

In Search of John Rothe Fitzpiers

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When John Rothe caused his arms and initials to be placed on the front of his new "mansion house in the city of Kilkenny" along with the date 1594 he was about forty five years of age, and had already lived through a period of significant changes in Irish affairs. The date of his birth is not known exactly, but it was within a few years of 1541, the year in which King Henry VIII put aside the title "Lord of Ireland" which his predecessors had claimed since the time of Henry II (1154—1189) and declared himself "King of Ireland," a step in the Tudor policy of strengthening the English grip upon Ireland, and a gesture intended as part of his repudiation of papal authority from which the earlier title was derived. The Tudor dynasty gave five monarchs to the English throne, and John Rothe almost certainly saw the reigns of three of them, and when he died on 31st January, 1621, the first Stuart king, James I, had only four years and two months left to reign.

DOUBLE DATE

John Rothe's memorial tablet, still to be seen at St Mary's church off High Street, gives the date of his death as 1620 not 1621, but it must be remembered that the New Style calendar published by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 was not adopted in Ireland until nearly two centuries later. At the time the inscription was carved on the tablet, the Old Style calendar was still in operation here, and according to it New Year's Day fell on 25 March. John Rothe's death, took place on January 31, that is before New Year had arrived, hence the year was reckoned as 1620, though according to the New Style, with New Year's Day on January 1, it would be 1621.

FLOWERS AND FRUITS

Troubles were many in Ireland during the greater part of John Rothe's lifetime, although, fortunately for him, his own town and surrounding district escaped the worst of them. It is probable that as a young man he was present when in 1569, at the outbreak of the Desmond revolt, Kilkenny was besieged by

an Irish army 4,500 strong, including 400 men with firearms. The town put up a resistance and the besiegers withdrew. More than twenty years later came the wars fought by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and once again Kilkenny was fortunate to be spared attack and devastation. Lord Deputy Mountjoy, on his way to encounter the Spaniards who landed at Kinsale in September 1601, spent some time in Kilkenny, having among his followers a young Secretary named Fynes Moryson, who has left this description of the town as he saw it. "Kilkenny . . . is a pleasant town, the chief of the towns withinland, memorable for the civility of the inhabitants, for the husbandman's labour and the pleasant orchards." And of the surrounding countryside he wrote, "Also I observed that the best sorts of flowers and fruit are much rarer in Ireland than in England . . . for Ireland being often troubled with rebellions . . . the inhabitants take less pleasure to till their grounds or plant trees . . . Yet is not Ireland altogether destitute of these flowers and fruits, wherewith the county of Kilkenny seems to abound more than any other part."

It may be too fanciful to suggest that Fynes Moryson, an important government official, was entertained *inside* the house of prominent local citizen John Rothe, but if he walked through Coalmarket he cannot have failed to see the *outside* of it looking much the same as it looks today. At any rate he has left us a picture of Kilkenny and vicinity when John Rothe was in his prime, peaceful and prosperous.

SPANISH AFFAIRS

Peaceful and prosperous, but precarious too, as John Rothe had reason to think when he reflected upon the errand that had brought the Lord Deputy to his town. Relations with Spain were an important element in politics all through his life. In his childhood Philip II, King of Spain, if not exactly king of England also, was at least the husband of English Queen Mary, and when in 1619 he set about drawing up his will, King James I was endeavouring to arrange a marriage between his heir Charles and one of the daughters of Philip III. In John Rothe's middle years it was not marrying or giving in marriage that occupied the attention of English and Spanish monarchs, but hostility and war. John Rothe was doubtless well aware of what went on, for he was interested in public affairs and sat as

member for Kilkenny borough in the third parliament of Elizabeth I, April 1585 to May 1586. The culmination of the struggle between England and Spain came in 1588 with the failure of the Spanish Armada, but this repulse was not seen at the time to be the conclusive defeat that it eventually proved to be, and the expectation was that at a favourable moment there would be a renewal of the attack. Such was certainly the intention of Philip II, who began preparations for a second armada, though he did not live to see it sail. His successor Philip III in September 1601 dispatched a fleet of thirty-three ships with troops, supplies and munitions to co-operate with the most formidable Irish rebellion the Tudors had experienced, and though inferior in strength to the Grand Armada, reduced in size by unfavourable winds encountered on the voyage, and less menacing than it might have been had it come a couple of years sooner when Hugh O'Neill was winning the battle of the Yellow Ford, this second expedition achieved something the Armada of 1588 had not succeeded in doing. It put a military force ashore at Kinsale and occupied the forts of Castlehaven, Baltimore and Dunboy. By December ten more ships had arrived with reinforcements in support. What did John Rothe and his fellow merchants think of these developments so dangerously close to them? There must have been anxious days if not sleepless nights in the "mansion house in Kilkenny" until the reassuring news came of the Spanish surrender in January.

VARIOUS PROPERTIES

Two inscriptions in stone are to be found in Rothe House, one on the wall above the front entrance arch, and the other on the pediment of the well in the second courtyard. Both describe John Rothe as a merchant. In the Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society for 1849 there is a description of the house, "This building exhibits a most interesting, and nearly perfect example accommodation to the opulent merchant's family, his apprentices and servants, together with storage for his goods". What kind of merchant John Rothe was is not very clear. Whatever he may have done in his earlier years, there is little to suggest that he stored goods in his house when his will was made in March, 1619. This will, a very detailed document, makes clear that his eldest son, Peter, was to inherit

but there is no mention of stock in trade, and it is specifically stated that "the great cellar under the fore street building" is to be for John Rothe's widow "to her own use". This cellar, with its separate entrance direct from the street, would be the most natural place for the storage of goods, but apparently it was put to domestic, not business, uses. John Rothe, in his later years at any rate, was an owner and lessor of land, and to judge from the descriptions a good deal of the property was land plundered from the church at the dissolution of the monasteries. A large number of properties are mentioned in the will, some being in his ownership and some held on lease, e.g. "I leave and bequeath to my wife my farm of Carrynemean, in the county of Kilkenny, during the years that are unexpired thereof, and do hope my noble good Lord, the Lord Viscount Mountgarrett, for the long love and intercourse between us, will renew the said lease to my said wife or my said heir".

He was a millowner as well as a landowner, for corn mills "within the city" are mentioned as also a "tucking mill". Tucking appears to have been a process in the finishing of cloth.

MONEY PROBLEMS

As one would expect of a wealthy man, there are many references to money in the will, and being a very methodical person John Rothe carefully specifies the kind of money intended in each case, "current money of Ireland" for some, but for the more important ones "current money of England." Well might he do so for he had seen many fluctuations of currency in his time. During most of the reign of Elizabeth I Irish money was minted in England, and Irish Shillings, known as "harpers" because they were stamped with a harp, were equivalent to ninepence in English money. But during the years of rebellion and warfare in Ireland, in an effort to keep down expenses, a debased coinage was used to pay the royal troops, which inevitably had the effect of driving out the good money and causing wild variations in prices, "for no man cared to lay it up, and all things were bought at excessive rates." After the wars had ended and conditions became more settled again, it was possible for King James I in 1605 to take away the base coin and restore silver money as before. In the meantime, severe losses had been suffered by many. As one critic put it, "without doubt it

proved a very great prejudice to the army, and whether it turned to Her Majesty's advantage or not I cannot tell. However it could not but fetch in a vast gain to the paymasters and officers of the Treasury, and perhaps it owed its contrivance to the avarice of that sort of men, which is usually very ingenious where anything is to be got." Frynes Moryson too complained on his return from Ireland, "We served there in discomfort and came home beggars." He at least could escape from the situation, but John Rothe had to stay where he was and make the best of it.

ENGLISH STANDARDS

It is one of history's little ironies that for a long time Rothe House has been associated with the activities of an organisation which would have aroused small enthusiasm in the man who built it, namely, the Gaelic League. Substantial citizens of Kilkenny in John Rothe's day were probably conversant with spoken Irish as a medium of communication essential to them in their daily affairs, but in Gaelic culture they had little interest. Their background was English, and they desired to maintain English standards of "civility" in face of what they regarded as the barbarism of the native Irish. They agreed with the Act passed under Henry VIII in 1537 aimed at promoting English speech and manners. "And be it enacted that every person or persons, the king's true subjects inhabiting this land of Ireland, of what estate condition or degree he or they be, or shall be, shall use and speak commonly the English tongue and language and shall bring up his children in such places where they shall . . . have occasion to learn the English tongue, language, order and condition." But only two years later the government embarked upon a course of action which quite frustrated the intention of the Act of 1537 and one that provides an excellent example of the contradictory policies which always bedevilled English attempts to rule in Ireland. To satisfy Henry VII's urgent need for money the religious houses were dissolved, and it was to the religious houses that people like the Rothes sent their children to be educated. How were they to preserve their Englishness if their schools were suppressed? In 1539 a petition was sent through the Lord Deputy to London, asking that some monasteries might be spared and mentioning six in particular, of which two were in the

neighbourhood of Kilkenny, namely Kells and Jerpoint. Several reasons were given in support of the appeal, among them the service to education rendered by the religious houses. "Also in (these houses) young men and children, both gentlemen's children and others, both of man-kind and woman-kind, be brought up in virtue, learning, and in the English tongue and behaviour." It was an entirely reasonable and logical request, but it met with no response; Kells and Jerpoint went the way of the other abbeys and their schools disappeared.

EDUCATION AIDS

The situation was not peculiar to Ireland; in England also the closing of the religious houses had effects on education. But in England a remedy was attempted in the next reign by the establishment of King Edward VI Grammar Schools. As usual Ireland was neglected and no government schools were set up. To meet the need for education some private schools were opened and of these one of the most successful was that established in Kilkenny by the Earl of Ormonde, taught by Peter White, a Waterford man educated at Oxford. In later years one of White's former pupils wrote of him, "He had so good a success in schooling his pupils as in good sooth I may boldly abide by it that in the realm of Ireland was no grammar school so good; in England I am assured none better." Did John Rothe attend that school? One would like to know. But at least it is clear that, wherever he acquired it, he was a man of education, and that he valued education for his family. In his will, having made careful provision for all his four sons, he goes on, "If my son Matthew shall follow his study of learning in any school or other place of literature out of the city of Kilkenny, then for his better maintenance and furtherance thereto he shall have . . ." and resources are specified on which Matthew could draw as he needed.

As well as four sons John Rothe had seven daughters, for whose advancement in ladylike accomplishments he thoughtfully provided virginals as a fashionable means of making music. The virginals (usually referred to in the plural) was a keyboard instrument like a spinet, and was so named because it was considered particularly suitable for young women. Whatever success in performance may have been achieved by any one of the Rothe daughters she did not excel to the extent of

persuading her father to leave her the virginals in his will, for he directed that it should remain where it was permanently "to serve the use and ornament of my house." Perhaps after all none of the girls was able to play it, and it was there simply as what in today's jargon is called a "status symbol."

PUBLIC HYGIENE

In the further corner of the second courtyard, right beside where the kitchen used to be and surmounted by a pediment carved with the names of John Rothe and his wife Rose Archer and the date 1604, one may see the well from which the household drew its supply of fresh water. And in the surrounding cobblestones is still plainly visible the surface drain sloping away from the well across the courtyard, through the archway and across the first courtyard, and then under the arch next the street where it comes to an abrupt end against the more modern pavement of the entrance. It was somewhere not far from this spot that the responsibility of John Rothe, private citizen, became involved with the responsibility of John Rothe, alderman of the city of Kilkenny. What manner of liquids and solids were carried by this drain? Not water from the well only. When heavy showers fell on those extensive areas of high-pitched roof, enormous quantities of rainwater must have poured into these cobbled courtyards and rushed down the outlet. John Rothe drew water from his well. From what source did his milk supply come if his family used milk? Was it brought in from farms outside the city walls, or did he keep a cow or two on the premises? With his garden or orchard beyond the kitchen block of his house he could have done it better than dwellers in other cities who sometimes kept cows in cellars or small back yards and sold milk to their neighbours. And if he kept cows, what became of the cow manure? What indeed of the whole problem of waste disposal? When the contents of John Rothe's surface drain flowed out under his front gate into Coalmarket to join drainage of other houses in the same street, and the overflow of High Street further up the slope, the company of city fathers in Kilkenny had on their hands a continuing problem of no small difficulty. Records of the period when John Rothe served on the town council are lacking, but entries in earlier records provide hints of the sort

of situations with which the municipality had to deal. At one period it was ordered that every householder must cleanse the pavement outside his own door on two specified days each week. Drastic procedure was laid down for dealing with pigs found rooting in the cemetery of St. Mary's. And citizens with no wells of their own had the unhygienic habit of washing clothes and entrails of animals in the public fountains. But whatever problems of public sanitation may have perplexed him and his municipal colleagues, John Rothe could at least thank his stars his city was Kilkenny and not Edinburgh, for there the houses were many houses high, accommodating numerous inhabitants who, lacking a better way of disposing of ordure, threw it out of their windows into the public street during the hours of darkness, and the abominable mess spread stinking over the roadway until swept up by street cleaners next day.

ARCADES

How the Kilkenny streets were surfaced in John Rothe's time is a matter for conjecture, but in the opinion of the historian Graves, their state was better than it was in the 19th century. He mentions the "mud deluged foot-ways of 1849" (the year in which he wrote). Restoration work done on Rothe House has revealed the arches of the arcade which extended along the whole front of the house, and this arcading was a feature of many other old Kilkenny houses that have disappeared. According to Graves "arcades of massive stone arches, or pent-houses of timber, ran along the streets . . . Here the merchant displayed his wares secure from the action of the weather, for then there were no shop windows; and the thrifty housewife on her shopping expeditions had no need to wade along mud-covered footways—the pent-houses and archways, made continuous by the archways in the party walls of each house, affording a covered walk."

SANITATION

While John Rothe was putting the finishing touches to his newly-built mansion, renovations were being carried out on one of the palaces of his Sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth I at Richmond, where water closets were installed in 1596. Even had he known of this new departure in sanitation, John Rothe could not have applied it in his own house in the middle of a town which lacked a system of mains drainage. The Romans understood the matters much better than their successors in Europe, and Kil-

kenny in this respect was no worse than contemporary towns. Passages in the diary of Samuel Pepys, who wrote in London a hundred years after John Rothe's time, reveal some of the horrors that could arise from an inadequate method of waste disposal in a built up area. So when the visitor to Rothe House steps casually into the outscale in the second courtyard and pulls a chain, let him reflect that he has an amenity unknown to the original occupants, and one which would have added much to their health and well-being had they enjoyed it.

Not that Rothe House can have been an unhealthy place to live in, for John Rothe and Rose Archer reared to maturity a family of eleven children; no mean achievement in a period when the highest and wealthiest households could be ravaged by diseases. They had four sons, who all grew to manhood. Their king, James I, had only two, and Henry the elder one, a youth of great promise, (the "hopeful seed" referred to by the translators when dedicating their new English version of the Bible in 1611) at the age of eighteen was carried off by typhoid, a disease usually associated with defective drainage and contaminated food. That was in the year 1612, when John Rothe's eldest son Peter was twenty-two.

ROTHE MONUMENT

It was in the same year 1612 that John Rothe erected a memorial chapel for himself and his family "between the cross church and the northern porch of St Mary's church," on a piece of ground which he had purchased from the Dean and Chapter of St Canice's cathedral, who made a condition that the chapel was to be maintained and repaired "forever" by the Rothe family. He dedicated the chapel to "the glory and honour of the most holy and individual Trinity," and willed that it should always be known as Trinity Chapel. Within this chapel was set up, after the fashion of the time, an elaborate stone monument to himself. The chapel, along with the greater part of the church itself as it existed in John Rothe's time, has disappeared, but the monument is still to be seen built into a wall not far from its original site. In his methodical way John Rothe arranged for his wife's name as well as his own to be carved on the tablet, leaving blanks in the inscription where the date of her death might be inserted when the time came. But his purpose was never carried out, and no one can say with certainty what

became of Rose Archer or where her body was laid. It is conjectured that she lived to see the historic events that occurred in Kilkenny during the years following 1641, and to share the misfortunes which later fell upon her son Peter and the house he inherited. Where and when she died is unknown, and the inscription stands incomplete today as it did when the stonecutter's chisel ceased work upon it in the early years of the 17th century.

An Amateur looks at the Ossory Tombs with Apostolic Surrounds

MARGARET M. PHELAN

The many table tombs in Ossory of the 16th and 17th Century, mostly carrying knights in armour, or a knight and his lady, or a floriated cross, are surrounded on three sides with carvings. The fourth side is against the wall and either was never decorated with sculptorings or is now invisible. These carvings sometimes take the shape of a partial surround of apostles with, at each end a crucifixion, or a coat of arms, or symbols of the Passion — or women saints may take the place of the apostles, as in the tomb in St. Canice's Cathedral of the Unknown Lady (immediately to the left of the porch as one enters on the South wall).

These notes and illustrations intend to deal solely with the apostolic surrounds, their occurrence in Ossory, their possible maker, their symbols.

INCIDENCE

First for their incidence. They occur in St. Canice's, St. Mary's, St John's, Gowran, Jerpoint, and Kilcooley. The greatest number (8) occur in St. Canice's Cathedral where they surround the following tombs.

- (1) James Shortall of Ballylarkin A.D. 1507.
- (2) Pierce 8th Earl of Ormond and his Countess A.D. 1539.
- (3) James Butler, 9th Earl of Ormond, who was poisoned—
1549 — uninscribed, exactly similar to effigy to 8th Earl.