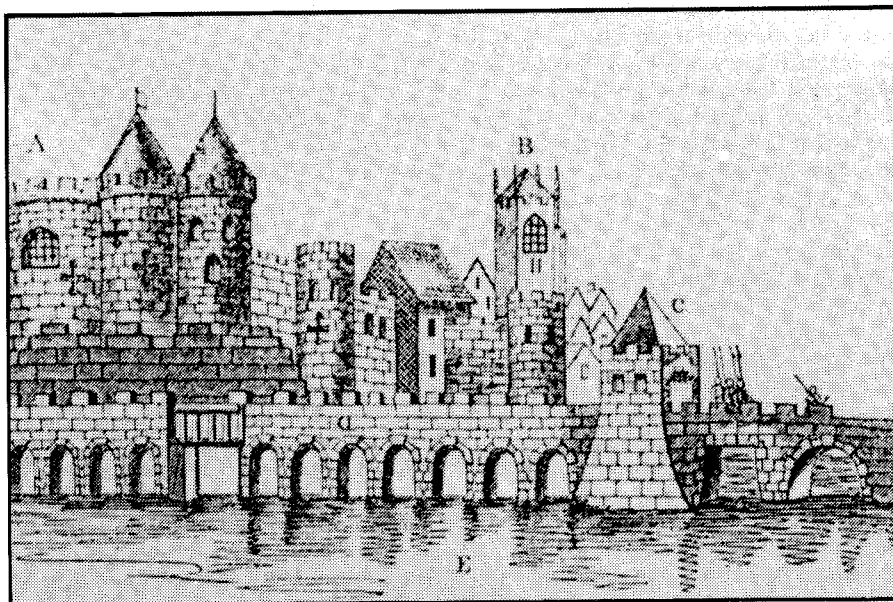


A DESCRIPTIVE POEM ON LIMERICK IN 1690

BY MICHAEL LLOYD AND EAMON O'FLAHERTY

The following poem is a description of the city of Limerick and its hinterland by an Irish Jacobite, who was probably a native of the city. The poem's full title is *Descriptio obsidionis urbis Limericensis in Hibernia* (A description of the siege of the city of Limerick in Ireland) and was dedicated by its author to Alexandre de Rainier de Droue, marquis of Boisseleau, major-general in the French army in Ireland, who was governor of Limerick during the first Williamite siege in 1690.⁽¹⁾ Boisseleau died in 1698, which allows us to date the poem between 1690 and 1698, but it is likely that the description of the siege is closer to the event – probably shortly after 1692. The description of the city forms part of a much longer Latin poem on the events of the siege, much of it devoted to praise of Boisseleau's part in its defence. Boisseleau's own role in the siege was initially rather dispiriting, due to his open criticism of the weakness of Limerick's fortifications, but his support for resistance, along with that of Sarsfield and Berwick, against the judgement of a large part of the garrison, and his spirited reply to William of Orange's invitation to surrender the city were important in determining the course of the first siege. Boisseleau's reply 'that he could best earn the prince of Orange's esteem by a vigorous defence of the town entrusted to him' is considerably embroidered in the poem, and is made into a key part of the narrative, which contrasts the heroic and courageous figure of Boisseleau with the cowardice and treachery (among other things) which the poet imputes to William of Orange.

The authorship of the work is a matter for some interesting speculation. The text given here is based on the manuscript preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Fonds français, 12160, ff.303-306). The manuscript consists of a large volume of Jacobite poetry, compiled by a native of Limerick, the learned priest John White, or Jean Le Blanc, as he described himself in French. The poems are of different genres, beginning with a *Genethliaque*, a poem rejoicing in the birth of James II's son in 1688. Not all the poems are by White,



King John's Castle, St. Mary's Cathedral and old Thomond Bridge,
by Thomas Dineley, 1680.

and the manuscript includes a long genealogical poem in Latin by the historian Roderick O'Flaherty, an important part of whose work was devoted to showing how the Stuarts were descended from early Irish kings. One of the longest poems in the manuscript is the narrative account of the siege, from which the description of Limerick is taken.

The Whites were one of the leading merchant families in Limerick and, in common with the majority of the Old English community of the city, were quick to embrace the religious and political doctrines of the Counter-Reformation. Sir David White of Russellstown, mentioned in the Inquisition of 1615, had seven grandsons, the seventh of whom was colonel in the service of Charles II and the fifth of whom, John White, is recorded as having died in France. In the turbulent years of the Cromwellian conquest, most of the White descendants either died or left the country.⁽²⁾ John White, the compiler of the Paris manuscript, had both a military and an ecclesiastical career in France. He saw military service in the French army under James II, then the Duke of York, in the 1650s, while England was under

republican government, and had further military service under James's future father-in-law, the Duke of Modena, in Italy. By his own account, he 'gave up the sword ... to embrace a station in life which obliged me to abhor blood',⁽³⁾ and in 1669, at the age of fifty, John White, 'orator, theologian and professor', was an unsuccessful candidate for the place of vicar-apostolic of Limerick.⁽⁴⁾ The texts, then, are the work of an old man whose life was typical of the Old English elite of seventeenth-century Ireland, with their complex and often contradictory loyalties to the Crown, the Catholic Church, and their inchoate concept of an Irish constitution. He wrote in Latin and in French because 'forty-three years of banishment have made me more at ease in French than in English'.⁽⁵⁾ White's work, like that of Patricius Michaelipolitanus printed in Limerick in 1690,⁽⁶⁾ also shows how the Irish abroad survived by becoming part of the networks of clientelism and patronage which dominated French society under Louis XIV.⁽⁷⁾ In intellectual terms, White expressed great admiration for the Jesuit Theophile Raynaud, a rather rebarbative and somewhat eccentric scholar who managed to fall foul of Richelieu, and



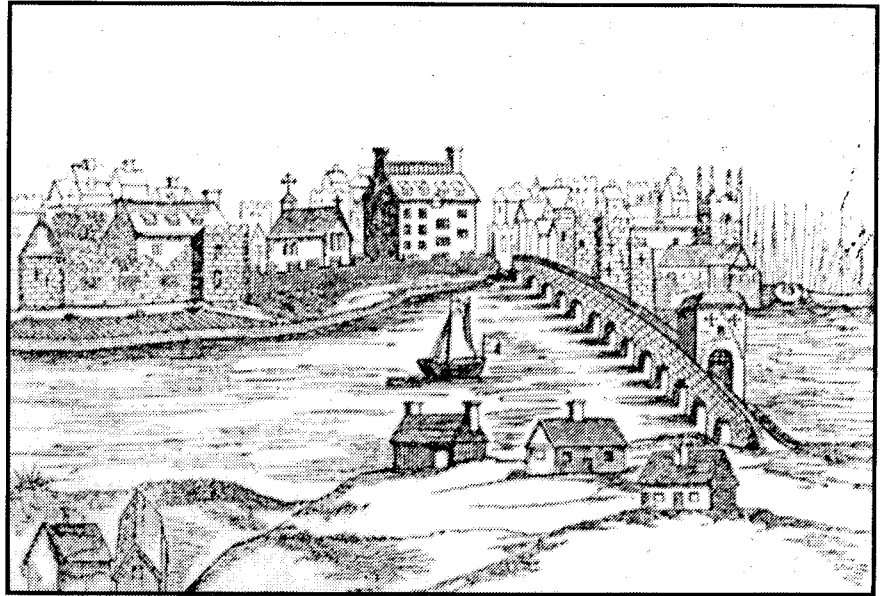
whose works are a baroque cocktail of bizarre scholarship.

We cannot be fully certain that White is the author of the 'Descriptio', but the obvious local knowledge and deep affection for Limerick, as well as the exaggeration and misty-eyed nostalgia of the poem make it seem likely that he was indeed the author. As a description of the city, White's text bears comparison with David Wolfe's 'Della citta di Limerico' of 1574.⁽⁸⁾ The references to 'marble', as the black polished limestone of the city sometimes seems, is almost an echo of Wolfe's words, and praise of the handsome stone houses of the English Town, or the Great Town, as the poet tactfully describes it, are found in almost all early modern descriptions of the city. The twin towers of the quay are beautifully illustrated in seventeenth-century ink drawings, although the chains do not appear. Of greater charm, and some significance, is White's appreciation of the city in the country – a place surrounded by gardens, farms and water, factors which were of great significance in the city's reputation as the strongest place in Ireland. His description of the beauty of the rapids on the Shannon at Limerick almost immediately brings to mind the falls at Curragour, now threatened with destruction.

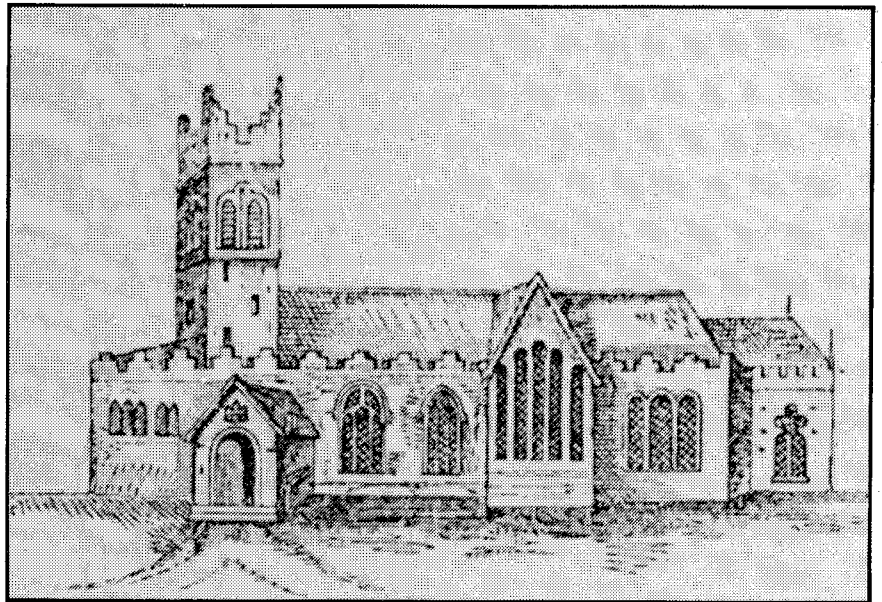
Written in Latin hexameters, the poem is not only the product of nostalgic recollection, but of a long literary tradition. The description of a beautiful place, or *ecphrasis*, shows the influence of epideictic oratory as early as the poetry of Virgil or Ovid. Formulae existed, which guided the production of these poems, and these formulae became even more rigidly established in the Middle Ages. Sometimes, the poets' adherence to these formulae could have incongruous results.⁽⁹⁾ In the present poem, for example, the stress on the opportunities for shade in summer might be more notable in a Mediterranean context than an Irish one. These influences are compensated for to a great extent by the wealth of local colour which comes through the constraints of form. The exile's memory can be deceptive, but it also tells us a great deal about what is enduring in the memory of a place.

Descriptio Urbis Limericensis pro-ut erat ante Bellum.

*Urbs manet antiqua excelsis circumdata
muris
Turribus atque altis per circuitum
undique sparsis,
Ut se defendant mutus sunt arte
magistra,
Hostes et pellant, fabricatae ex ordine
miro.
Est potius duplex urbs inclitya
Limericensis,
Pons ambas jungit Saxorum mole
peractus,*



Thomond Bridge and King's Island, 1680.



St. Mary's Cathedral, 1680.

*Desuper exstructi sunt parte ab utraque
penates:
Campestris sic una vocatur, et altera
Magna ...*

Translation (In Prose Form)

A Description of the City of Limerick as it was before the war.

The ancient city is surrounded by lofty walls, with high turrets scattered everywhere round the circuit, carefully designed to defend each other and to repel the enemy, and constructed in wondrous order. The glorious city of Limerick is really two cities. A bridge joins them both, built of stone, with houses towering above it on each side. One city is the lower city, on the plain, the other is the Great Town.

The Great Town is surrounded by the famous river Shannon, to the west of

which stands a very strong castle, a safe defence and the king's stronghold in the city. Broad walls guard the castle, and a moat and rampart on the river bank. Soldiers and arms defend it. Beside the castle is the port, a trustworthy harbour for vessels, girded with walls and with two lofty turrets. The port's entrance can be guarded by great chains. When Neptune calls the waters of the river into the sea, the land remains dry until the tide flows back. To the west lies a fertile island next to the walls, surrounded on all sides by the river, adorned with verdant gardens and planted with trees by which the Summer heat is tempered. In Springtime it is laden with all the fruits of the earth. Perpetual flowers always give off their pleasant fragrance on breezes pleasing to the senses. A thousand fragrant herbs mixed with flowers grow there. The fertile earth

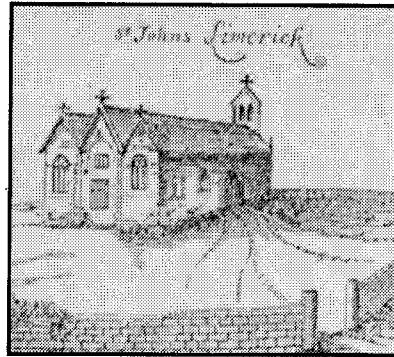
brings forth a thousand health-giving herbs which cure diseases. The strolling traveller walks on a thousand plants, and no deadly serpent lies hidden in the grass. On one side lie luxuriant and grassy meadows where milch-cows, mules and heifers graze.

The island, by the fertility of the generous earth, supplies the necessities of human life and the requirements of idle pleasure. The other part rises with a pleasant and gentle slope which provides pleasant paths for the townsfolk and pleasant grassy ways all round for strollers. Nature brings forth a thousand scattered colours and living things of many kinds.

Here one may gaze on mountains, valleys, woods, farms, fields, hedges, rivers and all beautiful things, as if placed there by art. Ingenious art, and the telescope, show, with refracted rays and reflections, so many varied shapes of different sizes. The healthy breeze lifts the minds of men, and the pleasant climate is good for the health of body and soul. A colonnade stands before the houses of the city, adorned with pictures drawn with consummate art. The houses are adorned with gardens. Huge streets shine, paved with carefully hewn stones, as if laid with marble. Several houses are built from pure marble – lofty as the walls which gird the city all around.

The pleasant stream runs through the country for the use of the city people, healthy by night and giving useful help in many ways to the local farmers.

The river holds the great city in its arms, in a gentle embrace, planting a thousand kisses on its cheeks. Flowing closely by the walls, it holds the land in its



St. John's Church, 1680.

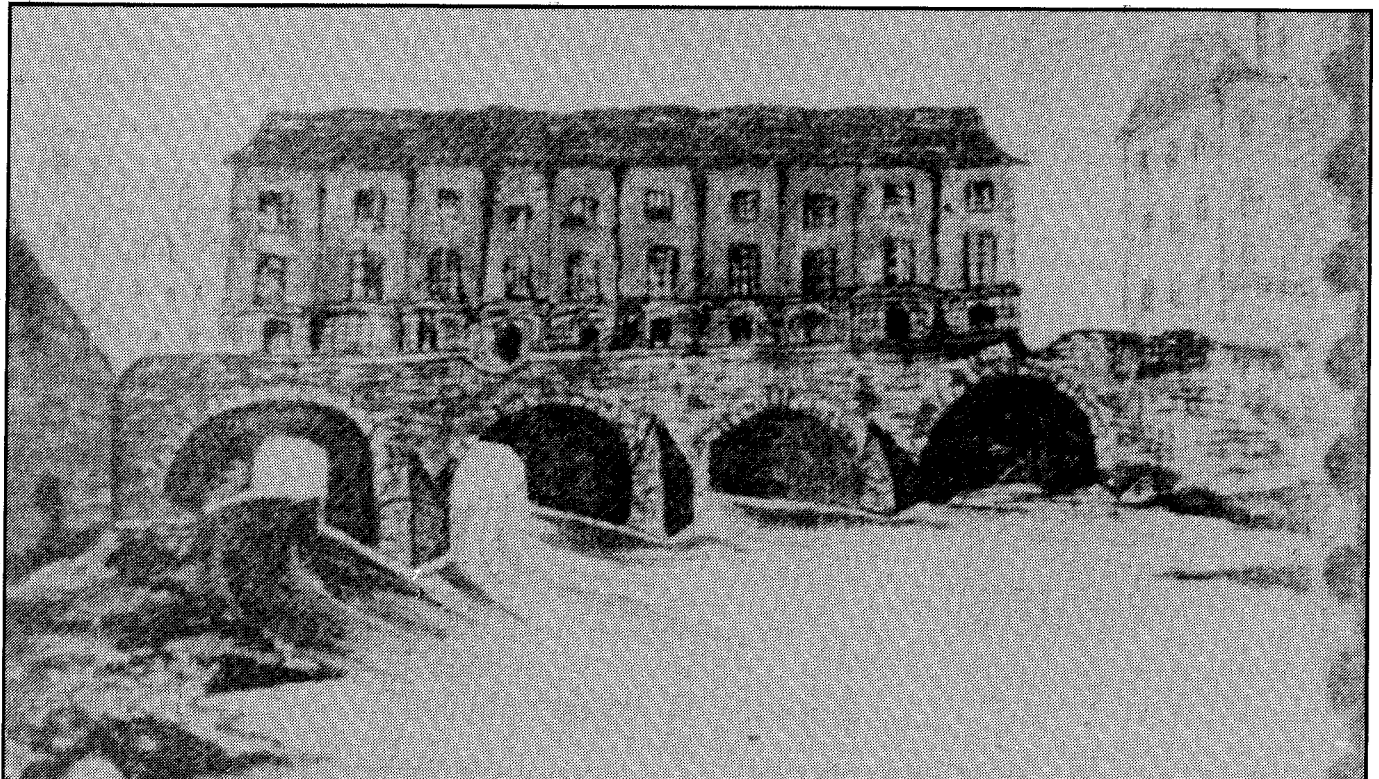
curved grip, and though it flows away from there, it never recedes without being sad, because it knows that it will never again find such a pleasing refuge in the kingdom. So, when the river is flowing from the city, it rejoices in the Sea's command, and willingly flows backwards with the tide, to see its lover once again. It rejoices in the beloved walls, giving them thousands of kisses. But when Neptune recalls the waters, they must slide back into the sea again, compelled by law, lamenting its sad fate. The wandering river abounds in every kind of fish, the plain abounds with fruit: flocks roam the fields, the tender air abounds with birds. So fertile is the soil that Limerick city, in times of peace, is full of ample meat and fish, wild animals, birds, vegetables and fruit of every kind. There is no equal to this abundance in the whole kingdom: here there is every kind of food for human life.

The traveller proceeding towards the city sees harsh rocks scattered beautifully in the river. Paths curve closely round,

with dense hedges here and there, and trees with thick covering of leaves by which the summer heat is tempered. Tempered also is the cold when the North Wind blows, and the coldness of the North East Wind is kept at bay. Heat and cold alike are softened by the marvellous temperance of the place, which is why it is so healthy for the body and prolongs the life of man.

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1. On Boisseleau, see J.G. Simms, *Jacobite Ireland, 1685-91* (London, 1969), pp. 171-2.
2. The inquisition is printed in the *History of Limerick* (1866) by Maurice Lenihan, pp. 138-40. Lenihan also reproduces a family manuscript, which was then in the possession of 'Miles Vernon Bourke, Esq. M.D. of Limerick'.
3. B.N., FF 12160, f.61.
4. John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Dublin, 1927), p.479.
5. B. N., F. F. 12160, f. 5.
6. See Jim Kemmy and Chris O'Mahony, 'A 1690 poem', *Old Limerick Journal*, French edition, No. 25, (1989) pp. 19-20.
7. See Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-century France* (Oxford, 1989).
8. See Brendan Bradshaw, 'Fr. Wolfe's Description of Limerick City, 1574', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. XVII (1975) (*Feilsgribhinn Eamoinn Mhic Giolla Iasachta*), pp. 47-53.
9. Cf. E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Eng. tr. by W.R. Trask, New York, 1953), ch. 10.



Old Baal's Bridge in the eighteenth century.