



# COQUEBERT DE MONTBRET'S IMPRESSIONS OF LIMERICK 1790

BY SILE NI CHINNEÏDE

## INTRODUCTION

### (I) The man. . . .

In the year 1788, Charles Etienne Coquebert de Montbret, Consul General for the Hanseatic towns, left Hamburg to take over his father's position in the *Chambre des Comptes* at Versailles, a post held by members of the Coquebert family in each successive generation since the end of the seventeenth century. The France to which he returned was a France plunged in turmoil where popular agitation was forcing the well-meaning, vacillating king to do away with hereditary sinecures, and consequently Coquebert was no sooner installed as *Correcteur Ordinaire* in the *Chambre des Comptes* than the position was abolished and the returned exile found himself unemployed. However, unlike others in a similar position, Coquebert was a competent man of affairs and so was seized upon immediately by La Luzerne, head of the French Admiralty, to undertake a difficult assignment in Ireland.

To understand why an official of Coquebert's rank and experience should be needed to fill the seemingly unimportant post of French consul in Dublin it is necessary to know something of the awkward impasse into which France and England had then drifted with regard to commercial relations. Ever since the war of 1688, there had been no interchange of consuls between the two countries and, though in actual fact trade had been continued, that trade was illegal. When the commercial treaty of September, 1786, was signed, the problem of appointing consuls was again considered, and there is written evidence of a scheme drawn up by the French Admiralty<sup>(1)</sup> to have a consul general appointed to London, together with consuls at Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow and Dublin, but the difficulties were not solved then, nor indeed until after the Peace of Paris in 1814. Then, in January, 1789, when La Luzerne tackled the problem, Ireland under Grattan's Parliament was enjoying semi-independence, and it was a clever move on the part of the French minister to attempt the establishment of a consulate in Dublin. The English government could hardly object and might even be glad to wink at the institution of one official commercial link between France and the British Isles. La Luzerne believed that Coquebert was the right man to forge that link.

From Coquebert's point of view there was much to be said for and against accepting the post. Owing to Herder's influence, the intelligentsia of Western Europe was beginning at this time to take an interest in lesser-known civilizations and a group of French scholars had visited Ireland shortly before to study the relics of her early culture. Further evidence of French interest in Irish affairs is to be found in the fact that Young's book on Ireland made an early appearance in French and that, more surprising still, a translation of Twiss's *Tour in Ireland* in 1775 was published, from which all that gentleman's sneers at the Irish people were discreetly omitted. It seems

that the remote island had a certain fascination for Frenchmen of that generation, for between 1787 and 1798, the Baron de Boert-Duholand, Pierre Chartreau, and the Chevalier de la Tocnaye all toured the country and wrote more or less picturesque accounts of their travels there. Therefore, as a promising field for the study of languages, science, and history, Ireland was well worth a visit; and her potential usefulness to France in case of another war with his Britannic Majesty was never absent from the French mind, even in the deceptively peaceful atmosphere of January, 1789. Then, the salary offered, sixteen thousand francs,<sup>(2)</sup> was such as to tempt a man with heavy family responsibilities, who could not afford to remain idle for any length of time.

On the other hand, a journey to Ireland – because of the children, one a mere infant – would involve a temporary dislocation of family life, a matter of serious concern to people bound together by the strongest ties of mutual affection. Eventually, after due consideration, it was agreed that the separation must be endured, and the appointment was signed in January, 1789, though the final break was not made until many months later. A serious illness interrupted the preparations for departure and there followed a long period of convalescence at St. Germain and Versailles which detained Charles Coquebert long enough in France to witness the early scenes of the Revolution being enacted, as it were, on his own doorstep. The Ancien Régime had perished. Then, with the king's reluctant blessing, nobles, clergy, and commons set to work on that new democratic constitution which, it was generally believed, could not fail to bring universal happiness to the French people. To leave a beloved wife in the gloomy days of February was sufficient sorrow; to turn one's back on this brave new world must have been a veritable heartbreak. As some measure of consolation, the new consul decided to take his eldest son, Ernest, with him on his travels, and this little lad, who was nine years of age at the time, was his father's constant companion during every stage of his adventures in Ireland.

These adventures are recorded in four notebooks, three of which are now in the manuscript room of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and one in the Municipal Library of Rouen. They are the work of a man who, because of his religious background and his extensive knowledge of Irish history and literature, was better qualified to understand the Irish people than his famous contemporary, Arthur Young. During a stay of some two and a half years, he made three long journeys which brought him into the most remote corners of the island and enabled him to collect valuable information with regard to Irish industry, agriculture, speech, antiquities, customs, politics, flora, and fauna. In May, 1791, he set out from Dublin on his third journey with a view to exploring the west and north. The following notes are to be found in the Paris manuscript from which they are here published by kind permission of the Conservateur du Cabinet des Manuscrits.

(Reprinted from the *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. XXV, Nos. 1 & 2, 1952).



## (II) . . . And his Notebooks

The destruction of privilege, which was one of the most notable achievements of the French Assembly in 1789, brought with it the abolition of countless well-paid offices, many of them mere sinecures. Among those deprived of their occupation as a result of the reform was Coquebert de Montbret. Coquebert being a man of ability and experience, unlike some of his fellow-functionaries, did not, however, remain long unemployed but was sent, almost immediately, to Ireland as Agent Général de la Marine et du Commerce à Dublin.<sup>63</sup>

Only a revolution could have made possible the appointment of such a remarkable man to such an unimportant position. At eighteen years of age, he had been attached to the Bureau des Consuls at Versailles; one year later, he obtained the appointment of Commissaire de la Marine at Hamburg and, there, acquitted himself so well that he was made Consul General of the Hansa towns. He returned to France to take over his father's office at the Chambre des Comptes and, when that office ceased to exist, he proceeded to Ireland, where he remained until September, 1791.<sup>64</sup>

Coquebert's most important work is a treatise on the geography, statistics and commerce of Europe,<sup>65</sup> but far more interesting to us in Ireland are four notebooks never published,<sup>66</sup> and never intended for publication, which are at present in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Nouv. Acq. XXIII). These rough jottings give a Frenchman's candid impression of various Irish towns in 1790 and 1791. Intended for no eye other than the author's, they give us also an intimate insight into the mind of a typical intellectual of eighteenth century France possessed of all the virtues and failings of his time and country, a man whose interests covered the whole field of contemporary thought and speculation. On languages, ancient and modern; natural science, economics, mathematics,

antiquities, and much else, he was something of an authority, and combines a sincere sympathy for suffering humanity with a shrewd understanding of his fellow-men, a keen sense of humour and a shocking contempt for all dogma; as witness the following comment on religious affairs in Ireland: *C'est peut-être un avantage d'avoir 2 religions, une speculative pour les gens comme il faut et une sensible pour le peuple.* ('It's an advantage to have two religions, a speculative one for the well-bred people and a sensible one for the ordinary people' - *Old Limerick Journal*)

Later in life, Coquebert contributed to many learned journals; edited the *Journal des Mines* 1793-1794; carried out experiments on the manufacture of gun powder; taught geology, history and economics in Paris, helped to introduce the new system of weights and measures and, besides acting as consul in Holland and England, was entrusted with delicate negotiations in regard to navigation on the Rhine, the re-patriation of prisoners-of-war, etc. Under Napoleon, he became a member of the *Légion d'Honneur*, was given the title of baron, and become secretary-general to the Ministry of Commerce.

It is not surprising that the private notebooks of such a man should make interesting reading. Unfortunately, they are very difficult to decipher with certainty in places, due to careless scribbling and the writer's disconcerting habit of changing his language without warning, using, with ease, Latin, Greek, German, Irish and English, the main text being, of course, in French. We know that he undertook to edit a Chinese dictionary at home. Apart from the text, there is a difficulty about presenting Coquebert's information because his remarks are so disconcerted, often amusingly so, as on page 16 (20. 099): *Ankett, la femme de Mr. Roche la 3<sup>e</sup> = iea euen 23 enfants, mauvais fermiers dans le comté sont très rares.* ('Ankett, the wife of Mr. Roche the third, had 23 children - bad farmers (producers?) are very rare in the county' - O.L.J.)

(Reprinted from *The North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. 5, 1948)

## The Journey from Cork to Limerick

Coquebert kept a record of all he saw and heard during his travels in Ireland, and from these rough notes, jotted down for his own information and amusement, much can be gleaned about local affairs in this country towards the end of the eighteenth century. Having examined in detail the social, economic and cultural life of Cork and Kerry over a period of four months, predictably the consul felt that his next duty was to visit the second largest city in Munster, and undeterred by the prospect of travelling on bad roads at the worst season of the year, this he proceeded to do in December, 1790. In the following pages we accompany him step by step on his journey from the Lee to the Shannon.<sup>67</sup>

'I left Cork' he wrote 'at nine o'clock in the morning on December 27th in a hired carriage belonging to Mr. Hamel of Hammond's Marsh'. While admitting that this method of travelling was neither cheap nor fast, he considered it very suitable for anybody anxious to get to know the country, apart from the fact that it is the only method of travelling in Ireland outside the fixed routes such as

those from Dublin to Cork, Dublin to Limerick and Dublin to Belfast.

The first part of the journey passed without incident, and making their way by Bottlehill, or Battlehill, Ballynamona and Lord Muskery's house (now destroyed), the party arrived in Mallow in time for lunch at one o'clock. This lunchbreak must have been brief, for all that was noted about the town was that many people came there to drink the waters, especially during the summer months, and that these waters (very much the same as those in Bristol) were superlative for chest diseases, consumption and such-like ailments.

Up to this point travelling conditions must have been relatively safe, for the first mishap recorded occurred on 'the steep slippery hill leading out of the town'. It began when a beggarman, attempting to stop the carriage, got into an altercation with the postilion. Pushed aside, the affronted beggar overwhelmed the travellers with curses, with the result that when shortly afterwards the horses refused to move, the driver made no effort to urge them forward 'See how the beggar's curses are following us,' he wailed, 'we shall never get out of this'. Then, apparently as discouraged as their

driver, the horses began to slip backwards and were on the point of being hurled down the slope when, thanks to the 'never failing helpfulness of the Irish peasantry' and to the efforts of a man of more importance who came especially from Mallow, the danger was averted with no worse consequences than a delay that forced the party to spend the night 'in a thatched house in a rather miserable village called Buttevant'.

## Buttevant

Surprisingly enough, under that humble roof, the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Casey, provided good beds, a good fire and quite a good supper of snipe, teal, wild-duck, etc. 'What more could we need?', asked Coquebert, adding that this was not the first time when expecting nothing he was better served than elsewhere. From his host he learned that the town was owned by Lord Barrymore; the parish priest was a Father Roche and the Protestant minister a Mr. Hamilton.

To imagine our travellers relaxing for long hours in the comfortable beds of the O'Casey family after the hard going of the first day would be to underestimate the indomitable Coquebert. Anxious to



see all that was to be seen, he and his friends appeared the following morning before dawn at the nearby abbey where 'crows and other birds, now the sole inhabitants, frightened by visitors at such an early hour awoke and fled in every direction.' Close to the western entrance, they found a cubic mass of piled-up bones, said to have been placed there after a battle, and through the loopholes of a vaulted 'souterrain' under the church (with another tier above) they got a fine view of the River Awbeg passing almost at their feet. Nothing more than a roof, Coquebert reflects, would have been needed to put the church into use again. And, in fact, two monks were still fairly well housed on the lands of the convent where they said Mass in fine weather,<sup>(9)</sup> 'the celebration of the office in the ruins being well calculated to maintain the devotion of the people'. A Cork merchant named O'Connor told the visitors how he arrived there in the depth of winter and found a number of people assembled in prayer. Anxious, as always, to gather information from those in close contact with the local inhabitants, Coquebert called to the house in which the monks were living, only to be told by 'a large buxom woman suitable for looking after two Franciscan friars' that the priests were away from home, having gone into the country to hold stations and to make their Christmas collection.

Other places in the district that excited his interest were the former abbey of Ballybeg and the village of Doneraile. If the local stories were to be believed, Ballybeg Abbey ceased to function before the dissolution of the monasteries because 'a monk summoned to Rome sold his soul to the devil in order to travel more quickly and as a result the place was cursed by the pope.' Amused by this sample of local lore, the party decided to visit Doneraile, their curiosity inspired by Smith's statement that in his time Doneraile was the most beautiful village in Ireland. Nothing was said to confirm or to contradict Smith's assessment. All that he noted about the place was the existence of marble quarries and the fact that very fine pottery had formerly been made there from clay resembling that of Carlingford. The last place viewed on this excursion from Buttevant was Castle Saffron, 'castle so named from the saffron once cultivated there for use by the ancient Irish.'

## Charleville

Back on the main route, the road led through a limestone region towards the Ballyhowry mountains, steep on the eastern side, with gentle slopes to the west. At the foot of these mountains, the road conditions deteriorated to such an extent that on a bare patch still covered with ice from the frost of the night before, the carriage came to a halt. Not for long, however, as the 'ever-helpful



*Kilmallock ...'a town of some consequence at one time,' from a painting by James Mulvany (1766-1838), the National Gallery of Ireland.*

Irishmen' soon appear on the scene once more to hoist the vehicle to safety, after which the grateful passengers entertained their rescuers to a drink. 'I should advise anybody who travels in Ireland', wrote Coquebert, 'to take tobacco and brandy with him in order to acknowledge services rendered; for most Irishmen appreciate small gifts like these far more than double their value in money.' On this note of mutual goodwill, rescuers and rescued parted company, as the travellers resumed their journey to Charleville, where they spent the night.

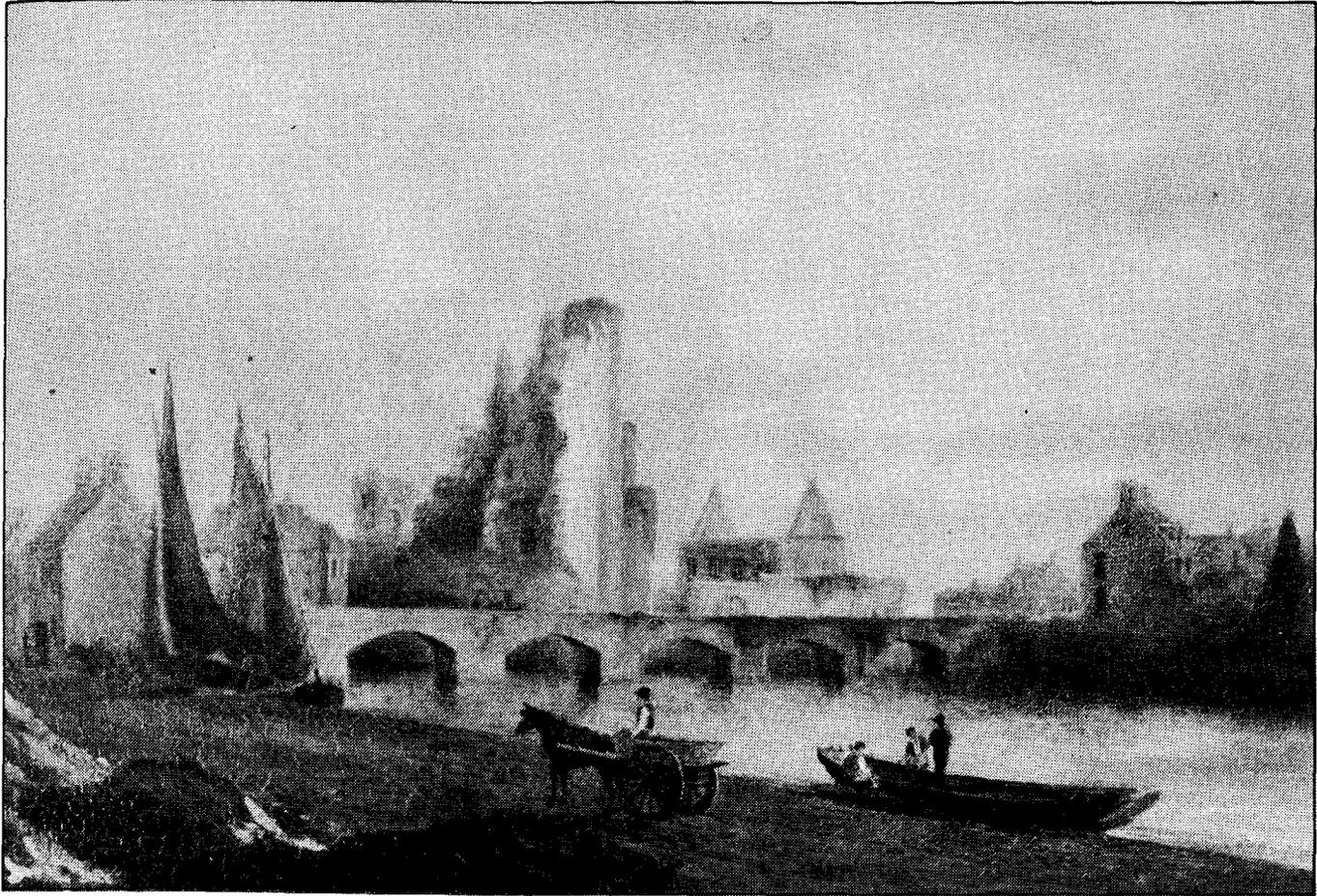
Charleville, 'formerly known as Rath Eoghan', turned out to be little more than one long street with a market-place in the middle. To find accommodation, the group had to sleep in a couple of inns, Coquebert and his small son securing beds at the widow Fleming's place.<sup>(10)</sup> From there, as was his wont, the father decided to call on the parish priest. Indeed, the friendly rapport this rather cynical French scholar established with the Catholic clergy all over the country is one of the most remarkable facts to emerge from the pages of this diary. The fact that so many of them had been educated in France may account in part

for the warmth with which Irish priests greeted a visitor from that land. And that he, for his part came to respect their way of life and to understand their problems is clear from such entries as: 'although many family bursaries are available at the rue du Cheval Verd,<sup>(11)</sup> students at the Lombard College have to be kept for three or four years at the expense of their people at home until they can earn some money for saying Mass.' Nothing he had learned from his previous experience of clerical attitudes to foreigners had prepared him for his strange encounter with the parish priest of Charleville. The incident is best recounted in his own words:

*I got a boy at the hotel to bring me to the house of the parish priest, a man named Garret Morris, requesting the lad to inform the priest that a Frenchman passing through the town would like to speak to him. As I waited at the door the wily old fellow, no doubt suspecting a request for alms, began by abusing the boy for bringing along visitors. Then, just as I was about to depart, out he came himself, breviary in hand, 'Sir', he said very brusquely, 'you see that I am saying my office, a priest's first duty, therefore I*

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*The Desmond Castle, Askeaton, in the 1790s.*

cannot receive you', 'But, monsieur', said I, 'suppose I were a person in need of some advice, or a man seeking spiritual or temporal assistance?' 'It would make no difference', he answered, still more abruptly, 'my breviary comes before all else'; and, with that, he shut his door. I found it extremely droll that a priest from whom I was asking nothing should slam the door in my face, while the evening before – and indeed that very day – simple countryfolk had given us every help with so much warm-heartedness, refusing to accept any compensation for their trouble.

This incident amused Coquebert, as it also amused his friends in Cork and Limerick. Nor was the Rev. Garret Morris the only strange character encountered in Charleville. At the hotel, the newly-arrived had already heard about a pilgrim living in the vicinity, and now wishing to dine alone, decided to contact this individual. What he had already learned about the 'hermit', who had lived for many years at Muckcross 'Abbey', probably aroused his curiosity concerning the existence of such peculiar people in the Irish countryside. His meeting with the Charleville specimen reads as follows:

*I sent for a sort of pilgrim called Hogan who had been described to me as a 'bon vivant'. He was a man of about sixty years of age with fiery eyes and a long grey beard. He wore a cloak on his*

*shoulders, carried a gnarled staff in his hand – all the appurtenances of a pilgrim of St. James. A bottle of wine soon set him talking, and the good apostle laughed heartily at the hypocrisy of the curé – professional jealousy. He had lived, he said, for fifteen years on the charity of good people. He treated me to a long discourse on his illustrious ancestors, Milesian on his father's side and Strongbowian on his mother's. He is descended, it appeared, from the Hogans of Tipperary, the most important family in the kingdom, who ruled Ormond and defeated the Danes under Brian Boru. This fellow with his bragging, his pious slanders and his counterfeit tone of piety and inspiration amused me for an hour or two in a town that offered little of interest. As we were leaving, he made my son go down on his knees to receive his blessing. I bade farewell to him with a good bottle of wine in his stomach and six shillings in his pocket.*

As a student of human nature, Coquebert obviously enjoyed his meetings with these two irascible characters in Charleville, but the only features of the town itself that merited his attention were its cavalry regiment and its Protestant school. Luckily, the following day's itinerary gave promise of better things. From *Brooke's Gazette*, Dublin, 1776, Coquebert had learned that Kilmallock was once an important place, 'described by some geographers as the

Balbec of Ireland.' And, arriving there on the morning of 29 December, he felt that the ruins support the view that it was a town of some consequence at one time. It would appear to have been surrounded by walls flanked by towers, and the many well-built houses of grey limestone (from old abandoned quarries on the outskirts of the town) stand in strange contrast to the miserable hovels nearby. Some of these houses were embellished with a pointed arcade running all along the cornice of the first storey, but the arches of the doors rounded, none *en ogive*. Many churches were to be seen, including the abbey which Coquebert could not explore because the entrance is cut off by an overflow of water from a nearby stream. Over the gates (still standing) were two kinds of fortresses, one of which was then being used as a prison. That these ruins should send two members to the Dublin parliament puzzled a foreigner. The only inhabitant mentioned was the parish priest, a Monsieur Font, and it was probably he who warned the travellers that the only inn in the place was a very bad one but that they would find two excellent hotels at Bruff, just four miles farther on.

Even the short drive from Kilmallock to Bruff did not pass without some measure of excitement. On this occasion, the carriage was held up by the presence of a crowd assembled to gaze at the body of a sailor found lying on the road. The



Old Thomond Bridge.

victim, it appeared, was a man who had just obtained his discharge, and his throat had been cut by two comrades with whom he had been drinking the night before. In spite of this gruesome sight, the diarist found time to comment on some of the more noteworthy places to be found on the River Maigue – Croom, once the property of the O'Donovans and later held by a branch of the Fitzgerald family, from which the family took its device, 'Crom Abu,' and Bruree where, according to O'Halloran, the bards continued to hold their concourses up to 1740. That there was no longer such meetings in Ireland also noted, although they were still held in Wales.

In addition to its two inns, Bruff has also a church and a chapel. Bruff belonged to a Sir Henry Hartstonge, but the land on the other side of a stream called Cavouri, or Morning Star, was owned by Lord Carbury (Evans). Bruff is in the barony, now called Small County, formerly *Aos Greine* from the mountain of Knock Greine up to Limerick, and *Aos Trimaige* from Owny to Limerick. The first part was the patrimony of the O'Comings, now O'Connells, who had given their name to the castle known as Castle Connell.

Leaving Bruff, the travellers were then within twelve miles of their destination, and the last stage of their journey is described as follows:

*The road from Charleville to Kilmallock is very flat as is also that from Kilmallock to Bruff, but beyond one approaches a chain of mountains of*

*strange broken and picturesque form. This is the part of our route best worth seeing. To the right, two or three miles from Bruff, is a bare grey limestone mountain called Ordun Reagh forming part of a chain of low hills high enough to command a good view of this very flat region. A castle of the Lords of Desmond guards the pass. Our road takes us past a pretty lake a mile and a half (half a league) in circumference lying between fertile hills. According to the 'Dublin Magazine', p. 238, 1764, the waters of this lake become disturbed and fetid at the approach of bad weather. O'Halloran holds that there was a town called Cahir quite close by on the main route from Cork to Limerick, the remains of streets and other traces having been found there. Harris places 'Monastere na Galliach', or na Calliach, near the lake, a monastery of the canonesses of St. Augustin - 'des caillittes'. A mile beyond is the ruined castle of Loughguir held by the Desmond branch of the Fitzgeralds in 1600. In this place are two large circles about 150 feet in diameter formed by great blocks of stone, and, to the right further down, two clusters of stones of the type known as 'kernan'.*

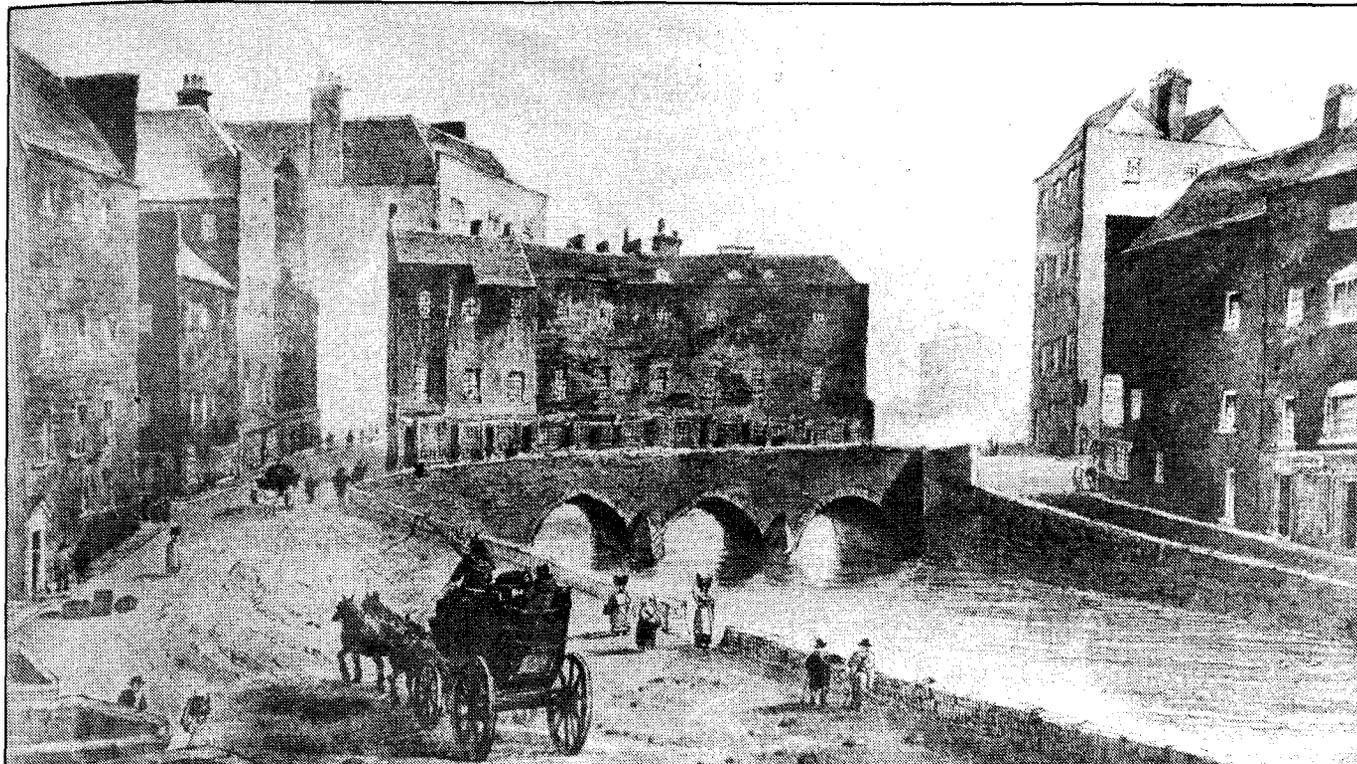
Unfortunately for Coquebert, and for us, the *jours courts* of winter cut short a personal exploration of the Lough Gur district, forcing the travellers to press on to where a black limestone bridge, almost in ruins, is being repaired. This was Sixmilebridge,<sup>(2)</sup> beyond which was an abandoned castle believed by the diarist to be Rockstown Castle.

As the snow lasted for only one day,

the whole countryside was exposed to the travellers' view. After Mallow, little broom was to be seen, and the fields were full of cattle, cattle that in the French consul's opinion were of little benefit to the country, considering the fine crops this fertile land could produce. But what really horrified a stranger was the condition of the many wretched dwellings confined to the roadside to avoid breaking up the pasturage. Nobody, he felt, travelling through Ireland could witness such misery unmoved, a misery accentuated by the sumptuous style of living enjoyed by the *seigneurs*. And it was even a greater shock to find that the people living in these hovels near Limerick city were paying a combined sum of between £800 and £1000 yearly in hearth money. The blacksmiths' shops alone, where they were to be found, were very picturesque. The same could not be said of large sculptured yew trees seen in a minister's garden, beside an isolated church, two and a half miles from Ballineety. These, strangely enough, were viewed with disgust, 'the kind of bad taste seldom encountered in Ireland.' Two miles from the offending yews, the city of Limerick came into view, with the mountains of Clare beyond.

## The City of Limerick

Coquebert's description of Limerick City, its buildings, streets and cultural life does not appear as continuous narrative in the original. The numbers in brackets,



Old Baal's Bridge and the Abbey River.

from 171, are intended as a guide to those interested in the manuscript. They represent the pages from which the preceding extracts are taken. Even from this short section of the work in Coquebert's own words, a reader can hardly fail to be struck by the foreign visitor's grasp of things Irish, including the Irish language, an amazing achievement considering that he spent, in all, less than two years in Ireland.

Having passed the hills, one catches sight of Limerick and the mountains of Clare beyond. The approach to Limerick is by a fairly long suburb. Taylor's inn, the only good one, is on the left, near St. John's church, in a street called The Square.

The Irish cabins, even in this rich county, are like the mud huts which beggars build on our highways, or those which the charcoal-burners make for themselves in the woods. It is hard to distinguish them from the surrounding heaps of crops. Very few have windows, in some there are one or two holes which are stuffed, at night, with a wisp of straw. Less frequently still, have they chimneys and, when there is one, it is made of boards or bundles of sticks. The roofs are often weighed with stones and even with pieces of wood, as protection against the wind. The entrance is generally the dirtiest place on the main road. Cleanliness becomes a matter of painful interest because, to all appearances, it is non-existent. Extreme misery turning men's minds to more pressing needs, relegates cleanliness to the realm of superfluous refinements. Every cabin, at this season, has a heap of turf outside it, covered with a little straw, the turf of this district being very

black. It is the ordinary fuel of Limerick. Approaching Limerick, the cabins have some cabbages in the gardens which I noticed because this is not usual.

In spite of the obvious poverty of the dwellings, one seldom meets beggars, and children do not annoy one asking for charity, as often happens in our villages. If there are individuals who beg, they are always worn-out old men. An Irishman is content with little; he says, like *la Fontaine*, 'food and clothing, what more can man need?' and, for food, his requirements are confined to the viands of the Golden Age. In spite of this, he is surprisingly energetic worker. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that their manner of existence is too deficient in all those things which we have come to regard as necessary to happiness to coincide with our idea of the joys of rural life.

There is nothing remarkable about the dress of the Irish of both sexes. It is the garb of destitution. The men wear dark frieze riding coats with sleeves, but generally worn like cloaks, long and buttoned to the end.<sup>(171)</sup>

Limerick is not as big as Cork but, in general, better built. The majority of the houses are of brick and in the Dublin style. There are footpaths and pretty shops. The quays are very fine. Broad Street passes through Irishtown,<sup>(13)</sup> which is on the eastern side of the river, later, one crosses Ball's Bridge,<sup>(14)</sup> which is built upon on the left side and one enters the, even better, English, town, the principal streets of which are called Mary Street and Nicholas Street. It is there that the Bourse, the Post, and the Prison are to be found. In a street named Bridge Street, running diagonally, which leads to the

new Bridge, there is a very good café supported by subscription, where all the papers are to be had.

On the eastern quay are the Play-House, the Bank and, at the end, the Custom's House, which is a fine building. Limerick has three papers, 'Chronicle', 'Herald' and<sup>(15)</sup> M. Conway, Bishop of Limerick, and M. McMahon, Bishop of Killaloe, live in Limerick. The river, at the bridges, is smaller than the branch at the Petit Pont in Paris but at the Custom's House, it is as wide as the Seine in front of the Arsenal.

The permission given in 1762 to import Irish food into England, particularly butter, has forced up prices and reduced exports to Germany – fresh butter cost 15/-.

Canal from here to Killaloe, one mile completed, thirty thousand pounds expended upon it about 1767. It will be finished in three years and will be useful to permit sailing boats to navigate on Loc Derg. The canal will be eight foot deep and will encourage agriculture in the counties of the Up. Shannon which confine themselves to-day to raising cattle. Then, these counties will produce pork and butter, being able to send them, at small cost, to Limerick. Coal will be brought from Leitrim at 12/- a ton. Finally, in time of war, the troops destined for England will come there in order to escape the corsairs who cruise near Cape Clear and will be transported by this canal, and by the Dublin canal, to Birr and to Dublin.<sup>(172)</sup>

Ball's Bridge fell down some years ago. A row of houses has been rebuilt there.<sup>(16)</sup> The Park, a district near the canal, is inhabited by a number of Mac Namaras. There are on the Shannon five weirs



belonging to the Corporation, where 8 to 1,600 salmon are taken every day during the season. They go up the river in July, the males first. The peasants catch them at night.

The people (of Limerick) are rather turbulent. When they wished to have Sir Henry Hartstonge, the Government sent Mr. Waller. There was a great uproar<sup>(17)</sup>.

Dinner at Mr. Stephen Roche's home with Mr. O'Halloran and Mr. Ousley.

Curiosities in Capt. Ousley's included various spearheads and other copper articles. There I saw the only antiques which I have yet seen, these having been found at Clonmacnoise. They are a kind of small buckles and a small figure carried . . . All these probably come from Carthage.

There is no good map or description of Limerick county. A rather poor history of the town<sup>(18)</sup> has earned the bookseller, who is also the author, a Mr. Ferrar, about £150 and a nice letter from the Pope, in which he offers him help from the Vatican for a history of Ireland.

O'Halloran published in 1774 a treatise on the antiquities of Ireland, *une revue vindicta*, in reply to Leland and Whitaker, printed in Dublin by Ewing, who got the author to remove his name so that he might not become embroiled with his colleague.<sup>(19)(173)</sup>

Mr. Roche has his domain two miles from Askeyton, near the Shannon. It is called Moyabhainin, i.e., my little wife. His second wife was an O'Brien.

The great ships of war and Indian merchantmen come up almost as far as this, seven leagues from Limerick. In 1779, 12 Indian ships entered the Shannon waiting for a convoy which was sent for them.<sup>(174)</sup>

The gentlemen of the neighbourhood, to maintain the price of their cattle and to prevent Cork having a monopoly, have for sometime granted a premium of 10 sh. to Limerick merchants who buy a bullock weighing 500 k. or more. In this way they have achieved their object. The exchange which used to be 13 or 14, less often 11, is at present 1 to 1½ above par, a proof that Ireland is flourishing and that her total exports exceed her imports.

There was a meeting of the Canal Company on the fourth at the café. Mr. Arthur, for whom I had a letter, and who is a member, having arrived there I gave him this letter and left with him immediately for his place, Glenomera, about five miles from here in the mountains of Co. Clare, almost the same distance from Killaloe. His wife (sister of the Chevalier O'Brien, Lucius), his married daughter and his son Therenice were far from expecting a visitor, at this season, especially a Frenchman.

In winter, particularly after Christmas, 25 or 30 received in the same house, each having 4 horses with 3 or 4 mounted servants and, sometimes, led horses, all these being housed and entertained. Everything is to be had on the premises. One kills, as required, a bullock, some

sheep, a number of fowl. There is game of every kind in the season, woodcock and wild-duck so tame that they would come as far as the walks under the windows. Within 12 or 15 miles of Dublin horses and people begin to be sent to inns, but not here. Mr. Arthur has about 300 acres with his house. The houses are of petrosilex or sandstone.<sup>(175)</sup>

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur have been 4 years at St. Germain for the education of their children. Chevalier O'Brien has a Mr. MacAnalli (for long a merchant in Bordeaux) to teach his children.

Back in Limerick where Mrs. Arthur wished to visit Mrs. Barclay, we passed in front of the weirs and Mr. Quinn's house. These weirs, leased by the town, give sometimes 1,100, according to others 1,800, salmon per day. They are sold at present for 6d. up to 12d. per pound. Those that are salted for export are the unsaleable ones, which are to be had for a penny. Some forty tons are exported, partly to Italy. Rape-seed is cultivated, 30,000 tons exported in 1787. This grain grows very well in dried bog-lands. A little oil is also extracted from it.

Limerick receives a hundred ships every year but has neither a creamery nor a sugar-refinery. It is proposed to establish a malt-house in the spring. Before the permission to import into England butter was 24sh. and of poor quality, in large casks 2 guineas, 28½. The need to satisfy the London market has improved it and the price has more than doubled, land rents in proportion.<sup>(20)</sup> Limerick has been able to kill this year 2,500 bullocks and as many cows, Cork 1,300 of each.

Two-thirds of Ireland's lands have never been made use of and only need to be cultivated to prosper. The rich plains and the beautiful bays of Ireland are deserts while the marshes of Holland are covered with superb towns.<sup>(176)</sup>

The people live entirely on potatoes. They cost 1 Jan. 1791 9sh. a barrel of 8 bushels or 48 stone. They are not rich enough to feed on oaten bread. That costs 9d. a stone of 14lbs., exactly four times as much, and supposing it is more nourishing, it is at least double.

The Limerick people are more given to drink than the inhabitants of Cork. The use of whiskey is general and extends even to the women.<sup>(181)</sup>

For three years the city has had no light, the Act of Parliament not having been renewed for the tax on the inhabitants. Those of Newtown Pery wish to be exempted from the city charges, there is a dispute going on about the matter.

There is a windmill at the end of Newtown Pery. This calls for comment, as they are rare in Ireland. There is plenty of running water, and, as a result, wind is little needed.

Almost all the small traders live on Dublin spirits, wine and especially sugar, as there is no refinery in Limerick and about a dozen in Dublin. Transport by land costs 3sh. in summer, 4 in

winter. To avoid a mountain the road no longer goes by Knockadery, where the mines are, but by O'Brien's Bridge, Castle Connell and Nenagh.<sup>(182)</sup>

Saw, on the 8th, the plan of the new prison by the waterside, two buildings separated by a yard, the one behind for criminals, the first for debtors (county and city separated.) Mr Smyth the architect.<sup>(187)</sup>

The price of beef in Limerick is 2d½, in Dublin 3d., hares 2 English shillings, rabbits 5d. for the flesh, 8d. the skin. rabbit skins are very dear, formerly they cost only 4d.

Philip Roche had only one son, who left young children under age; a daughter, married to a Mr. Ryan, who has been a long time in Limerick; Stephen Roche John, i.e., a son of John; his mother is 80 and had 81 children and grandchildren. He himself had 14 by one wife, 9 by another.

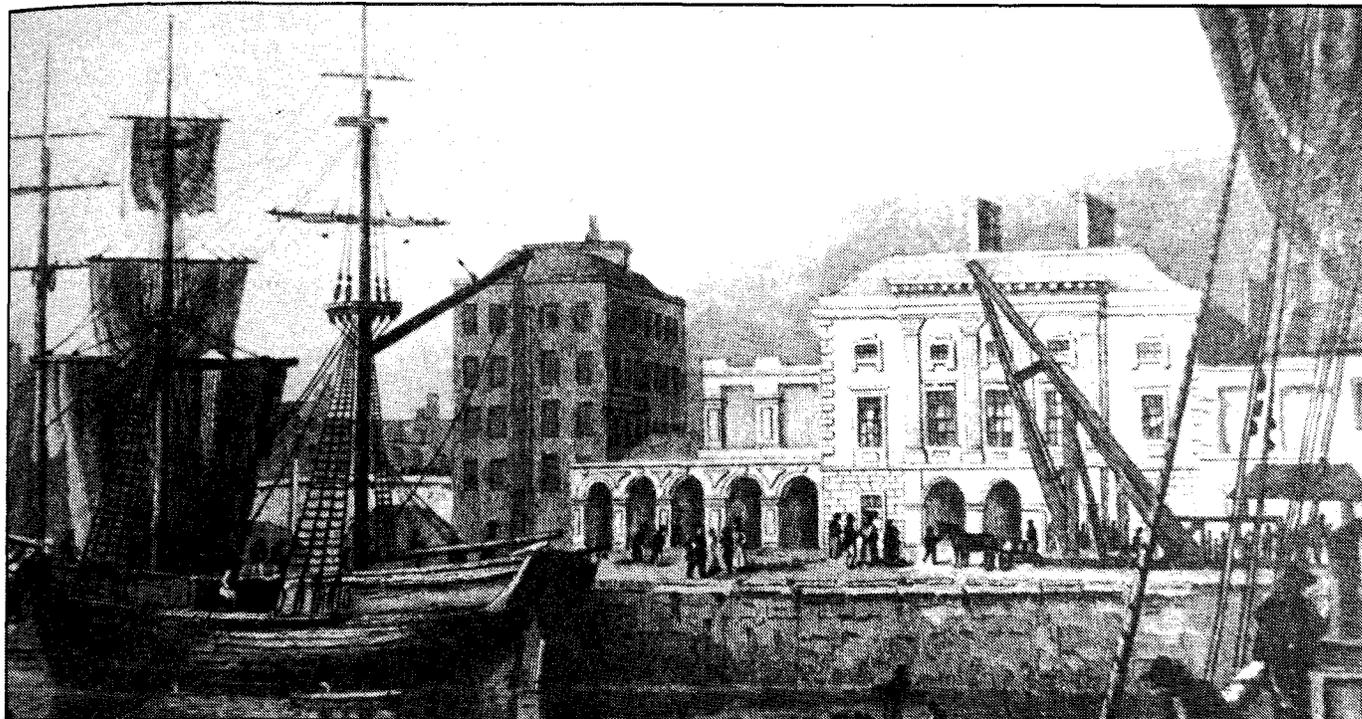
The Irish people marry very young, the boys at 18, or 20, the girls sometimes from 13.<sup>(187)</sup>

Serge for lining is made at Limerick and dyed and dressed in Dublin, also rather nice carpets and striped cloth for mattresses and sailors. The potatoes are excellent, the women pretty and the streets dirty.<sup>(188)</sup>

If Ireland were not dominated in all things by England, the more important towns would not be situated as they are, on the side of the St. George's Channel where the ports in general are bad and difficult of approach. The most flourishing would probably be those of the West or South, which are deeper and better situated for commerce with America, Spain and Portugal. Galway and Limerick especially, with their fertile lands and navigable bays are better destined to become capitals than Dublin or even Cork.

## Shannonside

Since the French consul's interest was not confined to the city itself, and since his scattered notes contain much about the Shannon region, some further observations made after his arrival in the city are worth recording. Most of his information came from a Mr. Arthur and a Mr. Roche, Limerick merchants who are in close touch with rural life. Arthur, married to a sister of Sir Lucius O'Brien, lived on his wife's patrimony, situated half-way between Limerick and Killaloe. This estate consists of 300 arpents of land, together with 200 arpents of forest (old plantations) and more than that amount of woodland along the river at Crathlagh. Roche's domain, also acquired through marriage with an O'Brien, lies near the river two miles from Askeyton. This branch of the O'Brien family had died out on the death of Mrs. Roche's brother in the Austrian service. From these facts we can assume that female members of the old aristocratic families whose men-folk had departed for



*The Custom House.*

military service in foreign lands were well content to marry into the rich merchant class of Limerick City.

Turning first to the notes on Co. Clare, we learn that Clare cattle, unlike the small black beasts of Kerry, were fairly large, with curved horns sometimes twisting right back to their mouths. They had long tails, were well furnished with hair below, and usually had thick curly coats. As little of the land was suitable for fattening cattle, it was mostly used for breeding, and although the winters were mild, the animals of poor tenants were often in grave danger. On the other hand, the best wool in Ireland was reputed to come from the Burren. Unfortunately, high prices then being paid for English bulls, cows, rams and English sheep admired for their short legs and round bodies were doing serious harm to Clare wool. Everybody, it seemed, agreed that this was so.

The flat coastal regions of Co. Clare were very thinly populated and, apart from a few catches of herrings, very little fishing was done there. Limerick City was supplied with fish from Kinsale, Youghal and Dungarvan. On the other hand, Burren oysters, a valuable source of wealth, were being sent to Dublin. Oysters from Kenmare Bay were sold in Cork City for six shillings a hundred, but those from the Burren fetched even a higher price. Oysters, however, could be bought locally from people on the roadside for twenty pence a hundred, though these may well have been an inferior type, also mentioned, that are taken from the bed of the Shannon.

A visit to Quin Abbey provided an interesting link between France and Co. Clare. There, the many memorials

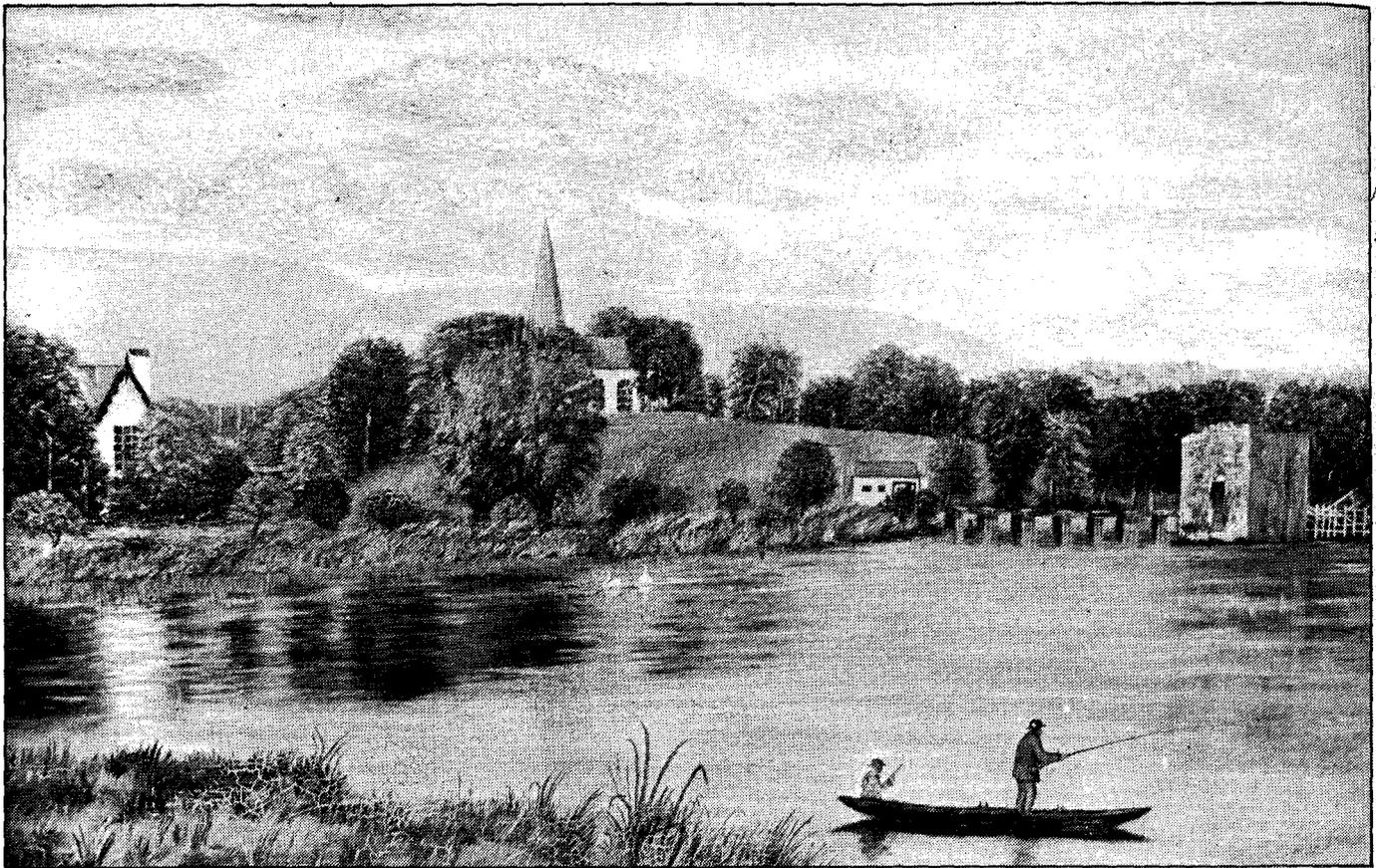
commemorating members of the MacNamara family reminded the French visitor of the valuable service that family has rendered to France. He recalled that the parents of John MacNamara (+1747), vice-admiral of the French Navy and commandant of Rochefort, who was awarded the Grand Cross of St Louis, had their property in the baronies of Burren and Tulla. And this man's nephew, Henry MacNamara, not only became a vice-admiral in his turn, but was also made a count by Louis XVI. It was this Henry MacNamara who brought back the ambassadors of Tipoo. A note, obviously added at a later date, stated that Henry MacNamara has been put to death at the Ile de France.<sup>(21)</sup>

Bela was situated at the mouth of the estuary in Co. Clare, and good anchorage was to be had at Carrighaholt, Foynes Island and Kilrush. Other features of the lower part of the river mentioned are Inis Gotha (the Windy Island), 'Inis Scatterry today' and an escarped rock, 'Ile Rocal,' so resembling a ship that it has often been mistaken for one. The Shannon current was swift, though a swimmer informed Coquebert that it not as strong as the current in the Garonne. The account of the salmon weirs owned by the Corporation has been published elsewhere<sup>(22)</sup> and need not be quoted again beyond a note that further clarifies the price at which salmon were sold. Limerick salmon, the biggest in these islands, cost from six-pence to twelve-pence a pound in winter, but were to be had for two-pence in the season. Herrings appeared in the river from June to August; a few were caught even in December, and Coquebert recalled that he had eaten herrings in Cork in the

month of November.

Tarbert was to Limerick what Cove was to Cork. Ships halt there when the wind made it difficult to mount or to descend the river and it was there that the Customs Bureau was situated. Ordinary tides at Limerick were eight feet, springtides sixteen feet. Ships of 500 tons stopped at Pool, one mile from the city; those of 350 tons came to the dock on the Clare side of the river and the others, needing only 13 or 14 feet of water, docked at the Customs House. Prior to Coquebert's arrival, twenty-four ships had been held up for several months, five in the port and nineteen outside. The reason for this holdup was not given. Cargoes on these vessels included coal and salt from Liverpool, slates from Valencia, wine and fruit from Lisbon, kelp in transit from Galway to Belfast, and oats from Clare bound for Liverpool. The city had little direct trade with the Indies—most of the traffic was with England. Limerick itself had only about eleven or twelve ships of about 150 tons and a few sloops, some of which went to Killybegs to fish. A Mr. Nesbitt of Ballyshannon had been making £5,000 a year from fishing whales which frequent the N.E. coast from May to the end of August.

Ball's Bridge (damaged some years previously) should be called the Bald Bridge, being a translation of the Irish name *Droched Maol*, maol meaning a bald man or a cow without horns. The bridge was so named because it was without a parapet. Another bridge of fourteen arches, all different, is astonishingly flat and solid. This bridge has existed for five or six hundred years. Although sometimes covered with water, it



*The River Shannon at Parteen.*

survived even the frost of 1740. Near it are a few old towers. Clare begins at the bridge. One mile beyond, on the road from Irishtown, there is a quarry of beautiful black marble. This road is very neglected and there is very little contact between the two towns - 'Baile Gall', *la ville anglaise*, and 'Baile Gaoidhel', *la ville irlandaise*, 'see Cogadh Gaoidhel le Gallaibh, lingua Gallica, *ouvrage excellent*.' At Partine, a village near an island one mile from the city, there are weirs, a castle built to protect them and a beautiful house owned by Mr. Quinn. Mr. Bruce had built a number of small dwellings suitable for artisans at Castleconnell, by means of which he hoped to attract workers.

Limerick had three or four thousand houses, all very crowded. The population in 1760 was 32,196, but since the ramparts were removed, the place was not longer unhealthy. Some old houses, like those in Galway, have survived - the curious Thomcore House in Great Street, one near the quay, one near the former post office and one near Mr. Roche's house. The lighting system had not operated for three years, but there were six night-guard posts. The only garrison was a regiment of infantry lodged in the former citadel. The city bank is that of Thomas Maunsell & Co., founded in 1789. The two hotels were the Black Swan at Thomondgate, and Taylor's New Inn<sup>(23)</sup> in the Irishtown. For entertainment, the citizens had two cafés (one for gaming) and two *salles de Comedie*.

The Menonites had a library near the Courthouse. The only promenade, a very dirty one in winter, is along the canal to the Shannon. In his professional capacity as French consul, Coquebert was unhappy to find that port-wine was ousting the wine of Bordeaux from the Limerick market. Of the 36,000 pipes of wine produced in Portugal, 20,000 passed into British territory. This new preference for port he explained by the fact that it was as strong as brandy, and as people did not switch from robust to delicate beverages, once they become accustomed to the emotional effect of strong drink, they are forced to continue using it. One of the local wine merchants was John O'Bryen, and other traders mentioned were Michael Rochfort, John Arthur and the Quakers, Fisher and Harvey.

The addiction of upper-class men and women in Limerick to strong drink, especially whiskey, an addiction unmatched in other parts of Munster, was remarked upon more than once, and it is clear that Coquebert took a rather poor view of the rich inhabitants' way of life. 'They eat and drink too much, wasting their time.' It would be difficult to believe that all the wholesale merchants were 'wasting their time'. However, Coquebert explained that there were only eight or nine such merchants in the city, while he was told that the attorneys (*procureurs*) numbered about four hundred and that the advocates were still more numerous. It seemed that

these lawyers shared about £500,000 a year between them, money they spent as fast as they earned it. In the light of such affluence, the mayor's allowance of 20/- a day appeared surprisingly low, a disregard offset perhaps by the fact that following his year of office he became 'a Justice of the Peace, and a member of the Corporation'. The Protestant bishop enjoyed £3,200 a year as compared with the Catholic bishop's income of £200. La Touche's grandfather was a wool(?) merchant in Francis Street. The son became associated with the bank of alderman Keane, or Kane, in Dublin, hence his rise to fortune. La Touche controlled the exchange through the national bank. This bank remitted money to the absentees at a fixed rate of 1/2 or 1 per cent which produced a profit of £8,000.

However convinced Coquebert may have been of the irresponsibility and extravagance of the upper classes in Limerick, his  *carnets* leave us with the impression that he met more congenial spirits in that city than in any other place visited during his various tours in Ireland. Nowhere else did he contact so many men of learning in such a short period. The fluent French spoken by most of his new acquaintances must have helped him to plunge straight into the vigorous cultural life of the city. Confined to the house by a freak storm of snow, hail and lightning during his visit to the Arthurs, he and the Arthur family passed the time reading with cynical

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amusement the new highly romantic novel *Caroline*<sup>(24)</sup> that had just arrived at Glenomera. And reading of more lasting interest was put at his disposal by friends in the city. For further reference, no doubt, he made a list of works concerning the history of Ireland, including those of Harris, Curry, O'Halloran, Hutchinson, Parker, Archdale, etc., together with some rare volumes published on the Continent such as *Hibernia resurgens contre les persecutions des irlandais* by Donat Roirk, Rouen 1621, *Scotus hiberiae restitutus* by Jean Ponce, irlandais, Paris 1660, and Allemand's *Histoire monastique d'Irlande*, Paris, 1690. 'Chez Arthur', where a *rotie au café* was to be had for twopence, he discovered a very comfortable place in which to read.

But it was from the treasures stored in Mr. Ralph Ousley's house that the French scholar derived the greatest satisfaction. Mr. Ousley had a singular collection of newspapers from all over the world, including papers from Calcutta and Bengal in which some of the information was printed in English, some in Persian and some in an Indian vernacular. More interesting still,<sup>(25)</sup> Ousley's fine collection of archaeological finds, the first Coquebert had seen in Ireland. Fascinated by the one hundred strange objects exposed to his gaze, he applied his knowledge of classical antiquities in an effort to grasp the nature and purpose of the various items, and for further reference he even jotted down an extract from Ousley's catalogue, an extract that reflected the collector's intelligent approach to his subject, since it recorded not only the date of each find but also, where possible, the place where it was discovered. ...<sup>(26)</sup>

It is matters such as these that best illustrate Coquebert's contribution to our knowledge of cultural activities in Ireland towards the close of the eighteenth century. Nowhere else in contemporary descriptions of our island by foreign visitors do we find any worthwhile mention of this aspect of Irish life. Everywhere he went, as in duty bound, the French consul made a survey of local trade and industry, taking note in the towns and cities of streets, buildings, and the number and way of life of the inhabitants. In this respect, Limerick was no exception. What was exceptional about his visit to that city was the opportunity it offered to study the past history of Ireland as well as the contemporary scene. To have gathered so much information in such a short space of time was no mean achievement, dites toujours que vous restez peu des temps. In fact, it was on 29 December that our travellers caught his first glimpse of the Shannon, and the last relevant entry in this section of his carnet reads: *partie de Limerick II janvier, 1791.*

The extracts quoted from the notebooks give the measure of the author's feeling for Limerick. Reading

through the whole work, one gets the impressing of a sincere affection for Ireland, but more especially for Shannonside. Indeed, in the last years of the eighteenth century, Limerick must have been a remarkable city, seeing that Coquebert met so many kindred spirits there. His experiences are a fine illustration of the intellectual ties than existing between Ireland and France. The O'Hallorans, the Ousleys and the Arthurs were as much at home in St. Germain as in Newtown Pery and, among them, the French savant no longer felt himself a stranger in a strange land.

## REFERENCES

- Note dated 2 November, 1786, in Archives de la Marine.
- Arch. nat. A.F. IV 516 contains a report on Coquebert's salary. It states that as consul at Dublin he had a salary of 16,000 francs.
- Notice in *Annales Maritimes*, 1846.
- According to F.W. Ryan, Coquebert was appointed consul in Ireland in Jan., 1789, but the Biog. Univ. states that he was sent to Ireland *la place de Conseilleur Correcteur ayant été supprimé*. From the 'brevet' of Jan., 1789, mentioned by Ryan, it would appear that the position of Conseilleur Correcteur, held by de Montbret, was abolished during the first efforts at reform, some months before the official abolition of such posts by the Estates General.
- Quite a good account of Coquebert's career is given in the *Nouvelle Biographie*, which states that the above treatise never appeared in print but, since that notice was written, most of his work has been published.
- Some lines from the MS are appended to an article on the author by F.W. Ryan, which appeared in the *R.I.A.I. Journal*, 1931.
- Most of the observations here recorded are to be found in a manuscript listed in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, as *Nouv. Acq. XXIII, Irland iii, feuillets 164 avers - 188 avers*. The original text is in French, and the writer's spelling of placenames has been retained throughout.
- For Coquebert's account of the city of Cork, see *J. Cork Hist. Archaeol. Soc.*, Vol. XVIII, 1949. - O.L.J.
- Earlier, Coquebert found a 'monk' at Muckross which, together with this entry, shows that friars were still operating from their ancient foundations in Munster during the late eighteenth century.
- Coquebert's ten-year-old son, Ernst, was his constant companion during his travels in Ireland.
- In Paris, later known as rue des Irlandais.
- Sixmilebridge, Co. Limerick, is shown on the map attached to the *Post Chaise Companion*, published in

1803, together with the note that it is near Grange, 'the beautiful and well improved seat of Standish Grady, Esq.'

- Baile Gall*: the English Town. *Baile Gaedheal*: The Irishtown. Note in MS.
- Ball's Bridge should be called Bald Bridge, which is translated from the Irish name *Drochid-maal(?)* having had no parapet at one time. One uses the word *maal(?)* for a cow without horns or a bald man. Note in MS.
- Blank in manuscript. Actually it was the *Limerick Journal*.
- 'Feb. 4th, 1775, a high tide did considerable damage. Several of the houses fell.' *The History of Limerick* by Maurice Lenihan, p. 365.
- Coquebert remarks later than Sir Henry Hartstonge is the idol of the people, and his wife even more so.
- Ferrar was opposed to France and French ideas. He writes in his history of 'our natural enemies, the French.'
- In the copy at present in the National Library, Dublin, the printer's name has been torn out. The Limerick Library copy gives J. Murray of London as the printers, and the date 1772.
- Figures quoted by Prof. G. O'Brien from Newenham, and Dublin Custom House books give butter exports for 1760 as 207,246 cwts; for 1790 300,669 cwts.
- The support of Tipu, Sultan of Mysore (1782), was constantly sought by both France and England in their struggle for supremacy in India. News of the French Revolution, having reached Ile de France, Madagascar, the inhabitants ordered Henry MacNamara to put the new laws into force, and, on his continued refusal to do so, he was finally hanged on 4 November, 1790.
- N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 5 (1946-48), 99
- It was at Taylor's that Coquebert lodged during his stay in Limerick.
- This entry supports the view of certain critics that *Caroline de Montmorenci, a Tale Founded on Fact*, is incorrectly included in all our major bibliographies of eighteenth century English novels. The fact that it was in the hands of Coquebert's friends four years before its publication in England (1794) proves it to have been a translation of a French novel.
- The extract from Ousley's catalogue is to be found in *Nouv. Acq.*, XXIII, Ireland III, 20,099, *feuille* 177 *revers*, 178 *avers and revers*, a copy of which is available in the National Library of Ireland.

The author wishes to thank Mdlle Olga Popovitch for valuable assistance in deciphering the pages of the *Carnets de Voyage* quoted.

(Notes from 12 to 25 by Robert Herbert, editor of the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*. - O.L.J.)

(Reprinted from the *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. 5, 1948, No. 4, and Vol. XIV, 1971).