



The Barrington Normans of Limerick

by Desmond O'Grady

I

Those we read in books of who made history
mesmerize more than the ambiguous story itself.
The rest, in the ebb and flow of Time's mystery,
commands as much presence as an empty shelf.

Three major foreign movements into Ireland:
Euro-Christian, ethnic Norse, Norman.
Each imported what we lacked first hand:
culture, sea-trade, Christian civilization.

No invasion, before the crazed Cromwellian,
stayed unabsorbed – including that infiltrator
Welsh Patrick and also Strongbow the Welsh Norman
armed with the Papal Bull Laudabiliter.

The Christian saved us from the ailing Pagan
values of life based on a cattle bargain.
The Norse built harbours, opened the Mediterranean.
The Normans changed our tribal law to Roman.

These Normans also centralized our government;
based law and order on the Magna Charta,
the jury, coinage, central Church establishment
and focused life on castle-town trade and barter.

Yet they themselves remained unmaterialistic.
Warlike as Normans, they offered all possible peace
to perennially fighting native tribes. The ethnic
Irish absorbed them and adopted their Euro-grace.

Where Normans settled Christianity flourished.
They brought religious orders from the Continent,
including the Cistercians, eleven forty-two A.D.
They brought stability, peace, construction, art.

II

Those names I grew up with at school while young,
or work and live with daily, now a man,
read etymologically old Irish or old Norman.
The prominent name in my home town was Barrington.

These troubadour Barringtons came in the eleventh century
with William the Conquerer and brought the French chansons
de geste of Charlemagne, Arthur and Godfrey.
That love tradition sparked Nouveau Eireann.

The Limerick Barringtons, all-round Elizabethan,
built and paid for bridges, quay-sides, a hospital
for the poor and patronised both partisan
and artist. They also subsidised the wherewithal

of a mont de piété, or poorman's loan-house,
to the wholesome sum of almost twenty-six
thousand pounds – the first in the British Isles –
at nominal interest rates to keep up face.

One built Glenstal Castle, the Benedictine
Abbey school today. Another brought
the game of rugby first to these green
fields of Ireland with its sense of sport.

Others grew soldiers, historians, administrators,
politicians, engineers, architects, artisans;
a few fell for the visual arts or for
the Church or law. One fell to the gun of partisans.

In all, for almost a thousand Irish years,
the Barringtons worked to mould a civic face on
their adopted country for modern histories.
That's the Norman mind – and European.

Adieu

The government's closed Barrington's Hospital now.
There's not a Renaissance Barrington left to rescue.

Kinsale,
Hall'owe'n Weekend, 1988