

A CHOROGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE SOUTHERN PART OF
THE COUNTY OF WEXFORD, WRITTEN ANNO 1684: BY
ROBERT LEIGH, ESQ., OF ROSEGARLAND, IN THAT
COUNTY.

EDITED BY HERBERT F. HORE, ESQ.

WHEN the philosophic and industrious Sir William Petty was engaged in preparing his folio atlas of Ireland, it occurred to him to procure chorographic treatises on the several counties of the kingdom, and he accordingly entreated various gentlemen, who by capacity and local knowledge were qualified for the task, to furnish him with accounts of the districts in which they resided. The great geographer's requests received numerous responses, as appears by the results, most of which were to be seen, about twenty years since, in MS., on the shelves of the late Mr. Thorpe, the well-known London bibliopole. The science of Archæology was not sufficiently popular in the days of the author of the Down Survey to warrant the publication of these, now old and valuable, contributions to the topography of our country. The then new race of gentry had no associations with the past of Ireland. Veteran colonels and captains, who had officered the iron-sided battalions of the Republic, and had been rewarded for storming Irish castles and walled towns by grants of the estates of the reculant defenders, did not sympathize with the ancient glories of the Gael, nor care for architectural remains, which, for the most part, had been battered into ruins by Commonwealth cannon. It was not until Vallancey published Sir Henry Piers' useful, however discursive, tract on Westmeath, that any one of the MSS. under consideration was rendered serviceable by the instrumentality of printers' ink; and not until our own day did a second treatise of similar origin, the excellent account of West Connaught, receive publicity, by means of the Irish Archæological Society. The space, in these our *fasciculi*, is necessarily broken and contracted; it is therefore intended, for the present, only to publish one of the three MS. collections made for Sir William Petty, relative to the county of Wexford. At the same time, as it may be interesting to know somewhat of the antecedents of Mr. Leigh, the writer of it, we prefix the ensuing notices of his ancestor, John Lye, who filled the post of Interpreter of the Irish tongue to Queen Elizabeth's government in Ireland.

John Lye, as Interpreter to the State, an important functionary during the disturbed reign of Elizabeth, is frequently noticed in

our public records and correspondence; and his services obtained rewards which, conjointly with services loyally rendered by one of his descendants to Charles II., placed his posterity high among our landed gentry. His extraction is a curious archæologic question. He was, of course, conversant with the Irish and English languages. He appears to have been one of the few remarkable men of the native race of that period, who became singled out from the general disaffection to the English Crown, and who, serving the Government by their talents and loyalty, rose to power and honours, and founded wealthy and noble families. Of such distinguished men we may mention Sir Patrick Fox, also Interpreter and Intelligencer to the State, ancestor of Fox of Fox Hall; William O'Duinn, who exercised the same office, and was, probably, progenitor of the family of Doyne; and Patrick Mac-an-Crossan, who, as Sir Patrick Crosbie, founded the extinct house of the Earls of Glandore.¹

The Mac Laighid, or O'Lees, were hereditary physicians in West Connaught. One of them, Morogh "O'Lye," as he signed his surname, an eccentric inhabitant of the county of Galway in the time of Charles II., having failed to recover his mortgaged and forfeited patrimony after the Restoration, commenced the practice of medicine and surgery, and, in order to give himself fame, being in possession of an antique vellum MS., written in Gaelic and Latin characters, treating of medicine, and which probably belonged to his professional ancestors, he imposed on the vulgar by asserting that this wonderful book had been given him in the enchanted island called I-Brazil, whither he had, he declared, been forcibly conveyed. The "Book of I-Brazil" is to be seen in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, and besides containing, as we must notice, a signature of the "Lee" family, is curious for that mixture of astrologic and medical lore which pervaded the science of medicine when Dan Chaucer satirized "Doctours of Physike." Referring to the pages of a contemporary, the "Ulster Journal of Archæology," which prosperously continues to strew the path of hoar antiquity with flowers, our readers will find, in a paper on "Gaelic Domestics," that the ancient native leech, who had his serviceable abode in the house of an Irish chieftain, was sometimes known by the awe-inspiring name of "The Astronomer." Morogh O'Lye, a mere quack, as well as an impostor, does not seem, according to the good author of the chorographic account of Iar-Connaught, to have realized much of that precious metal which Chaucer deemed to be the idol of his imaginary practitioner; but we may hope that this deceiver, in after years, though he did not, like Prospero, drown his book, became more devout than the old poet's type of his professional brethren, whose "studie was but

¹ "Tribes of Ireland," p. 25.

litel on the bibel." Whether John Lye, before he became interpreter to the state, spoke Irish or English as his mother tongue, his maternal parent having been either a *Gael* or a *Gall*, or whether he studied either language "on the grammar," are parts of our unsolved question. Yet we may observe that it was an obvious advantage for a member of a family of doctors, one of a learned profession, to render himself capable, so far as speech went, of practising in every house. In one of his petitions to the Crown, he says that, "*being an Englishman*," he is very perfect in the Irish tongue.¹ He is designated John "Alie" in a record of the time, and also "Lye."² Alie may either be an Anglicised form of O'Lye, or a corruption of an ordinary English form of surname, "At the Ley." Soon afterwards, his descendants took the name of "Leigh." Possibly they may have been of the same family as Captain Thomas Lee, who unquestionably was cousin of Sir Henry Lee (the famous old knight of Ditchley), and who became so much *Hibernicis ipsis Hibernior* as to have had his Irish and mortal career closed at Tyburn for his share in Essex's mad revolt. However, in a letter dated 1600, the interpreter writes of his "cousin," Sir Charles O'Carroll, which connexion, as it implies an anterior relationship with the chieftains of Ely O'Carrol, seems to favour a Gaelic origin. It is impossible to say how the phrase, "being an Englishman," was interpreted by Lye, or in his day. He may have been freed from "Irish servitude," and granted the right to use the English laws, and so have considered himself no Irishman, though born in Ireland. At any rate, he was serviceable to the English Government, and was duly rewarded; so that we may trace his brief story with the reflection that, if he was of native origin, his is an exceptional instance of loyal and valuable service to the Crown. The first record in which his name occurs is the Memorandum Roll of the Exchequer of 9th Elizabeth, in which is the following entry:³—

"John Lye, junior, prays inrolment of the following:—

"Forasmuche as it is verie requisite and necessarie to the state of this realme, in consideration of the daylie resorte of the Irishe gentlemen and others of this realme for their severall affayers to the same, to have and use an Interpreter for the better understanding of their greves, and redresse of their causes; and for that we have had long tryall and experyence of our servant John Alie, whom we have used in that service, and he being a person most meet and convenyent, for sondry respects and good considerations, to serve the Lords Justices in our absence, We the Lord Deputie and Counsell have condiscended and agreed that he the said John Alie, as interpreter to the state of this realme, shall have and receive the Fee of twelve pence Irish per diem; Willing and requiring you the Threasorer

¹ State Paper Office, 5th Jan., 1586-7.

² Rot. Excheq. 9 Eliz.

³ Communicated by the late James Frederick Ferguson, Esq.

or Vicethreasorer for the tyme being upon sight or register of these our letters to be made, to paye unto him the said Fee of xii^d Irish per diem, as the same shall tearmlie growe unto him, taking his bill testifyinge the receipt hereof shall be yuere sufficient warrant in that behalf, given at Carlingford, the xxiiith of September, 1587.

“To our trustie, &c.
 “Sir W^m Fitz William, Knt.
 “Vicethreas^r &c. at Wars, &c.”

“HENRY SYDNEY,
 “ROBERT WESTON, &c. &c.

The second notice is an entry in the Council Book of “a freedom of forty marcs to John Lye, the interpreter, in respect of maintaining a bridge upon the black-water, in the county of Kildare.”¹ By this order he was exempted from the payment of a sum he owed the Crown, for a consideration more appreciated in his time than even in those palmiest days of grand juries, when Squire Somebody,—

“Of his great bounty,
 Built a new bridge at th’ expense of the county.”

The State dragoman’s services had already been rewarded by a lease of Crown lands in the shire he was assisting to keep passable, as appears in a State Paper entry of 1571, of the suit of “John a Lee, interpreter to my Lord Deputy, and a messenger unto dangerous places.” He was employed as an envoy from Dublin Castle to the great Gaelic chieftains during times of danger, and in places of peril of wild woodkerne, who little respected even an ambassadorial officer. His petition, already noticed, of 1587, is dated from Clonagh Castle, in Kildare; and his suit was for a grant of Rathbride, a manor in this county, which was conceded to him, and became the seat of his descendants. Stowe mentions that on the trial of Sir Brian O’Rourke, in the year 1591, at Westminster, for various acts of high treason, “Master John Lye, of Rathbride, a gentleman out of Ireland, was appointed to interpret between the Court and the traitor.”

Captain John Lye, who wrote from Clonagh to the Secretary of State in 1599, was perhaps the son and successor of the State Interpreter, who died, full of years, in 1612, and lies buried under a flat tombstone, in the graveyard of Kildare Cathedral, near the large ash-tree, with this brief inscription:—

“John Ly de Rabrid, armiger, et Amy FitzGerald, anno 1612.”

The grandson of the interpreter, and author of the chorographic treatise about to be given, became “Robert Leigh, Esq., of Rosegarland” (in the county of Wexford), which ample estate was conferred on him for his loyalty to the exiled Charles II. The proofs of devotion to the royal grantor are acknowledged in the patent grant,

¹ Add. M.S. Brit. Mus. 4790, p. 317.

which sets forth that :—“The King, being very sensible of the many services performed to him at all times by Robert Leigh, Esq., both in foreign countries, in the time of his exile, and at home since his restoration, in recompense thereof,” bestowed on him, for these honourable considerations, which diametrically differed from the reasons for the numerous grants of the period, the extensive property still possessed by his descendant, F. A. Leigh, Esq.

The original treatise is in the possession of Sir Thomas Philipps, Bart., Middle Hill, Worcestershire, by whom a copy was obligingly communicated to the editor. When it was transmitted to Sir William Petty, it was accompanied by the following letter from the writer, who probably penned the MS. at Rathbride, his seat in the county of Kildare, as he speaks of being at a distance from Wexford, and this absence from the district he describes accounts in some degree for much of the omissions he apologizes for :—

“SIR,—The time drawing now neere in which you tould me you intended to rid yourself of the worke you had in hand in order to the Irish Atlas, I send you herewith, tho’ very imperfect, the best account I can (at this distance) give you of the Countye of Wexford. I neede not desire you to make use only of such off the particulars as you shall judge proper for publike view, but shall entreat you to take no notice of my being your Intelligencer, for though I have with all the certainty I am able tould you all the Remarkable things I could call to mind in those parts, yett its possible some persons may take it amisse their concerns were forgotten. I have made mention of myself upon occasion of my concerns in the County, and should be glad (if it consists with your method) those few words, or some that may expresse the same truth might be incerted, otherwise by no meanes, for I desire it not soe much out of ambition as I doe to shew my gratitude for benefits received, and in hopes that others of my father’s posteritye may be the more moved to serve their King here after, for the Example’s sake.

“I am, sir, yr. affectionate kinsman,

“and humble servant,

“ROBERT LEIGH.

“I wish you may be able to read these papers, for besydes the want of skill in the dictating part, the boy that writt has comitted many faults alsoe, which I beg you to excuse.”

Although our chorographer evidently felt more interest in the antiquities of his native land than, as we imagine, the ordinary rural gentlemen of his time experienced, he might well style his treatise “very imperfect.” His description of New Ross and the adjacent baronies is a mere superficial account of half the shire of Wexford, comprising the country that had come immediately under his observation; and, although he was no Gallio so far as archaics are concerned, he deserves little praise for a literary performance he might easily have rendered full, accurate, and valuable.

(To be continued.)