

A D'Alton Letter



John D'Alton, the great nineteenth century historian and antiquarian and author of so many books, also contemplated writing a work on

the city of Limerick. A letter to an unknown recipient makes clear how much thought and effort had been spent on the project. The letter is now preserved in the Monsell collection of correspondence in the Public Record Office of Ireland.

17th Octr 1845

Sir,

On receipt of yr letter of the 14th inst being most anxious to facilitate the object of yr commendable inquiry I commenced to select from the mass of records and notices wh I possess for illustrating the City of Limerick such as might exclusively apply to the Cathedral of St. Mary a search which I have continued until now but I candidly confess to you the materials for a history of your most interesting City have so crowded upon me from circumstances to which I shall beg leave to allude that I would not for my own credit attempt such a 'Memoir' as the subject requires without a devotion of time beyond what I could thus afford.

In the last work which I published in the May of the present year "The History of Ireland" and "Annals of Boyle" I prefixed a classified Catalogue of the manuscript compilations which I have with 30 years of devotion of income and research drawn up for the illustration of Irish localities and families to the number of upwards of 200 volumes and in that list No. 34 is thus described "one volume octavo (now two volumes) designed for similar compilations on and of a History of the Co. Limerick the available materials collected for the deeply interesting Corporate Civil and Ecclesiastical History of the City of Limerick alone would extend to three volumes". The volume in the introductory portion of wh p xxxv this notice appears has been out of print these two months but a copy can be seen at my son's who is now a resident solicitor at 19 Thomas St Limerick. The quantity there spoken of has since increased as I had some expectation the prospect of my publishing a History of the City and County or at least of the City alone would have received the indemnity of local encouragement and I believe I need not tell you that as yet works of

By Aideen Ireland

Irish literature must be brought into market with a bounding (?) or no prudent man wd be an author of such.

Upwards of 2 years since after preparing for the press my "History of Drogheda" on the enducement of a fee of 200 guineas from its Corporation and a contribution of plates to the value of 300 l offered to that of Limerick to draw up and print at my own expense and risk the corporate Civil and Ecclesiastical History of their City if a fee of 400 Guineas were contributed wholly or in part by them but that offer was not responded to. On the 26th March of this year on the occurrence of my son's connection with that City I transferred the proposal to Colonel FitzGibbon offering to draw the History of the City in 2 vols for 200 Gs or with the Co. in 4 vols for 700 Gs to be contributed by the Noblemen, Gentry etc interested and on the 7th July last previous to the Assizes I repeated the latter offer to Mr. M. Barrington adding that each contributor to the fee shd receive from me at the rate of 4 copies of the work for every 20 Guineas of their investment as I on all occasions prefer that the money should be lodged in Government stock in the names of mutual Trustees not to be paid to me until the work was completed.

I have but to add to you that while I should be most proud to publish the History of the City and County as above with of course full memoirs of the leading families for which you will see (in the above volume not ...) I possess materials that may perish with me I yet should if that be hopeless draw up & print at my own expense for 100 Guineas the History of the Cathedral with that of all its Prebends and appendays (?) and make it my business to visit the spot in the next Christmas vacation I should be glad then without any additional fee to enlarge the volume to a History of the Kings Island thus comprising with the Cathedral & Munchins the Dominican & Franciscan friaries the Castle & possibly the three more remarkable bridges I at last hope you will admit that after having taken such interest in the Annals of Limerick I might hope my offer would be accepted in some shape - indeed so early as 1833 in the 25th No. of a periodical that then circulated & I believe largely in Limerick the "Irish Penny Magazine" I gave an article of some length on its history.

I find I have various notes of the architecture of St Mary's Cathedral as it existed at different times the windows, stalls, chapel ... screen etc the monuments & monumental sculpture - details relative to its original ... in the 12th century, its subsequent repairs in the 13th, 15th, & 16th centuries the renovations effected temp. Bishops Adams & O'Dea & yet later by the citizens - the royal appropriation by King William for its improvement; records of its chantries as that of ... Anne & its Hospital - licences to its officers to study at Oxford or Cambridge, maps & surveys at various periods from 1590, in which it is set down.

I may here notice that as the subject of the New Colleges is so rife that while in 1629 the Dominicans passed resolutions for establishing five Colleges in Ireland the confirmation of their project expressed selected Limerick for one and when Queen Elizabeth nearly 20 years before the founding of Trinity College designed the establishing of a college 'a westward' she recommended a site "aptly situated both for health & commodity and the river Shannon running by it".

It is time to apologise for intruding this long letter upon you but I feel it called for in deference to your request and was certainly anxious to make one so connected with Limerick as yourself by birth, property, rank and alliance acquainted with the efforts I a comparative stranger have volunteered with little more than indemnity for its literary advancement now perhaps more important than ever to project.

I have the honour to be Sir
Very faithfully yours
John D'Alton

It can only be regretted that the above letter raises more problems than it solves. We know that D'Alton did not write his projected history nor do we know the considerations which made such a project impossible. We do not know the recipient of the letter or whether the latter himself undertook such a work as that detailed by D'Alton. Worst of all, it has not proved to be possible to trace D'Alton's son in Limerick. The contemporary trade directories do not list him as a solicitor or resident of Limerick and the later Griffith's Primary Valuation does not list him as a resident of Thomas Street.

John D'Alton did not die until 1867, twenty two years after the above letter was written but it was left to others to carry out the task he had envisaged.