

## The Origin and Dating of the Name of Limerick's Irishtown

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The origin of the use of the name of Irishtown is discussed. The assumption that it dates back to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and that it is associated with the expulsion of the Irish from the city is questioned. The conclusion is that the name is of seventeenth-century date.

According to the tradition recorded by local historians the Irishtown of Limerick city was formed when the Anglo-Norman invaders expelled the existing inhabitants from their newly won city. The tradition goes back into the later seventeenth century. Dineley, on his visit to Limerick in the 1680s states, 'The distinction of this city into English and Irish Town hath bin ever since the Conquest and first reduction in the Reign of Henry II, when the English took to themselves the best of the town, wall'd it in, and excluded the natives.'<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this seems to put the division back to the time of the first Anglo-Norman intrusion into the city in the mid-1170s rather than under Lord John, but Giraldus Cambrensis, who recorded the taking of Limerick at that time, makes no mention of any such clearance.<sup>2</sup>

In 1827 Fitzgerald and McGregor wrote that, 'English settlers now flocked to Limerick in great numbers and arrangements were made, consistent with the policy of the times, to preserve tranquillity among the three distinct races by which this district was now inhabited. Treaties of amity were concluded with the neighbouring chieftains - the suburb now called the Irish-town was allotted to the native inhabitants and some portions of the adjacent territory were granted to the Ostmen, while to secure the allegiance of the new English colonists, many immunities were conferred on the citizens by Charter in the second year of John's reign'.<sup>3</sup> More recently Kevin Hannan stated, 'The citizens had to go. They were squeezed out of their Island town and most found sanctuary in the southern suburb across the Abbey River'.<sup>4</sup> According to Seán Spellissy, 'The Irishtown came into existence as the Anglo-Norman invaders of the old city forced the earlier inhabitants out of their island homes across to the other bank of the Abbey River. This second settlement dates back to the days of King John'.<sup>5</sup> The earliest dated usage of the name Irishtown is in the Civil Survey of 1655.<sup>6</sup>

Limerick was essentially a Viking or Ostman town under the political control of the O'Brien kings, so displacement of an existing population should have created an

<sup>1</sup> E.P. Shirley (ed.), 'Extracts from the Journal of Thomas Dineley Esq., giving some account of his visit to Ireland in the Reign of Charles II', *JRSAI*, vol 5, new series, part iii (1866) p. 441.

<sup>2</sup> A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin (eds), *Expugnatio Hibernica, the Conquest of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis* (Dublin, 1978) pp 149-53.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. P. Fitzgerald and J.J. McGregor, *The History, Topography, and Antiquities of the County and City of Limerick* (Dublin, 1827) p. 392.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Hannan, 'The Irishtown', *Old Limerick Journal*, no. 10 (1982) p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Seán Spellissy, *Limerick the Rich Land* (Ennis, 1989) p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Art Ó Maolfabhail, *Logaimneacha na hÉireann Imleabhar I: Contae Luimnigh* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1990) p. 32; R. Simmington (ed.), *The Civil Survey Vol IV, County of Limerick* (Dublin, 1938) p. 400.



Ostmannstown not an Irishtown. In both Dublin and Waterford there is good record of the Ostmen having been expelled,<sup>7</sup> while there is a suggestion of the same in Limerick in a reference to several roads between the '*villam custmannorum et Cormonerem*' in an inquisition of 1224.<sup>8</sup> If this does refer to a separate and new settlement then it probably would have been in the area of Irishtown. According to Lilley an expulsion of the existing inhabitants is to be expected as a standard part of Anglo-Norman colonization,<sup>9</sup> but there is reason to be cautious in a Limerick context. While Giraldus Cambrensis gives a vivid account of the taking and subsequent abandonment of Limerick in the mid-1170s, we know nothing at all of the circumstances of the return of the Anglo-Normans some twenty years later, whether by peaceful invitation or force of arms.<sup>10</sup> If the re-occupation was by agreement then it is hardly likely to have included, what we today would call, ethnic cleansing. It is, therefore, worth noting that the Ostmen of Waterford were initially allowed to remain within the walls and only expelled after a rebellion.<sup>11</sup> The other few snippets of evidence we have for Limerick do not suggest expulsion. The Ostmen, unlike the Irish, were allowed English law, which put them on equal footing with the incomers, while at least one early provost of Limerick has the Scandinavian name, Siward.<sup>12</sup> The 1224 inquisition further implies that there was no Irishtown because the jurors state that they know of no natives (Irish) other than those on the bishop's land in Omaill and in Oluby.<sup>13</sup>

Archaeological excavations have shown that there was settlement in the Irishtown area from the thirteenth century onwards, but nothing has yet been found which can tie that settlement to one particular ethnic group.<sup>14</sup> The discovery of corn-drying kilns, leather working and a comb-maker's workshop suggests the possibility that that this settlement may be nothing more than the deliberate location of the more dangerous or obnoxious trades away from the city centre, while there is no real evidence to suggest that it spread any great distance from Baal's Bridge.<sup>15</sup> The walling of Irishtown, in the fifteenth century, was a display of civic pride, a statement that Irishtown was part of the city and not the home of the dispossessed.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, H.B. Clarke (ed.), *Irish Cities* (Cork, 1995) pp 90 & 195; Oxmanstown in Dublin preserves the name of the suburb to which the Ostmen were evicted.

<sup>8</sup> *Custmannorum* = *Ostmannorum*. Ken Nicholls, 'Inquisitions of 1224 from the Miscellanea of the Exchequer', *Analecta Hibernica*, vol. 27 (1972) p. 106. *Cormonerem* may be the same as the *Cormoran* in J. MacCaffrey (ed.), *The Black Book of Limerick* (Dublin, 1907) pp 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> K. D. Lilley, "'Non urbe, non vico, non castris': territorial control and the colonisation and urbanisation of Wales and Ireland under Anglo-Norman lordship', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 26, 4 (2000) pp 517-31.

<sup>10</sup> Orpen cites the early granting of a charter to Limerick as 'a clear indication that Limerick was occupied by agreement and not by force', G.H. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans* (3rd edition, Dublin, 2005) p. 215, (Vol. 2, p. 159 of original edition).

<sup>11</sup> Lilley, 'Wales and Ireland under Anglo-Norman lordship', p. 526.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Hodkinson, 'Serious Crime in early 14th century Co. Limerick', *NMAJ*, vol. 3, (1992) pp 37-44; 37 and idem, 'Some thoughts on early Norman Limerick and the Mayoralty', *NMAJ*, vol. 46 (2006) pp 1-4.

<sup>13</sup> Omaill was in Mungret parish, see B. Hodkinson, 'A History and Archaeology of the Liberties of Limerick to c. 1650', *NMAJ*, vol. 47 (2007) pp 39-65:40-1, Oluby is uncertain, but see Drummoluba (with variant spellings) in MacCaffrey, *Black Book*, pp 54, 109, 116, 121, 123 & 124. The natives in question seem to be the *betaghs* on the episcopal manor of Mungret, whose descendants appear in the fourteenth-century rental in the *Black Book*, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> C. Tarbett, '31. Broad Street, Custom House', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1987* (Dublin, 1988) pp 19-20; C. Tarbett & K. Wiggins, '65. Charlotte's Quay, Abbey C. Ward', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1988* (Dublin, 1989) pp 35-7; K. Wiggins, '63. Broad Street/Curry Lane, Abbey C. Ward', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1989* (Dublin, 1990) pp 34-5; B.J. Hodkinson, '32. John St., Custom House', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1987* (Dublin, 1988) p. 20 and B.J. Hodkinson, '37. John St., Custom House', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1988* (Dublin, 1989) p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> B. Hodkinson, 'Thom Cor Castle: a 14th Century Tower House in Limerick City?', *JRSAL*, vol. 135 (2005) pp 119-129:125-8.



While there is no evidence, other than tradition, for a late twelfth or early thirteenth-century origin for the name Irishtown, there is sufficient documentation to suggest an alternative. The earliest use of the name is, as noted above, in the 1655 Civil Survey of Limerick. This described the town as divided into three, the 'northern suburb', 'the middle ward' and the 'southern suburb or Irishtown'. The Survey was taken in the aftermath of the surrender of the city to Cromwellian forces, in 1651, and lists all the pre-war proprietors within the city together with their religious affiliations. Only those of the Protestant religion, eight in number, were deemed to be of the 'English interest' and allowed to retain a firm grasp on their property. From the Survey it is clear that Limerick was heavily garrisoned in the immediate aftermath of the siege. In the northern suburb the castle formed the main guard but there was a secondary strongpoint in Stritch's castle which stood in the area of the present Bishops' Palace. It was, however, the separate walled enclosure of Irishtown that was most heavily garrisoned, with four strong points, at Baal's Bridge,<sup>16</sup> St John's Gate,<sup>17</sup> West Watergate,<sup>18</sup> and Tomcore Castle at the central road junction of Irishtown.<sup>19</sup> That these citadels were sited to hold the Irishtown against an internal threat is best demonstrated at St John's Gate, where a new fortification was constructed against the inside of the existing gate with its two artillery bastions pointing inwards to dominate the town. That this was strictly a military zone is demonstrated by the diversion of the main street around the outside of the citadel to a new public gate cut through the wall.<sup>20</sup>

By contrast there was no citadel at all in St Mary's parish which comprises the 'middle ward'. While it is not explicitly stated, this is the area which the Survey deemed to be the city proper, as it is only this area which can be the '*urbs*' to the two 'suburbs'. This conclusion is supported by two early descriptions of Limerick. In 1574 Fr. Wolfe stated that, 'the city forms an island in the fast flowing River Shannon and is only accessible by two stone bridges', in other words the city is only entered once Baal's Bridge is crossed.<sup>21</sup> The existence of the walled suburbs is, however, acknowledged, 'The boundary (borough) of the city is better fortified than the city itself'. Bradshaw, the editor of the description, suggests that Irishtown was ignored for snobbish reasons; that Wolfe, a man of Old English stock, looked down on the mere Irish. He does not seem to have contemplated either the possibility that the term Irishtown had not yet come into use or that the city and its walled suburbs were distinctly separate entities to the sixteenth-century mind.

In 1619 Luke Gernon wrote that, 'Lymericke divides itself into two partes, the high towne, which is compassed with the Shannon, and the base towne and in forme it doth perforth resemble an hower glasse, being bound together by that bridge which divides the two partes'.<sup>22</sup> Had the terms Englishtown and Irishtown been in common usage then one might possibly have expected to find them employed in this description.<sup>23</sup> Gernon

<sup>16</sup> The Castle called the Shambles, 'Now made into a Cytheadell', Simington, *Civil Survey*, p. 400.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Cytadle about St Johns Gate containes a great stone house wth a Cross house the great Castle on the Gate and a lardge waste plots of ground now made use of for a Cittadle', *Civil Survey*, p. 406.

<sup>18</sup> 'The great Sytadle about water gate, contayninge Nyne houses and Watergate Castle', *Civil Survey*, p. 411.

<sup>19</sup> 'Tomcore Castle and the Garrett place thereunto belonging, now made use of for Sytadle', *Civil Survey*, p. 415.

<sup>20</sup> B. Hodkinson, 'St John's Gate and the Citadel in Irishtown, Limerick', *NMAJ*, vol. 46 (2006) pp 129-31.

<sup>21</sup> B. Bradshaw, 'Fr Wolfe's Description of Limerick City 1574', *NMAJ*, vol. 17 (1975) pp 47-53:47.

<sup>22</sup> See 'Luke Gernon' in Cornelius Kelly (ed.), *The Grand Tour of Limerick* (Allihies, 2004) pp 9-10. The full text of Luke Gernon's account can be found on CELT, the Corpus of Electronic Texts at [www.ucc.ie/celt](http://www.ucc.ie/celt).

<sup>23</sup> Begley quotes the text as reading 'the base town or Irishtown'; the explanatory 'or Irishtown' should, however, be in parentheses because it does not appear in the original text. J. Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Dublin, 1927) p. 307.



does not explicitly acknowledge the twofold division of the 'high town' on King's Island, but the existence of a central kernel to the city is implicit in what he writes later: 'In the highe streete it is builte from one gate to the other in one forme like the Colledges in Oxford, so magnificent that at my first entrance it did amase me'. Oxford colleges are stone built and present a continuous frontage along the street. The only section of the high street between St John's Gate and Thomond Bridge where this comparison was applicable was between Baal's Bridge and Newgate, in other words the 'middle ward'. A reading of the Civil Survey shows that there was a mixture of property types along the main street in the northern and southern suburbs where stone buildings were by no means predominant. The main street of the middle ward, however, was, for the most part, lined with stone houses. This contrast can be seen on early, pre 1610, maps of Limerick, most clearly on the Hardiman map in TCD and less so on those in the Hunt Museum and British National Archives.<sup>24</sup> The last named spawned a series of maps, including that in *Pacata Hibernia* of 1633, where Irishtown is marked as 'The base town'.<sup>25</sup> The first cartographic appearance of the name Irishtown appears to be on Webb's 'Limbrick Leaguer 1651',<sup>26</sup> where it is marked as 'The Suburbes Comonly Called Irish Towne'. This map was probably drawn in the immediate aftermath of the siege and so conceivably predates the Civil Survey by a year or two.

The city, or middle ward, was entirely enclosed within its own wall and thus formed a defensible unit in its own right. The explanation for the lack of a garrison within it, suggested here, was simply that there was no need because the Irish population had been cleared from it to be replaced with new settlers from England and elsewhere, as the following extracts demonstrate. A letter, dated 16 August 1651, from the Commissioners of Parliament to Colonel Ingoldsby states, 'We have received the list of Irish which you have turned out of Limerick. We know not the persons by their names but believing you have done the same in order to the better security and future planting of that place with English, we approve of the same, and indeed shall be glad to hear that those houses out of which those Irish are removed are supplied with English, and when that is done we should freely give our consent to another removal of the Irish for that purpose'.<sup>27</sup> In a letter of November 1651 General Ireton wrote, 'We hope to finde yet more Arms and Ammunition, and intend speedily to clear the place of a multitude of People that are most dangerous (either in Quality or Infection) and by degrees it may be rendred more English, as you or your ministers shall finde opportunity of Planters, though there are now divers of the now Inhabitants (and some persons of Quality amongst them) whose carriage all along towards the English People and Interest, and particularly in this surrender, may deserve your admittance to continue here, and favorable dealing in point of their Estates'.<sup>28</sup>

In the aftermath of the surrender, some citizens were executed and some expelled from the town, but others remained and, it is suggested, these were concentrated into the heavily garrisoned southern suburb, which immediately became known to the occupying

<sup>24</sup> TCD MS 16 L 10 (59); Hunt Museum; British National Archives MPF 1/96.

<sup>25</sup> T. Stafford (ed.), *Pacata Hibernia or a History of the Wars in Ireland during the reign of Queen Elizabeth*, (London, 1633, 2nd ed., Dublin, 1820).

<sup>26</sup> Worcester College, Oxford MS YC20, ccvi; a drawing based on the original is to be found in K. Wiggins, *Anatomy of a Siege* (Bray, 2000) p. 76; a copy of the original is in the Limerick Museum collection.

<sup>27</sup> R. Dunlop, *Ireland under the Commonwealth* (Manchester, 1913) p. 251.

<sup>28</sup> 'Letter from the Lord Deputy-General of Ireland upon Surrender of Limerick, 1651', in John T. Gilbert (ed.), *A Contemporary History of Affairs in Ireland from 1641 to 1652* (Dublin, 1880), vol. 3, p. 267, Also available on CELT.



forces as Irishtown. That some of the dispossessed were still around is demonstrated by the fact that many former 'Irish Papist' proprietors sat on the jury convened to make the Civil Survey.<sup>29</sup> It is not possible to totally depopulate a town then repopulate it immediately with strangers and expect it to function properly. The local knowledge and correct mix of skills would be lacking, so within a short time the Irish began to move back into the centre to help provide these services. In 1659 it was ordered that, 'all dispensation for continuing any Irish Papist within the said city be revoked, and made null, and that no Irish papist whatsoever be permitted to reside within the said city'.<sup>30</sup> This was in all probability disregarded out of economic necessity. The Census of the same year records 727 people in the middle ward of whom 350, or slightly less than 50% were Irish.<sup>31</sup> This is in marked contrast to the Civil Survey which lists c.150 Irish proprietors and just 8 English in pre-war Limerick.<sup>32</sup> The middle ward had effectively been transformed into Englishtown.<sup>33</sup>

As noted the tradition of the Irishtown was in place by the early 1680s so how could it have arisen so soon after the event? In part the thirty years which had elapsed would have been sufficient for a whole generation to have grown up without direct experience of the events of the early 1650s. The division of Limerick into two entities either side of the Abbey River had a long history, clearly visible to its citizens in the form of walls and gates. It would be no great leap of imagination for people to assume that the names given to the two entities were as old as the entities themselves, while the myth may even have been actively encouraged in order to justify the new settlement. Dineley was not a modern investigative journalist, he wrote a journal of his travels in Ireland; it is detailed in parts and superficial in others. While in Limerick he may not even have come in contact with those dispossessed in 1651 to learn the true story.

<sup>29</sup> Simington, *Civil Survey*, pp 455-7. The distinction between native Irish and Old English disappears at this time because, to the victorious Cromwellian forces, they were all Irish Papists. After 1651 the major families, such as the Bourkes, Arthurs, Creaghs, Fannings, did not rehabilitate themselves sufficiently to hold the office of mayor which, previously, they had more or less monopolised between them. The Fannings seem to have been entirely expelled because the 1659 census does not list the name at all among the principal Irish names, S. Pender (ed.), *A Census of Ireland c 1659* (Dublin, 1939) p. 265.

<sup>30</sup> Dunlop, *Ireland under the Commonwealth*, p. 716.

<sup>31</sup> Pender, *Census of Ireland*, p. 263.

<sup>32</sup> Simington, *Civil Survey*, pp 490-1.

<sup>33</sup> According to Ó Maolfabhail, *Logaimneacha Contae Luimnigh*, p. 32, the earliest date for the use of Englishtown is 1840. Three earlier examples have been noted in the course of research for this essay, Phillips 1685, Twiss 1775 and Campbell 1775, all to be found in Kelly, *Grand Tour of Limerick*, pp 20, 48 & 52 respectively.

