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Lieutenant-colonel John Ryan of Glinogally: a Tipperary Wild Geese officer's monument at Aire-sur-la-Lys

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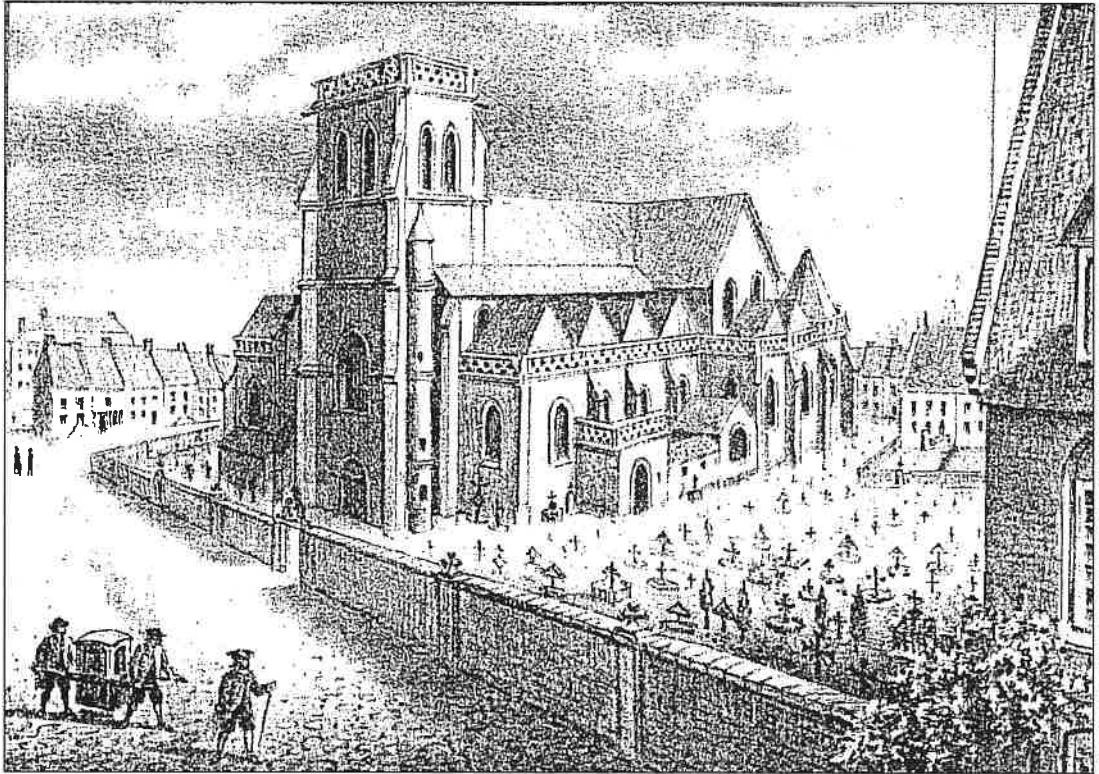
A now vanished monument in the church of Notre Dame at Aire-sur-la-Lys reflected the pride of a Tipperary Wild Geese officer in his ancestors. It has led to the identifying of a number of interesting references to his career and to his efforts to establish, within the French system, the nobility of his family.

Short History of Aire-sur-la-Lys

Aire-sur-la-Lys is a town of just over 10,000 inhabitants, situated in northern France between Béthune and Saint-Omer. Founded in the 10th century at a crossing-point on a marsh, this town was so strongly fortified in the Middle Ages that it was never taken by the English during the Hundred Years' War. It became a Spanish possession from 1499 to 1676. In 1641, the French besieged Aire-sur-la-Lys and captured it. Irish troops were involved in the defence. Mention is made of three companies of infantry entering the town on 21 May: 'one Spanish, one Italian and one Irish'. The defence of the Saint-Omer gate was entrusted to the Spanish and Irish who immediately set about fortifying their sector with trenches, and by blocking watercourses.¹ Two weeks after the town's fall, its new French garrison was, in turn, surrounded by the troops of a relieving Spanish army² which had arrived just too late. A painting conserved in the town hall depicts the plan of the second siege. That painting shows the regiment of Eugenio O'Neill (Owen Roe)³ encamped close to – and probably within – the church of St. Quentin which still exists today. The Spanish army's blockade forced the garrison to surrender on 7 December 1641. The town was annexed to France decades later (in 1676) but, even up to the siege of 1710, relations between the town council and the French authorities were tense.

Aire-sur-la-Lys was reconstructed and was once more on a sound footing when, in 1710 during the War of the Spanish Succession, it was attacked by the armies of Marlborough and Prince Eugene. Yet again, Irish troops were involved in its defence; the town was badly damaged by the allied siege guns. Several residents kept diaries of the siege and these have referred to the Irish presence. For instance, when a surprise attack was attempted 'near the lime kiln' at dawn on 3 October, 'an Irish officer with sixty men vigorously repulsed the assailants'.⁴

References to Irishmen in Aire-sur-la-Lys come up in several contexts. For instance, on 14 July 1702, Bartholomew Barrett, aged 37, a soldier in David Barry's company, Clare regiment, with 15 years' service – including service in Ireland during the Williamite wars – a native of Galway and a glovemaking by profession, was recognised as being no longer fit for active service. He had suffered a fall in a street of Aire-sur-la-Lys and was sent on detachment to Cambrai with other disabled men; there, before a notary, he formally renounced his rights to the *Invalides*, on 25



Église Notre-Dame D'Aire sur-la-Lys

October 1707.⁵ The mayor of Aire-sur-la-Lys has said that the next street to be named in his town would have the name Barrett.

During the great siege of 1710, Jacques Ribaut refers in his diary to the death of an Irish officer defending the Arras gate. Yet another Irish link was the translation of part of the annals of Luke Wadding from French into English; this was done in a Poor Clares convent in the town.⁶ In 1726, there was a brigade of half-pay Irish officers, under the command of *sieur* O'Hanlon, in garrison in the town.⁷

Aire-sur-la-Lys conserves many traces of its long history – the collegiate church of St. Peter (which is still in use having been repaired after the heavy Anglo-American bombardment in WWII) with the statue of the town's patroness Notre Dame Panetière, the Baillage (town guardhouse), the vestiges of the Vauban fortifications, an impressive town hall, a lofty civic belfry, and many other fine building and old streets.

The church of Notre Dame was the building of greatest significance to the Irish during the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV. A church of Notre Dame had been built outside the walls of Aire in 1353 but was razed in 1520 by order of Charles V because it interfered with the external defences of the town that constituted a major element in the monarch's plans for the protection of the Spanish Lowlands. In 1522, the foundation stone of the new church of Notre Dame was laid, close to the town centre; it was consecrated by de Crequy, the last bishop of Théroutanne, in 1548. In the shape of a Latin cross, 50 metres by 30 metres, it was at the heart of municipal activities for more than 240 years.

The Church of Notre Dame

Six priests were attached to Notre Dame which was the religious centre for the town's main guilds: the tanners, shoemakers, merchants, barbers (*perruquiers*), and porters (*portefaix*) had the chapels of their five patron saints there; these guilds had considerable influence over those who were admitted to the church. Moreover, Notre Dame was the church most closely associated with the town hall, and it benefited from the advantages of its trade associations, having revenues of 5,000 *livres* a year; its *curé* was the Dean of the town. The church council was drawn from the principal citizens of the locality.

The privileged situation in relation to this church which was enjoyed by the Irish military families in Aire-sur-la-Lys was indicated in several ways and notably by two monuments within it: to Christopher Fitzgerald and to John Ryan and his wife. An examination of the records pertaining to monuments in 25 churches in the region shows that these two monuments to 18th century Irish soldiers are unique. Moreover, at the time, inhumation within a church rather than in the adjoining cemetery was regarded as a special concession.⁸

Church Monuments of Irish Military Interest

The Fitzgerald monument was close to the altar and bore the following Latin inscription:

*Jacet in hac Urna Corpus nobilissimi
viri DD. Christophori Fitzgerald
ex illustri Geraldinorum Familia
Rathronia apud Lagienses in Hibernia
nati, ordinis Ludovici Equitis
torquati, qui postquam Quastoris
Munus in Legione d'ô Donnelle
integerrime administraret Centuriam
vexit in Legione Comitis de Clare, belli-
cam virtutem nec non egregiam in
Regem Christianissimum fidem quin-
que et triginta annorum Spatio pro-
bavit, christiane obiit die 13 Junii anno
1724 aetatis vero 54. Pie Lector fauta
apprecare. Requiescat in pace.*⁹

A shield with the family arms was cut in the stone, above this inscription. The text states that captain Fitzgerald was born at Rathronia in Leinster, was a knight of the Order of Saint Louis, served the Most Christian King (Louis XIV and subsequently Louis XV) in the regiments of ô Donnell and Clare for a total of 35 years and died aged 54. Fitzgerald's death is recorded in the register of the church of Notre Dame as follows:

On the thirteenth day of this month of June 1724, sieur Christopher Fitzgerald captain in the regiment of Clare in garrison in this town died. His body was inhumed in this church on the fourteenth day of the above month in the presence of sieurs Charles count of Clare, colonel of the said regiment, and Denis Honan, almoner of the said regiment, who have both signed this act.

The Story of Lieutenant-colonel Ryan

In the choir of the same church, there was another memorial stone of special Tipperary interest, in white marble, with the following inscription:

Fides ad unum

Icy reposent jusqu'à la Résurrection les corps de messire Jean comte de Ryan, chevalier seigneur de Glinogally, Brevillier, la Trammerie, et de Bracquincourt, etc, lieutenant colonel d'infanterie Irlandaise et commandant pour le Roy à Warneton, chevalier de l'ordre militaire de St Louis décédé le 29 janvier 1727 âgé de 54 ans, et de dame Marie Jacqueline de Coupigny son épouse, décédée le 16 janvier 1739 âgée de 64 ans. Priez Dieux pour leurs ames.¹⁰

At both sides of this inscription, eight shields with family arms were cut in the slab.

*Ryan – ô Meanchir¹¹
ô Brien – ô Carolle
..... – ô Connor
Buteler – Macarti*

*Coupigny – de Torque
..... – Bourgogne
Obert – Cornille
de Rouck –*

Because of wear on the marble, canon Hellin was unable to decipher one of the Irish and two of the French family names. Monuments within the church of Notre Dame were rare; the canon recorded only eight others there; these were to prominent French personalities such as baron Charles de Hennin who died on 5 May 1701, aged 85, and lieutenant-colonel Pierre de Pascal of the Burgundy regiment, who died on 4 May 1730, aged 66. Such monuments required prior permission. The objective of quoting the sixteen family names (*quartiers de noblesse*) was to establish that the family was of noble descent. Evidently, the inscription was intended to show that lieutenant-colonel Ryan was descended from ancient Irish families, and that his wife was of the French nobility.

Ryan's death was recorded as follows in the registers of Notre Dame:

On this day, the twenty ninth of January 1727, the body of count John Ryan (messire Jean comte de Ryan) lieutenant colonel and chevalier of the military order of Saint Louis, who died the previous day, was inhumed in the choir of this church, in the presence of messire James Ryan, messire Philippe François Coupigny, lord of Noyelles, and messire Joseph Durozoy the king's lieutenant and governor of Aire, chevalier of the military order of Saint Louis, who signed this act.

This John Ryan is also mentioned in several other documents; the following registrations were entered in the records of Béthune:

2 December 1699, John Ryan, captain in the Lee Irish regiment, married Marie-Jacqueline de Coupigny,

and

31 August 1704, Marie-Françoise, daughter of Marie-Jacqueline de Coupigny and captain John Ryan of the Lee regiment, was baptised.

The Stuart Mss. conserved at Windsor hold two references to John Ryan:

On 20 July 1701, at Saint Germain, it was certified that

20
 I
 comte de
 ryan

Ce jour d'aujourd'hui vingt neuvième jour du mois de janvier
 l'an mil sept cent vingt sept a été inhumé
 dans le chœur de cette église le corps de messire
 Jean ^{comte de} ryan. Lieutenant colonel
 et Chevalier de l'Ordre militaire
 de St Louis decédé le jour précédent
 en présence des témoins à savoir
 messire Jacques comte de ryan et de messire
 philippe François coupigny seigneur de
 Noyelles messire Joseph de Rojode
 lieutenant pour le roi gouverneur
 d'Aire chevalier de l'Ordre militaire
 de St Louis lesquels ont signé cet acte
 avec moi
 Jean comte de ryan
 coupigny
 Noyelles
 Rojode
 Duroy

Paroisse Notre-Dame. Acte de décès
 Jean Comte de Ryan Décédé le 28 janvier 1727. (n°20)

Ce jour d'aujourd'hui vingt neuvième jour du mois de janvier
 de l'an mil sept cent vingt sept a été inhumé
 dans le chœur de cette église le corps de messire
 Jean comte de Ryan, lieutenant colonel
 et chevalier de l'Ordre militaire
 de Saint-Louis décédé le jour précédent
 en présence des témoins à savoir
 messire Jacques comte de Ryan et de messire
 Philippe François Coupigny, seigneur de
 Noyelles, messire Joseph de Rojode
 lieutenant pour le roi gouverneur
 d'Aire, chevalier de l'Ordre militaire
 de Saint-Louis lesquels ont signé cet acte
 avec moi.

*John Ryan, captain in Lee's Irish regiment, is a gentleman descended from the Ryans of Glanogaha, Tipperary, a family that has always been Catholic and loyal.*¹²

There is a further relevant entry on 17 February 1704:

*For swearing and admitting captain John Ryan to be Gentleman of the Privy Chamber.*¹³

When the Lee regiment was reviewed in October 1706, captain Ryan aged 30 was stated to have commenced service in June 1696 as an ensign in the Hogan company; he was appointed lieutenant *réformé* {on half pay} following the Lee regiment on 1 September 1698 and was made captain *réformé* on 28 May 1704; he had been at both battles of Hochstet (Blenheim to the English) and at the sieges of Ath, the fort of Kehl, and Augsburg; he was described as 'a brave and honest man, with spirit and capacity for detail, good for the command of a company...'.¹⁴

On Saturday, 10 January 1722, Charles d'Hozier, genealogist to the king of France, *Juge d'Armes et Garde de l'Armorial général de France* and knight of the orders of Saint Maurice, Saint Lazare and Savoy, signed and issued a document which stated that, in August 1721, letters in the form of a charter, signed by the young Louis XV, by the Duke of Orleans who was regent, and by Le Blanc, minister of state, naturalised John Ryan, Irish by nation, knight of the order of Saint Louis, and lieutenant-colonel *réformé* of Irish infantry in the Lee regiment. Hozier's document 'maintained and confirmed Ryan in the possession of his ancient nobility, and ennobled him afresh, *en tant que besoin*, together with his children and his posterity, male and female, born or to be born...' The arms of the Ryan family were described at length in the text and were shown, in colour, in the margin of the document.¹⁵

Why did lieutenant-colonel Ryan insist so strongly on documenting his aristocratic ancestry? One reason could be that the French nobility was striving to conserve officer posts in the French army for their own sons. During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) the issue of army posts going to men of 'obscure families' was raised repeatedly. Bauffremont de Listenois¹⁶ wrote to Voysin, the minister for war, on 15 May 1710 that some regimental posts were being sold to 'the sons of butchers, of merchants and of maltsters'.¹⁷

Later, on 25 April 1718, the French council of war adopted a decision by virtue of which inspectors were given the duty of verifying that colonels selected, only from noble families, those who would be proposed for posts of *lieutenant-en-second*.¹⁸ The perceived link between the nobility and army command was strongly maintained through to the Revolution; it was a source of great annoyance to the merchant classes and operated to reduce the effectiveness of the French army. On 11 July 1727, marshal Berwick wrote that the brilliance of the monarchy was maintained only by the valour of the nobility.¹⁹

In the church, also, great stress was laid on the importance of having noble ancestry. Between 1715 and 1742, there were only 10 *roturiers* (i.e. non-nobles) among the 153 bishops appointed in France; between 1743 and 1774 (when Louis XV died) there were only 3 out of 145.²⁰

It is possible, too, that Ryan – or his wife – thought of the marriage of their daughter. The convention was that, where a nobleman married a woman of lower rank of nobility or a commoner, the groom gave his left hand to the bride,²¹ and this embarrassment could be avoided by the certification of the nobility of the Ryans.

Thus, in the interests of his descendants and because of the demands of society, lieutenant-colonel Ryan took all the necessary steps to establish and conserve his family's status as being of aristocratic stock. The references quoted above recall the memory of a brave man who maintained, in France, the reputation of his clan and family at a time when the situation in Tipperary was bleak.

During the French Revolution, the church of Notre Dame was closed to worshippers in November 1793 and was sold to entrepreneurs. After being used as a store and later as a source of building materials, it collapsed on 29 June 1802 and was not rebuilt. The two sepulchral monuments of Irish interest are gone but the site of the church is now marked by a commemorative plaque.

On 2 June 2002, under the aegis of the municipal authorities led by the mayor, monsieur André Démaret, joint Franco-Irish ceremonies were held in the town at the site of the church of Notre Dame, in the town hall, in Saint Peter's church where a special Mass was said by Fr. Caoimhín O'Neill of Carlow College, in the Vauban fortifications, and in the municipal library. Mr. Séamus Pattison, Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Eireann, His Excellency, Pádraig McKiernan, Irish Ambassador to France, and brigadier-general Frank McKevitt, representing Ireland at NATO, together with a large representation from the Irish community in Luxembourg, and many of the local citizens attended.

There was a municipal reception at the Mairie and a special exhibition of historical documents of Franco-Irish interest selected and presented by members of the local historical society. The town's silver band played and marched and a colour party of French army veterans paraded. A wide selection of tunes was piped by Christy McCarthy of Youghal. A remarkable shrine, containing the relics of the late 7th century Irish martyrs, Luge and Luglien (who were assassinated near Lillers in northern France on a pilgrimage from Ireland to Rome²²), was brought specially from Montdidier for the commemoration, a gesture which was very much appreciated by the Irish visitors. The ceremonies honoured, in a worthy and dignified manner, the memory of lieutenant-colonel Ryan and of the many thousands of Irish who knew Aire-sur-la-Lys over the centuries.

Notes

- 1 Société des Antiquitaires de la Morinie, Bulletin no. 2 (1861), p. 427.
- 2 The Spanish army in the Lowlands included men from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, the Balkans, Ireland, Belgium... It was stated that thirteen languages were spoken by the elements constituting the Spanish forces. Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road 1567-1659*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1972, p. 198.
- 3 For a further mention of Owen Roe in this context, see Jerrold I. Casway, *Owen Roe O'Neill and the Struggle for Catholic Ireland*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, p. 41.
- 4 Leon Guillemin, *Les sièges d'Aire*, Chroniques Locales, Aire, 1894, vol. 1, pp. 1-72, (at p. 35).
- 5 Register of the *Hôtel Royal des Invalides* (HRI), 2Xy, vol. 14, no. 13061, at the château de Vincennes.
- 6 A copy of a modern English version of this work is available in the Franciscan Library at Killiney.
- 7 HRI register, 2Xy, vol. 23, no. 40864.
- 8 This privilege was a feature throughout Europe; there is the verse on one buried outside a church:
Here I lie at the church's door;
Here I lie because I'm poor.
The further in, the more you pay
But here lie I just as warm as they.
- 9 Sepulchral inscription noted by canon E. A. Hellin of St. Bavon, Gand on 10 October 1772; Bibliothèque royale de Bruxelles, Ms no. G 1520, p. 74. The author thanks M. Gérard Aubert, member of the *commission d'histoire et archéologie de Pas-de-Calais*, for bringing this to attention.
- 10 *Ibid.*; these records are usually limited to the religious dimension of the funeral and do not advert to the pallbearers, the quantity of wax candles burned, or the crêpe that was worn as a sign of mourning. (The inscription on the monument gave most of Ryan's titles and stated that his wife was buried there also.)

- 11 Most likely Maher.
- 12 Entry book 3, listed at p. 160 of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, Calendar of Stuart Papers (HMCCSP).
- 13 Entry book 4, listed at p. 190 of HMCCSP.
- 14 French Army Archives, château de Vincennes, carton of Lee regimental papers.
- 15 Now conserved at the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, de la Ponce Mss. no. N 12, pp. 656-7.
- 16 A relative of his, Jacques Antoine de Bauffremont, marquis de Listenois, knight of the Golden Fleece, *maréchal de camp* and colonel of dragoons, killed during the siege of Aire-sur-la-Lys in 1710 on 23 September 1710, was buried with great pomp within the church of Notre Dame.
- 17 Louis Tutey, *Les Officiers sous l'Ancien Régime*, Plon, Paris, 1908, p. 79.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 19 Quoted in Babeau, *La Vie Militaire sous l'Ancien Régime*, Firmin-Didot, 1890, vol. II, p. 80.
- 20 François Bluche, *Louis XV*, Perrin, Paris, 1983, p. 187.
- 21 Yves Coirault, *Saint-Simon, Mémoires*, Gallimard, Paris, 1983 edition, vol. I, p. 1323, note 11. Saint-Simon, in his voluminous memoirs, repeatedly harped on the importance of the conservation of military command in the hands of noblemen. These restrictions grew worse as the 18th century advanced. On 31 December 1759, Louis XV decided that only those who could prove noble ancestry back to the year 1400 could be presented to the king and the royal family, sit in the royal carriages or accompany the monarch on the hunt (Bluche, *op. cit.*, p. 114). Such measures cultivated the roots of the Revolution.
- 22 An elaborate pageant, involving over 800 participants in costume, is planned for the Spring of 2005, by the local authorities, to commemorate this duo.