

Some Thoughts on early Norman Limerick and the Mayoralty

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The list of mayors of the city given in Lenihan's history has perpetuated and reinforced the popular belief in Limerick that the mayoralty of the city dates from the time of King John. Further evidence to support the argument that Limerick did not have a mayor until the 1230s is provided and some of the early entries of the list given by Lenihan are shown to be based on unreliable sources.

In 1199 King John confirmed a number of grants of land in the Limerick region which had been made a year or so previously by the justiciar, Hamo de Valognes.¹ These grants consisted of two elements, knights' fees, in what was to become County Limerick and burgages in the city itself. Historians have tended to focus on the former element at the expense of the latter, so this note is an attempt to investigate some of the implications that flow from the latter.²

The following is a summary of the grants. Thomas Fitzmaurice received a total of 10 knights' fees in return for 3 and a third knights' service plus 1 burgage, William of Naas 5 fees for 1 and two parts service plus 1 burgage, Lambekin Fitzwilliam 5 fees for 1 and two parts service plus 1 burgage, Humphrey of Tickhill 3 fees for 1 service plus 1 burgage, Geoffrey Fitzrobert 5 fees for 1 and a third service plus 1 burgage, John de Gray 3 fees for 1 service plus houses within the city, Robert Sergeant 1 fee for a third service plus 2 burgages within and 2 without the city, and Walter Crop 8 fees for 2 and a half service plus 5 burgages. There was a possible 9th grant to Milo le Bret but the original document is deficient at the relevant point.³

What is interesting with these grants is that they are made to men of substance, of the knightly class. It was, for instance, through these grants that Fitzmaurice became the founder of the Desmond branch of the Fitzgerald family; William of Naas was his brother. So what was the rationale of these urban grants? The traditional explanation of burgage tenure is that Norman lords founded new towns on their territory and used the offer of burgage tenure as an incentive to entice settlers into Ireland. For many of those making the journey this could mean a transition from servile to free status. Quite clearly, therefore, there was a different motivation at work in Limerick.

The explanation probably lies in the fact that town was not a new foundation but a Hiberno-Norse town with over 200 years of history. The original Viking foundation had been taken over by the Dál gCais in the late 10th century and so contained a mixed population. One has to ask, therefore, who was actually displaced from the burgages that were parcelled out and with what degree of acceptance were the Normans received from the population that remained? The mechanism by which Limerick came back into Norman hands, peaceful or otherwise, is unfortunately not known, because the event is not recorded in any sources, Irish or Norman. Doubtless there were inhabitants who recalled the Norman storming of the town and its occupation some twenty years previously. Many people probably had good cause to resent their arrival. While the Normans recognised the Norse as cousins, and therefore of free status, many Irish were reduced to a servile status with no legal standing. One has to assume that the vacant burgages were confiscated from a displaced urban elite.

There was thus a question mark over the reliability of the town in a crisis. In this context

¹ H.S. Sweetman, *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland 1171-1251* (London, 1875) nos. 87, 93-97, 99, 103 & 104.

² G. H. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169-1333* (4 vols, Oxford, 1911-20), ii, pp 162-72; A J Otway-Ruthven, *A history of Medieval Ireland* (2nd ed., London, 1980) p. 73; C.A. Empey, 'The Settlement of the Kingdom of Limerick', in J. Lydon (ed.), *England and Ireland in the later Middle Ages* (Blackrock 1981) pp 1-25.

³ Sweetman, *op. cit.*, no. 100.

it should be noted that the castle lay outside the town⁴ and the fortified town sat astride what would have been the main line of retreat or reinforcement across Baal's Bridge. It is suggested therefore that the purpose of the grants was threefold, to give a wide range of influential people a personal stake in the well being of the town, to create a protective garrison, and to hasten the Normanisation of the town.

The lifeblood of the town was trade, which is not an activity usually associated with the lordly classes. Their main interest was running their estates and manors, so it is highly unlikely that they were directly involved in the day to day business of the town. The burgages were probably let out to reliable followers, while the original grantees retained the status of citizen that came with ownership. Despite their dislike of trade the grantees doubtless expected their tenants to provide an income which more than offset the annual rent payable to the Crown for the burgages. Only two of the grantees, Robert Sargent and Walter Crop received more than one burgage, and it may be that these two were singled out to keep an eye on the town. Of all the grantees only Walter Crop appears in any other documentation specific to the town. He was allegedly mayor in 1212⁵ but this can now be called into question.

It is often quoted in literature about Limerick that the city had a mayor before London: this is not so. Larry Walsh has shown conclusively that the city was only formally granted the right to elect a mayor in its 1292 charter.⁶ He further demonstrates that the first charter of King John, dated 1197, gave Limerick the same rights as Dublin and Bristol, so the city probably introduced the position of mayor shortly after Dublin received its mayor. This is confirmed by three documents in the Black Book of Limerick naming Simon Hereward as 'maior'.⁷ The documents are undated but Walsh suggests Simon must fill in one of the blanks in Lenihan's mayoral list between 1218 and 1255.⁸ It is possible to narrow this down. Dublin received its first mayor in 1229, so it is unlikely to be earlier than that, while one of the documents lists Walter Crop as a witness. Assuming this is the same Walter Crop of the 1199 grant then he would have to be long lived to survive into the upper end of the range, thus a date in the 1230s is most plausible.⁹

Prior to the introduction of the mayoralty, the chief officer of the town was a *prepositus*, usually translated as provost or portreeve. The significant difference between a provost and a mayor was that the former was an appointed official while the latter was elected from among his peers. The provost might therefore hold his position for several years while a mayor was elected on a yearly basis. There is only one provost, Siward, who can be attested from contemporary documents rather than the later compilations used to compile Lenihan's list. These are two documents in the Black Book which can be dated to 1201 and pre-1204.¹⁰ It is possible to speculate that the Siward, whose name appears on the Limerick coins of the period, may be the provost acting as supervisor of the mint.¹¹

If we accept that the mayoralty was introduced some time in the 1230s we have to ask where did all the early names in Lenihan's list come from? The list was compiled using the White Manuscript, Arthur Manuscript and Sexten Chartulary, all of which contain mayoral lists.¹²

4 B.J. Hodkinson, 'The Topography of Pre-Norman Limerick', *NMAJ* 42 (2002) pp 1-6.

5 Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick, its History and Antiquities* (Dublin 1866) p. 691.

6 Larry Walsh, 'The Mayoral Myth' in David Lee (ed.), *Remembering Limerick* (Limerick 1997) pp 39-45. From 1189 the first citizen of London was called mayor, but the mayor initially was an appointed official. It was only in 1207 that the citizens received the right to choose their own mayor. It is this date that is the source of the misunderstanding that Limerick's right to a mayor is ten years older than that of London. Limerick's first charter of 1197, however, makes no mention of a mayor and simply grants the city the rights and privileges given to Dublin and Bristol in their charters. Neither of these towns had a mayor at that time.

7 J. MacCaffrey (ed.), *The Black Book of Limerick* [henceforth *BBL*] (Dublin 1907), pp 36, 37 & 51. For the probability that Hereward served more than one term see B. Hodkinson, 'Lenihan's Mayoral List', *NMAJ* 42 (2001) pp 107-9.

8 Lenihan, *Limerick*, pp 691-2.

9 The town could not unilaterally decide to have a mayor and displace the royal provost, so it assumed that the right was purchased from the king some time in the 1230s.

10 *BBL*, pp 27 & 98, William de Burgh who died in 1204 is a witness to the latter.

11 The name Siward appears on the Limerick halfpennies and farthings minted while John was Lord of Ireland. The later coins issued when John was King bear the names of Willem and Wace.

12 White Manuscript, RIA MS 24D21; Arthur Manuscript, BM Add. 31.885; Sexten Chartulary, BM Add. 19.856.

White starts his in 1195, but the other two, compiled at an earlier date, start in 1215 and 1256 respectively. A close examination of these lists shows that the parts up to 1230 are spurious.

The first provost, John Spafford, carries a surname that does not appear in a Limerick context again until the early 15th century. The next four names Alexander Barrett, Henry Troy, Adam Sarvant and Thomas Cropper (1196-9), allowing for minor variations in spelling (Serjant and Crop), appear again as a group in the four years 1258-61. If these are the same people then they must be octogenarians, which is highly unlikely, while the likelihood of the same four names re-occurring together is equally unlikely. A second group, consists of Roger May, John Cambitor, Walter Crop, Robert White, Siward Minutor and Siward de Fferendona (1210-15). It is clear that these names were garnered from the Black Book. In document CXXVI, which can be dated to 1215, the group appears, in the order given above, as citizens of Limerick making a grant of land in Omayl to Bishop Edmund on behalf of the community.¹³ The witness list includes Henry Pincerna, seneschal of Munster, Godebert de Rupe, constable of the castle, followed by six other names. Nowhere in the document is there a mention of a mayor or provost. The compiler of the Arthur Manuscript lists the six citizens and the last six witnesses, in document order, and states that they were all citizens of Limerick. The manuscript at this point has two columns, a right hand one of dates and a left hand one for comments. On the assumption that the first person named is the leading citizen the compiler has placed Siward de Fferendona in the right hand column under 1215, while the remainder appear to the left. Siward is given the title of provost, but one should not read too much into this, because the titles provost and mayor appear interchangeably in this list in subsequent years.¹⁴ White states that he used three sources in compiling his list, and also consulted the Black Book. It appears he recognised the distinction between citizens and witnesses in the document but chose to interpret the citizen list as a sequence of mayors and so included them all. The next two names, J Russell alias Creagh and John Banbury, 1216 & 1217, reappear consecutively in the Sexten Chartulary under 1263 and 1264. Lenihan lists John Avenbrugger as mayor for 1219 stating that he got this from FitzGerald's list but 'on what authority I know not'.¹⁵ The final man is Reynold (Reginald) de St Jacobo in 1230. His name is in doubt because he was of the seigneurial class, being on record as donating a quarter of land in Cathyrasse to Bishop Robert (1251-75) while he is specifically titled Lord Reginald, in 1274.¹⁶ It is significant, however, that an undated, but clearly earlier, document gives him the title of 'seneschal of the city of Limerick', while in two of the documents naming Simon Hereward as mayor, his is the first name to appear in the witness list after the mayor and bailiffs.¹⁷ It is therefore plausible to suggest that Reginald served as the last provost of the city. A question mark can thus be set by fifteen of the sixteen names listed in the period 1195-1230. The only conclusion to be drawn is that the 1195-1230 section of the list is a post-medieval concoction.

The assumption that the mayoralty goes back to the time of King John is by no means a new phenomenon. A copy of a letter in the Sexten Chartulary, dating from the 17th year of the reign of Edward II (1323-24) states that King John made a grant of 40 ploughlands to the Mayor and community of Limerick. However, an earlier inquisition held at Limerick in the 4th year of Edward I (1275-76), in a similar matter refers to the citizens only. It would seem that the confusion arose after the position of mayor was written into the new charter of 1292.

¹³ *BBL*, p. 103, the lordly status of Siward de Fferendona, Roger May and John Cambitor, is confirmed in a document where they appear together as witnesses together with Henry Pincerna, Godebert de Rupe and Walter Crop, see, E. Curtis, *Calendar of Ormond Deeds, 1172-1350* (Dublin, 1932) No. 19.

¹⁴ Lenihan, while stating that the list starts in 1215, fails to point out that there are actually few years with entries. For instance the period 1215-1270 has just 7 names, 4 of which are the four previously called into question.

¹⁵ Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 692; P. FitzGerald & J.J. M'Gregor, *The History, Topography, and Antiquities of the County and the City of Limerick* (2 vols, Dublin, 1827) ii, appendix ii, p. iv.

¹⁶ *BBL*, pp 45 & 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 101 & 36-7.

Appendix

Lest the tone of the article above gives the impression that Lenihan is completely unreliable in the first half of his list, it is perhaps necessary to counterbalance this by stating that parts of the list can be confirmed from contemporary documents within the Sexten Chartulary.

- a) A document of July 1573 is titled "An inquisition taken at her Ma^{ties} Citty of Limerick before Mr Thomas Arthur Maior of the s^d Citty Patrick Creagh and William Creagh bayliffs". Lenihan has the same mayor but gives the bailiffs as Thomas Stretch and Milo FitzEustace Arthur.
- b) A document of 10 August 1577 is titled, 'Witnesses taken & examined by Simon Sexten towne clerkof her Ma^{ties} Citty of Limericke being therunto authorised by Stephen White Maior of the same'. Lenihan gives Stephen White for 1576, which is acceptable given that the change of mayor did not take place until latter part of a year.
- c) A petition for replevin of distress for rent taken by the Corporation, dated 30 July 1601, names Geoffrey Galway as mayor. Allowing for the mid-year changeover this would agree with Lenihan's 1600.
- d) A document of 3 Feb 1618, 'The humble petition of Edmond Sexten To the Right Wo. The Maior, Sheriffs & Citty of Limericke', names Dominic Roch, which is the same name Lenihan has.

From another source, National Archives 999/275/6, it is possible to confirm John White as mayor in 1391. In the document, dated 10 August, he and other citizens are pardoned for sedition.

However a further two anomalies in Lenihan's list have been noted in dated documents within the Sexten Chartulary.

- 1) A document of 2 Aug 1583, is titled, "Interrogations wher uppon witnesses are examined by the authority of John Stretch Maior of her Ma^{ties} City of Limerick". Lenihan gives Nicholas Comyn
- 2) Another document titled, "The coppie of an intery in the Book of entryes of Limericke", dated 20 May 1629, names Piers White as mayor, and Edward Sexten and David Roche as Sheriffs. Lenihan gives Dr Domnk Fitz-David Whyte as mayor and Piers FitzAndrew Creagh and William FitzStephen Roch as sheriffs. The surnames of the mayor and one bailiff tally but the first names are different.

The lesson to be drawn is that the list is best treated with great caution.