat Stores in Clare Street, was fired at and wounded in the left hand.

Now holding in abhorrance such sanguinary acts, and the Repetition of such Cruelties, and in Order to bring to condign punishment those concerned in such Treacherous conduct, a Reward of One Hundred Pounds Sterling will be paid by the Corporation of this City, for apprehending and prosecuting to conviction within Six Calendar Months from this Date of Any one or more of the Persons, concerned in any of the said Outrages.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

⁷ J. H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges*, London and Glasgow 1956, p. 146.

Improvements and development also figure, if only very slightly, in the life of the Corporation. On the 11th of October, 1813, an application was made by the Ballast Office for the rock called The Beeves lying in the Shannon in order to erect *a Tower or Bacon* [sic] so that ships would not be wrecked on the rock. The Corporation agreed to this request and granted the rock to the Ballast office for a period of nine-hundred and ninety-nine years, at a nominal rent (not specified).

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There are also lists entered in the Minute Book of various expenditures authorised by the Committee of Accounts. One order for the 21st of April, 1815, gives payment of £423. 17. 5. to Mr. James Pain, Architect, for various repairs and alterations (not specified) to the Exchange in Nicholas Street. Mr. Andrew James Watson, was paid £23. 17. 5. for repairing and lighting the globes of the Exchange; however, the length of time that this payment covered is not stated. A company referred to as Messrs Meade & French was paid £88. 4. 3. for supplying the Mayor, Sergeants and Constables with hats for 1814.

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In February, 1817, when returning from the opening of Parliament, an attempt was made on the life of the Prince Regent. He was hated because of his public extravagance and luxurious living at a time of near starvation for the labouring poor in England, even though in cold reality his style of living did not add to the distress of the poor. The Corporation directed that an address stating its happiness at the failure of the assassination attempt be forwarded to His Royal Highness.

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On 1st December of the same year the Corporation had another cause to direct that an address be forwarded to the Prince Regent. However, this was an unhappy occasion, for his only daughter, Charlotte, Princess of Wales, had died while giving birth to a dead son. She had been popular because of her youth and high spirits and the country was stunned by her death.

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It was decided to give the sum of £50 to the Fever Hospital, on the 12th of October, 1818. This institution stood on the site of what is now St. John's Hospital. In a recent history of that hospital the following explanation is given of the word "fever":

The word "fever" was used mostly to denote typhus, typhoid and cholera. These seem to have been endemic, because smouldering cases of fever were always to be found in the poorer districts of the city; but occasionally they flared up into virulent epidemics in which the mortality rate was very high.⁸

⁸ John F. Devane, *History of St. John's Hospital*, published privately 1973, p. 7.

One such epidemic broke out in Limerick in the years 1817-1819, and during that time three thousand, one hundred and fifty-three patients were admitted to the hospital. Conditions in the face of the huge outbreak were very bad indeed. The institution was built to cater for seventy-eight patients at a time, but during these outbreaks the daily numbers rose to one hundred and ninety-one. The extra patients were housed by covering the lobbies and the floors with straw, in order to provide beds, and placing three or four people, who were complete strangers to each other, in each of such beds.

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At the beginning of the nineteenth century a conflict which had begun, in fact, in the middle of the previous century came again into sharp focus. The Corporation was considered to be a body only interested in farming out the Corporation's estate at low rents to friends and members, and in charging high taxes and giving little or no services to the city in return. As Newtown Pery grew, merchants and prosperous citizens generally were determined to keep themselves free of the toils of this rapacious body. Therefore a Bill giving self-government to that part of Limerick was fought for and finally became law in 1808.

However, the party called the Independent Citizens continued the conflict with the Corporation. Their plea came before the Clare Assizes in 1814, and on the 11th of March of that year a decision was given in favour of the Independents, by which they asserted their rights to the franchise and freedom of the city *by birth by servitude and by marriage*. Up to this the Corporation attempted to limit the privilege, where possible, to its adherents. The issue was extremely important because freemen held borough franchise and were free from the city taxes.

However, in spite of the Court's decision an entry dated the 4th of January, 1819, would seem to indicate that the ruling did not end the conflict.

Resolved unanimously That Whereas it appears to this Council that Subscriptions have been levied with great activity in all parts of the City for the purpose of carrying on a vexatious Petition against the Return of the Hon. Major Vereker, and whereas the chief object of the Petition is to try the right of the Corporation to make non resident freemen, and to oblige it to make others Free which they do not conceive they are bound to do, and in fact to try the very questions which this Corporation have been long engaged in law about. Resolved therefore that our Chamberlain be directed to defend this said Petition as far as the rights of this Corporation are involved and that he be allowed such Sums (as it shall appear to this Corporation upon account being by him furnished) as he shall have expended for the above purpose.

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A committee was set up to ascertain the value of certain premises belonging to the Corporation, with a view to granting them to the Right Honourable Lord Viscount Gort, for a term of three lives, renewable forever, at a yearly rent of £67. 0. 3. The report returned was recorded on the 11th of October, 1819. All the properties to be

let were described as being inadequate in some respects, in order, it would appear, to justify the allocation and low rent charged. The following are some examples, but it is not a full list of all the properties rented to Lord Gort. Nos. 1, 2, 3, Carr's premises, Carr Street, consisted of three small plots of ground on which there were ruins of cabins. The Lime Kiln plots contained about two acres and adjoined the town wall on one side and St. Michael's burial ground on the other; Murphy's plot was in the Irish-town, fronting John's Street, with a rear on Frances Street. Gloster's Concerns adjoined Thomond Bridge; here the proposed widening of the bridge meant the removal, it was claimed, of the most valuable of these tenements; adjoining this there was an old inn and several small tenements, all in bad repair.

At the same meeting the island of Rhebogue was granted on a lease of three lives, renewable forever, at a yearly rent of one hundred and twenty pounds and a peppercorn, to Denis Fitzgerald Mahony and Daniel Gabbett. Both men had been or were then members of the Corporation.

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The activities of the Corporation did not, however, go unnoticed by the London Government. The petitions and complaints from its Limerick opponents ensured an investigation by Westminster, for on the 26th of June, 1820, it was pointed out that the Corporation's books had been taken to London by the Town Clerk, by order of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

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The Corporation proposed that an address be sent to King George IV, in order to offer congratulations on his *safe arrival* when he paid a state visit to Ireland. The address continued by expressing the *just sense of obligation we feel to your Majesty's condesention in bestowing so distinguished a mark of your Royal Favour upon this Country.*

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Ireland was given a new Lord Lieutenant in 1822; he was, in fact, a brother to the Duke of Wellington, but, unlike the Duke, he was known to favour Catholic Emancipation. He was, therefore, welcomed to the country by a great public meeting, at which an address of congratulation was proposed by Daniel O'Connell and seconded by Richard Lalor Sheil. The annual decoration by Orangemen to the statue of King William, in College Green, Dublin, was forbidden by order of the new Lord Lieutenant and the Orangemen reacted with predictable anger. On his way to the theatre a bottle was hurled at his head but it missed its target and the culprit was arrested; and on the 30th of December, 1822, the following resolution was passed by the Limerick Corporation:

Resolved unanimously that an address be forwarded to his Excellency Marquis Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, expressing our horror and detestation of the vile and atrocious attack made on his Excellency at the Theatre and our Congratulations on the fortunate preservation of his Excellency.