

Tercentenary Commemoration of the
Siege of Limerick 941-56 (Local History)

43

Richard Arthur, Bishop of Limerick,

1623-1646

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In his early thirties, Richard Arthur was recalled by his parents from a snug berth in the civil service to follow the traditional family career of a trader. According to their own telling, the Arthurs came from Somerset with the first onrush of Normans. For a few generations they were landowners about Emly; thereafter for centuries their name was to be linked with merchant enterprise in Limerick City. Old Nicholas, who flourished five hundred years ago, was the most notable of them all. Trading ventures brought him across the sea-lines of England's war upon France. He spent two years as a prisoner of the French in Mont St. Michel, the two years of the meteoric military career of St. Joan of Arc. Old Nicholas, the privateer merchant, had married a Cork woman and ever after the family owned property in Cork. Our Richard was a Leesider by birth, but it was in Limerick he chose to work when he returned from his seminary in the Netherlands, a mature man of almost forty years.

Richard was in his eighty-ninth year when he died as Bishop of Limerick, in May, 1646. Thus he would have been born just about the time that Elizabeth came to the throne of England. He must have been a civil servant (in Dublin, and in the President's office in Cork) until 1588 or later, for Lynch, Richard's biographer, says that he had worked in government offices with Boyle, the future Earl of Cork. Now Boyle first reached Ireland as a penniless adventurer in the year of the Armada expedition. Lynch was ordained by Bishop Arthur in 1625. Obviously he was fascinated by this Counter-Reformation prelate; to him he allows more space in *De Praesulibus Hiberniae* than to any of his contemporaries. Among the curious details about his hero Lynch asserts that Boyle looked on Richard Arthur as a brother—*qui Arthurum proinde fratrem appellabat*.

Soon, however, the ways of the two Richards drifted apart. Richard Boyle gleaned much useful information in the department for forfeited lands and when he died three years before Bishop Arthur he had accumulated a vast fortune and founded a dynasty. Down the same road but for the grace of God had gone Richard Arthur. Our Richard was summoned back to Cork on the death of an elder brother. Business voyages took him to London and back time and again and his London experiences inspired in him a strange resolution. Every month since the Armada failure, English priests home from Douai seminary were going to execution for what the ingenious Cecil called treason. And each of these great-hearted Englishmen would echo the challenge from the dock of Campion, their school-mate: "If our religion do make us traitors, we are worthy to be condemned, but otherwise are, and have been, as good subjects as ever the queen had." In these grim circumstances Richard Arthur, the prosperous young merchant, answered an imperious call. He forwarded the proceeds of his tradings to his amazed parents, retaining something for his seminary expenses in the Low Countries for which he now set out.

Writing in 1630, Bishop Arthur said he had worked in Limerick for thirty-two years. Lynch says that before coming to Limerick he preached and catechized for a spell in his native Cork. The Cork interval must have been brief, for Arthur's name figures among those associated with the college which Christopher Cusack, of Meath, opened at Douai, in 1594. If Arthur knew Boyle as a civil servant in Ireland, and afterwards engaged in trade, he can hardly have set out for the continent before 1590. As he was back in Cork before engaging in the Limerick mission in 1598, we may credit him with six or seven years between Louvain and Douai. According to Lynch he spent a period in a Capuchin novitiate: he must have known Francis Nugent, the first Irish Capuchin, who was in Belgium at the time and who was kinsman to Cusack, Arthur's rector at Douai.

When Richard Arthur came to Limerick towards the close of the century, the diocese had not had a resident bishop for twenty years. It was he who now took over the churches of St. Mary and St. John for Catholic use on the death of the queen. The address he delivered on the occasion is reproduced by Lynch: it reflects the coaching in scriptural controversy he must have received in Louvain and Douai. The optimism of the Irish cities was premature: for them James I. was son of Mary Queen of Scots; for history he was a peevish, pompous pedant, and the Puritan administration in Dublin soon showed that nothing essential had changed with the passing of Elizabeth. Sir John Davies came to Limerick in 1606, to administer the new king's justice. He found it "a town or castles, compassed by the finest wall that I saw." He found it, too, a haven of such priests and Jesuits as "do lurk in the other principal towns of Munster. In Limerick these three: Brien O'Cairn, a Jesuit; Richard Cadan, Richard Arthur, priest." Later that year Brouncker reported the capture of Dr. Cadan "the notablest priest in that province, and a continual dweller in that town." The investigations of Rev. John Brady, historian of Meath diocese, have revealed that Dr. Cadan had been appointed Vicar General of Limerick by Papal brief dated 22 February, 1602.

At the close of 1606, the reign of terror reached its climax with the execution of Sir John Bourke, of Brittas. Arthur at the time, according to Lynch, had to go on his keeping, having first disposed of his effects for the benefit of the city poor. On such occasions he would venture as far as Cork or Galway, Kinsale, Clonmel, or even Kilkenny to preach and instruct at inns and taverns hoping that hostile eyes would not penetrate his disguise.

Lynch has an amusing picture of him on his rounds in Limerick, dressed at times as a shepherd from the fields, sometimes as a fisherman hawking his catch, even as a poulterer with his squawking hens, or a faggotman beside his bundle-laden horse. One day he came through the city gate as a groom in the retinue of Andrew Comyn. Soon they noticed they were being shadowed and a whispered consultation led to a surprising stratagem. Comyn wrathfully abused and belaboured his groom until the spy, judging no Catholic would so treat a priest, turned his attention elsewhere.

When comparative calm followed the stormy period, Dr. Arthur would receive his people at his quiet home, which was a training

school, too, for the young priests smuggled in from abroad. So beloved was Arthur that when he had to quit his lodgings every home in the city was open to receive and shelter him. His household chapel had its choir of a dozen city boys; the altar fittings were the best the city could afford. Living dangerously did not rob Arthur of any of his gracious human qualities. Lynch tells us of the melody of his singing birds, and of the vigorous protestations of his parrot, which discouraged ladies from too close approach to the sanctuary. Alas, ill luck befell the merry parrot (or was it, perhaps, the enmity of the devout female sex?); in addition two choice horses died, and Dr. Arthur consoled himself with the consideration that the few remaining ties with earth were snapping.

Dr. Cadan had disappeared in Brouncker's reign of terror and a few years later Rome appointed in his stead, Luke Archer as Vicar and Commissary of Limerick (Brief of 19.1.1609). Luke Archer's responsibilities at Ossory and Leighlin were too numerous to allow him much time for the administration of Limerick. His connection with Holy Cross makes one wonder whether he may not have been the donor of the *particulae antiquissimae Crucis Christi* which Dr. Arthur was to enshrine in the Arthur crucifix still happily preserved. Archbishop Kearney, of Cashel, appointed Dr. Arthur to replace Archer as Vicar of Limerick. Dr. Kearney might claim to be the first of the Irish seminarists; he had spent the years from 1568 to 1596 in and about Douai guiding, advising and financing such Irish clerics as came his way. He used his influence to have his old friend from Douai raised to episcopal rank. Richard Arthur was consecrated Bishop of Limerick in 1623: a year later Dr. Kearney died in France.

Within seven years of his consecration the ageing bishop was seeking a coadjutor to share the burden of office. The appointment was delayed for fifteen years, and in the interval Dr. Arthur relied more and more on his active and devoted Vicar-General, John Creagh. There were worries with the vigorous Strafford who had awarded the Loftus property in Mungret manor to the State Bishop, Dr. Gough. James Stritch, son-in-law and heir of the last Loftus, was naturally indignant, and Dr. Arthur came within range of his wrath. The Bishop had to go on his keeping again as in the grim days of Brouncker's *battue*. Away back in 1610, Dr. Adams, the establishment bishop, had delated Richard Arthur to the authorities in a letter dated from Kilmallock and preserved in the State Papers. Dr. Adams listed Arthur among "the noisome puddle of priests run out from the great sink of treason and rebellion to infest this miserable nation." Poor Adams' visit to Kilmallock may account for his liverish humour: the town council and tenants at the time were vigorously resisting his claims as lord of the manor. In time, too, he came to recognise Geneva as more of a personal menace than Rome. His low church dean, Andrews, ambitioned the see, and Lynch quotes an aphorism of the afflicted Adams about the ecclesiastical position in Limerick: "We have three bishops here—myself, the king's appointment; Andrews, deriving authority from the lower regions; and Richard Arthur, an honest man sent by the Pope." Strafford and Laud between them settled accounts with Andrews eventually. The deputy suggested to the archbishop to transfer Andrews from Limerick deanery to the See of Ferns, "and then I assure you he shall leave better behind

him." It was so done, but not before Strafford made him break a lease of Limerick deanery lands which Andrews had let "very charitably to himself."

In the summer of 1642, the Castle at Limerick surrendered to the Confederates but the attitude of the merchant oligarchy who controlled the city council remained ever ambiguous. Dr. Arthur rebuked their failure to admit Scarampi, the first Papal envoy. They adhered to that principle of theirs, from which, as Gilbert puts it, "during the whole course of the war, no power of the Confederates, no authority derived from their king, could break them off from keeping themselves in the condition of a free state depending as far as pleased them upon those whom they thought fit to acknowledge their superiors, and to increase their traffic by an undisturbed commerce with all men."

Dr. Arthur was too old to take much part in the deliberations of the Confederation: he was usually represented by vicars. He was still active in church matters; in 1642, he had encouraged the Capuchins, his friends of fifty years earlier, to open a house in the city. The Carmelites came, too, during the Confederate years, as well as the Jesuits and the Congregation of the Mission. John Creagh, the Vicar General, had proposed to confer the parish of St. Munchin as an endowment for the Vincentians. The Augustinian hermits had succeeded to the rights of the Canons Regular, though a Portuguese canon sought to retain possession of what remained of the old Priory. The Dominican and Franciscan friars, of course, had kept up their succession all through the Reformation period. It is typical of Dr. Arthur's mind and interests that he should have been in touch with the Franciscans of Louvain and their historical work. His Vicar, Dr. Creagh, wrote to John Colgan: "Here I send to you a note of the churches of the diocese of Limerick with a few fragments of miracles of certain saints according as by tradition they were had. The Lord Bishop doth commend himself unto your Reverence, and is very glad that you have undertaken that laudable work which we hope shall be much to the honour and renown of this kingdom and nation. If we find out in process of time any more of this kind, and pertinent to your work, it shall be sent to you with care and diligence." At Limerick the research mentioned by Creagh is reflected in the White manuscript List of Churches which was compiled during the Confederation. The List names wherever possible the patron of each church and the date of his festival. The Arthur Chalice, still preserved by the diocese though it is dated 1625, appears to be Spanish work of a generation earlier. Possibly it is a reminder of Dr. Arthur's years in the Spanish Netherlands.

Happily, the O'Dea Mitre and Crozier carry the story of their donor inscribed upon them. The first reference so far traced is that given by Lynch in his sketch of Dr. Arthur. "He left to his successor," says Lynch, "the gilt pontifical ornaments which he had secured, and the mitre and crozier which men looked upon as a gift from the heavens." Conor O'Dea is not mentioned in the context but it may be assumed that the reference is to his resplendent *pontificalia*. No doubt they were the same which the old bishop tendered to the Nuncio at St. Mary's doorway. "These have come to me from the Catholic Church, to the Church I yield them now."

He stood before the Nuncio beneath the recessed arches of the great west door. Below the tide lapped in the little harbour where the rivers met: across the great estuary stood the old home of the Arthurs behind their mill of Cora Dobair amid the fields of Fearann Seoin. Like all the Arthurs, he had loved ships and the sea and now the ebbing tide of life was bearing him to that deep haven which had been his true goal through all the turmoil of his stormy years. His young coadjutor had just come in the Nuncio's wake; his strong hands might wield the crozier of O'Dea, that man of Thomond who had left this precious legacy, the Gael who had held sway among the Norman and old English clerics of this city.

About the Nuncio and the tired Bishop stood the city fathers—the Creaghs, the Arthurs, Roches, Whites, Stacpooles and the Bourkes. Had they yet learned that local patriotism was not enough, that their trading republic could not play any longer for its own lone hand? They had not learned, and their indecision was to deepen the tragedy of 1651. Their sons learned better and have made full amends. At the turn of another century men like Francis Arthur and Martin Creagh, with courage born of adversity, would guide their Limerick people from the shadows of the penal underworld to the light of freedom's morning. All these things were in the hidden future, like the coadjutor's escape from the stricken city and his death in Flanders, like the exile of John Creagh, the Vicar General, ending in the marble tomb of St. Isidore's, holding the ashes of a heart that had been so sick for home.

The Nuncio was back in Limerick the following May when death came to Bishop Arthur. Rinuccini came to speed the siege of Bunratty, and to storm heaven he had the new devotion of the Forty Hours celebrated in the Cathedral. The old bishop lay dying all that week, exhausted from fever and scarcely conscious. The Nuncio came in time to give the Papal Blessing "and as if God had sustained the bishop for that privilege he then lapsed into final unconsciousness" as the Rinuccini Memoirs say (1646).

"Last night," says the Nuncio's diary for May 23, "he rendered his soul to God amid universal grief, for who did not know of the gracious goodness of this prelate and his patience under the hardships of terrible years. His will disposed of forty crowns, for that was all that remained: these things were as nothing to him, save in so far as they might serve to gain Christ."

They buried him in his cathedral in the full pontifical habit as the Nuncio had prescribed, "a novel spectacle contrary to the usage of persecution time, his head mitred and his face uncovered. Behind the bier walked the Nuncio, the Archbishop of Cashel, the Coadjutor now successor, the remaining clergy and his people without number." It was on Pentecost Sunday, the Sunday when a bishop speaks to his people in his cathedral. *Defunctus adhuc loquitur*. The gentle voice of Richard Arthur is long since stilled, but sometimes surely among "his people without number" the echoes of his life can still whisper to the listening heart.