

CALENDAR
of
THE ROSSE PAPERS

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A.P.W. MALCOMSON



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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Intellectual is not a word that springs to mind in describing the Anglo-Irish gentry of the 18th and 19th centuries. One thinks of them as, at their best, brave, dashing and witty; at their worst, drunken, dissipated and illiterate. But there has, of course, always been a leavening of less typical families, and of these none are more interesting than the Parsons of Birr. To have produced, in three generations, a patriot statesman, two leading astronomers, and an inventor of genius is by any standard an impressive achievement. ...’ Thus Mark Girouard, at the outset of a four-part article on Birr published in *Country Life* in 1965. While it could be argued that this assessment rates the generality of the Anglo-Irish gentry too low, there can be no doubt that the Parsons deserve to be singled out as a family of unusual and unusually sustained ability.

THE PARSONS FAMILY AND BIRR, 1590–1791

Girouard continues: ‘... The fortunes of the Parsons family in Ireland were founded by two brothers, William and Laurence, who came over from England about 1590. Like the great Earl of Cork (with whom they had marriage connections), they were members of the group of tough and capable Englishmen that pioneered the resettlement of the country after the wars of the 16th century. William, the elder, ... obtained large grants of lands, mostly in Wexford, and was created a baronet in 1620. He was the ancestor of the Earls of Rosse of the first creation whose line died out in 1764. ...’ The offices conferred on or acquired by him (most of which gave him opportunities for building up a large landed estate) included those of Surveyor-General of Ireland (1602), Commissioner of the Plantations in Leinster, Ulster and Connaught (1604), Joint Supervisor and Extender (with his younger brother, Laurence) of Crown Lands in Ireland (1611), and Master of the Irish Court of Wards (set up in 1621 on his recommendation to the all-powerful royal favourite, George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham). Sir William Parsons retained his offices and some of his influence after the assassination of his patron, Buckingham, in 1628. He served, controversially, as one of the two Lords Justices of the kingdom, 1640–43, was imprisoned for a time in Dublin Castle, and died in England in 1650.

Sir William’s younger brother, Laurence, the ancestor of the Earls of Rosse of the second (1806) creation, lived initially at Youghal, Co. Cork, before his participation in the plantation of Co. Longford caused him to establish himself at Birr after 1622. His offices, too, were mainly Munster-based. A lawyer by training, he was Clerk of the Crown, Peace and Assizes for Munster, 1604–16, Attorney-General for Munster, 1612–24, Judge of the Admiralty and a deputy Vice-Admiral for Munster, 1619–28, and Second Baron of the Irish Exchequer, 1624–8.¹ The first of the brothers to attach himself to the rising star of the Duke of Buckingham, he was knighted in 1620 and died – much earlier than his elder brother and in the same year as Buckingham – in 1628.

Like Sir William's, Sir Laurence's official career was (in the words of Mark Girouard) '... more successful than meritorious; and it is his activities as a coloniser and developer of plantation lands that are interesting. In 1620 he acquired 1,000 acres of arable land and 277 of wood and bog in the territory in central Ireland known as Ely O'Carroll. This acquisition centred on the town and castle of Birr; on June 26 of the same year it was constituted a manor under the new name of Parsonstown. Parsonstown and Birr have remained alternative names for the town up till recent years. [Indeed, in 1968, Eamon De Valera wrote to Anne, Countess of Rosse, with surprising courtliness, that he scarcely recognised the name 'Birr' which she had used in a letter of invitation, because he always thought of it as Parsonstown!]²] ...

By the early 17th century the tribal system of Ely O'Carroll had disintegrated and the territory was in a state of chaos, with four different O'Carrolls disputing for the lordship. On the death of Sir Charles O'Carroll in 1619 the territory was declared (understandably, if on rather tenuous grounds) to have become crown property and a Royal Commission for the Plantation was set up on September 30, 1619. A very considerable proportion was regranted to the old proprietors; but a number of new English settlers were introduced, who, it was hoped, might bring an element of stability into this disturbed area. Among the new settlers the Parsonses rapidly became the most prominent.

Sir Laurence Parsons proved himself a vigorous and capable developer of his new estates. The town grew and flourished under his benevolent autocracy ... [When he] ... acquired Birr it was little more than a village. All that survive visually from the Middle Ages are the bridge that carries Main Street across the River Camcor, picturesquely built up with houses, like a miniature version of old London Bridge, and the ivy-clad walls of the main body of the church, surrounded now by the overgrown tombstones of the old Birr families. The actual tower of the church was probably built by Sir Laurence and is decorated with his arms; perhaps he built it from the first with defence in mind, and it certainly played its part, as a defensive outpost, in the two sieges of the castle in 1643 and 1690. This church tower and his work at the castle are the sole architectural remainders of Sir Laurence's time, but in fact he did much to establish the prosperity of the town, which he ruled autocratically, but benevolently. He started a glass factory, under a Huguenot family of the name of Bigo; it was, for a time, prosperous and well known, and used to supply Dublin with window and table glass. He acquired for the town the right to have two weekly markets, and laid down a number of ordinances that show a sense of civic amenities in advance of their time. The sidewalks were to be paved at the inhabitants' expense, Sir Laurence having paved the main road at his. A 4d. fine was exacted from anyone who "cast any dunge rubbidge filth or sweepings into the forestreet". Anyone who lit fires in their house other than in stone chimneys was to be banished from the town. He had a prejudice against barmaids, and no woman was allowed to serve beer "uppon payne to bee sett in the stocks by the constable for 3 whole markt dayes". ...

[Sir Laurence also] ... substantially enlarged the castle, and his work remains the core of the building that is there today. ... The original castle of the O'Carrolls was a great square tower, known as the Black Castle. It stood about 60 yards north-west of the present building, where smooth lawns now lead from the entrance front towards the park. ... Between 1620 and 1627 Sir Laurence made considerable alterations and additions He put two English masons in charge, and paid them 2s. a day each. The most important piece of work undertaken was the building or rebuilding of a gatehouse 46 feet by 25 feet, which forms the hall and centre of the

present building; the archway of the gatehouse ran through what is now the basement under the main entrance, and the long and rather narrow shape of the present entrance hall is due to the fact that it was the room above this archway. This new gatehouse was steadily enlarged until it became the main house. At some, on the available evidence, undatable stage it absorbed what appear to have been originally two free-standing towers set diagonally to either side of the main gatehouse and known, in the military language of the day, as “flankers”. The linking of these flankers to the central block produced a very curious and individual plan – a central block with two bent arms hooked on to it – which can really only be explained visually, by an aerial view or a plan. Immediately south of the house the ground drops steeply down to the Camcor River, a lively mountain river still clear and turbulent from the Slieve Blooms where it has its source. Seen from the west the house and its wings extend in a long embracing sweep; as one moves round to the south they contract into a high and compact silhouette hunched up above the river. Perhaps this is the aspect of Birr that sticks most firmly in the memory. To the east the town jostles straight up against the castle walls, as it has always done – an intimate relationship between great house and town found comparatively seldom in England and even less often in Ireland. ... In the course of time the defensive importance of the castle dwindled, but it still played a leading part in the life of the town – economically and socially because the growth of the town was actively stimulated by the Parsons family, physically because the barrier of the castle and its demesne on the west forced the town to expand to the north, east and south. ...

Sir Laurence Parsons died in 1628, fourteen years before the castle entered on one of the two most stormy episodes in its history. In 1641 the Irish Catholics rose in rebellion. Sir Laurence's grandson, William, was made Governor of Ely O'Carroll and garrisoned it for the crown. His diary survives at Birr, together with a large number of other contemporary documents, part of a collection of family papers of a size rare for Ireland. On April 13, 1642, the Molloyes, Coghlan and Ormonders appeared in force together, and at ten in the evening set the town on fire and burnt almost every house in it to the ground. “And when they saw the Towne on fire, they blew up their Bagpipes, and beat up their drums and fell a Dauncinge on the hills.” Then followed a difficult time for the castle, culminating in a rigorous five days' siege on January 16–20, 1643. Among the besiegers was a mason who had worked on the building of the castle; under his instructions a mine was laid under its west side, and the threat of this forced the garrison to capitulate on honourable terms. William Parsons withdrew to join the English army in Dublin; Birr was for a time garrisoned by the Catholics, but in the end they abandoned it, having burnt it out first.

William Parsons died in 1653, and never re-occupied the castle. This was left to his son, Laurence, who was created a baronet in 1677. In 1681 the English topographer Thomas Dineley was in Ireland and entered in his journal the following information: “Lord of this town is Sir Laurence Parsons, where there is much plenty of Ewe-Timber, that of his House the Windows, Staircases, Window Cases, Tables, Chairs, Benches, Stooles and Stooles [sic] are formed therewith. Here is said to be the fairest staircase in Ireland.” ... A few years after Dineley made his entry, Birr was once again in trouble – as a result of the disturbances provoked by the reign and expulsion of James II. In the late 1680s, Sir Laurence Parsons and his family removed for a time to London, leaving an agent at Birr by the name of Heward Oxburgh. Oxburgh soon proved himself a far from faithful servant, whose ultimate ambition appears to have been to

supplant his employer's family altogether. The rents due to be remitted to London failed to arrive, and when Sir Laurence returned to Birr he found himself little more than a prisoner on his own estates. In 1689 Oxburgh seized the castle on the grounds that it was being held as a garrison for William of Orange; Sir Laurence and two others were put on trial as traitors to King James, and condemned to death by a packed jury. Fortunately they managed (in the teeth of Oxburgh's opposition) to obtain a reprieve, and were ultimately rescued by Williamite forces before the sentence was put into effect.

But troubles at Birr were not over. It was garrisoned by the Williamites, and in 1690 was hotly besieged by the Duke of Berwick and an Irish Jacobite army – in which the relentless Oxburgh was a colonel. Various accounts of the siege survive. One of the garrison wrote of the besiegers that “their great guns never ceased, but continued without intermission like a continued thunder; only now and then a little comical discourse, and scolding would happen from our men, bidding them go home and dig their potatoes, and calling them rapparees, which they took as a great affront.” The garrison were in the end reduced to making their own bullets: “they cut and melted a leaden cistern belonging to Sir Laurence in which his lady used to salt her beef for hanging and was so large it would hold the carcasses of 5 or 6 beeves.” The “great guns” of the Jacobites seem to have been placed to the north-west of the castle “and as good luck would have it played at the flanker next them, which we judge to be the strongest part of the house.” This must have been the north flanker, which still carries cannonball scars; a number of the actual cannonballs are preserved in the house. But the enemy artillery never succeeded in making a breach, though “three great bullets missed the flanker and came in at the parlour window, which hit the wainscot, two of which stick yet in the wall.” Ultimately, in the course of a night, their army slipped away and marched on south to Limerick. This was the only occasion on which the Duke of Berwick was forced to raise a siege, excusably perhaps, as he was in his first independent command, dependent on untrained Irish levies, and only nineteen years of age.

The castle then became a Williamite military hospital. Four hundred sick and wounded men were in it from August 9 to the end of September 1690, and left it in a filthy condition. “The stairs and floors of the house, which to my knowledge used to be neatly and cleanly kept, were so thick with dirt one could not see what they were made of, and the rooms so full of vermin both black and white, there was no coming near them.” The corpses of entire horses were disinterred from the muck-heaps in the stable yard – or so the steward wrote to Sir Laurence Parsons ... It remained a source of bitterness in the Parsons family that they never received any kind of recompense for the losses they sustained through their support of Charles I and William III. The disasters of the 17th century were probably responsible for the relative lack of incident in the history of the castle in the 18th century – it was a period of recovery, ended by the burst of building activity that started in or soon after 1800.

Nevertheless, within the old walls a certain amount of decoration took place in the Georgian period. What little is known about the Parsonses of these years suggests that they had civilised tastes. An engraved walking-stick presented to Sir William Parsons, the 2nd Baronet (died 1741), by Handel passed through the sale-rooms some years ago. This Sir William sent his son Laurence (1712–56) on the Grand Tour, and a surviving bill from the time of the latter contains payments connected with the construction of a ballroom having “2 square ceilings” and a “cumpass ceiling”, and of a “Cumpass Ceiling in the Room next the River.” ... [This bill is a rare exception in an

archive which is unusually rich by Irish standards for the 17th century, but inexplicably blank for the period *c.* 1690– *c.* 1775.] Sir Laurence's son, another Sir William (1731-91), laid out the park, but at the expense of the "Black Castle" or "Black Tower" of the O'Carrolls. According to Thomas L. Cooke, a local historian and the author of *A Picture of Parsonstown* (Dublin, 1826), Sir William initially converted the top of this tower "... into a sitting room and he and his friends occasionally, after dinner in summer-time, used to drink their wine there." But in about 1778 the same Sir William swept [it] away ... [along with the adjoining] stables, kitchen and courtyard, and replaced them by the lawns and parkland that are still there today, making the original arrangements almost impossible to visualise. ...

[Major changes also took place in the town of Birr at about this time] ...; for the town reached its greatest prosperity in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and most of its buildings date from then. Expansion started in the 1740s, when, to commemorate the Battle of Culloden, Duke Square and Cumberland Street were laid out, as a northward extension of the Main Street. In the centre of Duke Square the Duke of Cumberland, imperiously pointing down Main Street, was elevated on a handsome stone column [designed by Samuel Chearnley, a cousin and protégé of Sir Laurence, 3rd Bt]; the statue was supplied from London, carved by Sir Henry Cheere in 1747. This grandiloquent example of Hanoverian propaganda could not be expected to weather the changes of this century; the Duke has been unseated, and only his head, much battered, ... survive[s]; Duke Square has become Emmet Square and Cumberland Street is now Emmet Street. ...

Sir William Parsons ... played an enthusiastic part in the Volunteer movement of the 1770s and '80s, in the course of which the Volunteer army, raised by the local gentry and aristocracy to defend Ireland from possible invasion from France, were used to prise substantial concessions to the Irish parliament and Irish trade from the English government. As a young man ... [his son, Laurence Parsons (1758–1841), later the 5th Baronet and the 2nd Earl of Rosse] served as a subaltern in the Parsonstown Volunteers, the embroidered banner of which, together with various other Volunteer relics, are still preserved at Birr. ...

SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, 5TH BT AND 2ND EARL OF ROSSE

The 2nd Earl of Rosse is a man who holds a decided place in Irish political and cultural history of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, even if he is in neither respect a figure of the first rank. But the archive in the Muniment Room at Birr Castle, and the castle itself and the town of Birr, are dominated by the contribution and legacy of the 2nd Earl. A good deal has been written by and about him, whether in manuscript, thesis or printed form. First and foremost, he is the subject of an unpublished Ph.D. thesis by N.D. Atkinson, 'Sir Laurence Parsons, 2nd Earl of Rosse, 1758–1841' (Dublin University, 1961). This work is inevitably dated, and perhaps from the outset, it suffered from the fact that the author obviously succumbed to the charm of the then Lord and Lady Rosse, and from the more serious defect that only a small minority of Parsons's papers had then come to light and were available to Atkinson. Nevertheless, his work provides a solid bed-rock and includes many perceptive insights. Other writers – Mark Girouard, Peter Jupp and R.B. McDowell – have addressed aspects of Parsons's career. More recently, the present writer published, in William Nolan and Timothy O'Neill (eds.), *Offaly History and Society ...* (Dublin, 1988), Chapter 14, a piece entitled 'A Variety of Perspectives on Laurence Parsons, 2nd Earl of Rosse'. This draws very heavily on the previous work of these

other scholars (as indicated by the quotation marks in the text). What now follows is an abridged version of that article,³ and the reader should refer to it for detailed citation of the passages drawn from Atkinson, Girouard, Jupp and McDowell.

'Sir Laurence Parsons, 2nd earl of Rosse (1758–1841), eldest son of Sir William Parsons of Birr, and Mary, only daughter and heiress of John Clerc of Kilbury, was born on 21 May 1758. He graduated B.A. of Trinity College, Dublin, in 1780, and in the same year published a pamphlet denouncing the Irish mutiny bill. ... In July 1782 he was elected one of the representatives of the university in parliament, in the place of Walter Hussey Burgh, created Chief Baron of the Exchequer. He disclaimed party politics, but his intimacy with Henry Flood, for whom he had a profound admiration, seems unquestionably to have coloured his political views. He followed him [in 1782–3] in the matter of the Renunciation as opposed to Simple Repeal, advocated retrenchment by reducing the army, and cordially supported the Volunteer bill for the reform of parliament. His friendship for Flood rendered him naturally hostile to Grattan who, he insisted, had more than once sacrificed the public welfare to private pique, and on a notable occasion [he] taunted him with having bungled every great public measure that he had ever undertaken. ... He opposed Pitt's Commercial Propositions (1785) from the beginning; but on the question of the regency (1789) he went with the minority, arguing strongly in favour of following the example of England. To do otherwise, he declared, would be "only an assumption of a power which we never could put in practice, an idle gasconade which may alarm England and cannot by any possibility serve ourselves". ...' '...The outbreak of the French Revolution had a decisive influence on his political development. As he later wrote, in 1822: '... When first I came into parliament, I was led into an approbation of ... [parliamentary reform] by the example of Mr Pitt. But when the French doctrines of the Revolution began to prevail, I changed my opinion, and [in 1793] wrote a pamphlet entitled *Thoughts on liberty and equality* ...'. In the intervening period between 1789 and 1793, '... Flood's two objectives, of financial retrenchment and constitutional reform, still underlay much of Parsons's political thought, ... [and] they were asserted now with a sense of urgency not evident before. ...

Yet, it is clear that he had no revolutionary changes in mind. He opposed any extension of the franchise, since "the poorer the voter, the more liable is he to be easy to corrupt". He was anxious to preserve the ascendancy of the propertied classes, who he believed were alone fit to rule, and he was prepared to build up an "artificial superiority" in the constitution to preserve them from the physical superiority of the lower classes. ... "'Tis better for a people that those who have been educated with the expectation of enjoying fortune and power should possess them than those who have not." ...' In subsequent private correspondence he made the point even more explicitly. '... As to the general principle of appointment, I confess, I have a partiality for gentlemen. I would rather associate with them; I would rather deal with them; I would rather see them put into places of trust and power. Those who are raised much more above their native sphere seldom I think demean themselves altogether suitably. ...'

'... The reasons which led Parsons to remain aloof from his colleagues [who formed the Irish Whig Club in June 1789] are not difficult to find. He had already formed the opinion that an organised opposition was undesirable and worked against the efficiency of parliament. ... He was still preoccupied with the teachings of Flood, and could not be expected to view with much sympathy a movement so strongly influenced by Grattan. Moreover, the events in France

ROSSE PAPERS

SUMMARY LIST

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A/	DATE	DESCRIPTION
1–26	1595–1699: 1871	17th-century letters and papers of the two branches of the Parsons family, the Parsonses of Bellamont, Co. Dublin, Viscounts Rosse, and the Parsonses of Parsonstown, alias Birr, King's County. [N.B. The whole of this section is kept in the right-hand cupboard of the Muniment Room in Birr Castle. It has been microfilmed by the Carroll Institute, Carroll House, 2–6 Catherine Place, London SW1E 6HF. A copy of the microfilm is available in the Muniment Room at Birr Castle and in PRONI.]
1	1595–1699	Large folio volume containing <i>c.</i> 125 very miscellaneous documents, amateurishly but sensibly attached to its pages, and referred to in other sub-sections of Section A as 'MSS ii'. This volume is described in R. J. Hayes, <i>Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation</i> , as 'A volume of documents relating to the Parsons family of Birr, Earls of Rosse, and lands in Offaly and property in Birr, 1595–1699', and has been microfilmed by the National Library of Ireland (n.526: p. 799). It includes letters of <i>c.</i> 1640 from Rev. Richard Heaton, the early and important Irish botanist.
2	1595–1699	Late 19th-century, and not quite complete, table of contents to A/1 ('MSS ii') [in the handwriting of the 5th Earl of Rosse (d. 1918)], and including the following entries: '1. 1595. Elizabeth Regina, grant to Richard Hardinge (copia). ... 7. 1629. Agreement of sale from Samuel Smith of Birr to Lady Anne Parsons, relict of Sir Laurence Parsons, of cattle, "especially the cows of English breed". ... 15. 1636, 19 February. A schedule of the lands and hereditaments for which William Parsons Esq. compounded (5 ^{1/2} pages). ... 17. 1636. Grant of lands of Bogoin, Clonbrany and Shangallagh to Dame Anne Parsons (copy). ... 21. 1638, 15 June. Order for "the remedy of defective titles" to William Parsons, brother of the late Richard Parsons, son of the late Sir Laurence Parsons, Knt, to whom the original grant had been made, concerning lands in the barony of Fermoy, Co. Cork. ... 25. 1639. Royal examination of William Parsons and Capt. William Peisley concerning the finding of arms at the house of John Carroll of Clonlisk. ... 35. 1641, 30 August. Instructions from the freeholders of the King's County to their representatives, William Parsons of Parsonstown alias Birr, King's County, and John Coghlan of Streamstown (original parchment, much strained, and paper copy – numerous autograph signatures). ... 39. 1641. List of properties (forfeited) in the counties Cork, Tipperary, Westmeath, Limerick and Longford, with "proprietors in 1641, denominations and to whom granted, number of acres, and rent received; endorsed, "forfiters [sic] Sir George Preston". ... 59. 1650. A "dunning" letter from William Davys to William Parsons. 71. 1668, October 29. Letter of the Duchess of Ormond[e] to Sir

A/2 *contd.*

- George Preston at Dublin concerning his patent for the salmon weir [in dispute between Preston and the corporation of Limerick]. ... 125. Dressmaker's bill for "Madam Parshons", 1689. ... 133. Parchment deed -certificate stating the losses of Sir L[aurence] P[arsons] during the siege of Birr Castle in 1687 and 1688, signed by numerous inhabitants of King's County (gentry), 1690 (on back, list of houses burnt and pulled down). ... 154. Receipt for £55.12s.0d. by William Parsons's officers, 25 July 1642 (copy). ... [155–189 are all similar documents, 1641–3.] 205. List of holdings in Cork with proprietors in 1641; endorsed, "A copy of the lot in which I am concerned". ... 207. Petition by Sir William Parsons, 2nd Bt, ... to ... parliament; refers (a) to Sir Laurence Parsons's imprisonment and sentence of death, also to William Parson's services in 1641; endorsed, "late Duc Ormond [sic] told me not [to] give [in] this petition, and he'd serve me with the King". ... 211. 1680/81. Accounts of money lent to and paid for Sir Richard Parsons (of Bellamont? – 8¹/₂ pages foolscap ...). ... 219. Instructions for Capt. [Heward] Oxburgh, March 28, 1686 (7 pages foolscap). [221–247 also concern the Oxburgh affair, for which see the Introduction.] ... 251. 1641. King Charles I's letter concerning Concordatum money. 253. 1641. King Charles I's letter concerning Brian McConnell "of the King's footemen [sic]", to Sir William Parsons and Sir John Borlase. 255. Order of the Lords Justices of Ireland [Parsons and Borlase] concerning contribution for the fortification of Dublin by the parish of "St Michael's".
- 3 1607 [?Bond of lease] concerning John Netterville of [Dowth?], Co. Meath, [and probably relating to the senior branch of the Parsons family, as Frances, daughter of the 1st Viscount Rosse, married the 4th Viscount Netterville. For the Nettervilles, see also D/18 and F/11.]
- 4 1612–94;
1912; 1940 Tattered vellum-bound volume covering the period 1612–94, microfilmed by the National Library (n.5483: p.5650), and containing, according to the *Hayes* description: memoranda about Star Chamber procedure, with notes of cases heard *c.* 1612–16; official letters relating to the plantations of Co. Longford and King's County, 1619–26; orders for the preservation of royal rents and revenues in Ireland, 1623; instructions to officers of the Exchequer as to their duties, 1623; instructions of Sir L. Parsons for his plantation at Birr and for markets in and the government of the town, 1626–7; near-contemporary particulars of the acreage of Ely O'Carroll; rentals of the estates of the Parsonses of Parsonstown, mostly in King's County, 1629–94; medical and kitchen recipés, 1645–52, including some to cure 'the stone'; and details of the births and baptisms of the children born to Sir Laurence Parsons, 1st Bt, and his wife, Frances, 1660–66; together

A/4 *contd.*

with (and not covered by the microfilm) a lease of 1912 and legal papers of 1940 relating to the tolls, fairs and markets of Birr and reciting earlier grants back to the 1620s.*

5 1617–94

Folio volume similar to A/1 and described in other sub-sections of A as ‘MSS i’, containing 94 very miscellaneous documents. This volume has been microfilmed by the National Library (n.527: p. 795), and is described in *Hayes* as ‘A volume (marked vol. ii [*sic*–i]) of papers relating to the Parsons family of Birr, dealing with private and public affairs, governing the period 1617–1692 [*sic*], ... mostly dated 1649–49’. In the appendix to the *First Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts* (London, 1870), p. 127, it is described (by Sir John Gilbert) as ‘A volume in large folio containing about 90 original letters and documents connected with the affairs of Ireland from 1626 [*sic*] to 1694, and having special reference to the transactions in the King’s County and its vicinage’. In the appendix to the Second Report of the H.M.C. (London, 1874), pp. 217–23, a full description is given. The following is a brief summary of some of the documents in the volume:

Agreement between Richard Roche Fitzdavid and Sir Laurence Parsons for the lands of Shinanagh, Co. Cork, 1620; acquittance from R. Smith and J. Knollis to L. Parsons for £84 for the redemption of two ploughlands in White’s Island which Capt. Tent sold, 23 October 1625; order of composition between William Parsons and the Commissioners on Defective Titles, 4 April 1636; certificate of Sir B. Mayart, Justice of the King’s Bench, of the acknowledgement by H. Sacheverell of Ballingagort, Co. Armagh, of £50 due by him to Anne Parsons, 24 June 1636; order to William Parsons concerning Birr and other lands in King’s County, signed by Ri. Bolton, Trinity 1636; similar order concerning Newtown and other lands in King’s County, 1636; indenture between Lady Anne Parsons of Parsonstown and D. O’Kenedy of Tirreglasse, Co. Tipperary, and E. O’Kenedy of Portlaghan, Co. Tipperary, concerning the lands of Lackenboy, barony of Lower Orrmond, 14 January 1636[17]; schedule of the lands and hereditaments for which William Parsons compounded with the Commissioners for Defective Titles, 15 June 1638; order by the Lords Justices and Privy Council to Capt. W. Peisley and William Parsons for searching the house of John O’Carroll of Clounlish, 13 November 1639; acquittance from Donnell MacCahirr O’Molloy to Lady Anne Parsons for £100 in redemption of a mortgage, 25 March 1640 [141]; commission from the Lords Justices and Privy Council to William Parsons for raising footmen and horsemen in the country of Ely O’Carroll, 12 November 1641; letter from Phelem Molloy,

* See detailed calendar.

A/5 contd.

Catholique [sic] camp, Eglish, to William Parsons asking him to join the King's [ie. Confederate] party rather than the Puritans, and offering him protection, 17 March 1641[/2?]; account of sums due to William Parsons for the garrisons at Birr from November 1641 to January 1642, April 1642; order by the Lords Justices and Privy Council for 25 horse for Capt. William Parsons and 100 foot for Capt. Chidley Coote, for the defence of the castle of Parsonstown and the town and country thereabouts, 1 April 1642; letter from Farrell O'Kennedy to William Parsons offering to arrange a meeting with Colonel Richard Butler and discussing the military situation, 28 July 1642; letter from Ro. Moore [a Confederate colonel] to Lady Anne Parsons discussing her request for the restoration of her captured coach-horses, 5 September 1642; receipt from Chidley Coote, J. Williams and Simon Tench for money received from William Parsons, commander-in-chief of Ely O'Carroll, 29 October 1642; note of money paid by William Parsons to the soldiers under Capt. Carroll and to the garrisons at Parsonstown, Ballyndarrow and Cloynakill from November 1641 to January 1642[/3]; articles of surrender for Birr Castle signed by T. Preston, the Confederate General of Leinster, and William Parsons, 20 January 1642[/3?]; order by the Lords Justices and Privy Council for the repayment to William Parsons of sums spent by him for Capt. Chidley Coote's company, 3 June 1643; orders from Ormonde to Capt. William Parsons to march with his troops to Jobstown, Monasterevin and Kilgobbane, 3 and 20 June and 5 July respectively; letter from R. Southwell to Capt. William Parsons about the land of Ballyage and other lands round Kinsale, 11 June 1647; various papers relating to the military services of Capt. William Parsons, 164 3–8; debenture under the Act of Settlement awarding to Capt. William Parsons £1,112-odd for arrears of pay from November 1641 to September 1643, 10 March 1663[/4]; terms of Birr Castle's surrender to the Jacobites, signed by Colonel H. Oxburgh and Lieutenant-Colonel R. Grace, of the one part, and Sir Laurence Parsons, Bt, of the other, 27 February 1688 [/9?]; warrant from James II to Francis Coghlan, High Sheriff of King's County, reprieving for one month Sir Laurence Parsons, James Roscoe and Jonathan Darby, lately indicted at Philipstown for rebellion, and sentenced to death, 29 April 1689; further grant of reprieve, 22 May and 7 August 1689 respectively; Colonel Garret Moore's certificate to the Duke of Tyrconnell concerning Sir Laurence Parsons's actions at Birr Castle, 8 March 1689[/90?]; and petition from Sir Laurence Parsons to the commissioners for the management of the forfeited estates, with the commissioners' order on it, September 1690.*

- A/6 1617–94 Late 19th-century list of contents of A/5, similar to A/2.
- 7/1–2 July 1619 Document recorded in the *First Report* of the H.M.C. as ‘Letters patent on parchment, from George, Duke [recte: Marquess] of Buckingham, Lord High Admiral, dated 28 July 1619, containing grant of Admiralty to Laurence Parsons, with seal and autograph of Buckingham; together with an earlier deputation to Parsons from George Lowe, Vice-Admiral of Munster and Leinster, 23 July 1619. [George Lowe was one of the four patentees of the farm of the Irish customs. In 1614 he had bought out on their behalf the Irish vice-admiralty (which Buckingham’s predecessor, Lord Nottingham, had granted to Nottingham’s son). Their object in making this purchase was presumably to enable them to combat piracy and so enhance the proceeds from the customs farm. Lowe appointed one principal deputy, Humphrey Jobson, but seems to have employed a number of local deputies as well, Laurence Parsons being one of the latter. See Victor Treadwell, *Buckingham and Ireland*, 1616–1628 (Dublin, 1998) pp 99–100. The ‘grant of Admiralty’ from Buckingham to Parsons was actually the appointment of Parsons as Judge of the Admiralty for Munster. (Judgeships of the Admiralty in Ireland were in the gift of the Lord High Admiral until 1785, when the patronage was resumed by the Crown.) This patent could not initially be found in Birr Castle (see Treadwell, p. 327, 48*n*), but has since turned up and bears reference A/7/2.]
- 8 1620–40:
1660–66 Clutch of papers, crudely bound with a parchment cover, microfilmed by the National Library (n.5483: p. 5650), and described in *Hayes* as ‘Abstracts of leases of holdings in Parsonstown Manor made by Sir L. Parsons, 1620–40 ...’. The volume was turned upside down and used by the first Sir Laurence Parsons to record accounts for the period 1627–8. These last have been transcribed (1983) by Miss Frances Wilson, and the MS. and typescript of her transcript are included with the volume.*
- 8A 1620–21 Volume, not at present to be found in Birr Castle and probably missing since the period 1826–75, described in the second edition of Cooke’s *Picture of Parsonstown*, which was published in the latter year under the title *The Early History of the Town of Birr or Parsonstown ...*, as an account book kept by Sir Laurence Parsons’s steward, Francis Morley, and recording among other things the ‘... prices of provisions, work and materials for building in Birr and the end of 1620 and beginning of 1621 ...’.*
- 9 18 Oct. 1641–
20 Jan. 1642[1/3] [Capt. William Parsons’s?] diary of the siege of Birr Castle in 1643 and other military events during the early years of the wars of the 1640s, re-bound in half calf in the early 19th century, and some pages of it detached with a view, apparently, to conservation, but without having so far been conserved (these pages have been

* See detailed calendar.

- A/9 *contd.* placed loose between the front end-papers). The diary has been photostated by the National Library (MS. 13667). The rest of the volume consists of 44 pages of copies of deeds relating to the Savage family of Cottenhoe, Buckinghamshire, and to Sir Arthur Savage of Raban Castle (grandfather of Frances Savage, wife of Parsons's son, Sir Laurence, 1st Bt? – see T/1), 1609–35.*
- 9A 18 Oct. 1641– Late 19th-century transcript of the diary, together with notes on
20 Jan. 1642[1/3] it and on other MSS in Birr Castle and elsewhere (all in the 5th Earl of Rosse's hand).
- 10 1646 Captain's commission in Colonel (Michael) Jones's regiment of horse for William Parsons of Birr, signed by Viscount Lisle.
- 11 1651: 1653 Copy, made *c.* 1820, of the will of Sir William Parsons, Knight and 1st Bt, the former Lord Justice, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, together with an incomplete, typescript copy (made by Rolf Loeber, [*c.* 1990]) of the will of William Parsons of Parsonstown, proved 1653, and typescript notes by Loeber on both wills.
- 12 1652–96 Volume described in the *First Report* of the H.M.C. as 'A thick folio volume of accounts of money, debts, payments, prices of articles, clothes, allowance, and other matters connected with the family of Parsons, from 1652–1696'.
- 13 1660 Power of attorney from Dame Catherine Parsons of Bellamont, Co. Dublin, mother and guardian of Sir Richard Parsons, 3rd Bt (and future 1st Viscount Rosse), to the Earl of Cork, Lord Digby and Sir John Cole, Bt, apparently to act as guardians on her behalf.
- 14 1662 Rules prescribed by the mayor and corporation of Galway for the regulation of one of the companies (or guilds) of the town. [The document is badly damaged, and the name of the company, among other things, is missing.]
- 15 [1666?] Volume of near-contemporary copies of State Papers, etc, concerning the terms of the Acts of Settlement and Explanation, briefly described in the *First Report* of the H.M.C. as 'A folio volume of 90 pages containing copies of documents concerning Irish matters, from 1641–1666', and calendared in the Second Report.*
- 16 1668–75 Account book, of uncertain provenance, belonging to one David Johnston of Dublin, recording payments to him for such diverse commodities and services as deal-boards, iron, sugar, indigo, calicoes and funeral expenses; among the clients mentioned are Capt. Claud Hamilton, Thomas Bligh and 'Mr Westenra' (presumably Peter Westenra, ancestor of the Lords Rossmore, as Bligh was the ancestor of the Earls of Darnley).
- 17 1666[–*c.* 1720] Small quarto volume containing medical and kitchen recipes, of Dorothy Parsons, daughter of Sir Laurence Parsons, 1st Bt. of Parsonstown, and incorporating some suggestions of 'Lady

* See detailed calendar.

- A/17 *contd.* Elizabeth Parsons', wife of Sir William Parsons, 2nd Bt, of Parsonstown?, with, loose in the fly-leaves, a pen and pencil drawing of 'Parsonstown House, 1668', showing alterations which appear to have been carried out and which, clearly, were intended to render the old castle more amenable to domestic living; the sketch is wittily headed, 'An excellent receipt to spend 4,000 pound [sic]'. [A photocopy of the 1668 drawing is present in PRONI, ref. T/3498/1. For other receipts/receipt books, see E/13A, G/20 and M/18.]
- 18/1-9 1669: 1671-3: Miscellaneous, loose letters and papers of Sir Laurence Parsons, N.D.: 1688: 1st Bt, including a copy of the Chancery bill in Parsons v L'Estrange, 1669, a county treasurer's computation of the number of acres in King's County, N.D., a copy of a letter from Sir Laurence Parsons to the 2nd Duke of Ormonde about money due Parsons out of the estate of Lady Preston [see A/1] 1688, etc. [Much of this sub-section is in a bad state of repair.]
- 19 1672-9: Parchment-bound volume described in some detail in the First Report of the H.M.C., as follows: 'A book of orders and rules of commissioners for assessment on the King's County, 1672-1679. In this volume are entered particulars of assessments and levies in various baronies [*sic*], including Meath, Dublin, Louth, Ossory, Rathdown, Wicklow, Shillelagh, Salt, Ikeathy and Oughterany. There are also contained rules and orders of the commissioners of array in the King's County, notes of their meetings, copies of letters, accounts of money laid out for exercising and training the militia, distribution of two troops and their companies upon the several baronies of that county allowing 600 acres for a horseman and 300 acres for a foot soldier. Two leaves are filled with a journal narrative, in very small writing, of local transactions of 1688-9.'
- 20 2 July 1681 Illuminated document recorded in the *First Report* of the H.M.C. as 'Letters patent granting to Richard Parsons of Bellamont in the county of Dublin the dignities of Baron of Oxmantown and Viscount Ross[e], dated at Dublin, 2nd July in the 33rd year of Charles II, 1681'.
- 21 1682 The same - 'Grant of arms to Sir William [sic - Laurence] Parsons from Richard St George, Ulster King at Arms, 1682'.
- 22 [c. 1688] Copy of a Chancery bill filed by Richard, 1st Viscount Rosse, and an apparently related memorandum about the disputes within that branch of the Parsons family which engendered the bill.
- 23 c. 1691 Volume, not now to be found in Birr Castle, described in the *First Report* of the H.M.C. as 'A volume in small quarto, of 130 pages, written in a very minute current hand about 1691, containing a narrative of the affairs of Sir Laurence Parsons from April 1687 to 1691, detailing circumstances connected with the wars of James

* See detailed calendar.

- A/23 contd.* and William in Ireland, the siege of Birr Castle by Jacobites in 1688, and of that castle and town in 1690'.*
- 24 1685–91: 1695 Folio volume, falling apart, containing a late 19th-century transcription of *A/23*; together with a [c. 1800?] copy of a 'Plan of the castle and town of the Burre [*sic*] as besieged by General Sarsfield in 1691, taken from the account given in Harris's *Life of William III*'; a photocopy of the respite of Sir Laurence Parsons's execution, signed by James II, 8 March 1690[/91]; the originals of two near-contemporary military commissions, one signed by James II and Lord Sunderland appointing Wentworth Harman a lieutenant in the Horse Guards, 1685, the other by William III and the Duke of Shrewsbury appointing Anthony Shepherd (a Harman connection) a captain in Fairfax's Foot, 1695; etc. [The commissions are both framed and hanging in the Muniment Room.]
- 25/1–13 1604: 1611: Highly artificial bundle of title and settlement deeds: the items of
 1621: 1625: 1611, 1621, 1625, 1627, 1632 and 1643 are King's County title
 1629: 1632: deeds, three of them to the lands of Ballindarragh and Crinkle,
 1634: 1639: one of them a deed of settlement on the younger children of Sir
 1643: [1666?]: Laurence Parsons, and others certified copies of the grants to him
 1680: 1682: of fairs and markets at Parsonstown; the deeds of 1639 are a post-
 1694: 1696 nuptial settlement on Capt. William Parsons, and a fine of the
 lands of Reban, Co. Kildare, the property of Thomas Savage, who
 presumably was a brother of Frances Savage, wife of Sir Laurence
 Parsons, 1st Bt; the remaining title deeds concern the Co. Wexford
 estate, settled in 1634 by Sir William Parsons, the Lord Justice, on
 Arthur Parsons of Tomduff, Co. Wexford, and his descendants,
 who died out between 1708 and 1711, when this Wexford estate
 passed to Sir William Parsons, 2nd Bt, of Parsonstown. There
 were two components of this estate: Tomduff (also known as
 'Parsonstown'), barony of Ballaghkeen North, near Courtown, and
 St John's, barony of Bantry, near Enniscorthy. In the first half of
 the century, the Co. Wexford Parsonsese seem to have been 'of
 Tomduff: the deed of 1696 describes the then Co. Wexford
 Parsons, William, as 'of St John's. [For the manorial lordship of,
 and other papers about, St John's, see B/12.]
- 26/1–12 1851: 1871: Artificial sub-section made up of subsequent communications
 1922: 1955: concerning the events covered by Section A, as follows: letter
 1973: 1982–6: from Eliot Warburton (the novelist and minor historian) to the
 1990 3rd Earl of Rosse asking if he possesses any MS. information
 about Lord Justice Parsons or can think of any one redeeming
 feature possessed by the latter, 1851; letter of 1871 from Sir John
 T. Gilbert to the 4th Earl of Rosse about the MS. diary of the siege
 of Birr Castle in 1642 [*A/9*], which had been mislaid at the time
 of Gilbert's First Report, but which he will report upon next time
 if it has since come to light; photocopies of reminiscences of Leap
 Castle, Co. Offaly, 1922, sent subsequently to the 6th Earl of

A/26 contd.

Rosse; carbon, typescript copy of Norman D. Atkinson's M.A. thesis, 'The Plantation of Ely O'Carroll, 1619–1693' (T.C.D., June 1955), with accompanying letter; envelope of papers about the O'Carroll castle of Leap, 1973; newspaper cutting and letter about Bellamont/Ballymount, Co. Dublin, seat of the Viscounts Rosse, 1982 and 1985 respectively; typescript dissertation on 'Birr as a landlord town, 1600–1900', by Siobhan McNamara, 1983; typescript notes on references to the first Sir Laurence Parsons in The Lismore Papers, [1985]; and photocopies of articles by Rolf Loeber on Clonony Castle, Co. Offaly, sometime home of the Boleyn and Clere families, 1985, and Tomduff, Co. Wexford, 1986; etc, etc.

[For other papers of a later date relating to the 17th century history of the Parsons family and Parsonstown, see B/12 and 15, F/11, J/17, M/20 and M/28.]



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* See detailed calendar.