

Dr. Richard Pococke's Travels in Ireland, England and Wales.

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Dr. Richard Pococke, Bishop of Ossory and later Bishop of Meath, was a great, indeed a perpetual traveller. The extent of his journeying in the first half of the 18th century is almost beyond belief. Yet he has written about it all: Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales were as home to him and so deeply was he imbued with the spirit of the East, a contemporary, one Richard Cumberland, suggested that there "was something in his carriage and deportment of the Arab character." Cumberland saw him in Daventry and wrote: "I saw from the inn a cavalcade of horsemen approaching at a gentle trot, headed by an elderly chief in clerical attire, followed by five servants at distances geometrically measured and most precisely maintained. He was conducting his horde with the phlegmatic patience of a sheik."

How such perfection could be maintained in Ireland at that time remains a mystery, but the bishop had plenty of chance to train his men in his ways as he led them from Balbec to Vesuvius, from Mount Ida to Chamonix where a boulder commemorated him as a pioneer of Alpine travel. On his way everywhere, he saw everything and wrote everything down. He is the true representative of the liberal education and philosophy so admired in that epoch of Dryden and Swift, Pope and Johnson. He used all his senses eyes, ears, taste, touch, smell and commonsense, which in his situation was another name for curiosity, essential for a traveller in an unknown land. He wrote about fish, fossils, shells, eagles, seals, precious stones, Roman mosaics, mines, hospitals, schools, alms-houses, statues, cathedrals, museum pieces, libraries, patterns, penances, ruins, tombs, castles, fables, prices, markets, commodities, language, people, and above all, what he calls Improvements, which were vast gardens, found mainly in England, for only there was the money available for their creation.

Dr. Pococke's letters now provide a cornucopia of information about his times, especially his informed personal thoughts, attitudes and re-actions to the problems, realities and myths he lived with.

Roads were his life-lines. He rarely complained about them, accepting all conditions equably, like the occasion he begged a miller for a door to get his horses over a morass. None was available, so he made do with a "piece of oxes skin". He was amused in Co. Down when he was told "that the hills were all level". Donegal had such splendid roads that he described their upkeep in detail: "A measure of land is allotted yearly to each house according to the value of the land. They are twenty-one feet broad with on each side a margin of green turf. They lay a coat of broken quarry stone, then earth, then gravel on top. These roads considering the cheapness of carriage in little truckles drawn by one horse almost answer the end of water carriage for they will draw a hogshead of wine up to 600 pounds in weight and one man will attend to three or four of them."

Wexford, the cheapest county also had "exceedingly good roads". Cork had some so good "Mrs. Oliver could drive around in her chariot and six". But the most unusual method of transport was "the curragh with the woman aboard. She paddled it at the head and when a puff of wind came she held up her gown for a sail".

The problems of accommodation added to the adventures. He rarely complained but usually commented. Limerick was "a disagreeable and dirty place. It didn't boast one good inn". Cardiff's "Red House was very fine. It was built by an ancestor of the Matthews family of Thomastown, Ireland and had some fine old wainscoting and furniture". The inn at Carlingford "was tolerable but the bed-chamber being within the kitchen in the morning the pigs made my levee".

Sometimes he found no inn on the road. Then he took what luck offered, as in Co. Kerry where Mr. Crosby invited them to his house, "which was a very reasonable piece of hospitality, the sun being near sett, and though called but six miles it was ten long miles to Tralee."

In the English letters there rarely is reference to lodgings or food but in Ireland, because conditions were generally so different, there is much report on these domestic problems. Despite the all-prevailing poverty, food was generously provided . . . oat-cakes baked on a griddle, potatoes and buttermilk. Once he saw his hosts "boiling a goat but they industriously concealed it from me and I suppose it was not very good." Near Lough Conn he stayed in a "cabbin" where there was clean straw and

blankets and where his host tried to protect him from the all-encircling smoke. His local guide “took a scallop shell . . . such as is used in the Red Sea area . . . and served a dram in it”.

Dr. Poocke felt strongly about “how abused these poor wretches were by those who imposed on them”. One family were amazed when he distributed his bread and meat among them and gave them “a piece of money when he left”. The houses also horrified him; mud hovels with two doors, the one away from the wind left open as the only source of light. “Yet often these unfortunates had to flee with their effects when the collector of the hearth money approached”.

On the other hand sometimes he was very lucky. The menu supreme of “the Milesian feast” eaten in the Kingdom of Kerry was detailed: “a dram offered before dinner, bacon and fowls and cabbage, roasted turkey, a lyon of mutton boiled, a boyled cod and pease, lobsters and two dishes of potatoes, a dish of stewed apples, all followed by a large dish of punch and wines”. For breakfast they had the left-overs: “minced turkey, fried mutton, boiled salmon, boiled eggs and a dram.” No doubt he was then ready for the road, any road.

There is elsewhere a delightful account of an impromptu picnic. When dining by a river bank he was joined by some poor people. “I bless I had to feed them”, he remarked. An Irish grace was said before his guests would touch the meal. He made a valiant effort to write it phonetically, because the Irish language was another of his manifold interests, but he also included this most enlightening translation: “God blessed the five loaves and two fishes and divided them among five thousand. May the blessing of the Great King who made His distribution descend on us and on our provisions”. On another occasion he and his “horde” met “a caravan of about seventeen horses . . . I shared my bread and liquor among them, and to the two or three protestants my meat also”. Nice touch.

Curiosity led him to attend a wake where he found the corpse of an old man stretched on the floor. “About three feet above was a board covered with a white cloth on which were candles”. Women “sat around and were entertained with s spirit of barley called whiskey, with tobacco and with bread and cake”.

He was often highly critical of local mores and especially deplored the prevalence of drink. Whiskey, “usquebaugh the general name for spirits as Arraki in the East,” he found was

made from barley and water pressed from potatoes boiled to a mash which they ferment with barme. It has tended very much to debauch and corrupt the common people”.

He does not seem to have been very interested in people, common or otherwise. When he referred to human beings it was usually because they were connected with things. A few, however, were high-lighted. In Co. Donegal he went to “Sir James Calwell’s house. This gentleman has spent most of his time abroad, was aid de camp in the Austrian service to General Odonnell whose father dined with us yesterday and they say is head of that family descended from the Earl of Tyrconnell who though he has only leases yet he is the head of the Roman catholics in this country and has a great interest and is a sensible man well vested in Irish history and it is said that being agreeable to the Empress was made a Count of the Empire which title he does not take upon him”.

Lord Trimleston gets a whole page. “He married young and retired to Paris where his genius leading him to Botany he studied Physick and often gave his advice to the Princes of the Blood. On the death of his father he returned and brought a great collection of exotic plants, among them a cinnamon tree and the Hermaphrodite which has on it the leaves of Orange, Lemon, Citrus and Cedra and each fruit contains in it the fruit of these four kinds. His skill as a physician became known, so he allotted Fridays to hear them all. He not only hears the poor but gives them drugs. He puts a box out for the rich. A nobleman of excellent sense”.

With his background, education, reputation and connections Dr. Pocke could visit and be a guest in the vast aristocrats’ houses, those now of the long queues in England and Wales. Longleat pleased him with its “grand appearance”, the result of fifteen years a-building. Hampton Court had “two grand suites of Dantzic oak, part of the improvement of King William” all being hung with pictures of great persons by Versomner, Vandyke, Lilly and cartoons by Raphael. Knole “was an exceedingly good house in the King’s bed-chamber the moveables were all silver in the gallery pictures of most of the family from Elizabeth’s time in the best hands in the garden they were making a nonagon building, to be a kind of cottage where poultry of all sorts are to be kept in which the Dutchess

delights". Foreshadowing Le Petit Trianon?

A Vanburgh designed house cost £200,000 of which £20,000 was spent on carriage of materials. The owner-builder had "amassed his wealth as paymaster to the Navy in Queen Anne's time". Wentworth Castle lawn reminded him of the Piazza del Popolo in Rome. The library had a valuable collection of books . . . which he investigated all one downpour of a day . . . and an orrery, globes, reflecting telescope, "indeed everything that is curious relating to astronomy and geography", and a Shepherd's Block "which was a block of yew used as a contrivance for an almanack before printing". The Duke of Norfolk had some of the best of Kneller's performances over the chimney". He also owned "an exquisite needlework of the Queen of Scots in which the drawing and shading are fine but the colours faint. It is the story of Bathsheba who is in the likeness of the Queen herself, the two maids, they say, represent her two women, and there is a black".

Of course, such magnificence and treasures were not often to be found in Ireland, but "Lady Allen's seat near Stillorgan had a park in which a fine obelisk was erected on four arches of rustic grotesque arches in the manner of the Piazza Navona in Rome but much larger". Curraghmore was a "grand house" and Lady Tyrone was making "a grotto from a profusion of shells and corals". Donegal town had an old castle "improved into a good house with a very well designed chimney piece in the style of Inigo Jones". Of Tintern "turned into a mansion by the Cocloughs" he commented he had never seen such an instance before. And we won't see it again.

In addition to his descriptions of mansions there are his opinions on towns. He noted "the fine carved windows, door-cases and chimney pieces" of Galway, a place "formerly inhabited by the Hollerns Fishermen till one Lynch in 1280 got a grant from Edward II and built two castles, one against the Flakerts of Cunnemarach . . . the Lynches have a chapel in which they bury. In the vestry on three large stones are cut as big as human life Our Saviour, the Virgin Mary to the right, and to the right of that God the Father and over his head the Dove. They were dug up somewhere about the church".

Cashel was "a poor town" but it had "that curious old chapel which is arched over and adorned with many little pillars like the buildings about the time of William the Conqueror". Cork "was pleasant but its streets narrow and dirty which makes chairs of

great use here. . . The Jayle is a noble building, all rustic and of the Tuscan order more like a palace than a jail". How much did the inmates appreciate this? He found Belfast "a considerable town of trade, the estate of the Earl of Donegal and the people very uneasy that they cannot get new leases to build all of them being near expiring for the estate is entailed and the Lord is in a state on infancy The town consists of one long broad street and of several lanes in which the inferior people live. The richer people with a number of others are of the new light Presbyterians, the rest of the old light and Papists. The new light are looked on as Arians; and these two lights have a greater aversion to each other than they have to the Church". Plus ça change

Derry is dealt with in a really extraordinary way, especially the description of the siege, a bare sixty years earlier. The Companies got "the estate on condition that they should fortifie it There is a foot-barracks in the town for a Regiment and a Magazine for powder and an arsenal for their old Cannon. They bombarded and played the cannon on the town and it is said that when they began to bother the town the besieged sent to 'em not to hurt the town as the gates were open for them to come in and it is said that a Colonel of a Regiment offering his services to try if he could enter the gates they having notice of it planted cannon one over another, gave them a terrible fire, salleyed out and cut the whole regiment to pieces. Below the town at the mouth of the river a chain was drawn to prevent relief coming to them, but a ship went against it under full sail, broke the chain and brought provisions when they were in great distress. The govenor has a salary of £600 a year".

He loved Killarney "and all that Lord Kenmary had done in about five years". This included building a tower and steeple to the church, a market house, roads at his own expense allotting the profits of the salmon fishery to public works. He encouraged his tenants to build three or four streets by giving them long leases, he had "a variety of boats to attend all strangers and what is more extraordinary he has raised such a town without any manufacture In a word he is a pattern for a most noble public spirit conducted by an excellent understanding and an unprejudiced judgement".

Kilkenny . . . and this, years before he came to live here . . . was high in his estimation . . . “most pleasantly situated on the banks of the Nore, the Castle a noble house with a grand Corinthian gate. It was finely furnished and the furniture was bought by one Hackett, a Creature of the family, who when he came to take down the hangings and tapestry found a second set under them which no one knew of, the others being as ‘tis supposed put up in haste”. But in case we now get big-headed from his praise he commented that “fire without smoke is no great benefit as the coal is so full of sulphur people who are not used to it cannot bear it in a room but it makes an excellent kitchen fire”.

A churchman and a scholar he was also a practical man interested in value, in prices, in L.S.D. Markets and their wares fascinated him. “At Mullet there was an oyster bed. They pick ‘em, they pickle ‘em and send them to Dublin, one penny per hundred, four pennies for the load of a horse”. Dungarvan, famous even then for its potatoes, sent a different cargo to Spain . . . the yolks of eggs boiled hard and salted. At a salmon fishery near Coleraine some days over 2,500 fish were caught, some up to 50 lbs. weight, selling at a penny per pound. Waterford, which had the finest quay in Europe except for Messina in Sicily, exported to Cadiz, Holland and England, butter, herrings, coarse “linnen”, woollen yarn and hides. Newport, Co. Mayo “had a good market for frieze, yarn, stockings, different sorts of corn and provisions, beef 1d per pound, mutton 5 farthings, chickens pence a piece, fat goose 6 pence, good French wine £16 a hogshead”. Galway had “a good trade in Spanish wines which they drank and above all to America till the Act was passed which obliged all ships from America to touch England first”.

All of us here know that Dr. Pococke’s greatest memorial in Kilkenny was the school bearing his name. This was founded after his death, completely endowed from his personal estate as stated in his will. Its function and purpose was to educate teenage boys in linen-weaving. With this in mind on his travels he always visited schools as he also investigated alms houses, hospitals and cloth-making factories. He was familiar with the technical names of various cloths . . . “tamies, camblets, shags, calimanancoes, worsted, druggets, linsey-woolsey, Salisbury whites”. Among the list of schools inspected by him were “Rapho”, Kilkenny, Manor Cunningham and Strangford. The

Earl of Limerick had grant-aided Dundalk's where "the girls were employed in spinning for the Cambrick manufacture. The flax was brought ready scutched and hackled from France. The work was done underground, the fresh air shut out in order to keep the yarn damp. This material was not exported as the ladies said they could not afford to wear it because it did not last as long as the French. Yet the most discerning cannot distinguish the best from the French Working in this close manner is unwholesome and occasions the Itch and the Scurvy". There were also forty boys in this Dundalk school. "I saw of them as could be got together and gave them a small present and a word of Exhortation".

As with almost everything in Kilkenny he gave his whole-hearted approval to the school. It had an endowment of £120 a year, a house and pleasant meadows along the river. "It is the only one in Ireland that has some face of a public school. But the prices are risen so high it is feared it will fall in its credit". A still topical comment. What fees were charged in this type of school may be deduced from a Preparatory school connected with the famous Blue Coat School in London. Boys aged seven to eleven boarded at 2/6 a week. Yet near Winchester the headmaster had £700 a year. Curriculum followed at Heath Academy, founded 1740, included "everything for education except riding, viz. Latin, Greek, Experimental Philosophy, French, Dancing, Fencing. Boarding costs 10 gns a year and they pay for what they learn".

Social conditions interested him, pleased him when they were good but did not disturb him or indeed arouse his indignation when they were horrific, as we would see them now. He found Greenwich Hospital "a delightful place" where the inmates were well treated, "yet the confinement is irksome to persons who have been used to rove around the world". A very personal reaction. Quite different was the situation at a tin mine where men worked eight hour shifts. "When they come up they call it coming up to grass. Women and children are employed in breaking it and separating the country from the ore, the tin from the copper". At Dunmanaway where the manufacture of cloth was started in 1746, by 1752 there were 60 looms and he found it "a most agreeable sight to see children employed in reeling even from four years old". In fact he deplored idleness and accepted no excuse for the bad habit, but hinted that some of it anyway was the result of over generous monastic hospitality before the

dissolution of the monasteries. After a splendid, detailed description of Glastonbury he summed up: “With regards to civil policy it is much better the poor should earn their bread by labour than be maintained by idleness as well as by encouragements to pilgrimages which diverted people from their business”. And the same moral vein caustically oozed out of a comment on misericords or as he called them “seats that turned up”. There was a vine under the abbot’s. Under what was probably the prior’s “there was a relief of a hairy man lying along with a great club, his right hand up to his chin, a woman before him and the words ‘Pensez moi et ples Po my’ . . . the only possible interpretation being, ‘Think much in order to please’. These last two seem to imply that the prior or deputy was to have the care of everything while the abbot had nothing to do but be merry These drole conceits show the low taste of the times”.

There are two memorial slabs to Dr. Pococke in St. Canice’s Cathedral. One refers to his life and labours, the second is the list of subscriptions to his renovation fund. The great church devastated by Cromwell was only gradually rehabilitated and the first serious restoration was attempted by Dr. Pococke, who as early as 1752, four years before his installation, reported that it was looked upon as the best in Ireland. A passionate devotee of the Gothic, he employed Mr. Sanderson Miller of Kyneton as architect and the work was undertaken from a model carried to Mr. Miller who never set foot in Kilkenny. However the Bishop had very definite views about what he wanted because he was an enthusiastic and critical pilgrim at all the great shrines in England. He found Gloucester Cathedral “an exquisite fine light Gothic building . . . where the East window is grand and beautiful beyond description”; Wells “improved by Bishop Jocelyn . . . a magnificent fabrick . . . excellent masonry . . . in good Gothick taste”; Canterbury “the glory of Austin”; Hereford “where they have practised Gothic windows within the Saxon frames”.

Yet while the grandeur of these man-made shrines appealed to him as did the vast ornate statue-studded “improvements” or gardens he studied mainly outside Ireland, he could also appreciate the poignancy of the worshippers near Dunfanaghy one morning about whom he wrote: “I observed a circumstance which added to the Romantic view of the mountains to the south.

In the side of one of them a sort of Ampitheatre is formed in the rock; here I saw several hundred people spread all over the plain spot and the priest celebrating Mass under a rock on an altar made of loose stones, and though it was half a mile distant I observed his Pontifical vestment with a black cross on it, for in all this country for sixty miles west and south as far as Connacht they celebrated in the open air, in the fields or in the mountains, the Papists being so few and poor that they will not be at the expense of a public building". In that age, with the vicious vigour of the Penal Laws just tapering off, it is interesting to note his explanation for the outdoor celebration. Equally of note is his calm re-action . . . no immediate message to the Red Coats.

This is a mere ruffling of the pages of Dr. Pocock's papers. Yet it shows Pocock, the enigma, Poccocke of the contrasts, typical of the period and at the same time most untypical. Here is the traveller in the Grand Tour tradition disturbing the dust of Balbec and buildings of classical dimensions, ancient and Renaissance. Yet he also thought it right to mention "Monei Rialta, the starry bog because the water appears on a moonshiney night like stars". He appreciated clean straw in a cabin" as he did "tables of Sicilian marble and Fineered Iallo of Siena". He loved the grandeur of Glastonbury in ruins but dwelt in detail on "the relief of a woman milking a cow, a pair of scales, the devil with his foot in one and an angel by the other". He is typical of his time in his reasonableness. There is just plain statement, usually without comment, and certainly none of Swift's fierce indignation. In that great period of Augustan prose in England, the balance of Dryden, the epigram of Pope, there is very plebian writing, few paragraphs, indeed, few marks of punctuation, perhaps because he has so much to say about everything, God made and man made, from "Gallerus, the curious building . . . (which) seems not to have been built on a centre but probably a frame inside out", to Round Towers the height of one being measured by the length of its shadow, to the church at Launcestown where on each "sille" there were little figures playing musical instruments. Was he gullible? He described what happened at Omeles well where a female child was dipped in the water and became a male. A bit uncertain what to believe in the teeth of positive local superstition he concluded it "might have been some trick concerning an estate". He was no historian. Among his gaffes: "The Castle at Chepstow

belonged to the Earls of Pembroke, the last of whom was Richard Strongbow who conquered Ireland . . . Strongbow came in two ships, one called Bag, the other Bun”. However these errors are forgotten in the pot-pourri he presented of his manifold interests . . . the impulse purchase of the head of Julius Caesar, the love of antique jewellery, his knowledge of fossils like *Siliquastra*, of plants like *Caryophilata Montana Purpurea* and those removed from a shipwreck and kept alive for years by “grafting”, his study of the tides at Poole, the lifting of a “man o’ war recently sunk”, his treatise on mining, his curiosity about the fare to Lisbon . . . “£4 paid to the Post Office, and the common price paid to the captain for accommodations 4 or 5 moidores”. Possibly technical terms are spelled correctly, but one of his most endearing qualities is the variety of spelling in that day just before Samuel Johnson, himself a traveller in a minor sort of a way, published the famous Dictionary.

Mrs. Delaney, doyen of the Dublin Blue-Stocking Society, dubbed Dr. Pococke a very dull man. Pococke? DULL? NEVER!!

SOURCES

Dr. Pococke’s Journey into England from Dublin 1750.

Pococke’s Tour in Ireland 1752.

The Travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke.

The spelling in the quotations may look extremely odd but it is taken accurately from the texts, two from The Camden Society, and the 1752 Tour published by Hodges Figgis.