

IN SEARCH OF THOMAS SMYTH, MAYOR OF LIMERICK

By

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Introduction

Georgian Limerick was dominated by two families, the Perys and the Smyths. It is the Pery family that now holds the title of Earl of Limerick. The Perys oversaw the development of the area of Limerick called Newton Pery and because of this their name remains familiar to today's inhabitants of the city.

The Smyths' legacy, on the other hand, is not so easy to track down, even though they were once the largest property owners in the part of Limerick known as English Town, where King John's castle and the Church of Ireland cathedral stand. In April 2009 I visited Limerick in search of information about one particular member of that family, Thomas Smyth. As I shall explain below, Thomas may have been my great-great-great-great-grandfather. Before we look at his public and private lives, let us first examine his family's legacy as one of the most powerful families in eighteenth-century Limerick.

The Smyths of Limerick

Thomas was born in 1740 to Charles Smyth and Elizabeth Prendergast. He had three elder sisters (Juliana, Dorothea and Elizabeth) and two younger brothers (John and Charles Lennox). All three sons were involved in Limerick politics. They were the third of three generations of Smyths with important public roles in the city. The first was that of their grandfather, Bishop Thomas Smyth. This concentration of power in just one family was made possible by the political and social situation of the day. The Corrupt Corporation, as the town's representatives were dubbed, used their money and influence to see that power was kept in the hands of a small minority. In the late eighteenth-century only freemen of the city aged over 21 held the right to vote, but as freemen were appointed by the corporation and were often friends who did not necessarily live in Limerick, the electorate was far from representative of the local population. The votes and the power belonged exclusively to members of the Protestant Ascendancy. A single example, reminiscent of the rotten boroughs of England, will show the extent of this nepotistic hold on power: Limerick City was continuously represented in the Irish House of Commons by at least one member of the Smyth family from 1731 to 1797.

The Smyth dynasty in Limerick was founded by Rt Rev Thomas Smyth, who was Bishop of Limerick from 1695 to 1725. He was born in 1650 to William Smyth (of Dundrum, Co. Down) and Mary Dowdall. The family had its roots in Stainton in County Durham, England, but had settled at Rossdale Abbey in Yorkshire in the 1500s. It was Bishop Smyth's grandfather, another William Smyth, who settled the family in Ireland in about 1630.

Bishop Smyth studied at Trinity College, Dublin, and was elected a fellow in 1679. He remained at the college until the outbreak of the Williamite War. He then fled to London, where he was curate to Dr. Thomas Tenison at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Tenison, who later became Archbishop of Canterbury, was impressed with Smyth's strong Protestant views and later spoke highly of him to Queen Mary.

Before long Smyth returned to Ireland and rose rapidly through the ecclesiastical ranks to the position of bishop. In 1693 he became Dean of Emly and two years later, on the recommendation of Queen Mary, he was appointed Bishop of Limerick. He was enthroned in St. Mary's Cathedral in 1696 and remained in Limerick until his death in 1725.

Bishop Smyth played an active role in public affairs, both in Limerick, where he set up a number of schools to promote Protestant teaching, and in the Irish House of Lords. He was a fierce critic of the Treaty of Limerick. He voted against it because, in his opinion, the changes made to it by the House of Commons resulted in a text that no longer represented the original treaty signed by King William III. The treaty was nevertheless ratified and under its terms the king granted £1,000 for repairs to St Mary's Cathedral, which had suffered considerable damage during the 1691 siege of Limerick.

Thomas Smyth married Dorothea, daughter of Rt. Rev. Ulysses Burgh, his predecessor at Emly, and together they had ten sons and two daughters. Unsurprisingly, their father's powerful position, especially at a time when religion was not a private matter but a political issue, helped many of the sons to obtain the best jobs. Some remained in their native Limerick and joined the small club of ruling elites: George was Recorder of Limerick and a Baron of Exchequer; James was Sheriff of Limerick in 1741 and Mayor in 1751; Charles, as will be discussed below, was Mayor of Limerick and one of the city's two MPs; Edward, a physician, paid for the construction of an asylum for the mentally ill at the House of Industry on North Strand, Limerick. Others went further afield and pursued careers in the army, the navy and the Church of Ireland. Arthur, for example, became Archbishop of Dublin and was buried in St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Bishop Smyth died on 4 May 1725 and was buried alongside his wife at St. Munchin's Church, Limerick. His final resting place is commemorated with an elaborate memorial, erected at a cost of almost £150 on the south wall of the chancel. The family had a long connection with this church. Additions and repairs were made in 1711 under Bishop Smyth and further improvements were undertaken by his family in 1752. Although Smyth's work in Limerick would have promoted only Protestant interests rather than furthering social cohesion among the city's communities, he was nevertheless

remembered as a “liberal benefactor to the poor”. In his will he left £600 for the poor of Limerick.

Of Thomas’s sons who remained in Limerick, Charles (1693-1784) undoubtedly had the most distinguished career. His marriage into the wealthy Prendergast family of Gort, Co. Galway, which had close links with a number of prominent Ascendancy families¹, enabled him to further consolidate his position as one of the city’s most influential men. He dominated Limerick politics for almost half a century. After being elected to the city's corporation in 1727, he became Mayor in 1732 and also served as Justice of the Peace and Governor of Limerick Hospital. Most importantly, though, Charles was one of the city's two MPs for a remarkable 45 years. In the political environment of the day, candidates relied heavily on support from the city’s guilds. To be guaranteed success, Charles joined both the Society of Victuallers and the Cordwainers’ Society. These two guilds held a great deal of power in Limerick and Charles was duly elected in 1731.

Having made friends with the right people, Charles no doubt saw to it that the guild members were always happy so that his re-election was a mere formality.

Thomas Smyth, Mayor of Limerick

Charles represented Limerick City until 1776, when he retired in favour of his eldest son Thomas. This was a busy year for Thomas. Not only did he become an MP, but he was also Chamberlain and Mayor, and formed a militia regiment called the Limerick Union, of which he was Colonel. Thomas was no stranger to politics. It was, after all, in his blood. He had already served as Mayor of Limerick in 1764 and, given his father's almost monopolistic role in the city's affairs, he no doubt grew up with a very acute awareness of how to conduct business. It appears he was made a freeman of the city in 1747 at the very early age of seven.

Thomas Smyth is said to have been very fond of his native city and a popular Mayor and MP. He was generous and public spirited and encouraged festivals that helped the city to prosper economically.

He was also responsible for clearing up the corporation's debts and reducing the mayor's salary from about £800 or £900 a year to £365 (he obviously had enough money of his own). These savings and other cuts enabled the construction of new buildings such as the Exchange, the first stone of which Thomas laid in 1777.

A huge civic jubilee was held to mark the end of Thomas's second and last year as mayor, with celebrations being held over five days in August 1777. The jubilee included a fancy dress ball to mark the Prince of Wales's birthday, which was attended by the elites of Counties Limerick, Tipperary, Clare and Kerry – many of whom were probably Thomas's

¹ Charles's wife, Elizabeth, was the rich young widow of Sir John Dickson Haman, and daughter of Brigadier-General Sir Thomas Prendergast, 1st Baronet. Her mother, Penelope, was the sister of William, 1st Earl Cadogan, and granddaughter of General Sir Hardress Waller. Waller was one of the regicides who signed King Charles I's death warrant in 1649; he later played a leading role in the 1651 siege of Limerick following Cromwell's bloody invasion of Ireland and also served as Governor of the city.

electorate. There was also a play at the Old Theatre, a “Venetian breakfast”, a regatta, an oratorio at St. Mary's Cathedral, a ball at the Assembly Rooms, and a concert of vocal and instrumental music. All this was probably enough to ensure that Thomas's friends and voters remained loyal for years to come.

Thomas continued to represent Limerick until 1785. In January of that year, suffering from a “lingering illness”, he sailed for Lisbon where he hoped to recover his health in a warmer climate. However, a storm forced the boat to dock at Bordeaux and it was there that Thomas died on 14 January 1785. He had expressed a desire to be buried in the family vault at St. Munchin's Church, Limerick, and this wish was carried out on 7 April.

The End of the Smyth Era

After Thomas's death the Smyths' influence in Limerick continued for only a few more years. His younger brother John succeeded him as MP, serving until 1797. John had changed his surname to Prendergast in 1760 when his maternal uncle Sir Thomas Prendergast, 2nd Baronet, died without issue, bequeathing him the Prendergast estates at Gort. Now, with his father and two brothers dead, John, as head of the Smyth family, changed his name again, this time to John Prendergast Smyth.

In 1816 he became 1st Viscount Gort and the following year died unmarried with debts of around £60,000. With him the Smyths' influence came to an end. The viscountcy was inherited by his nephew, Charles Vereker, the son of his sister Juliana, whose descendants still hold the title today.

Behind the Scenes: Thomas Smyth's Private Life

It is officially recorded that Thomas Smyth died unmarried without issue, but he may in fact have been the father of four illegitimate children – Eliza, Thomas, Charles and John. There have been several rumours over the years that suggest this; some have found their way into print and others have been passed down orally and in letters by those who may be his descendants.

I am one of those possible descendants, and this is why I visited Limerick earlier this year, to try to find out more about the private life of Thomas Smyth. Unfortunately my search was unsuccessful.

What complicates matters is the fact that Thomas's alleged children were not called Smyth, but Stuart. My great-great-great-grandfather Thomas Stuart, who lived at Lifford House, Co. Limerick, and Whitehall, Co. Clare, in the early nineteenth century, is supposedly one of his children. It has been relatively easy to trace my Stuart line back to Thomas Stuart, but confirming the rumours that he was Thomas Smyth's son has so far been impossible.

It would be too complicated to explain all the existing rumours in detail. Some have been published in biographies of Charles Stuart²; some are contained in family letters or have been passed down orally. Others suggest different circumstances, and were perhaps made in order to cover up the illegitimacy, which would no doubt have embarrassed Victorians who sought respectability for their family. One family letter claims that Thomas Smyth was in fact legally married (but if this were true, why were his children called Stuart and not Smyth?). I have even read a late nineteenth-century obituary claiming that the Stuarts were “lineal descendants” of King Charles II (descent from a royal bastard was obviously not frowned upon by respectable Victorians).

The rumour I am most likely to believe is one that is perhaps the hardest to prove, namely that Stuart was the surname of a woman Thomas Smyth knew in the 1750s and 1760s and who was the mother of his four children. This Miss (or Mrs) Stuart may or may not have lived in Limerick. The fact that all four children bore the name Stuart would imply that Thomas remained with this woman for a long time and that it was not a simple affair. Unfortunately my research has so far been unable to shed any light on Thomas’s private life, but it must not be forgotten that members of the eighteenth-century ruling classes often had (and in some case were expected to have) mistresses. After all, at this very time, King George III’s many sons were perfectly content living unmarried with their mistresses instead of producing heirs to the throne.

Conclusions

The appointment of Thomas Smyth as Bishop of Limerick in 1695 marked the beginning of a century during which he and his descendants dominated public life in the city. Through marriage the Smyths obtained wealth and useful connections, and the political and social situation of the day enabled them to consolidate their position of power. Many of the bishop’s sons had prominent roles in Limerick. In particular Charles represented the city in Parliament for 45 years until two of his sons – first Thomas, then John – succeeded him. Their deaths marked the end of a century of power and influence for the Smyths.

Although official sources indicate that Thomas Smyth died without issue, rumours suggest otherwise. Was he in fact the father of four illegitimate children? Did this cause a scandal in his family and was it the reason that his younger brother John inherited the estates of their uncle Sir Thomas Prendergast, 2nd Baronet, instead of him? But if it did cause a scandal, why did it not stop Thomas from being successfully elected Mayor and MP?

These questions may unfortunately never be answered, but I would like to make an appeal to any readers who may know of the whereabouts of private papers or letters relating to Thomas Smyth and his alleged children. I would be very grateful if you would be willing to contact me.

² Charles Stuart was born in 1757 or 1758 and went to India as a teenager. He rose through the ranks of the Indian Army, eventually becoming a major-general. When he died in Calcutta in 1828 he was generally known as “Hindoo Stuart”, as he had adopted a number of Hindu customs such as bathing in the Ganges and having his food blessed by Brahmins. He also wrote pamphlets encouraging European ladies in India to wear the sari, and collected Indian statues. His collection of statues can now be seen in the British Museum, where it is known as the Bridge Collection.

I would like to finish by thanking everyone who gave me help and advice during my trip to Limerick, especially the Limerick Civic Trust, the Limerick City Museum and St. Mary's Cathedral.

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