

Some Matters Touching Dromoland: Letters of Father and Son, 1758-59

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The rather strained relations between the profligate, horse-loving Sir Edward O'Brien, 2nd Baronet Dromoland, and his more serious, hard-working, if relatively dull son, Lucius, later 3rd Baronet Dromoland, are here examined through some of their correspondence of 1758-59.¹

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Sir Lucius O'Brien (1731-1795), 3rd Baronet Dromoland, is of interest for two reasons. He was, as a member of the Irish Parliament for all but one of 35 years, a hardworking if unglamorous, solid and thorough man of public affairs, usually in Opposition and a contributor to the patriotic cause. He was among those men of the second rank—men like Charlemont, Hussey Burgh, Pery, or Yelverton—who made possible the work of Grattan and parliamentary independence in 1782. In this respect he is nicely representative of one sort of Ascendancy figure. A second reason for interest is his place in an extraordinary array of four generations of Dromoland O'Briens in eighteenth century Ireland: the first baronet Donough (son of Máire Ruadh); his son Lucius; his son Edward, second baronet; Edward's son Lucius, third baronet. These four, so various in character and conduct, are marvellously typical of the diverse ways and fortunes of their class in this period. This second point, and more particularly the relationship of the father Edward and his son Lucius, and specifically some letters written by Edward in 1758 and the following year are presented and treated here.

Sir Lucius O'Brien was a member of six Parliaments, for County Clare or the borough of Ennis (and once, failing of Clare, for Tuam) from 1761 to his death in 1795.² He was in opposition to government a proponent of the limitation of parliamentary duration and regular elections at fixed intervals; he was a foremost proponent of free trade "pure and simple". He was active in seeking to open up the North American fishing grounds to Ireland and the Portuguese fisheries and trade. He was active in working for improvements in inland navigation, especially Shannon navigation and in the scheme for the Grand Canal. He supported Gardiner's Catholic Relief Bill. He was in county affairs and in private capacity an improving farmer and landlord, a grant-seeking and contributing member of the Dublin Society and proud host to Arthur Young; he attempted manufactures (linen and iron); he attended to road construction and maintenance; he solicited support for the refurbishing and upkeep of parish churches; he courageously refused to fight a duel at election time when barbarity of that sort was still expected of his station; he corresponded concerning

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¹The letters from Sir Lucius O'Brien to his father Edward printed here are among the Inchiquin Manuscripts (though not Calendared in Ainsworth), National Library of Ireland. For permission to print I thank the late Phadraig Lord Inchiquin; my thanks also to the staff of the National Library of Ireland for kind assistance. Support for this research was furnished by the Rackham School of Graduate Studies and the faculty assistance fund of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, University of Michigan.

²M.P. for Ennis 1761-68; Clare 1768-76; Ennis 1776-79; Clare 1779-82; Tuam 1783-90; Ennis 1791-95. See Ivar O'Brien, *O'Brien of Thomond*, Chichester 1986, p. 245, fn. 38.

Irish antiquities with the Chevalier O'Gorman, Charles Vallencey, and Charles O'Connor of Belanagare.³

As a patriot, Lucius O'Brien was a man of long hours, hard work, minute statistical studies; he made solid and substantial, diligent and tedious speeches, he corresponded at length with William Knox, he wrote pamphlets, he travelled to London to interview with various Boards of Trade. He gave the kind of attention to fact and detail that made possible the glamour of Flood and Grattan and the winning of free trade, the repeal of the Declaratory Act, the 'sixth of George', the triumph of Parliamentary Independence in 1782. His work was like that of Charlemont organizing the Volunteers, Hussey Burgh the most noted writer on trade, Sexton Pery as Speaker managing the Commons, and Barry Yelverton in legal affairs. He knew himself to be a drudge and a dull fellow, but not a drone. He writes to his wife Ann (French) who loved and admired him through twenty-seven years (1768-95) of marriage:

8 September 1771: We have had a Quiet good Summer Assizes without much business but what fell to the lot of that Drudge your husband as Foreman of the Grand Jury, whom I verily believe was formed for bearing Burthens all his life like Sterne's Ass & whom I compassionate as much as that Master of fine Feelings did his patient companion.⁴

³Ivar O'Brien, pp. 147-154; Froude, *The English in Ireland*, II, pp. 181, 223-4, 231-2, 342, 497; Lecky, *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, II, pp. 19, 84, 227, 232, 286; Ainsworth, *The Inchiquin Manuscripts*, Dublin 1960, nos. 598 to 760, variously; letters from 1762-1780; no. 725 is from Charles O'Connor of Belanagare. RIA MS 24D18, 12 July 1781, Chevalier O'Gorman to Lucius, on Antiquities. For Lucius' refusal to duel see Leo F. McNamara, "The Diary of an Eighteenth Century Clare Gentleman", *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 23(1981), 25-65. Lucius persisted in and was successful in soliciting support for the repair of church fabric despite the rather tart rebuke from his kinsman Inchiquin (IM no. 655, of 23 November 1766): "My dear good Sir Lucius, what is it that you see in me a propensity to build churches or endow them? An old fashion piece of Piety long ago neglected by Bishops, Deans, & Chapters; it would astonish and make these good men blush at such an attempt by a layman... as for me, I have no ambition for popularity of that kind. My advowsons cost me daily too much already to maintain; my ancestors built three cathedrals & endowed them, I think sufficient for me and my family..."

⁴Inchiquin MSS, NLI. Ainsworth notes in passing (IM, p214) that there are some 50 letters from Ann to Lucius O'Brien, but he does not calendar them in detail as "few are of special interest". These letters seem to me to be of considerable interest indeed, as affording a very detailed account of a domestic relationship, warm and affectionate. I am presently preparing the letters for publication. It may be of interest here to append the character of Sir Lucius written by Ann for their children in the year of his death, 1795:

To be as fortunate in that respect [marriage] as their mother has been is beyond my hope, for where is there within my knowledge such a man as their Father?—

Without Partiality, he is an Example his Children ought to make it their Whole study to Copy; none can know his heart as I do, who have the happiness of being his wife; and I know it to be possessed of as many virtues, as human nature will Permit, which we are told, is not Perfect in *this* Life; in the *next* I humbly *Hope* and *trust* his merits may meet their *full* reward; his Temper is the most perfect I ever saw, equally free from Passion, Sullenness, ill nature or resentment; if any man can be too Benevolent I believe he is, for he so soon forgives, that Minds less generous than his Own may sometimes, as I know do, take advantage of his Philanthropy, tho' a most Delightful Part of the Human Character—

His religion is of the purest kind, equally free as his temper, from any extremes of Enthusiastick Heat; superstition [*sic*], or the cold indifference too often shown by those who think the former a proof of a weak understanding; his Devotion is warm, and steady, yet as much as possible even *too much* concealed; I have often wished it to be more known, that such an Example might have more weight, at least to his Children, no one however indifferent to him could (as I have often had the comfort of doing) attend him to the great Solemnity of Our Lord's Supper & not wish to imitate his Example... [his bearing shows him] to be in charity with all men.

This, accompanied by quotations of devotional verse, are testimony that she loved and admired him all her married life. Her piety and discerning spirit are remarkable. TCD MS 5096.

Lucius' letters to his wife give a remarkably detailed picture of his affairs while he was periodically away from her and Dromoland, in Dublin or London on government or estate business. They show him consistently mindful of public and national affairs; they show an attractively regardful man, systematically and often anxiously struggling to clear the estate of debt, the legacy of a prodigal father.

Máire Ruadh, widow of Conor O'Brien, slain in 1651 at the Battle of Inchicronan during the Cromwellian conquest, saved the Leamanagh-Dromoland O'Briens by marriage to one of the victors, the trooper John Cooper. Her son Donough by shrewd and careful dealing became by common repute the richest commoner in early eighteenth century Ireland. Although King James's High Sheriff for Clare in 1690, and a captain of dragoons (tactfully non-belligerent) he was able successfully to represent himself as keeping law and order for King William, whose partisan he said he was, during turbulent times; he was also able to defeat the accusation of high treason and claims on the estate made by one Patrick Hurley.⁵ He (rather fortunately for the family) outlived by several months his eldest son Lucius, a misfortunate prodigal son of an unforgiving father, a man whose recklessness became a by-word and whose scrapes with disaster were many. The estate passed in 1717 to Donough's grandson Edward, who proved to be if less dashing then equally feckless as his father Lucius. Mad keen on horses above all, overly fond of claret and brandy, the rather attractively outspoken Edward showed a greater talent for running into debt than for meeting his bills. By mid-century he had projected a splendidly Palladian Dromoland (Illus. 1 & 2),⁶ but not built it, though he did build the two-storeyed octagonal gazebo⁷ sited on the hill opposite the gateway to Dromoland Castle; he had, by then, very nearly undone the fortune contrived by his grandfather from the patrimony so boldly preserved by Máire Ruadh. It remained for Edward's son, Lucius, to revert to something like the thrift and sense for management of Donough, the first baronet, if with less of Donough's guile and more of piety. The four together—Donough, the first Lucius, Edward, the later Lucius—provide a grand panorama of Ascendancy manners, ranging the spectrum from utter irresponsibility to the more sober traits of duty and sense of commitment to personal, familial, public and national affairs.

A specific passage in the relations of Sir Edward (Illus. 3) and his son Lucius (Illus. 4) affords us a good close look at some facets of this (both portraits are taken from Donough O'Brien, *History of the O'Briens*, London 1949).

Much of Edward's correspondence is taken up with bills and matters of debt.⁸ A good instance of Sir Edward's characteristic way of ignoring bills and letting the debts pile up is furnished by correspondence from Shem Thompson, headmaster of Hillsborough School, where his sons, among them the future Sir Lucius, were pupils. Lucius started as pupil in the autumn of 1743, at the age of twelve; this is implied by an account dated the 12th of April, 1744, sent with an account accrued to some £104, and a bill for the current six months of £15 more. (Ainsworth says board and education were £23 a year.) On the 19th of May, a week later, he writes to say that Mr. O'Brien—Lucius—has had a "Course of Physic and discharged a great number of worms". He goes on: "Your kinsmen here are very well. Mr. Ed^d O'Brien is very slow & idle with all. . . His Brother does much better. But w^t I am most surprised at is this, the Country wretched twang they contracted in their

⁵Ainsworth, *IM*, pp. 226-271.

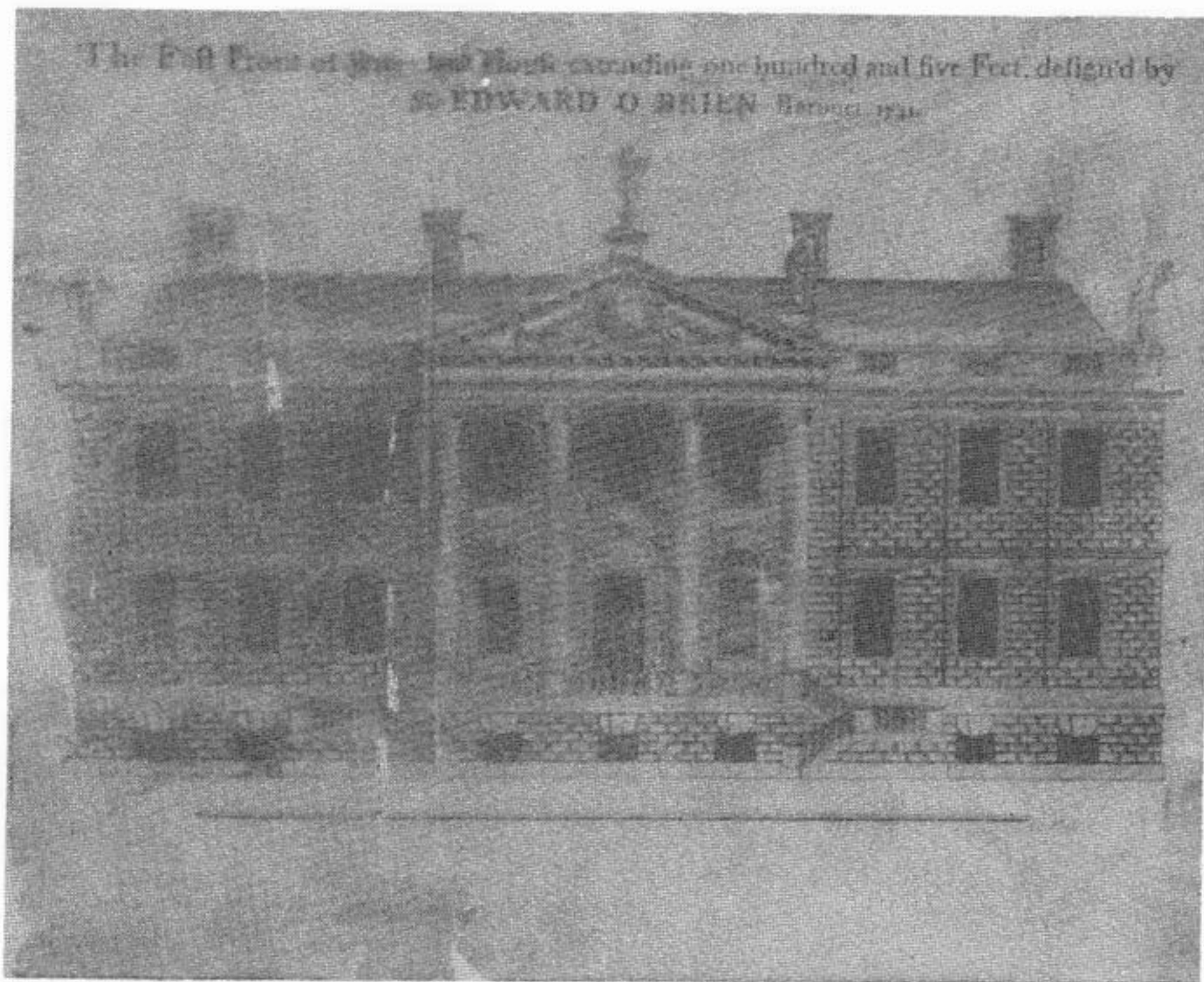
⁶National Library of Ireland MS 2791 includes several drawings made to Edward's design.

⁷The local tradition is that the gazebo was built to enable Sir Edward who repeatedly suffered from gout (a) to supervise the training of his horses as they were cantered around the hill each morning, and (b) to watch the local Point-to-Point races which are thought to have finished on the hillside below.

⁸Ivar O'Brien, p. 141.

more early years still continues with very little amendment. I am sure there has been care enough taken to get the better of it. You See, Sir, the powerful influence of the first impressions and the bad consequences of neglect in infant years". He says that Lucius will be ready for college by next Christmas or Easter; Sir Edward might think on a tutor for him; Sir Edward might wish to settle his account, with a rather large balance outstanding. On the 9th of December that year the account still owing stands at £128 2s. 9½d. Thompson reports that Sir Edward will not have to send Lucius to Hillsborough next term, as he has been entered in the college; he has gone through inoculation; when he can be reading he should review his Classics for "admission with reputation". The letters have grown definitely cooler in tone. Finally, on the 28th of May, 1748, Thompson writes that Sir Edward's son has "read as much logic as is required at the first examination after he puts on his gown" and for Sir Edward to send the balance on account; Thompson *needs* it.⁹

A series of letters from father to son in 1758-59, a decade later, show a crisis in Sir

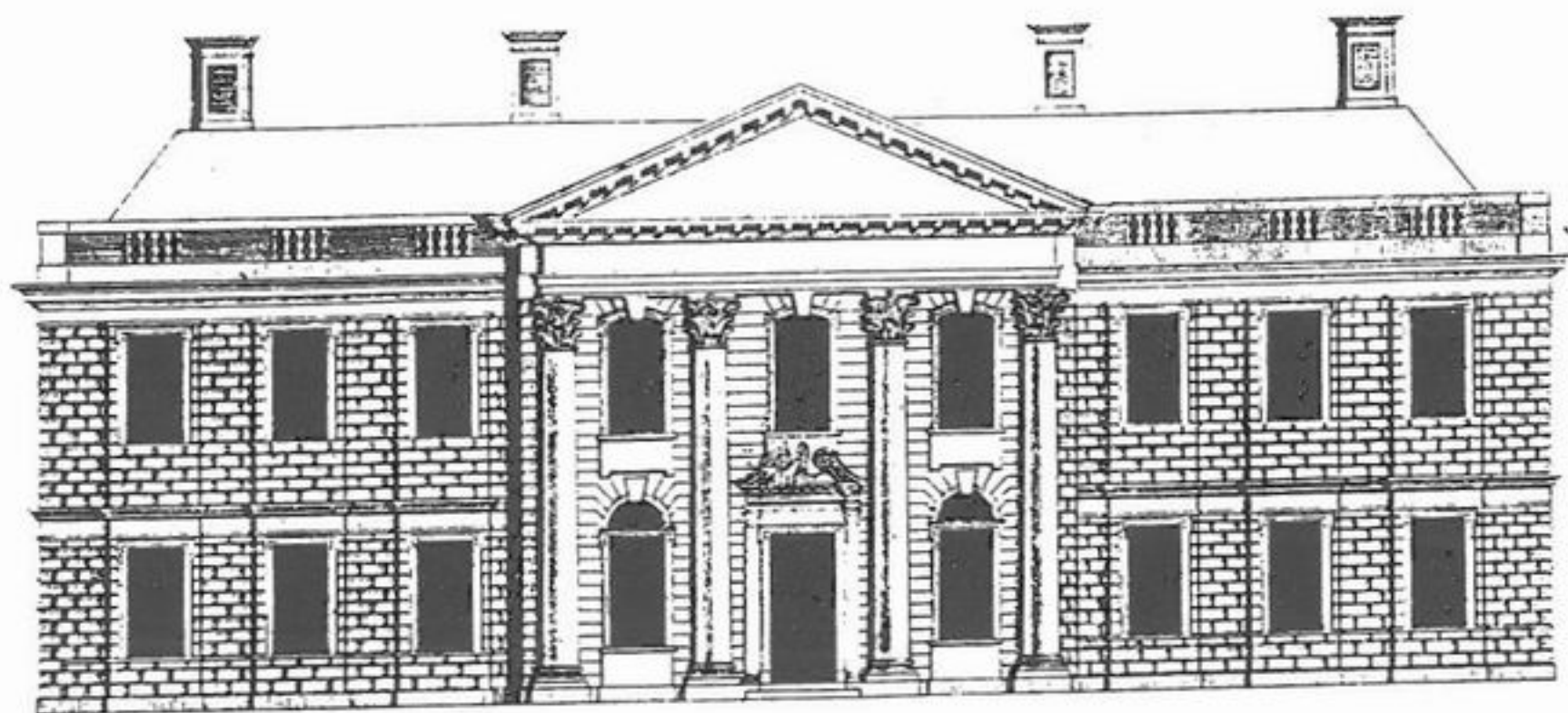


Illus. 1. "The East Front of Dromoland House extending on hundrd and five Feet, design'd by Sir EDWARD O'BRIEN Baronet 1741."

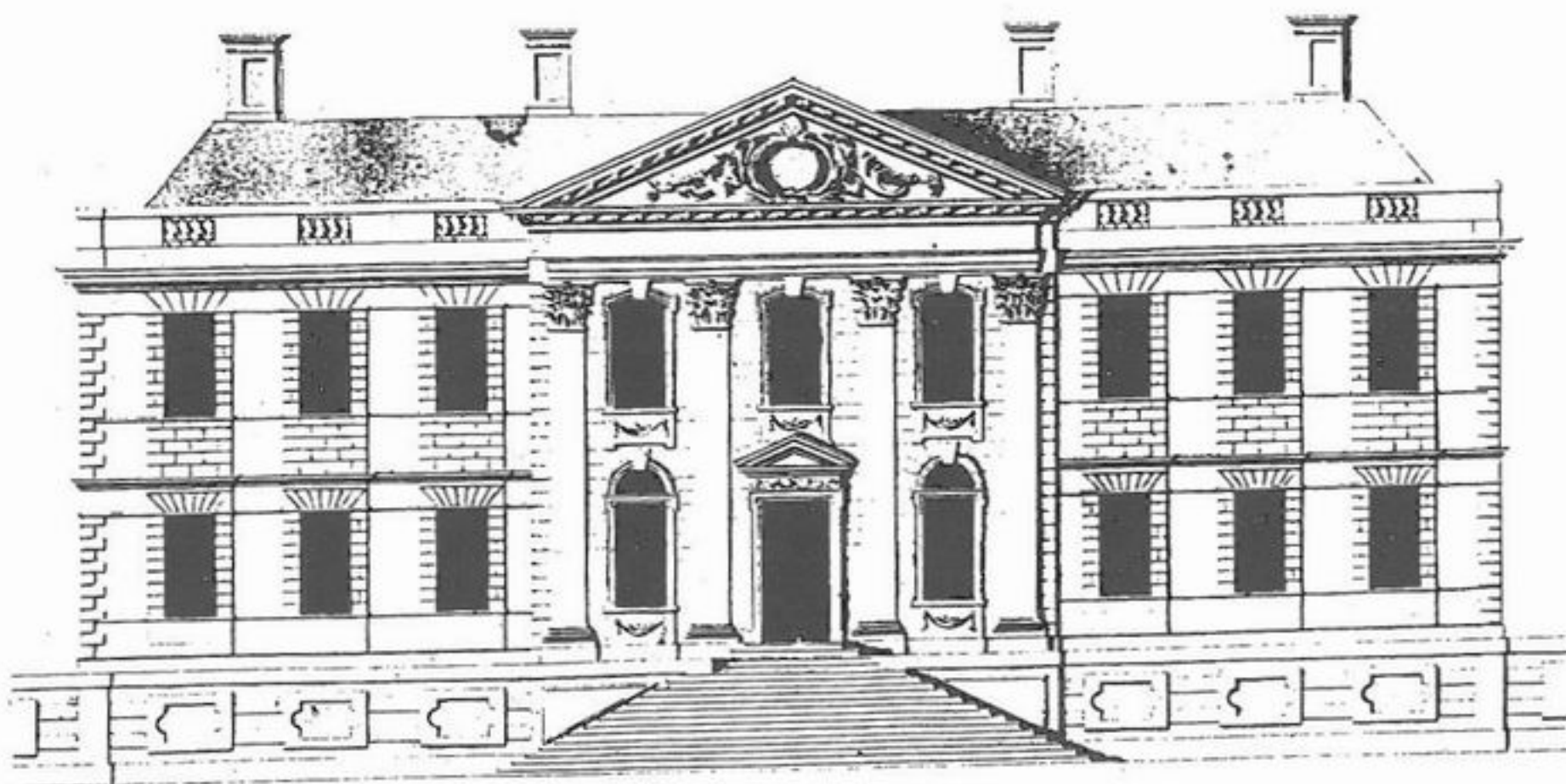
(Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

⁹Ainsworth notes the six letters (*IM*, no. 529). The details here given are from full examination, Inchiquin Manuscripts, National Library of Ireland.

The East Front of Dromoland House extending 105 Feet.



A DESSEIN for DROMIOLAN HOUSE.



Illus. 2. Alternative designs by Sir Edward O'Brien for Dromoland House.
(Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Edward's affairs and in his relations with Lucius.¹⁰ Early on his letters speak of lack of money, ill health, disappointment at Neddy's not having obtained a cornetcy in the Army, a planned trip to Cork to see Captain O'Brien, a plan to quit Dromoland. Then later in the year comes a blow. Lucius has apparently chastized his father on mismanagement, and the ill, hot-blooded old fox charges him with disrespect and an intolerable bearing. There is in the letters an implication that the father should sell up a deal of property and settle his debts; he owes a great deal in principal and annual interest (at 7%) and he has found an annual income of some £4,000 inadequate to meet expenses and obligations; although £2,000 annually is settled on Lucius (a sum Edward cannot get at as he muses on the necessity for making for his heirs other portions), it would appear that Lucius is concerned by his father's improvidence and the ruination into which his father is bringing the estates. His father protests that he has nothing to sell save a few poor horses (5th July), his sole pleasure and joy; when Lucius apparently insists that the horses must go the crafty old fellow points out that a notice of sale would reveal to the world the dire straits he is in, and *that* would alert creditor after creditor; Lucius takes his point, withdraws the suggestion and apparently proposes a trusteeship, or putting his father in a sort of receivership.

On the 4th of October, 1758, Sir Edward writes his son Lucius that he will be "put into a go cart with leading strings" as easily as "Into Such an Other Hole as that at Calcutta"¹¹, he looks forward to "my last Apartments at Killinasoolagh"—his tomb—"where I will find Rest & Peace". Later that month he writes to state that he will go abroad without giving reasons. "I know by woefull and dreadful Experience that It will be Impossible to get Rid of the Disgruntled Clan that Haunts Dromoland both above and Below Stairs, without my Quitting it for Some time and Shutting up the Doors against them. However as you desire it, I will Remain there in Purgatory for this Winter; that is, my Wife and Children shall do so, And I will be as much abroad as I Can At Different Places, I have chalked out for That Purpose". He says that he will remove from Dromoland in the Spring. About the trusteeship Lucius has apparently proposed he says: "I will *go to Goal* [sic] *before I comply*"; he would in that case be "like Old Lear", with his "Followers curtailed to one" and "Usurpers" in possession, he being constrained as to "how many *Horses—Servants—Dishes* of meat or *Bottles* of Wine I shall *Keep* or *Give*..."

Following Lucius' reply to this letter his father writes as follows:

Sir Edward to Lucius O'Brien Esq^r/.../Dublin From: Cove, near Cork Fryday the 10th of Nov^r 1758

The Day After I Wrote to You Last D^r Lucius I Received A Long letter from you wh^h I Could Not Answer If My Life Were At Stake As I had so violent A Disorder In My Head; that I had neither Eyesight or Resolution Nor Could I Raise It of my Pillow and Realy although... I am Very Ill, Greatly Perplexed and Distressed for want of Rest tho my Journey has Done me Good—

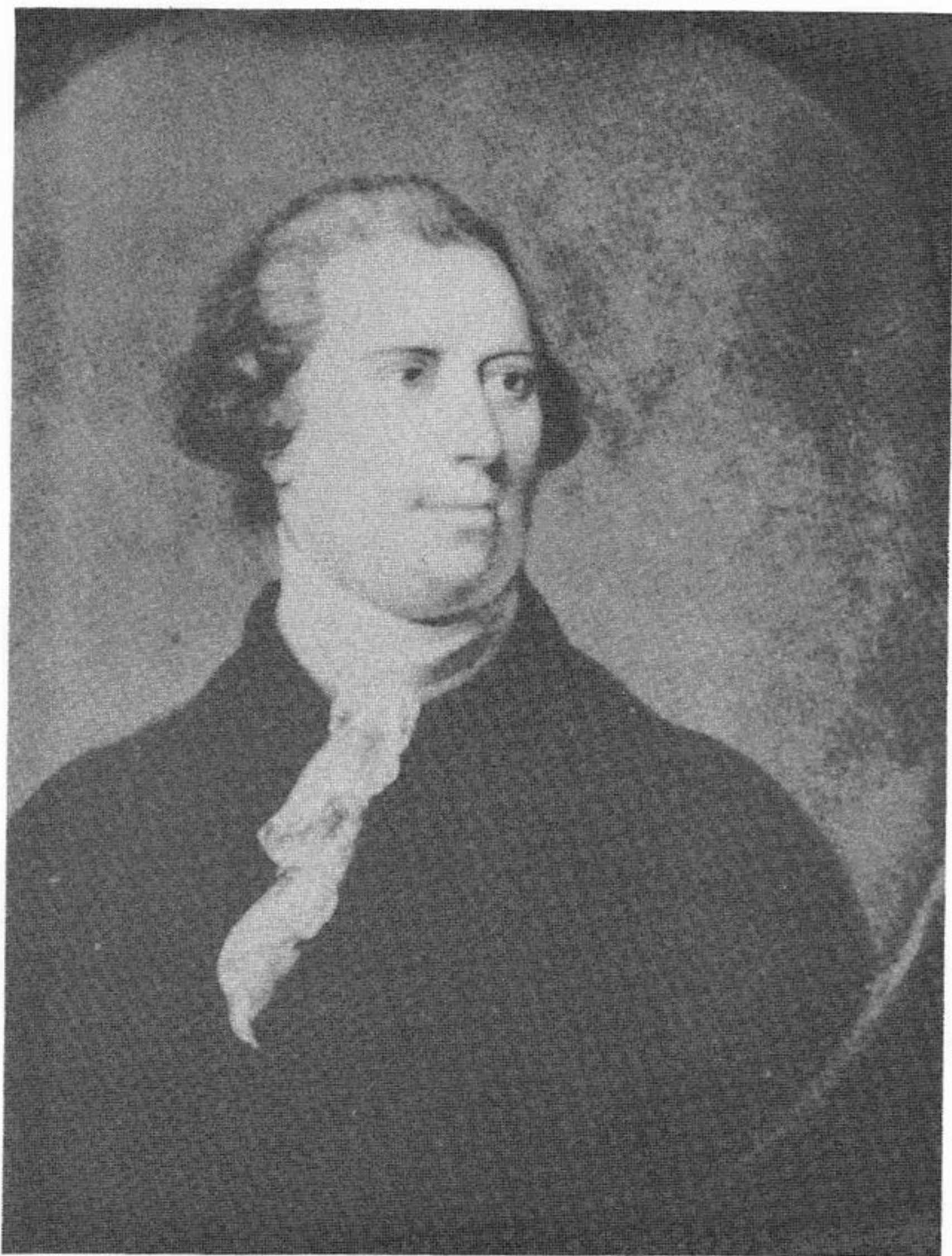
You tell me Plainly that When you Came over you Could have Saved me, even now you have a chance so to do—but in wh^t manner you do not point out. If you mean by this that I am to Turn Child have a Guardian appointed for me, Vest my all in Trustees, and have a Pittance Deligated to me At Will, I now Repeat w^t I before sayd that I w^d sooner employ my Hand to Blow My Brains Out and thereby Put an End to a Wretched Life than Use It to Execute Such a Deed, to Confirm myself a Drivler—for w^t I have be it what It Will both It and I shall be Free and Independend^t As I Will Not be Goaded like an Ass In A Yoak. I thought I had Explained My Self Suffitiently In My Last Letter, Read the Paragraph

¹⁰Inchiquin MSS, NLI.

¹¹The notorious incident of the Black Hole of Calcutta would at this date be fresh in recollection for Sir Edward, as would be the subsequent victory, in 1757, of Clive at Plassey, which confirmed British rule in India. In 1756 the Nawab of Bengali, in conflict with the East India Company, temporarily captured the Company's stronghold, Fort William, in Calcutta. Contemporary accounts averred that 146 European captives were held in a detention cell measuring some eighteen by fifteen feet that 123 of these died of suffocation. (Modern historical opinion, accepting the actuality of the incident—sometimes denied—revises the figure to 15 dead of 40 captives.)



Illus. 3 Sir Edward O'Brien, 2nd Baronet, born in 1705, died in 1765.



Illus. 4. Sir Lucius O'Brien, 3rd Baronet, born in 1731, died in 1794.

Again, and believe me I will Dye Upon a Scaffold or In a Goal [sic], before I Will Deviate A Tittle from that Resolution and therefore Expect to hear no more Upon the Subject as I shall take It Worse than if you spit In My Face or Kickt Me—As for Vesting Rents in My Trustees to keep down Interest and prevent Affairs from growing worse, I am Ready to do It In Any shape you Require by Trust or otherwise I care not how; but If I have but a Brown Loaf and Small Beer I will dispose of that how and where I Please and If I Like to Give It to my Dog I will be accountable to no man Living—

Y^r proposed Method to save me is Couched in such Mysterious Terms and such mystified Bargains (...?) that I own I do Not Understand Y^r meaning or wh^t I am to do—so I can say no more but that I will do anything that can be Expected from a Gentleman that does not quite doat; so propose it At once and you shall Find Me Ready to Join Issue/Except before Excepted/but if that by y^r scheme I will Comply wh^h y^r Last Request and never Trouble you more about my busyness, wh^h you seem so ready to be discharged from, before you have Entered Upon It I Cant or Wont say more; I expected a Staff In You to Prop my Old Age, now you are come to the bar and thereby qualified to save me; but I Find w^t I am now to Depend Upon. It is not the First Time I have been Disappointed where I least expected it. God help me, I am become a Burthen to my self and Others.

I am glad I came here, a worthyer Better Sort of man than my Kinsman and y^r name sake I never Saw. If he were going out, Instead of Coming Home, for Some Years you s^d be Rid of Either trouble or anxiety from D^r Lucius y^r affectionate father

Edw^d O'Brien

I go home on Monday

This sort of Correspondence Wrings my Soul

After a visit during the winter from son to father we have the following:

26 Feb 1759 Sir: Y^r treatment of me When You Were Last Here in General, and y^r Attempting to Insult me in My Sick Bed When You Were Pot Valliant In particular; Can Not So Recently have Elapsed My Memory—on the Contrary let me assure you; It has made that Fit and Lasting Impression that Such Unnatural Behaviour Deserves—

My Poor Father/who wh^hout vanity/was allowed to be as Fine a Gentleman As Any in the Age he lived, was Remarkable for the Deference and Tenderness He allways Treated S^r Don^h—wh^h was far from being that Indulgent Parent to Him that I have been to you, and Truly S^r I Must In my own Words Say I should Peremptorily Expect; thereafter, that in Y^r Conversation and letters, You will Lay Aside Y^r Despotical and Dogmatical Language of Must—Shall and Will; wh^h are Scarcely to be made up to... And Ill becomes a son to a Father.

The letter concludes with one of the best of all closes: "I remain your much abused but yet affectionate Father".

Earlier in 1758, in a letter dated Wednesday morning the 5th of July, Edward had resisted the suggestion that he sell up some stock, particularly some of his beloved horses. He points out that he would long ago have been in his grave were it not for the exercise and amusement provided him by them. Anyway, he complains, he is already reduced to "a very few cows and 2 Old Mares; and 3 or 4 favourite Colts and Fillys". He closes his case with a somewhat plaintive appeal to his general virtue and credit: "Every man in the British Dominions, that knows me, knows as Well as I do, that my Sole Amusement is my Horses, and that I neither play Cards or Dice, keep neither Whores nor Hounds." Sir Edward is here being not *entirely* candid. We know something of his consistently poor health, not solely from lack of exercise. Edmund Sexton writes (15 Nov. 1762) to condole about the return of his "nervous disorder" saying "you are well bumping away all night, when I wish you could stint yourself to 3 pints instead of a gallon."¹²

Lucius succeeded to Dromoland upon the death of his father in 1765. It would seem to have taken him ten years of unremitting effort and rather strict economy to repair the fortunes of the family. Dromoland was apparently flourishing when Arthur Young visited the house in 1776.

Sir Lucius was able to attend to the very sober national question of free trade. Without hounds, or whores—or horses.

¹²Ainsworth, *IM* no. 607.