

## Documents

### William Molyneux's 'Geographical Collections for Limerick'

In the 1680s William Molyneux (1656-98), patriot, astronomer, and scientist, the first secretary of the Dublin Philosophical Society, was invited by Robert Hooke, the secretary of the Royal Society, a sister organisation in England, to provide the text for the Irish part of *The English Atlas*, which an English publisher, Moses Pitt, planned to bring out. The atlas was designed to be a work of eleven volumes with maps and written descriptions of all the countries then known. Molyneux set about his task with enthusiasm and, firstly, prepared and circulated a questionnaire, in May 1682, to persons, one in each county, whom he judged would be in a position to assist him.

*Queries in which answers are desired for the illustration of that part of the English Atlas relating to Ireland.*

- 1 *The nature of the soil of the county, or place, and chief product thereof*
- 2 *What plants, animals, fruits, metals or their natural productions there are peculiar to the place, and how ordered.*
- 3 *What spring, or rivers, or loughs, with the various properties thereof, as whether medicinal, how replenished with fish, whether navigable, rapid or slow, etc.*
- 4 *What curiosities of art, or nature, antiquity are or have been found there?*
- 5 *What ports for shipping, and their description, and what moon causes high water?*
- 6 *What great battles have been fought, or any other memorable action, or accident?*
- 7 *What peculiar customs, manners, or dispositions the inhabitants of each county, or town have among them?*
- 8 *How each county is inhabited, thickly or thinly?*
- 9 *What places give, or formerly have given title to any nobleman; as also what ancient seats of noble families are to be met with?*
- 10 *What towns of note in the county, and especially towns corporate?*
- 11 *The names of such towns both antique and modern, English and Irish, and why so called?*
- 12 *The magistracy of town corporate, and when incorporated, and by whom built, and their return of parliament men?*
- 13 *Trade of the town, and the number of houses, and inhabitants, and manner of buildings.*
- 14 *What public or antique buildings?*
- 15 *What synods have been held there, what monasteries, cathedral, or other churches are or have been there, and from what saint named?*
- 16 *In what bishopric each county or any part thereof is?*

Daniel Hignett, the person chosen by Molyneux in May 1682 to write the Limerick account, was a prominent citizen of the city though little is known about him. He is listed as town clerk and one of the tituladoes of the middle ward in the 'Census' of



1659.<sup>1</sup> During the mayoralty of John Bourin in 1671, Hignett was one of the sheriffs, along with John Hart.<sup>2</sup> By a deed of mortgage, dated 9 December 1674, Daniel Hignett leased a fairly extensive property in the Englishtown from Edmund Pery. This consisted of a double-roof house slated, a yard, another yard at the north and an adjoining small house and parts of these yards and 'their appurtenances lying and being in the parish of St Mary's and the east side of High Street'. By deed of release from mortgage, dated 2 February 1676, Daniel Hignett ended any obligation to Pery.<sup>3</sup> In the Egmont MSS some items of further but inconsequential information about Hignett can be found. He had a brother, Arthur, who 'is redeeming time applying himself in my office, and I doubt not but to see him a good country clerk by this time twelvemonth.' In that same letter,<sup>4</sup> dated 23 April 1680, Hignett assures Perceval that rumours of a plot,<sup>5</sup> on being investigated in Limerick and Waterford, proved baseless. Lastly, it appears that Hignett was a relation of Sir Robert Southwell, 'it may do well before the Captain returns that you send my nieces to my cousin Hyde's, and thence on his arrival to my cousin Hignett's.'<sup>6</sup>

Peculiarly Hignett's account is in two parts. The first compiled by himself; the second by a Mr. Foley. From reading Foley's account it is probable that his paper, dated 4 September 1682, reached Hignett too late to be included in his own document so the latter forwarded both to Molyneux. Nothing is known of Foley except his address, which is readily identifiable as Clonadfoy, now known as Castle Oliver, just a short distance on the southern side of Ardpatrik village. He was not a landowner, as he is not mentioned in any list of titulados of that area. It is possible that Foley was just one of a number of persons contacted by Hignett as he set about collecting relevant information on Limerick.

*The first part of Mr. Daniel Hignet's account of Lymerick County<sup>7</sup>*

*This kingdom in St. Patrick's time about 400 years after Christ was first made a corporation by King John (Lord of Ireland), anno dmi 1198. Mayor and bailiffs the chief magistrates; London obtained to be governed by Mayor and Sheriffs only 8 years before this city had a mayor. This corporation beareth the name of mayor, sheriffs and citizens of the city of Limerick. The mayor and common council (by the late regulations of the lord lieutenant and council of the Kingdom pursuant to act of parliament) elect the magistrates (which must be confirmed by the lord lieutenant and council before they be sworn) and do all other acts for the rule and government of that corporation. All actions real and personal without limitations held before the mayor and sheriffs only.*

<sup>1</sup> John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Dublin, 1937) p. 345. The name is given as Daniel Higneek.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Appendix VI, p. 542.

<sup>3</sup> All three included in NLI MS D 23059-61.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Hignett to Sir John Perceval, *HMC Egmont MSS, II* (London, 1909) p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. This, presumably, referred to a Catholic plot: Hignett tells Perceval that in the case of the Lord of Tyrone a bill against him was found *ignoramus* at Waterford Assizes, and that 'the Lord Brittas is one of the county of Limerick plot. I hope he will be found innocent; and the rest are impeached here'.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Robert Southwell to Sir John Perceval, 11 Sept. 1682, *Egmont MSS*, pp 1 19. Southwell was a relation of Sir John and after his death in 1686, his heir, also John (1683-1748), later created 1st earl of Egmont, and his two other sons, were placed in the care of Southwell.

<sup>7</sup> The presentation of the two documents follows the style used by William O'Sullivan, 'William Molyneux's geographical collections for Kerry', *Kerry Arch. and Hist. Soc. Jn.*, 4 (1971) pp 28-34, where the spelling (except in the case of proper names) and punctuation have been modernised.



*This city is surrounded by the famous river Shannon forming a pleasant isle wherein the city is built, whereto the tides twice daily, constant flow, and ships of 300 tons can safely ride at her quay which is 20 leagues distant from the sea. Before the river looseth its name, about 14 leagues in that river from the city, is an island called Scatterry belonging to the corporation (the ruins of devotion (and churches) discernable therein) whereat every ship coming to this port is obliged to drop anchor and to call for a pilot (to conduct him up the river to the port) who is maintained there for that end by the corporation.*

*There have been two monasteries in this city (now dissolved), one of the Franciscans, the other of the Dominicans. About the year 1539, one Edmond Sexton was mayor of this city and Lyonell, Lord Gray, being the lord deputy of the kingdom to King Henry ye 8th, came to this city and designed a massacre there which the mayor understood. [He] seized the lord deputy and carried him for England where he was executed for treason. The king gave Sexton a considerable estate and in commemoration of this good service the corporation granted to him and his heirs (what honour they called the next station and voice to the mayor in all days of election of magistrates, before any lord or earl) and ye corporation to his day admit the same privileges to the heir of the house, one Edmond Perry, Esq. This city is esteemed the most warlike treasure of the nation. A pass, commanding the whole kingdom at its pleasure; on the north east side thereof, about a league up the river, is a great salmon weir belonging to the corporation; thence westward three score miles.*

*They have an admiralty jurisdiction and the mayor is admiral (to whom all royal fishes taken therein do belong). The river is stored with great plenty of all kind of fish but no encouragement for a fishing trade (except for herrings, the best throughout the whole land) by reason the tides are so rapid setting in, that the fish have no place to rest in. This city has a considerable trade by sea and land advantage by the rivers, long in draught, stored with county commodities of all sorts proper for exportation. It is situate in the 52A; 47M north latitude, calculated by good artists of late for satisfaction, thus the Blasquets (in all seamen's charts) are said to lie (near the mouth of the river) in 52A, 5M but exactly found to be in 52A, 1 5M. The course from the Blasquets in sailing to Limerick is thus vizt.*

<i>From the Blasquets to Loopshead</i>	<i>N. E. b. E</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>From Loopshead to Scatterry</i>	<i>E N E</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Tarbart Point</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Clear the point</i>	<i>S E b. E</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Fines island</i>	<i>E b. N</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Clear the Beeves</i>	<i>E S E</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Bunratty</i>	<i>ENE</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Clear Sadle Island</i>	<i>E S E</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Cratlah</i>	<i>ENE</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Clear Ladys Hole</i>	<i>S E b. S.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Key Of Limerick</i>	<i>E b. N</i>	<i>3</i>
		<i>108 miles</i>

*This 108 miles make 32 m due N. so that Limerick lies 32 minutes more northward than the Blasquets by good artists (notwithstanding charts and maps). The meridian is 52 A, 47 M exactly computed as is possible by sea.*



*Mr. Foley's last queries and answer to them  
Lymerick Town and County*

Cloghanodfoy,  
4 September 1682.

Sir

Your letter intimating the design that you and several other worthy and learned gentlemen have of undertaking a perfect description of this kingdom, came to my hands some months since but by what chance I mislaid it I cannot say, and though I took some pains to find it, with the enclosed queries, could not till within a few days. I should be very much pleased, if I were able to give you as great an assistance, in your intended work, as by the trouble you gave yourself in writing to me you seem to expect. And though I confess to have spent but very little of my time out of this kingdom, yet I made not so good use of my time spent in journeys to and fro as to do it like a geographer, or to take any other notice of those places I have been in then what might for that present divert or otherwise be necessary for knowledge of the roads. This negligent temper has incapacitated me from giving you any other exact descriptions of places than such as I have been most acquainted with - which to show my inclinations to oblige you and to throw in my small might towards putting forward the great and good work you are about.

I will offer you a short description of Limerick and county named from it being that wherein I live - Lymerick is the utmost bounds of the county on that side, and lies northwest of the greatest part of the county. It is, as it were, divided into two cities, one part called generally the English Town, the other the Irish. The English Town, with several large fields, is surrounded by the Shannon and joined to the Irish Town by a drawbridge called Baalls Bridge. On the opposite end of the town is another great bridge over the Shannon towards the county of Clare. These bridges stand about east and west, one from another. That towards the county of Clare is west, near which stands on the river an old fortification called the King's Castle. Opposite to this castle, without the town walls, lies a large piece of ground called the King's Island. This island, castle and greatest bridge lie at the west end of the town and are joined by the Shannon to that part of the town called the English Town and by it made an island. The east end carries the name of the Irish Town and has at the east end of it a citadel and a gate called St. John's Gate. There are but three churches, the cathedral called St. Mary's; another near the King's Island called St. Munchin's but these in the English - the third near St. John's Gate in the Irish Town and is called St. John's Church. There is also in this town set up the greatest tanyard it is said in the king's dominions, though I had not yet the curiosity to see it. The county I judge to be surrounded with great mountains, except that part where the Shannon bounds it, which I judge to be the north west part which divides it from the county of Clare. Westward it is bounded by the mountains of Sleivelogher between it and the county of Kerry; southward with the county of Cork by a range called Sliuvreagh eastward and northward with the county of Tipperary by the mountains of Owny. A great share of all these mountains bounding it do belong to the county of Limerick. The rest of the county within these mountains is a rich soil fit for most sorts of grain. It produces rape seed and cole seed which are seeds that grow not in other counties but in deep and rich marshes taken out of the sea or great rivers.



*There are but few corporations as Lymerick whose chief magistrate is a mayor and sends two burgesses to parliament; Killmallock, an old walled town governed by a sovereign and sends two burgesses to parliament; Askeiton, governed by a (indecipherable) and sends two burgesses to parliament. Castleconnell, Brittas and Killmallock are places in this county that give titles to noblemen.*

*Medicinal wells there are but two in the county that I hear of, one within 3 or 4 miles of Limerick, the other near the place wherein I live. We generally give them the name of spa wells whether they deserve that name, or from what minerals they come from I will not undertake to determine. That near Limerick I never saw. This near this place springs out near a red bog which has a very high mountain on one side and a dry hill on the other of it. The water tastes like ink, is very clear colour and will, from that clear colour, turn to the colour of a deep claret by putting into a pint of it as much as a scraped gall as will cover half your nail. It will do so by putting into it bruised oak leaves but not so strong nor so deep a colour. This account I give you of this county is to the best of my observation true; though not so full as it is like you may have from others, nor so well methodised and though I show my incapacity in writing on subjects of this kind, I choose rather to do so than, by being silent, seem to slight those so useful undertakings, you with so many learned gentlemen have engaged in or lose an opportunity of letting you see that to my power*

*I am your humble servant*

When Molyneux received the different accounts he drew on them to draft his contribution to the atlas. But, unexpectedly, his whole work came to naught:

The English Atlas was brought to a sudden halt after four volumes, covering the northern part of continental Europe, had been published. Pitt had got into serious financial difficulties and was arrested on 13 April 1685. Molyneux was disgusted and burned all that he himself had written. Fortunately, he kept communications he had received, hoping that some day the atlas would be continued.<sup>8</sup>

**Milo Spillane**

<sup>8</sup> J.G. Simms, *William Molyneux of Dublin*, ed. P. H. Kelly (Dublin, 1982) p. 36. The Limerick documents are in Trinity College Dublin, reference numbers, TCD MS 883/1 pp 239-241; TCD MS 883/1 pp 241-243; TCD MS 888/2 fols 57r – 59r. The author is grateful to the Board of Trinity College Dublin for permission to reproduce them.

