The Arthurs were a Limerick family of substance and renown. For centuries, they achieved prominence in the professions and in the commercial life of the city. Except for an interest at local level, they kept out of national politics, and thus lived and died without the vigilent bowelings and gloatings of enemies, or the malëdictions of political opponents. They left nothing but memorials which were of immeasurable value to the citizens and a name that will be remembered as long as Limerick exists.

Bishops, priests, doctors, church builders, merchants, millers, ship-owners and property developers – all members of the Arthur clan – were pre-eminent in the life of Limerick for six hundred years. Their name occurs in the list of mayors of the city no fewer than fifty-seven times, though I do not hold up this distinction in itself as a badge of respectability, for the famous chain was worn by some notorious scoundrels from time to time, but the Arthurs deserved the many honours they enjoyed in the city. The Arthur Manuscript, the chronicle and diary of Dr. Thomas Arthur, remains the most valuable historical document ever written in the city, and gives us a mirror image of life in Limerick from early in the fifteenth century to the beginning of the last quarter of the seventeenth.

Nicholas Arthur

The story of Nicholas Arthur unfolds like a tale from the Arabian Nights. Born in 1405, he was mayor of Limerick no less than seven times. He was a bold and enterprising adventurer, exporting in his own ship, pelts of fur-bearing animals – stoats, pine martens, otters, squirrels and hares; also tables of polished marble, scarlet and fine cloth mantles. Among his live cargo were ‘hounds, falcons and horses of generous breed’.

One can imagine the intrepid merchant sailing out of the little harbour, which was situated on the site of the present Potato Market, with his noisy, squawking cargo. In 1428, he was captured by pirates from Brittany and imprisoned for two years in St. Michael’s Mount. His captors robbed him of his cargo, worth 700 marks, and sold his ship (which he had chartered from a friend, John Chirch) at St. Malo. He was released only when his family paid a ransom of 400 marks. However, the resourceful sailor was not content with his life and liberty; the recovery of his ship, cargo and ransom was his first priority. ‘As soon’ as ever he had recovered from these distresses, he proceeded to wait upon his majesty, the king, to whom he perseveringly complained of the loss sustained by himself and his friend, John Chirch, and did not cease to press his claims until he obtained letters-patent from the king, date-marked London, 29 July, 1430, authorising him to make reprisals to the value of £5,332.13.4 sterling, from the property of the subjects of that Duke wherever found within the dominions of the King of England, whether by land or sea. Which reprisals he bravely, energetically and perseveringly levied even to the last farthing, and wrested from them perforce. ‘Apparently, these letters patent endowed Arthur with the right to rob every Frenchman he met in the kings dominions, whether on land or sea, until the desired sum was accopmited for.

If Nicholas did not marry a wife who was ‘immensely’ wealthy, these incidents are enough to show that he was a shrewd and tough businessmen. His well-to-do wife bore him six sons, four of whom became mayors of Limerick, and one, Thomas, became bishop of the diocese. The other was appointed to the important office of bailiff - an office which took on odious connotations early in the eighteenth century.

No doubt Nicholas’ many gifts to King Henry VI were by way of conciliating the regard of one who had already favoured him with the military
control of the city of Limerick. He was also granted the custodianship of the Castle of Limerick (now the old neglected tower-house in Mary Street). Among the gifts received by the monarch were 'falcons and large dogs fit for hunting, black marble sculptured with a team of leopards, Spanish steeds ambling with equal steps, pearls which Eleaunius had produced.'

His death, in 1465, is described in the same quaint style of the period:

At length, yielding to fatal necessity, having made his will on the eve of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and having received the Holy Viaticum of Our Lord's Body, and being fortified by the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, he fell asleep in the Lord. His wife, Katherine, survived him for full ten years and seven days, devoted to works of piety and mercy, and at length departed this life for a better one of the feast of the Exaltation of our Lord's Incarnation of the Holy Cross on the 13th Kalends of October in the year of our Lord's Incarnation, 1475; and her body was laid with that of her husband in the ancestral monument at the left wing of the altar of St. Catherine, Virgin and Martyr, in the Church of St. Mary's, Limerick.

The above details are contained in the diary of Thomas Arthur, who described Nicholas Arthur as 'my great-grandfather's grand-sire'.

Thomas Arthur

Thomas Arthur was born in the Irishtown in 1593, and, as one would expect from rich and influential parents, he was given the best possible education; but there being no place in Ireland where a Catholic could be educated, he was sent to France. He studied arts at the University of Bordeaux, and obtained a degree at the famous University of Rheims, after undergoing his medical training in Paris.

In a long autobiographical poem, he refers to his early scholastic days in France as follows:

I when a beardless boy dwelt in learned Bordeaux,
The Augustinian camp of the Thespian goddesses;  
Here it pleased me to devote my green youth's study to rhetoric
And the learned institutes of the wise.

A fellow-citizen of Dr. Arthur, Joseph Ignatius O'Halloran, brother of Sylvester O'Halloran, became a student at the Jesuit college at Bordeaux in 1736, and later, after entering the Jesuit Order, was professor of philosophy in the city's university.

Arthur's further educational progress may be followed in Maurice Lenihan's literal translation of his autobiographical Latin hexameters:

To Paris soon he sedulously proceeded, and there
With eager ears had heard the leading physicians,
And with rapid pen had committed to writing
The sacred and previously studied lectures of the learned.
There he had mentally imbibed the oracles of Apollo's shrine,
The van Hypocrites' difficult precepts,
There, too, O Galen, he perused several volumes of thy sound medical learning
There, too, he looked through the inner mansions of chemical science,
If he might thence derive any aid for the sick.

Soon after distinguished at Rheims with the honour of the doctorate:
Welcome and exulting he returned to the house of his fathers.

He lost no time in returning to his native city, and began to build up a practice among those who could afford to pay him. He was in Limerick during the Cromwellian Siege on 1651. This was an appalling time for the besieged and the besiegers alike. The coldness, gloom and despair, which were the prevailing features of every street and lane of the festering city, made the fruits of victory sour and unpalatable for the weary Cromwellians, for they had to share the hardships which had for so long afflicted the despairing citizens.

Right through the catastrophe, Dr. Arthur maintained his independence and high standing in the disease-ridden city, but the dreadful conditions evoked an uncharacteristic compassion in the otherwise unemotional doctor, to the extent that he organised whatever assistance was possible for the afflicted. He was not deflected, however, from Danton and Desmoulins on the steps of the scaffold.
attended to his accounts and to his
treatment of the better-off citizens - that
is, if they were not suffering from the
plague (typhus). Like all other doctors of
the period, he had a healthier respect for
his own preservation than that of his
patients. Amid the turmoil and misery,
he went about his rounds attending to
his privileged patients, jotting down
their names and sometimes details of
their complaints, but always the fees he
received from them, while the heads of
some of his friends were rotting on
spikes over the gates of the Irish town.

Arthur excelled his Irish contem-
poraries in the practice of his profession,
and if we are to judge from the manner
in which the serious illness of
Archbishop Usher - pronounced
incurable by the best doctors at the other
side of the channel - yielded completely
to his ministrations, he certainly excelled
his English contemporaries as well.

Arthur's extensive properties were
confiscated under the Act of Settlement,
but most of these were restored to his
family after his death in 1674 and
remained in the Arthur family until the
passing of the Wyndham Act in 1904,
when most were compulsorily acquired by
the Government.

Whatever might be said about
Arthur's stringency and love of money,
he remained faithful to his creed at a
time when changing it might have made
him a millionaire and would also have
saved his property from confiscation. He
seems to have escaped the adverse
verdict of history for his condemnation
of the Confederation of Kilkenny and his
unflinching loyalty to the establishment,
and also the neutral course which he
steered during the period leading up to
the capitulation of the city and the
dreadful atrocities of the occupation
forces afterwards. He was imprisoned
and excommunicated by his fellow-
citizens, but emerged in his lifetime as
one of the greatest and most respected
medical men in the British Isles.

While the doctor's convictions were
firm and unwavering, he never became
actively engaged in politics. Not so his
kinsman, Robert, whose activity in this
branch of the sciences a century later was
to cost him his life.

**Robert Arthur**

Robert Arthur was born in Paris, of a
Limerick father - a watchmaker - in 1761.
He was a man of great enterprise and
character who amassed a considerable
fortune through his business as a paper
manufacturer. He was better known in
Paris as Jean Jacques Arthur, from his
idolisation of Jean Jacques Rousseau. (A
namesake - Captain Robert Arthur - was
promoted on the battlefield to the rank of
colonel for his valor in 1747 at Laffelt,
where the Irish Brigade distinguished
itself).

Robert became deeply immersed in
the boiling politics leading up to the
French Revolution and in the reign of
terror afterwards, and became a very
close friend of Robespierre, so much so
that he became known as the 'Little
Robespierre'. He was a true idealist, for
he had nothing to gain from the
revolution. In fact he had everything that
a man might wish for - a beautiful estate
outside Paris, and a prosperous concern
employing more than 200 workers and,
above all, youth and good health.

He was a born revolutionary, and it
was with rare relish that he took part in
the storming of the Tuileries and the
overthrow of the monarchy in 1792. He
was a noted member of the famous
Jacobin Club. His denunciation of those
of his own political colour who were
cashing in on confiscated property for
their personal gain illustrated his
honesty and personal courage, at a time
when lives were being snuffed out like so
many candles on a church altar.

There is a story, well kept in the
traditional lore of Limerick city, that he
rescued a young student, Patrick Hogan,
from a murderous mob at the Irish
College in Paris during the reign of
terror. Hogan was afterwards parish
priest of St. Michael's Church in
Limerick. He died in 1839. By a curious
coincidence, the only two memorials in
St. Michael's are to Patrick Hogan and
Patrick Arthur!

It was Robert Arthur who proposed
the decree compelling householders to
write the names of all residents on the
front door.

After the defeat of the Girondists,
Clavière, the Minister of Finance,
committed suicide when he learned that
Arthur was to give evidence against him;
and the quick trial and execution of
Danton made it unnecessary for Arthur
to testify against him. In both cases,
Robert was cited to give evidence. One of
the Girondists at the time described
Arthur as the 'foreigner who became a
member of the commune, and is more
tactious and bloodthirsty than Herbert or
Chaunette'.

After the arrest of his idol
Robespierre, Robert Arthur signed his
own death warrant when he put his name
to the proclamation calling on the
people to rise in defence of their leader,
for there was no response, and he was
arrested for his action. Robert Arthur
suffered death by the guillotine two days
after Robespierre, on 30 July, 1794.

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