

The Earl and the Bishop: Further Light on the Thomond and O'Dea Monuments in St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick

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The circumstances surrounding the construction of the Earl of Thomond's tomb in St. Mary's cathedral in the early seventeenth century and its impact on the older monument of Bishop Cornelius O'Dea are discussed. Previous scholarship on this is reviewed and revised.

In a recent article in this journal discussing the strange circumstances of the disappearance of the effigy of Bishop Cornelius O'Dea from St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick, Brian Ó Dálaigh refers to the fact that the bishop's tomb had been moved by Donough O'Brien, Earl of Thomond, in 1621. He explains this action as a possible attempt to create 'a counterbalance to his own monument which was then being built opposite on the north side of the chancel'.¹ Some contemporaries, however, had a less sympathetic view of the earl's actions. Edmund Sexton, a prominent Protestant citizen and former mayor of Limerick, recorded in his diary for June 1621:

The bushops monument in St Mary Church in ye Quier was about ys tym broken downe being of fayre marbell exceedingly well hewne & a fair monument mad for ye lo: president ther & a smale thinge made in the south sid of ye chancell for ye bishop wher ye ould portraytur that lay in ye ould monumet of ye bishop was layed it beinge all of Allabaster the ould was thought to be more costly then yt made for ye president.²

It therefore seems that the bishop's original monument was far more elaborate than the altar tomb of 'black marble with an Inscriptcion in Letters of Gould' described and drawn by Dineley in 1681, upon which the effigy eventually came to rest.³

It was not only the bishop's 'portraytur' that was moved, however. The monument's inscription suggests that his actual remains were also placed in the new tomb, 'translated to this burial-place of the bishops of Limerick, that he might rest with his brethren'.⁴ It seems that Thomond was keen to clear a significant amount of space for his monument and for the vault underneath it, hence the bishop's ejection. The earl obviously wished for a prominent location for his last resting place, and since the inscription describes the south side of the chancel as the traditional burial place of the Bishops of

¹ Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'The Disappearance of the Effigy of Bishop Cornelius O'Dea', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 37 (1996), p. 88; T. J. Westropp, 'St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick: Its Plan and Growth', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 38 (1898), p. 116; R. F. Hewson, 'St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick: Its Development and Growth', *NMAJ*, 4 (1944), p. 58, show the relative location of the tombs.

² 'Sexton's notebook', National Library of Ireland (NLI), Ms. 16,085, f. 76. For Sexton and his milieu, see especially Colm Lennon, *The urban patriciates of early modern Ireland: a case-study of Limerick*, *The O'Donnell Lecture 1999*, Dublin 1999.

³ 'Observations on a Voyage through the Kingdom of Ireland', NLI, Ms. 392, f. 133. Published by E. P. Shirley, 'Extracts from the Journal of Thomas Dineley, Esquire', *JRSAI*, 8 (1866), p. 436. Dineley's illustration of the tomb is reproduced in Ó Dálaigh, 'Disappearance', p. 89. For other descriptions see *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead (Mems Dead)* 7 (1907-9), pp 125-6; M. J. Talbot, *The Monuments of St. Mary's Cathedral Limerick*, Limerick, 1976, pp 87-8; Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick: Its History and Antiquities, Ecclesiastical, Civil and Military* Dublin, 1866, pp 569-71; John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick Ancient and Medieval*, Dublin, 1906, p. 242; Hewson, 'St. Mary's Cathedral', pp 63-4; Peter Harbison, 'Some Medieval Thomond Tomb-Sculpture: Lost, Found and Imaginary', *NMAJ*, 14 (1971), pp 29-31.

⁴ Talbot, *Monuments of St. Mary's*, p. 88.

Limerick, the removal there of one the most venerated of their counterparts may have seemed entirely reasonable. It is likely that O'Brien's actions were influenced by the tomb-building project of his friend Richard Boyle, Earl of Cork, whose elaborate monument in St. Mary's Church, Youghal, had recently been completed. During the work, Boyle had also erected a new monument to the founders of the chapel, which he had appropriated to his own use, thereby symbolically claiming their approval and presumably silencing any complaints that might have arisen.⁵ O'Brien cast himself in a similar light by suggesting that he had returned O'Dea to his rightful place amongst the bishops of Limerick, and by drawing attention to his patronage of the new tomb, carefully glossing over any indication that the bishop's original monument might have been of finer workmanship.⁶ By so doing, he also conveniently created a link between himself and one of the most illustrious and respected figures of Limerick's past.⁷

But why had the Fourth Earl of Thomond decided to be buried in Limerick at all, given that by doing so he severed his connection with the burial place of his ancestors in Ennis Friary? Brought up in England as a Protestant and energetic in his attempts to apply English standards of civility to the areas under his control, as Earl and subsequently as Lord President of Munster, Donough O'Brien must have felt very little identification with his Catholic relations.⁸ It was this which may have led him to the most prominent Protestant church in the diocese of Limerick (suitable as it had reputedly been founded by his ancestor, Dónal Mór), and which also dictated both the size and the location of his monument. To replace the prestige conferred by antiquity of tenure at Ennis, he built the largest possible monument on the most prominent space available in the cathedral. In his will, dated 28 November 1617, O'Brien requested burial 'in my tomb or burial place within the cathedral church of St Marie within the city of Limericke, which I lately purchased there, according to my Honour and degree'.⁹ The death six weeks later of his wife, Elizabeth Fitzgerald, daughter of the eleventh Earl of Kildare, suggests that his concern to put his affairs in order may have been inspired by an illness she was suffering.¹⁰ Some details of some of the elements which may have formed the original tomb may be inferred from instructions for its construction given in this will:

I do require and charge my...son Henry to repair, finish and make up my tomb at Limerick and to lay upon it my picture in alabaster in robes and in the top of the tomb all pieces of armour as is upon Sir Francis Vere's tomb in Westminster; and two earls and two barons in their robes to be the supporters of the uppermost stone as the said Sir Francis his tomb is erected; and also to hang and bedeck the said tomb (by order of heraldry) with my coat [of] armour and all other rights due and appertaining to an earl.¹¹

However, the tomb, by Alexander Hills of Holborn the sculptor also employed by Cork, seems certainly to have been created on a less ambitious scale and using cheaper materials than originally envisaged.¹² The fact that the Earl's plans had to be curtailed could have contributed to his decision to dismantle

⁵ Clodagh Tait, 'Colonising Memory: Manipulations of Death, Burial and Commemoration in the Career of Richard Boyle, First Earl of Cork', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 101 (2001).

⁶ Its recessed location, the fact that it cuts into an fifteenth century window, along with Sexton's comments, suggest that an elaborately carved fifteenth century tomb, possibly like the Galway monument in the south transept, may have been removed to make way for the Earl's monument. Westropp, 'St. Mary's Cathedral', p. 44.

⁷ Westropp, 'St. Mary's Cathedral', pp 41-2; Begley, *Diocese of Limerick Ancient and Medieval*, pp 241-3.

⁸ For aspects of his career, see the praise poem written for him on his death. Brian Ó Cuív, 'An elegy on Donnchadh Ó Briain, Fourth Earl of Thomond', *Celtica*, 16 (1984), pp 87-105.

⁹ For the monuments and wills of two earls of Thomond see Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'A Comparative Study of the Wills of the First and Fourth Earls of Thomond', *NMAJ*, 34 (1992), pp 48-63. See also J. Ainsworth (ed.), *The Inchiquin Manuscripts*, Dublin 1961, pp 501-3; *Mems Dead*, 7, p. 125; Westropp, 'St. Mary's Cathedral', pp 47-8, 118-9; Talbot, *Monuments of St. Mary's*, pp 53, 83; Lenihan, *Limerick: Its History and Antiquities*, pp 594-5; Hewson, 'St. Mary's Cathedral', p. 58.

¹⁰ The *Dictionary of National Biography* gives the date of her death as 12 January 1617, but it is clear from the placing of her funeral entry that the year was 1618. NLI, Genealogical Office (GO) Ms. 66, f. 71.

¹¹ Ó Dálaigh, 'Comparative Study', pp 60-62; Westropp, 'St. Mary's Cathedral', pp 47-8.

¹² Rolf Loeber, 'Sculptured memorials to the dead in early seventeenth-century Ireland: a survey from *Monumenta Eblanae* and other sources', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 81 (1981), p. 275 (note 25); Tait, 'Colonising Memory'; A. B. Grosart (ed.), *The Lismore Papers*, 10 volumes, London 1886-8, First series, 1, p. 167.

O'Dea's tomb so that, as Sexton infers, his own would not be unfavourably compared with it. The damage suffered by the monument during the Catholic reoccupation of the cathedral in the 1640s may have stemmed in part from the indignation of the people of Limerick towards the Earl's usurpation of the burial place of their saintly bishop.¹³ That even the staunch Protestant and government supporter, Edmund Sexton, had disparaged the tomb's construction is an indication that Catholic views may have been even less favourable. Ultimately, its fate is an indication of the extent to which the fourth Earl had successfully created a new identity for himself.

It seems that Thomond's funeral in Limerick had passed off quietly soon after his death in Clonmel, 5 September 1624.¹⁴ Sexton recorded that 'The Earle of Thomond lord president dyed at Clonmell his corps brought hither & was interred within 2 or 3 days after without any solemnity', by which he presumably meant that the opportunity for an elaborate heraldic funeral ceremony like those occurring in Dublin during this period was foregone.¹⁵ The family seems to have had little interest in, or use for, the officers of arms, given that the fees due from them for the registration of the funeral certificates of both the Earl and his late Countess were never paid.¹⁶ In 1639, Henry O'Brien, fifth Earl of Thomond, was also buried in the vault in St. Mary's. He had expressed a desire in his will to be physically commemorated on his father's monument. However, the requested improvements, which were to include kneeling statues of himself, his brother, Barnabas, and their grandfather and great-grandfather, the third and second earls, were never carried out. Doubtless the debt in which Henry had left the earldom left his brother and heir with little enthusiasm for such a costly project.¹⁷ Other family members interred in the vault at around the same time included Captain Donough O'Brien, the fifth Earl's cousin, who was buried 'in the Monnumet of the Earles of Thomond' in August 1638.¹⁸ What remains of the monument still stands in the cathedral, having been partially reconstructed by the order of Henry, seventh Earl of Thomond, in 1678. At that point a defiant inscription was added, reminding onlookers that the fourth Earl, 'having derived his titles from an ancient and honourable family...left them to posterity more ennobled'.¹⁹ The altar tomb created by the Earl for O'Dea also survives but, as has been mentioned, the effigy is gone, looted piecemeal by those believing in its curative properties.²⁰

The circumstances of the creation in 1621 of both the Thomond and the O'Dea monuments are, therefore, far more complicated than has hitherto been realised. Donough O'Brien's construction of an illustrious new family burial place was tarnished in the eyes of the townspeople by his demotion of the gravesite's original inhabitant, Cornelius O'Dea, despite his efforts to present himself as the Bishop's benefactor. This perceived sacrilege was repaid in the 1640s when Limerick's Catholics again took possession of the cathedral. However, both monuments subsequently continued to act as foci of ritual activity. The re-edified Thomond monument served as the burial place of the earls of Thomond and their close family connections for many years, while the Bishop's effigy was resorted to by those seeking cures, until its oldest element was finally, and remarkably, devoured by its own popularity.²¹

¹³ Others give Ireton's soldiers as the perpetrators (e.g. Hugh W. L. Weir, *O'Brien, People and Places*, Whitegate, 1994, p. 20) but, given the circumstances, the statement by Ó Dálaigh and others that the Catholic party was to blame makes more sense. Note that the creation of the first Earl's monument in Ennis had similarly involved the dismantling of the tomb of Turlough Mór O'Brien (d.1306): Ó Dálaigh, 'Comparative Study', p. 56.

¹⁴ 'About 3 of the clock in the morninge of this day my honored Lorde, and noble frend donatus Earle of Thomonde, and Lorde President of Mounster departed this Lyffe at Clonmell.' *Lismore Papers* First series, 2, p. 138. See also 1, pp 104-5; Second series, 3, pp 126-8. The Earl's funeral entry may be found in NLI, GO Ms. 68, f. 48, and also in the copy of this manuscript in the British Library, published by the Society for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead. Walter Fitzgerald, *Some Funeral Entries of Ireland from a Manuscript Version in the British Museum*, Dublin 1909, p. 116.

¹⁵ NLI Ms.16,085, f.80. For heraldic funerals in Ireland, see Clodagh Tait, *Death, Burial and Commemoration in Ireland 1550-1655*, forthcoming 2002. For England see Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern Ireland*, London 1988.

¹⁶ NLI, GO Ms. 66, f. 71; Ms. 68, f. 48. In return, the heralds omitted to draw in the Countess' standard and arms.

¹⁷ Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'An Inventory of the Contents of Bunratty Castle and the Will of Henry, Fifth Earl of Thomond', *NMAJ*, 36 (1995), p. 162.

¹⁸ Fitzgerald, *Funeral Entries*, p. 65. He was the son of Sir Daniel O'Brien of 'Carriggychonly' in Co. Clare, brother of the fourth Earl.

¹⁹ Talbot, *Monuments of St. Mary's*, p. 83.

²⁰ Ó Dálaigh, 'Disappearance', pp 88-90.

²¹ This article is the result of doctoral research undertaken in University College Cork, and under a Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Many thanks to the editor, Liam Irwin, for his comments and assistance.

