

# THREE ARTHURS

**T**he 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 vengeful howls and gloatings of enemies, or the maledictions 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 Thomas Arthur, remains the most valuable historical document ever written in the city, and gives us a mirror image of life in Limerick from early in the fifteenth century to the beginning of the last quarter of the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

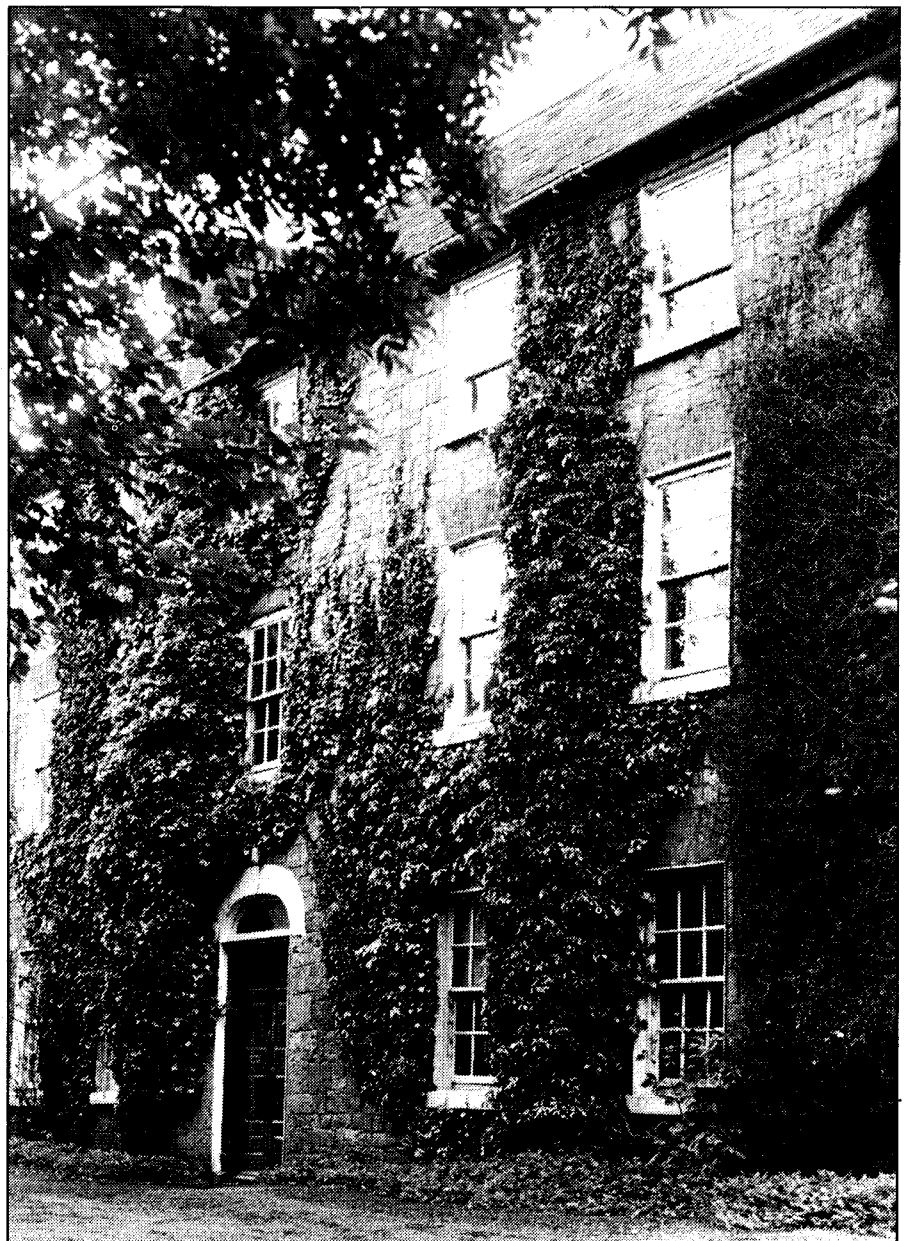
BY KEVIN HANNAN

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 accounted 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 businessman. 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



*An Arthur family house, off Athlunkard Street, Limerick.*



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.'

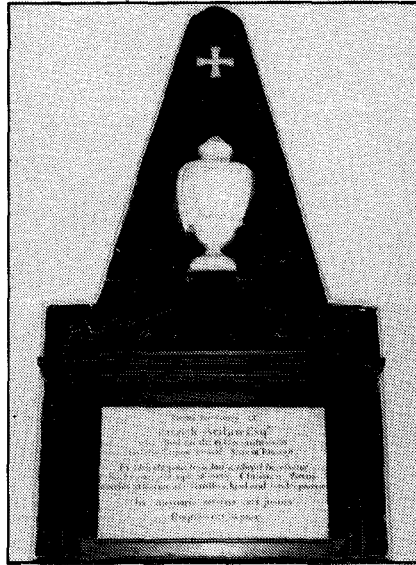
His death, in 1465, is described in the same quaint style of the period:

*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



*A memorial to Patrick Arthur at St. Michael's Church, Denmark Street, Limerick.*

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 wan 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

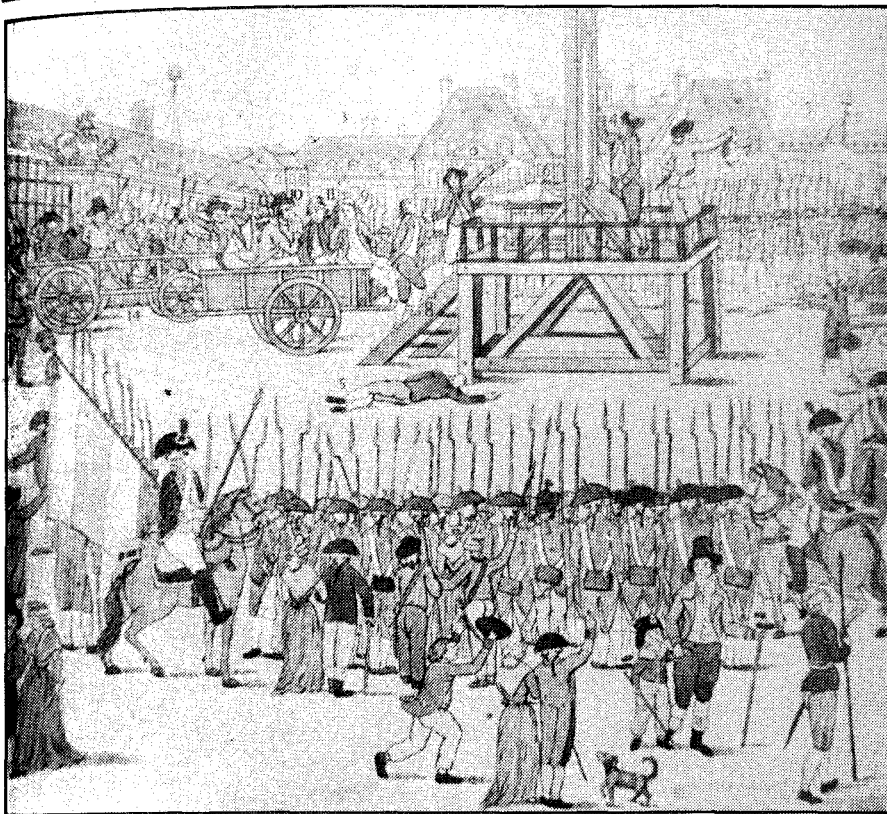


*Danton and Desmoulins on the steps of the scaffold.*

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*The execution of Robespierre and his associates in the Place de la Révolution on the morning of 10th Thermidor (28 July), as represented by a hostile witness.*

*Robespierre is shown seated in the middle of the tumbrel nearest to the foot of the guillotine, while Couthon's head is being displayed to the crowd.*

attending 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 Irishtown.

Arthur excelled his Irish contemporaries 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 valour 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 Tuilleries 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 factious 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.

### SOURCES

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