

King John's Charter to Limerick

A pamphlet was published by O'Connor & Co, Limerick, in 1897 in opposition to Limerick Corporation's plans to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the granting of the city's first charter.

This publication begins a series which is intended to issue as "Readings for the People." The aim is to produce in convenient form some of the gems of our National Literature for popular information and recreation. In its literature of prose and verse, and of song and story, Ireland possesses a heritage which is unequalled by the genius of any other nation. That literature for the most part is a sealed book to the masses of the people. We shall open its pages and progressively introduce its contents, guided in our efforts by the principles laid down half a century ago in the brilliant work which flowed from the inspiration of Davis. It was intended in this first number to write of the National Centenary which next year all Irishmen will be commemorating, but because of the effort which is being made to prostrate the spirit of Irish nationality in Limerick before the works of King John, we have altered our plan so as to embrace the history of John's Charter to Limerick in this issue. We write for the people, and to their appreciation alone do we look for encouragement and success.

"To make the country familiar with its own history, with the various events of great importance which have occurred in our memorable annals, is a task both honorable in itself and productive of great advantages to our people" - MacKevin to William Smith O'Brien.



Steps are being taken in Limerick for the celebration of what is described as the Seventh Centenary of the Charter of Incorporation of the City. Irish history, broadly speaking, is a much neglected subject, otherwise such a celebration would not be proposed, and the fact of its having been proposed indicates the process of anglicisation we are undergoing, and which in time might substitute West Britonism for Irish Nationality. The charter we are asked to celebrate is not a charter of incorporation in the sense of constituting a body for



Silver badge issued to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the charter, 1897.

Limerick Museum.

municipal administration: street cleansing and road making, and gas and water were not in King John's line. His was a genius of a higher order, and his charter an instrument of a more fateful purpose. It is a symbol of that dominant influence of English authority over Irish affairs against the which for seven hundred years the strength of Irish nationality has been fighting. It provided for the appointment of a Mayor and two bailiffs to govern Limerick in the absence of John, then Lord of Ireland, and thus typifies the military subjugation of the country which John and his Anglo-Norman followers were so zealous to accomplish. It is most singular at the present moment to find that Irishmen have been asked to celebrate the granting of this Charter, and that, too, by a Nationalist Mayor and Corporation who have thus appealed to the national instincts of our people to render homage to the works of a dishonorable English king, in whose favour no historian of England has a good word to offer, and whose memory no Englishman would ever dream of revering.

The installation of John as Lord of Ireland coincides with the extinction of the Kings of Munster, the last of whom, Donald O'Brien, died bravely in the struggle against the Normans. Donald was the representative of a kingly line. He had vowed that "Limerick should no more be a nest for foreigners." He had devoted himself to his religion and his country, and to this day, through all the change and havoc of centuries, his memory is preserved in the Cathedral of St. Mary, which he himself founded on the site of his royal palace. His death in 1194 removed at that time the ablest opponent of the English colonization of the country,

and Limerick did not come under the English Government till his decease. The establishment of that authority began with John, then Earl Moreton and Lord of Ireland, and the Charter now so much spoken of was issued by him from Killaloe and dated 18th December, 1197. Ordinarily that Charter might be taken as an honor conferred upon Limerick; in reality it implied the subjection of the people. It was not a concession to the mere Irish, but a privilege to the "superior" English who in the train of John flocked into Limerick and helped themselves to whatever spoliation the conquest enabled them to gather. It is well to quote the description of these events given by an historian of the period, and a writer, too, who was ever ready to preserve the English sentiment.

"Immediately after the death of Donald," says this writer, "the English appear to have recovered their authority in the city of Limerick. We find that in 1195, the seventh of Richard I., an English magistracy was established in Limerick, John Strafford being appointed to the office of Provost. In 1198 the title of Provost was changed to that of Mayor, when Adam Sarvant was appointed to that office. The citizens were also permitted to choose two bailiffs for the better government of the city. But the English in the same year were forced to abandon Limerick for a third time by McCarthy of Desmond. King John on his accession to the crown was so sensible of the necessity of regaining possession of this important place that he renewed his grant of the lands of Thomond to Broasa, while he committed the recovery and custody of the city to William de Burgo. From this period, for more than four centuries, the English, though surrounded by enemies on every side, remained undisputed possessors of a prize which had been so forcibly contested. John gave orders for the adoption of every measure for its security. Thomond Bridge was built and strongly fortified to secure a passage at all times into the territories of Thomond, and a castle of great strength was erected which commanded the bridge in its full extent. English settlers now flocked to Limerick in great numbers, and arrangements were made, consistent with the policy of the times, to preserve tranquillity among the three distinct races - Irish, Danes and English - by which the district was now inhabited. Treaties of amity were concluded with the neighbouring chieftains; the suburb now called the Irishtown was allotted to the residence of the native inhabitants, and

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Invitation to Dr. William Fogerty to the grand fancy dress ball at the Theatre Royal in celebration of the 700th anniversary of the charter, 28 December 1897.

Limerick Museum.

some portions of the adjacent territory were granted to the Ostmen, while, to secure the allegiance of the new English colonists, many immunities were conferred on the citizens by charter in the second year of John's reign. Amongst these privileges, the most important were that the citizens were not to be to be impeaded outside the walls, that they should be free of toll and passage through the king's dominions, and they might yearly elect a Mayor, a discreet and proper person, and faithful to the Crown, etc."

Here we have the acknowledgement that John's Charter was conferred on the English Colonists in order to secure their allegiance. With characteristic English haughtiness, they are styled the citizens who were not to be impeaded (arraigned) outside the walls, while the native inhabitants the Irish were condescendingly permitted to remain in the suburb called the Irishtown, which was not walled till a later date. During the reign of John that portion of the city inhabited by the Colonists was surrounded with walls and it is recorded that this King made several grants to his followers, within and without the walls. During the reigns of subsequent Sovereigns the terms of John's Charter were preserved and enlarged, only however in the English interest. In 1582 by charter of Elizabeth the subjugated area was raised to the dignity of a city. This charter sets out that "considering the fidelity and obedience which the citizens of that city to us in all things freely showed, and were ready to show at their

own very great expenses, labours and charges, especially in the most wicked rebellion by Gerald, Earl of Desmond and his Confederates, against us and our Royal power, very lately attempted and perpetrated. We have willed that our City of Limerick shall be, and remain for ever hereafter, a city in itself, and the citizens of the said city be, and for ever hereafter, shall remain one body corporate and politic in deed, fact, and name, by the name of Mayor, Bailiffs and Citizens of Limerick." Who the citizens were may be gathered from the provision that "no person who is by blood an Irishman or who shall live as an Irishman etc. etc., shall be preferred to any dignity, etc." This provision was excluded from the Charter of James, 1600. The names of some of the Mayors are not very Irish: Adam Sarvant, Thomas Cropper, Roger Maij, John Cambilor, Samuel Minuter, Siwardus de Ferendona, John Avenbragger, etc. The succession of Mayors and Bailiffs continued uninterrupted from King John's reign. "Limerick was formed into a state consistent with the ideas of its English rulers, whose policy was to have each city and town in Ireland thoroughly English, for nearly all outside the walls continued absolutely hostile to the Crown and interest of England."

The light of the history here quoted dispels the idea so erroneously set up, that John's Charter was a privilege conferred upon the Irish. It was, as indicated, an English instrument of power, and why Irishmen should be now called upon to

celebrate it surpasses comprehension. The subsequent history of the Mayoralty and the Corporation, for a lengthened period, is distinguished by the rule of an ascendancy party in Ireland down to the period of the reform of the Municipalities, when, thanks to the spread of better ideas and the struggle for religious equality, some of the disabilities that denied office to Irishmen were removed, and this good work crowned by O'Connell being elected Lord Mayor of Dublin.

By these reforms power passed into the hands of the people, and to that alone, and not to the charters of John or any later sovereign, must be attributed the honour and prestige which in a popular sense now attaches to the Mayoralty of Limerick in common with that of other Irish Cities. In sympathy with the enlightened progress which these reforms indicate, no Irishman can participate in the homage which is sought ingloriously to bestow on this charter in Limerick. If we honour the charter we cannot but consistently honour the king, who is described, not by a mere partisan Irishman, but by the English historian, Hume, as "equally odious and contemptible in public and private life; he had affronted the barons by his insolence, dishonoured their families by his gallantries, and enraged them by his tyranny," while of his tyranny we have an exquisite example in the words of Professor Gardiner, the most notable of English historians, who writes that while in Ireland, John amused himself by pulling the hairs out of the beards of the Irish chiefs.

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