

Thomas Roche of Limerick and Rotterdam 1736-1788

Tohn Roche (1688-1760) married Anne, youngest daughter of Philip Stacpole of Mountcashel, county Clare. His death is recorded on the Stacpole monument in St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick. There were four sons of this marriage; Stephen and Philip, both of whom became wealthy Limerick merchants, John who according to his mother's will went to Dublin⁽¹⁾ and Thomas whose trading records are to be found amongst the Old Notary Archives in the Municipal Archives of Rotterdam.⁽²⁾

Thomas was born about 1736 in Limerick and appears to have been the third of the Roche brothers. John Roche, his father, had an extensive trading empire, trading with Bruges and Rotterdam, supplying the West Indies with beef, butter and hides and importing sugar and rum.⁽³⁾ His mercantile success was built upon by his sons, notably Stephen and Philip, who operated their respective trading empires from Limerick. John junior was presumably looking after the family interests in Dublin. It is to be supposed that Thomas was sent to Rotterdam by his father, who already had trading links there, not only to act on his own behalf but also as the family agent in that busy international trading port. The names of Stephen John Roche, merchant of Limerick, Philip Roche, merchant of Limerick, John Roche jnr, merchant, as well as that of Thomas, all appear in the indexes to the Old Notary Archives in Rotterdam. In all there are about 100 deeds alone relating to Thomas Roche and his business for the period between 1756-1780. Most of these are in Dutch but some have been written in English, apparently a special service offered by some of the Rotterdam notaries. Nearly all of the evidence shown below about Thomas's trading activities is from the period 1756 - 1763; obviously there are many more deeds yet to be consulted.

On 2nd December 1756 (when Thomas was 20 years of age) he applied for and was granted the Burghership of Rotterdam, which allowed him to practice a trade or profession in that city. Thomas allowed no grass to grow beneath his feet, for that very day he went straight to a local notary named Adrian Schadee for a deed to be drawn up between himself and Captain Gerrit van Nijn of the ship *Maria Burthen*. The *Maria Burthen* could carry 135 tons of goods and on this first venture carried a cargo of wine to Limerick; once in Limerick it was to pick up a cargo of about 135 tons of beef, butter, tallow and hides for the return trip to Rotterdam. An examination of Thomas's main notary deeds show that

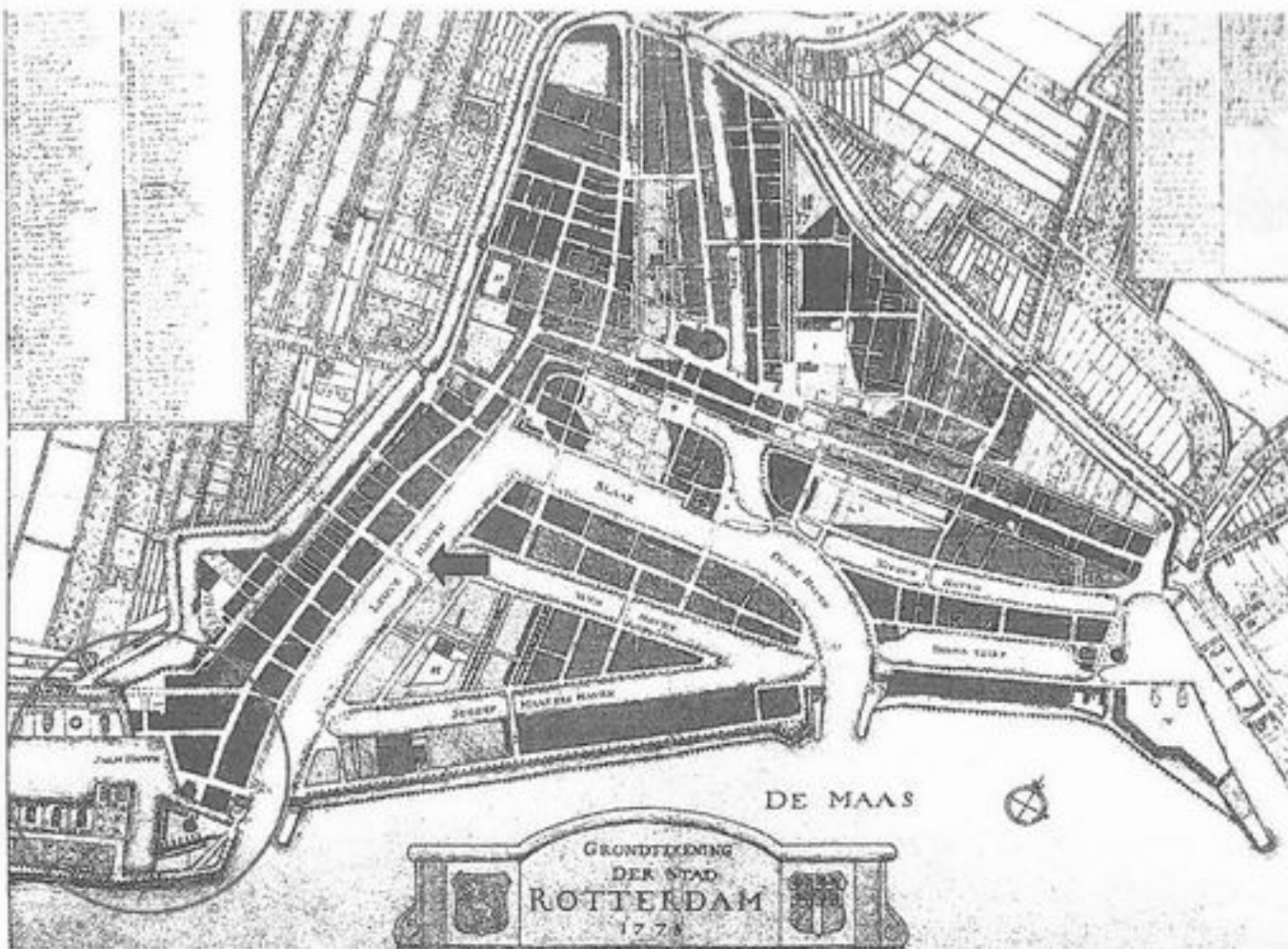
by Mary Casteleyn

he also dealt in cargoes of feathers, candles, gin, brandy and blue (a whitener used in washing). Thomas did not necessarily own outright all the ships which carried his cargoes. Some deeds record him owning only part of the ship; obviously different trading partners were obtained for each trip and venture, individual trading partners contributing what they could afford. For example he owned, or commissioned the whole of *de Bloem van der Zee* (*The Flower of the Sea*) before December 1758, but only three quarters after that date, and by 1759 only one quarter of the ship. But he also had a share in other ships such as *de Stad Rotterdam* (*The City of Rotterdam*) in which he had an interest of one sixteenth. Thomas did much trade with Limerick sometimes via Dunkirk, and with Cork, but also further a field to Norway, as well to Malaga and the Dutch West Indies. A deed dated 19th April 1762 shows him commissioning Captain Robbert Stedman of the frigate *Vriendschap* (*Friendship*) of Rotterdam to sail to the island of Malaga for wine; the return port of arrival was to be Vlissingen in Zeeland. Thomas Roche had at least one office clerk or agent in Rotterdam by the name of Andrew Meade. In 1762 Thomas gave power of attorney to Andrew Meade to look after the business in Rotterdam during a proposed absence on a foreign trip; neither the duration nor location of the trip is identified in the deed. This power of attorney shows the confidence that Thomas had in his clerk which gave Andrew Meade the right to buy and sell, claim money and goods and make drafts; in fact, proceed with anything to do with Thomas's trade. It is interesting that Thomas's brother Philip Roche also used a member of the Meade family as his agent in London, in this case Augustine Meade of the London based firm of Augustine Meade and Co., one of the Irish transatlantic provisioning firms operating from London during the period 1756 - 1775.⁽⁴⁾ The Roche family had connections by marriage with the Meade family of Limerick.

The Archives in Rotterdam provide evidence of those merchants Thomas was dealing with in Ireland. Patrick Weldon, merchant, of Dublin is mentioned in 1759 as owing him £100 for blue sent from Rotterdam to Dublin, a bill drawn on Isidore Lynch and Co., London, having been refused payment; this time Thomas appointed Alexander Armstrong of Dublin to act as his agent to recover the money owed. Mr James Roche of Waterford, merchant, was

appointed in 1761 as his agent in that city to recover money, goods, wares and merchandise owed to him by Messrs Andrew and Garret Harvey of Waterford, although the precise nature of the goods and wares is not identified.

The timing of Thomas's arrival in Rotterdam is interesting. The Seven Years' War 1756-1763, between the four allies of Austria, France, Russia and Sweden against Prussia and England, badly affected maritime trading opportunities but Holland, being neutral, allowed for a brisk trade from Rotterdam to carry on as usual. Even so, there was constant interference with neutral Holland's shipping. Trading had its problems and difficulties and Thomas Roche's deeds show that shipping was a hazardous enterprise. *De Voorzigtigheid* (*The Caution*) totally owned by Thomas Roche, on passage from Bordeaux to Curaçao (an island of the Dutch Antilles in the Caribbean, off the coast of Venezuela) was taken by an English privateer called *The Terrible* in November 1762 and carried into Jamaica, where the ship and her cargo were condemned. The term condemned as used in these documents appears to be a technical term meaning confiscated. On this occasion, Henry Holding of London, but late of Rotterdam, was appointed by Thomas to try to recover his ship and goods. *De Zee Nymph* (*The Sea Nymph*), sailing from Cork to St Eustatius, (a Dutch West Indian island near St Kitts), carrying a cargo of 180 barrels of beef which belonged to Thomas was seized by an English privateer called John McPherson of the *Britania of Philadelphia* and escorted on into Antigua in March 1758. A 1763 deed, five years after the seizure, shows Thomas still struggling to get compensation for his lost ship and cargo; following an appeal to the High Court of Admiralty in London, his ship and cargo were declared free and the 1758 condemnation of his ship and cargo annulled. Whether he ever saw his money is another matter, but this case does illustrate just how difficult maritime trading was and how persistent Thomas was in pursuing unjust seizures and condemnations of his ships and goods. *De Bloem van der Zee* (*The Flower of the Sea*), carrying gin and brandy and en route from Rotterdam to Bergen in Norway, was seized by an English yacht called *The Prince William* about 12th February 1759 and brought to the harbour of Fraserburg in Scotland. An affidavit of 27th March 1759 identifies Thomas as owner of a quarter of the cargo in partnership with Richard Proctor and others "all of this city (Rotterdam), merchants and burghers and consequently subjects of their High



Map of Rotterdam in 1778. The circle shows the location of Thomas Roche's house and warehouse. The arrow shows the location of the other warehouse.

Monique Peters of Purmerend, The Netherlands.

Excellencies the States General of the United Provinces ... they the said witnesses declaring that the said merchandizes ... be the sole property of the owners and that no subjects or subjects enemy to the Crown of Great Britain hath, have had or have directly or indirectly any partnership share or interest in the said goods" A further deed dated 24th July 1759 states that the cargo was taken in March 1759 to Leith in Scotland to be unloaded and was currently stored in a warehouse there; Thomas Roche and Richard Proctor appear to have taken matters into their own hands as

the deed is a warning by the other cargo owners that Roche and Proctor have no right to act independently without consulting the other owners. There are others deeds relating to this cargo, appointing agents in Scotland to act on their behalf but by August 1759 nothing had been recovered. Insurance of cargoes was an obvious solution; on 13th June 1758 Thomas insured goods to the value of 3000 guilders which were loaded onto a ship called *de Anna Rosina*. This ship, en-route from Limerick to Rotterdam, was seized by an English privateer and taken to Rye in

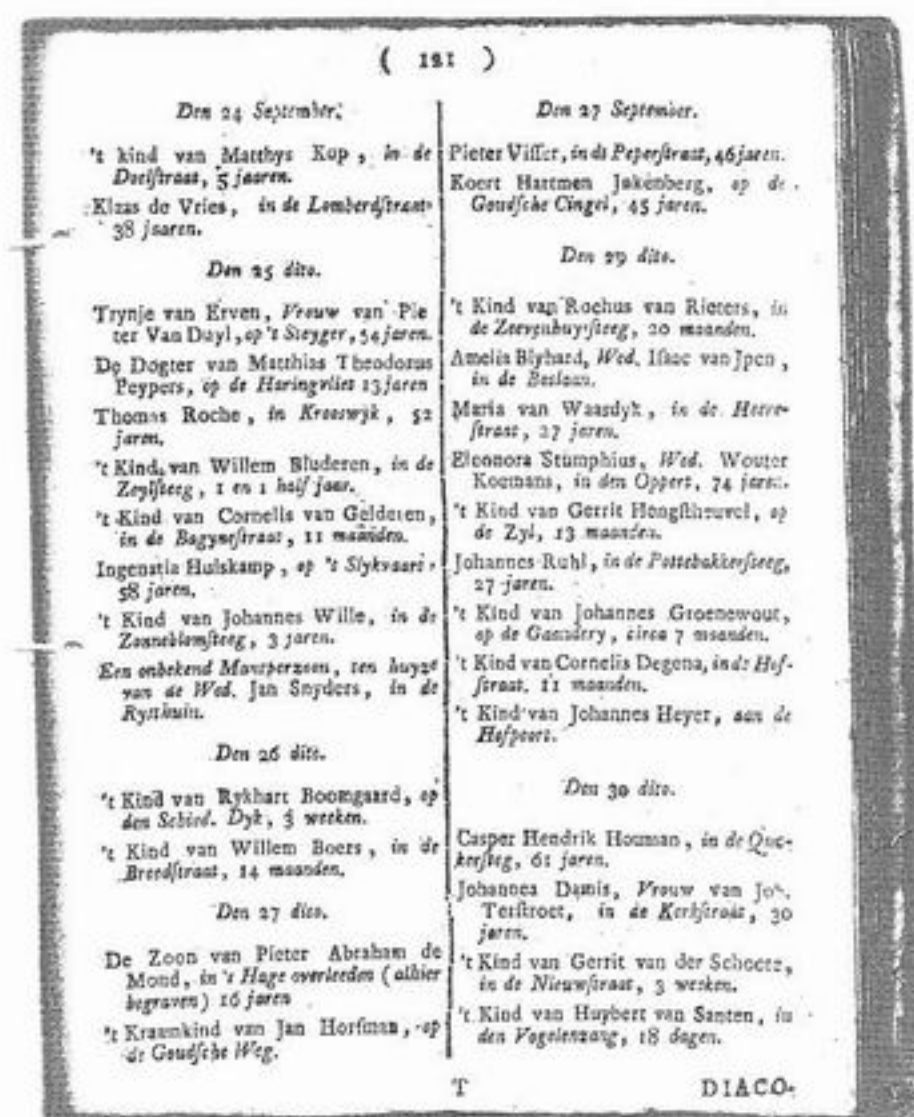
England. Thomas's insurer Theodorus Van Eijnden was given the task of recovering the cargo, but he failed. On 4th November 1758 the British High Court of Admiralty confiscated the ship and her cargo and then Thomas set about recovering all his costs from Van Eijnden. It was this constant interference with neutral shipping by the English that eventually took the Dutch into, what was for them, a fourth English war but the Dutch failed to stop the English from taking possession of ships sailing under the Dutch flag. Papers in the National Archives at Kew, London, identify similar troubles experienced by his brother Philip Roche. One petition in particular dated 1792, when England was at war with Holland, relates to two ships which had sailed from Limerick for St Eustatius and St Martin in the Dutch West Indies "for greater security under Dutch colours". These two ships had been seized by the English and the provisions, valued at £15,000, were to be "divided amongst His Majesty's Fleet and Army". Sadly the document does not reveal the outcome of Philip Roche's petition in which he states that he "never had, nor meant to have any concern with his Majesty's Enemies".⁽⁵⁾

With all these vicissitudes one could be excused for thinking that Thomas was not doing terribly well but in fact he appears to have become a very rich man. He was obviously a very astute merchant, operating well with his Dutch colleagues but not losing his Irish links. In 1764 George Macnamara, a doctor living in the Hague, gave his brother-in-law Charles Macnamara, a general, power of attorney to look after his business. This deed was witnessed by both Thomas Roche and Andrew Meade, fellow Irishmen and obviously known to the Macnamaras. The deeds mentioned in this



The front page of the List of Names of those married or who died in Rotterdam in September 1788.

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The page showing the entry for Thomas Roche (Thomas Roche, in Krooswyck, 52 jaren) in the List of Names opposite. Monique Peters of Purmerend, The Netherlands.

short article are but a few relating to the period under review. Most do show other hazards of maritime trading apart from seizure by English privateers. Loss of ships and cargoes from storms and tempests are an obvious risk and complaints by Masters and crew also had to be dealt with and the problems resolved. One such complaint by the crew of *De Voorzigtighejd* in July 1760 concerns the dangerous and negligent behaviour of the then Master Arnoldus Born, during a voyage from Dublin to St Eustatius via the Canary Islands. The Master (according to testimony), was frequently drunk, always absent from the ship whenever she docked, and the ship so badly provisioned, that water and food had to be rationed. In addition the Master was violent to the crew, attacking two sailors (named Pieter Berkhout and Patrick Mealy) and challenging the rest of the crew to combat by knife. This sounds like a positive nightmare that the 24 year old Thomas was left to sort out.

In 1777 there is evidence that Thomas was living above his warehouse in the *Zalmhaven* or Salmon Harbour of Rotterdam. An advertisement in the *Rotterdamsche Courant* reads:-

"On Friday October 24th 1777 at precisely 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the following brokers: H van der Pals, G van Alphen, W de Cromme, W.H. Carlebur and J van Alphen Gszoon, will sell in the inn called *Het Zwynshoofd* (The Pigs Head), an excellent shipment of about 900 barrels or firkins, of old Limerick butter from the year 1776. The butter can be viewed in the warehouse below Mr Roche's residence in the Salmon Harbour, and in the *Leuvenhaven* (Leuven Harbour) next to *Het Witte Hart* (The White Deer). Viewing prior to the sale day, October 24th 1777, or on the day itself."

At this distance in time it is difficult to gain an accurate impression of his character and personality but thanks to the Internet it is possible shed some light on his artistic interests as his name appears in a list of subscribers for a book of poetry.⁽⁶⁾ Thomas Roche died intestate on the 25th September 1788 aged 52 years in Rotterdam. He must have died very unexpectedly because although he was a wealthy man he did not appear to have had time to make a Will. I have found no evidence as to the cause of death. Between the end of September 1788 and October 1788, three advertisements appeared in the *Rotterdamsche Courant*, requesting all Rotterdam notaries to search through their client papers for a 30 year period to see if they could turn up the Will of the recently-dead Thomas Roche, but no such Will was forthcoming. Thomas Roche was buried in the Groote Kirk, Rotterdam on 26th September 1788 at a cost of 30 guilders. The burial record states that he is "*bejaarde jongeman*" that is an elderly bachelor and of the Krooswijk district of Rotterdam. This was an expensive burial as others listed on the page cost either 3 guilders or 6 guilders. The Groote Kirk is

a Protestant church, but at that time in Holland, Catholics were buried in Protestant churches. Thomas was buried inside the church, a privilege reserved for the rich; poorer people were buried outside in the graveyard which then surrounded the church. Although Rotterdam was badly bombed during the Second World War, the Groote Kirk, now called the Laurens Church, miraculously survived, but there is now no sign of a memorial erected to commemorate Thomas Roche.⁽⁷⁾

Six months before he died Thomas Roche had negotiated to purchase an estate in county Kilkenny and was also in the process of acquiring another estate in county Clare. So far I have not firmly identified either estate. However it is interesting that his nephew George Roche, son of Stephen Roche, came into the estate of Granagh, also known as Granny, county Kilkenny, on the death of his elder brother John Roche in 1825⁽⁸⁾ Granagh, including the ruined Castle, is situated on the Kilkenny side of the River Suir, just slightly up river from the port of Waterford. It seems probable that this is indeed the property which first came into the possession of the family via Thomas Roche; he would have certainly been interested in possessing a river frontage property on the Suir, so close to Waterford, to facilitate and extend his trading empire. However this remains a hypothesis until it has been possible to examine the deeds in the Registry of Deeds in Dublin. The purchase of one estate and the near purchase of another make it doubly puzzling as to why Thomas left no Will.

The Catholic Relief Act of 1778 (which enabled Catholics who had taken the oath of allegiance to the King, to take leases of land for up to 999 years), was followed by two further measures in 1782 which allowed Catholics to buy land, except that located in Parliamentary Boroughs. When Thomas Roche died intestate in Rotterdam in September 1788, his eldest brother Stephen Roche of Limerick became his heir-at-law. However a bill was filed against the heir-at-law by a Protestant discoverer, a blacksmith named John Lee, who claimed to be entitled to this estate in as much as Thomas Roche, the purchaser had never returned to Ireland and taken the oaths of allegiance as required. The case was heard before the Lord Chancellor, John Fitzgibbon, who as it happened, was not unfriendly towards the catholic Roches. The question was "whether a Roman Catholic subject, residing beyond the seas, purchases an estate in Ireland, and that he does not at some time during his life, return to Ireland, and take the oaths, his estate descends to his heir-at-law, or exists for the benefit of a Protestant informer?" After debating the subject the Lord Chancellor ruled that as Stephen Roche had taken the required oaths, he had every right to inherit his brother's property and that purchasers residing beyond the seas were only required to take the oaths "within six months of their return to this Kingdom and that the intestate having been prevented from returning by an act of God, the estate was not discoverable, it

having descended to his heir-at-law, who had before such descent, duly taken the oaths". The Lord Chancellor then dismissed the bill, with costs.⁽⁹⁾

Clearly other members of the Roche family profited from the inheritance of Thomas Roche's estate but we may never know exactly how. In the 1798 Will of Thomas's other brother, Philip Roche John, there is mention of £700 remitted to him "as appears in my books and in the books of my deceased brother Thomas Roche of Rotterdam, for the purposes of paying the same to the creditors of Michael Kelly, deceased; it is a difficult matter to find them, he (Kelly) having become a Bankrupt above thirty years ... I desire my executors may ... pay the said sum to the Trustees appointed therein first getting advice of an eminent lawyer how my property is to be exonerated on paying the same."⁽¹⁰⁾

Many names of other Irishmen appear in the index to the deeds in Rotterdam. Those noted because of my own interests are Augustine Meade, the one time London agent of Philip Roche of Limerick. Also listed in the index is the firm of Meade and O'Brien, the Dublin based business belonging to Thomas Meade, a Limerick merchant and Denis Thomas O'Brien of Dublin. Found too, is George Roche, notary of Limerick, whose deed is dated 1674. Obviously there is still much work to be done in these Dutch records, which remain a potential fruitful source of Limerick maritime history.

REFERENCES

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6. Woodhouse, James. Poems on Several Occasions. 1766. (Seen on Google Books 28th December 2008).
7. I am grateful to Sandra Meade Lara Kelly of Carlow and Amsterdam for visiting Rotterdam to verify this.
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10. The Prerogative Will of Philip Roche John proved in London 2nd January 1798.