Two early descriptions of Limerick

by Brian Hodkinson

In 1732 John Loveley (1711-89) of Caversham in England recorded a visit to Limerick in his diary, which was published in only 75 copies at the end of the 19th century. Cornelius Kelly in his book The Grand Tour of Limerick published an edited version of the Kilmallock entry, but did not include the Limerick city visit, which appears below. Loveley refers to Gerard Boate's (1604-50) description of Limerick and the Shannon estuary, which is also included here as the second description.

Loveley (pp. 42-3), "Saturday 17th [June]......

..The City consists of two Streets, of no great Width & is for ye most part Stone-building. St Munchin's & St John's, ye only churches besides ye Cathedral in ye Chancel of ye former, was heretofore ye Cathedral founded by St Munchin ye 1st Bp. of Limerick, is a Monun for Bp. Smith's Lady & just S. of ye Altar; ye Bp. was buried here since, but as yet there is no Epitaph for Him. Smith built an house hard by, & was Bp. Burscough, his immediate Successor, rents of His Executors; for ye Palace has these many years been lease'd out, & is now ye Sign of ye 3 Tuns. S. Marys, ye Cath. is a large anc. Pile; it's Pillars large & irregular, as usual here. In ye Choir are Galleries & Pews, ye Pulpit standing at ye upper end bef. ye Altar. N. of ye Altar is a very large stateley Monum erected for an Earl of Thomond & his Lady, His effigies defaced. Opposite to it on ye S. is ye recumbent Effigies on a raised Tomb (w'hich is not much late S. D.) it's Inscription on it) of Bp. Cornelius O'Dea, who resigned his Bp'rick in 1426 & dy'd in 1434. It is Alabaster, & ye people are continually cutting of it for ye Bloody Flux. The Hymns only were chanted here both M. & E. A Parish sit in ye Choir, whose Church yead where ye Hospital is now: ye Dean will not suffer Them to contribute anything toward ye repair of ye Cath. Mr Bandon ye present Dean, his Revenue near 400 E. P. Ann. ye Bp's 1800 E. P. Ann. In ye Vestry, w'hich is also us'd for a Chapter-house is a Latin Inscription in old Irish Capitals, Inserted in ye Wall; & here are other gravestones. No Monum for any Bp. but ye above-mentioned, tho' Ware forms us, but were bury'd here. The Bp. of Limerick has also ye Title of Ardfert & Aghado. The Vicars Choral have no Houses, but Others have built upon ye Ground & pay 'em Ground rent. There is no Library here now. The Barracks are at ye ruin'd Castle.

The following day Loveley moved on to Caherconlish.

Boate (1726; vol. 1 p. 11)

The next great haven on the west side of Ireland, to the south of Galloway, is that of Limerick, which hewer divides the province of Connaught from Munster, being of a huge length, no less than fifty miles: for so far it is from the mouth of the haven until the city of Limerick, to whose walls great vessels may go up, without meeting with anything else in all that way save a many little isles, but not any foul places, rocks, or sands. This harbour is nothing else but a great lough (half way its length growing somewhat narrow, but immediately inflaring it self into a great breadth) where into the river Shannon, (upon whose bank Limerick is situated) discharges itself a little way below the said city; although the English & the Irish both call it the Shannon all the way until the sea, as it were not a lough into which the river falleth, but the river itself thus inflared.

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REFERENCES
Gerard Boate. Natural History of Ireland (Dublin, 1726; reprinted Lampeter 2006).
John Loveley Diary of a tour in 1732 through parts of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland (Edinburgh, 1800).