

The White Manuscript



On Christmas Eve, 1997, we suffered one of the fiercest gales in living memory. Thousands of trees were ripped up by the roots and the awesome hurricane gusts sweeping through the city streets forced many a last-minute Christmas shopper to seek reluctant refuge from the elements in a public hostelry. 'Its all to do with the Ozone Layer' the storm-blitzed survivors muttered over their brandy and porter.

The weather does seem to have got topsy-turvy of late, with miserably cold summers and unnaturally warm winters. But if we look back into the annals of time we find that the Irish weather has always acted in an unpredictable, even bizarre, fashion. The Rev. James White, in his *Annals of the City, County and Diocese of Limerick*, written in the 18th century, informs us that in 1694 there was such a great frost in Limerick that the ice in the River Shannon was 9 feet thick, allowing people to walk over the river.¹ And on the 6th of December 1705, a terrible storm erupted in the city that started at one o'clock at night and finished at eight in the morning. During that time, the Shannon rose so high that it flowed over the parapets of Thomond Bridge and many parts of town were flooded. In the area around St. Francis' Abbey, and in the lower sections of Irishtown, people had to scramble smartly onto their rooftops to save themselves from drowning.²

But one of the most peculiar climatic events to have occurred in the Limerick area took place on 20th October 1695 when, according to the White Ms. 'there fell at Newcastle about Limerick, and in many parts of the County, a Shower of perfect butter, so as that none could doubt of it, and the like was not heard of before in this Country.'³ Which all goes to show that the Irish weather has always been a bit queer.

Born in 1715, James White attended the Jesuit school in Limerick and came under the influence of his teacher, Thomas Gorman, S.J., who, in 1730, sent James off at the age of sixteen to the Irish Seminary of St. Iago at Salamanca in Spain. Six years later, in May 1736, James returned to Limerick as a subdeacon and spent the rest of his life in the city in the service of the church. Ordained a priest on 23 December 1738 by Bishop Lacy, James White said his first mass on the following day, 24 December.

He was a dutiful and diligent priest, but he is best remembered as the author of the *Annals of the City, County and Diocese of Limerick*, which he patiently researched and compiled over many years. Better known as the White Manuscript, the 200 page document contains material relating to the history of the city

by David Lee

and diocese of Limerick dating back to Viking times. But Fr. White was not only an historian; he was a chronicler of contemporary events as well, for, up until his death in February 1768, at the age of 53, he recorded in his *Annals* many of the more important civic and religious events that took place in Limerick during his lifetime, events that he either eye-witnessed or had access to reliable information and documentation concerning them. As such, the White Ms. is an invaluable source of information for students of early Georgian Limerick, as it is one of the few decent primary sources we have for the period. For the purposes of this article, I shall concentrate on that section of the manuscript dealing with events that took place in his lifetime because that would be the most accurate and historically reliable portion of the manuscript.

Religious Tensions

As a Catholic cleric and historian, James White was acutely aware of the tensions and rivalries between Catholics and Protestants in Limerick during the Penal period, tensions that often arose from Protestant fears of a Jacobite descent upon Britain or Ireland. In early 1744, for instance, intelligence was received from France that Bonnie Prince Charlie had persuaded the French king to assemble an expeditionary force at Dunkirk, news that had immediate repercussions for the Catholic community in Limerick. According to the White Ms, in February of that year, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland issued a most severe proclamation against 'all the Catholick Clergy in Limerick, as well as in all parts of the Kingdome', forcing them underground. Writing of Limerick, White informs us that:

*'in this town there were two several searches made after them [priests], and for arms in all Catholicks houses ... many scandalous and Ananymous [sic] letters were dropt up and down the streets to the prejudice of Catholicks and even reports propogated that the Catholicks were to massacre all the Protestants on Easter Sunday, which occasion'd guards of Soldiers to patrole all that day about town.'*⁴

Catholics in Ireland laboured under a number of economic disabilities in the early 18th century, disabilities which were only gradually relaxed by the Irish Parliament in the latter half of the century, when the threat of a Jacobite / Catholic rebellion receded and the Protestant

Ascendancy felt more secure. For instance, up until about the 1760s, Catholic tradesmen were obliged to pay to the Protestant-controlled trade guilds and corporations a quarterly fee known as 'Quarterage' if they wished to remain in business. Those who refused to pay faced fines, closure of their shops, seizure of goods and even imprisonment in the debtors' prison. Despite paying quarterage, Catholics were not allowed to become freemen of the corporate towns and were denied all the privileges and benefits of citizenship, including the right to vote for parliamentary representatives and municipal officers. In Limerick, the physical expression of this exclusion from the civic life of the city was that Catholic tradesmen were confined outside the city walls in the Franciscan Abbey area.

Naturally, there was opposition to the imposition of this unjust tax, especially when people were sent to the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison, by city magistrates. In Cork, the resistance was particularly active and in November 1758, a number of Cork traders took a civil action in the Court of King's Bench against the Mayor of Cork for imprisoning traders for non-payment. The following year, in February 1759, the court gave judgement against the Mayor, a decision seen at the time as a significant victory by the Catholic middle classes throughout Ireland, and in the words of James White: 'This proceeding encouraged the rest of the Roman Catholick tradesmen of the Kingdom to refuse paying quarterage to their respective Corporations of their trades, and every one follow'd their callings without becoming quarter brothers, or freemen of said trades; and the like, the Catholick tradesmen have done in Limerick, many of them quitted the Abbey, and sett up their trades in the City.'⁵

There is an impression that the Penal days were a period of unrelieved gloom for Catholics, with no one being allowed to stick their noses above the gutter. However, not all Catholics were downtrodden subjects of the Crown. There was a prospering Catholic merchant class in Ireland during the 18th century which played a vital role in the country's economy. One of the main objectives of the Penal Laws was to prevent the resurgence of a Catholic landed class, but they did not hinder men of ambition from turning to trade. As evidence of this, the Rev. James White, writing in 1760, states that the trade of Limerick, both by land and sea, has up to that point in time been carried on mostly by Catholics. However, White was anxious for the future of that Catholic merchant class, as he complained bitterly that many of the city's merchants, out of avarice, were employing Protestant and Presbyterian apprentices for the sake

of the large apprentice fees, apprentices who, after serving their time, would set up businesses in competition with the Catholics. So infuriated was White with this non-sectarian attitude that he wrote, out of pique:

*I shall here insert the names of these Catholick merchants, who in opposition to all advice are guilty of these errors of taking Protestant apprentices, in order that hereafter their own children and Posterity may know them and condemn them - Viz. Mr. Stephen Roche John took one Evers who afterwards settl'd facing him in the same business; at present has one Wallis serving him. Mr. James Brown took one Wm. Harteny, who is now settled in the same business ...*⁶

and so the list goes on.

The Corrupt Corporation

Up to 1762, the Protestant-controlled Corporation of Limerick carried out a policy of billeting soldiers on Catholic houses, and also on those citizens the Corporation had taken a dislike to, without making any payment to the householder to cover the cost of food and lodging - this was despite the fact that the government allowed billeting payments to be made.⁷ A committee of enquiry appointed by the Irish Parliament to look into the corrupt practices of Limerick Corporation issued a report in December 1761 which found, among other things, that 'there has been great partiality and oppression for several years past' in quartering soldiers and officers upon the inhabitants.⁸ The committee cited as an example the following typical case:

*that Aldn. Arthur Roche, when Mayor, illegally and arbitrarily committed Patrick Sexton to gaol for refusing to pay a sum of money for the quarters of two serjeants at a time when he was only a lodger, and had but one room.*⁹

It has to be stressed, however, that Catholics were not the sole victims of the corrupt practices of the clique that ran Limerick Corporation. The 1761 Parliamentary enquiry cited above arose out of a petition signed by some 500 persons from both city and county, none of whom were Catholics, which complained bitterly of misappropriation of local taxes and public lands by members of the Corporation; the partial administration of justice by the city magistrates; vote rigging and a host of other sins and misdemeanours, including not cleaning the city streets and leaving them in a foul and dirty condition. Up to that time, the city of Limerick consisted mainly of the walled districts of Englishtown and Irishtown, and over this area the Corporation controlled the administration, trade and justice as if it were a medieval fiefdom.

Especially injurious to the prosperity and the economic development of the middle classes was the policy of the

Corporation in exacting customs and tolls at the city gates at a rate twice that which the laws allowed. Tolls were even being charged on goods that were liable for customs duties, and the tolls in the market were triple that which a parliamentary schedule allowed for.

White's Manuscript is of especial interest to local historians as he details the economic and political grievances of the oppressed citizens and tracks the political struggle that took place between them and the corrupt Corporation. Those opposed to the Corporation were known as 'The Independents' and they were enthusiastic supporters of Edmund Sexton Pery, who, in the late 1760s, proposed the establishment of a Georgian New Town on that part of his landed estate that lay to the south of the old medieval city. This involved the building of what was virtually a new city based on a grid of wide streets and blocks of terraced houses, a dream that subsequently became a reality with the building of Newtown Pery.

The attraction of this New Town for the mercantile and middle classes was that it lay outside the rapacious jurisdiction of the Corporation. Limerick's merchants and traders deserted the dirty, mean streets of the Old Town for the more spacious and healthy streets and houses of Newtown Pery.

James White died in 1768, but he lived long enough to witness and chronicle the birth of this new city, and for this the White Ms. proves a very useful source for architectural historians. One of the key dates in Limerick's architectural history is 1760, when the government formally declared that Limerick was no longer to be regarded as a fortress city, a decision that allowed the citizens to throw down the old town walls if it answered their convenience. White writes that Edmund Sexton Pery was the first to take advantage of the government's decree, for he:

*began by throwing down forty yards of the Irish town walls near the devil's battery in order to make a road from Mungrett road to his new Square [John's Square] back of St. John's Church.*¹⁰

Pery's enterprising initiative was followed by the inhabitants of St. Francis Abbey, and so much progress was made in knocking down the old medieval walls that, in 1760, White observed that

*This year the City of Limerick begins to show much better than it did hitherto, and to have a wholesomer air circulating in it, and that by means of throwing down the old walls, and opening all the avenues laiding to the city.*¹¹

Other improvements came thick and fast in the 1760s, new river-side quays were laid, roads constructed, the New Bridge was built over the Abbey River, and old Baal's Bridge was vastly improved for traffic when a row of houses on the bridge was demolished. A new Limerick was rising based on a prospering and confident

mercantile class that was benefiting significantly from the mid-18th century onwards from an expanding provisions trade with Britain. Limerick was struggling to throw off the shadow of the past, but it was to be many years later before the corrupt, malign and sectarian Corporation was finally abolished.

From this brief survey of just some of the events and political issues recorded by Fr. White, it can be seen that his Manuscript offers the student of Limerick's history a rich mine of information. As a primary source, especially for the early Georgian period, it is one of the literary treasures of Limerick. Of course, like every other historian and chronicler that ever lived, Fr. White has his biases, both witting and unwitting, and there are many aspects of Limerick's social, political and religious life that he does not throw light on. What a historian or annalist leaves out of his account is just as important and significant as what he leaves in. He was, after all, a Catholic cleric, living in a time when Catholics were facing many and various forms of discrimination. But when we take factors such as bias and editorial selection into consideration, we have, in the White manuscript, a document that illuminates a very dark period in Limerick's history.

James White holds the distinction of being Limerick's first prose historian, and in his ground-breaking footsteps have walked John Ferrar, Maurice Lenihan, Kevin Hannan and Jim Kemmy. There is no more fitting memorial to the Rev. James White than the following passage which was written into the pages of the White manuscript following the author's death in the spring of 1768:

*February the Seventh between the hours of Ten and Eleven in the forenoon died the Revd. James White the Compilor of this M.S. He was a Gentn. of a very regular conduct, punctual in his duty, curious in his researches, esteemed loyale who had the pleasure of his acquaintance, which made his death universally regretted. To him the curious are indebd. for his elegant and elaborate discription not only of this City, but of the Counties of Limerick and Clare. In a word he was a Good Priest who flattered none and did justice to all. Requiescat in pace. Amen.*¹²

REFERENCES

The page numbers are those in the copy by Maurice Lenihan, British Library Add, Ms. 31,886.

1. *White Ms.* p. 74
2. *ibid.* p. 76
3. *ibid.* p. 74
4. *ibid.* p. 113-4
5. *ibid.* p. 190
6. *ibid.* p. 169-70
7. *ibid.* p. 172
8. *ibid.* p. 174
9. *ibid.* p. 174
10. *ibid.* p. 169
11. *ibid.* p. 171
12. *ibid.* p. 193