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Sir Laurence Parsons, second Earl of Rosse

1758 — 1841

ATKINSON

THESIS
97A

SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE

1758 - 1841

N. D. Atkinson

When Sir Laurence Parsons entered the Irish Parliament in 1781, at the age of twenty-three, he already possessed a number of advantages which were of considerable importance in the political life of eighteenth-century Ireland. He was heir to a comfortable estate on which his ancestors had resided since the early years of the previous century; successive memb ers of his family had played a conspicuous part in the affairs of the Irish midlands; he was a graduate of Trinity College, where he had been a leading member of the Historical Society, now established as the chief training-ground for Irish public life.

By the time of the Union, nineteen years later, he could not claim even one decisive victory. His opinions on the Mutiny Act, Catholic emancipation, the Corn trade, internal defence and war against France had been disregarded by government and opposition alike. Except for a brief period in 1794 when he was supported by a small group of members who shared his dislike of the war with France, he remained isolated and with little political influence.

The explanation of Parsons's failure is to be found in his unwavering allegiance to the teaching of Henry Flood who was his close friend during his early years in the Irish Parliament. Prior to 1789, his advocacy of Flood's two

objectives of financial retrenchment and parliamentary reform represented a worthwhile attempt to strengthen and improve the Irish constitution. Yet the French Revolution introduced new elements into Irish political life the significance of which Parsons never appreciated. He failed to see that by standing apart from the stronger and more cohesive opposition which emerged from the Whig Club in 1789, and by retaining his hatred towards Grattan and Flood's other enemies unimpaired, he was weakening the best possible chance of winning reform. Even during the Union controversy he never found it possible to identify himself completely with the other members of the opposition.

Parsons's political views were determined by his belief in the right of the landed classes to hold a monopoly of political power. He feared any social upheaval which might upset the stability of the constitution and destroy the established position of property and rank. These fears led him to advocate a programme of popular reform more urgent and more far-reaching than that demanded by the members of the Whig Club. He was not, as Lecky and others believed, drawing close to the ideals of the United Irishmen; his attitude was, in reality, one of conservatism and extreme caution.

The same motives dominated his economic policy. He was

anxious to safeguard the interests of agriculture as the basis of the property of the landed gentry. This occasionally led him to express views of a decidedly sectarian nature, as when he attacked the merchant classes during the debates on the India bill in 1792 and the Corn Law amendment bill in 1797. He showed himself to be well aware of the wider opportunities offered to Irish agriculture as the new industrial age unfolded itself in England, and he opposed the free trade movement which threatened to deprive Irish agriculturalists of their privileged position during the years which followed the Union.

The Union which, symbolically perhaps, divided Parsons's life into two almost equal chronological sections, also marked an important turning-point in the course of both his public and private affairs. He made no attempt to project the Union controversy into the imperial Parliament. Instead, he co-operated closely with the administration, hoping for official allies to preserve the ascendancy of the landed classes in Ireland. It would seem that the changed strategic situation of the war against France, increased tension between different sections of the community in Ireland and the political apathy which prevailed amongst the Irish upper classes after the Union, all contributed to this development. He accepted appointment to public office first at the Irish Treasury and

then at the Irish Post Office, where he carried out a highly successful programme of administrative reform.

Parsons's work as a landlord and local administrator belongs to the period which followed the Union, when political affairs had ceased to interest him so deeply. He did not take an active part in the administration of his estates, which he left largely in the hands of an agent, and he took no steps to encourage local industry. Instead, he concentrated his attention on what was for him the far more congenial task of transforming the town of Birr, in the King's County, into a place of considerable grace and beauty. Several architectural monuments survive to give testimony to his work, the chief of these being his home at Birr Castle.

Shortly before the Union he married Alice Lloyd, a member of one of the neighbouring families of the King's County. He was deeply attached to his wife and family, and took a particular interest in the education of his sons whom he kept at home under his own supervision even after they had been entered as undergraduates at Trinity College. At all times a scholar by inclination and habit, he must be held in large measure responsible for the academic achievements of a number of succeeding members of his family.

Before the Union, Parsons wrote a number of pamphlets on political subjects, and a defence of Flood's bequest for the study of Irish in Trinity College, which gives evidence of

considerable historical research. After the Union he turned his attention to more purely academic matters and produced both a large body of poetry and a treatise on the Christian Revelation.

The present work is based largely on unpublished material derived from the Parsons MSS. in the possession of the Earl of Rosse, at Birr Castle. Extensive use has also been made of MSS. in the Public Record Office, British Museum and Public Record Office of Ireland, and of a number of local archives.

SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE. IN COURT DRESS.
Reproduced from a portrait at Birr Castle, by kind permission of the
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SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE. IN COURT DRESS.
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SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE
1758 - 1841



By
N. D. Atkinson B.A., M.Litt.

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'Thus the gentleman's son is raised. He is early taught that the true character of gentility is being kind and meek and benevolent towards those in inferior situations. That it is those most used to power that make the mildest use of it. That it is the note of an upstart to be oppressive, overbearing, impertinent. And so education takes its effect and forms the mind.'

Memorandum of Sir Laurence Parsons.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PARSONS OF PARSONSTOWN

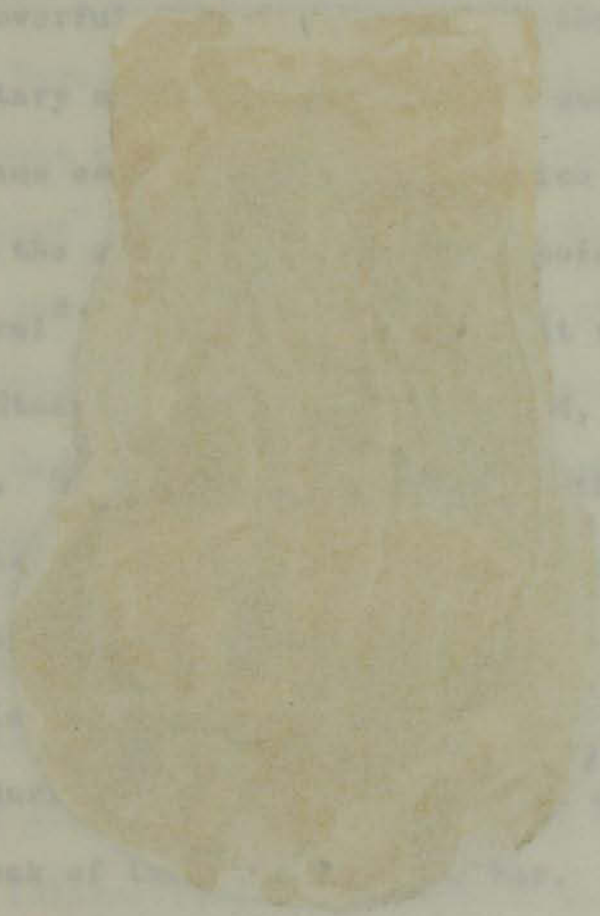
The early history of the Parsons family is shrouded in obscurity. We only know with certainty that three brothers bearing this name appeared in Ireland towards the close of the sixteenth century, and entered upon careers in the service of the Irish government.

One usually reliable source[1] states that they were sons of William Parsons, Bishop of Norwich. Yet it is not difficult to show that no Bishop of Norwich has ever borne the name of Parsons, and again, that there was no Bishop of the name during the sixteenth century.[2]

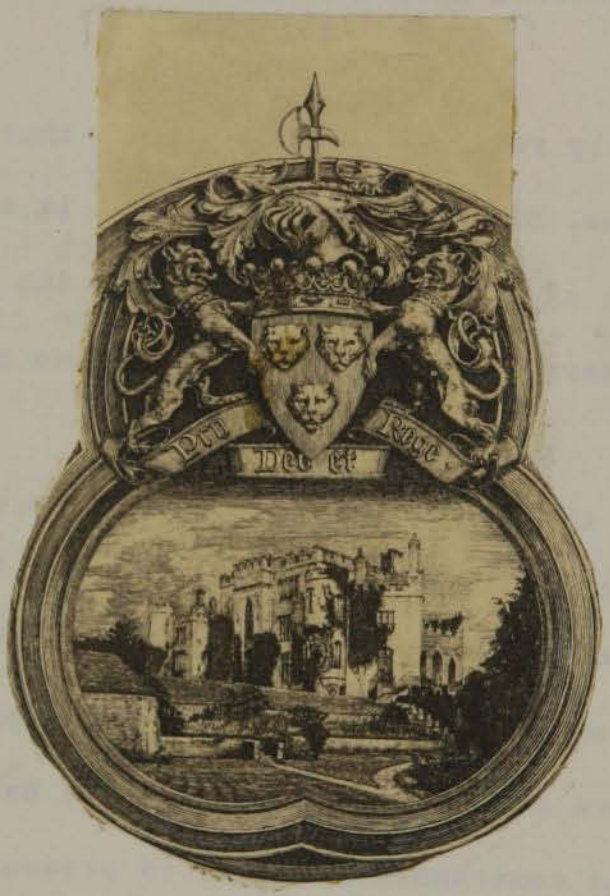
A second theory is put forward by a writer in the Dictionary of National Biography who suggests that the three brothers were sons of William Parsons of Disworth Grange in Leicestershire. This theory is certainly supported by the rather striking frequency with which the name occurs in Leicestershire records belonging to this period.[3] Moreover, some remarkable evidence is presented by a contemporary writer, William Burton, in his View of Leicestershire, which gives a description of a coat of arms then found in Disworth parish church

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1. Irish Pedigrees (T.C.D. MS. F.4.18).
2. List of the Archbishops and Bishops of England (Crockford, Clerical Directory, p. 1352).
3. In the marriage registers, from 1620 to 1727, it appears fourteen times, and in the enrolment of wills, from 1521 to 1709, fifty-nine times.



Reproduced by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.



ARMS OF THE PARSONS FAMILY, AND BIRR CASTLE.
Reproduced by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.

and almost identical with the arms still used by the Parsons family.[1] It seems not unlikely then, that the three brothers lived at Disworth during some period before they came to Ireland.

Whatever their origins, the early Parsons do not appear to have found themselves in circumstances of any great affluence. They possessed a powerful friend, however, in their uncle, Sir Geoffrey Fenton, Secretary of Ireland, and it was under Fenton's influence that they became established in the service of the government.

William, the eldest brother, was appointed to the office of Surveyor-General[2] in 1603, and carried out the surveys which preceded the Stuart plantations in Wexford, Leitrim, Longford and Ely O'Carroll. He became an authority on the new plantation policy, and in 1620 was chosen to go to London to give the King a personal account of what had been accomplished.[3] William rose to a position of considerable trust in the Irish administration, and served as Lord Justice during the period between the departure of Strafford and the outbreak of the English Civil War.

Fenton, the second of the Parsons brothers, never attained much eminence. He was employed by William as agent for the estates

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1. Burton's description is as follows:
   In the church these arms. Geuilles, three lions passant gardant. Or. Sable, a lion rampant argent coronne. Or. Unde arg. and sable. Arg. a bend sable in the sinister point a cinquifoyle azure.
2. Sir G. Fenton to Cecil, 8 May 1603 (Cal. S.P.I., 1601/3, p. 49).
3. The King to St. John, 26 February 1620 (Cal. S.P.I., 1615/25, p.275).

which the latter acquired from the plantation in Ulster, at Clogher, County Tyrone.[1]

Laurence, the youngest brother, was founder of the line which came to reside at Birr. He received his first public appointment in 1604, when he became Clerk of the Crown and Peace in Munster,[2] and in the following year was joined with William in the office of Escheater and Receiver-General of Crown lands in Ireland.[3] In 1603 Sir Geoffrey sent him back to England to study law at Grey's Inn, where he remained[4] until 1607. When he returned to Ireland he does not appear to have received any immediate promotion, but in 1612 he became Attorney-General for Munster,[5] and by 1625 was one of the Barons of the Exchequer.[6] In 1627 he succeeded Sir Adam Loftus as Judge of the Admiralty in Ireland,[7] a position which he held until

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1. State of the Ulster Plantation, 1611 (Cal. S.P.I., 1611/14, p. 121).

2. List of Pensions, Sept. 1611 (Cal. S.P.I., 1611, p. 110).

3. Patent of James 1, 1620 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 249).

4. For this information, I am indebted to the Librarian of the Inner Temple.

5. Parsons family pedigree (Parsons MSS.).

6. The King to Lord Deputy, 19 Nov. 1625 (Cal. S.P.I., 1625/60, Addenda, p. 294).

7. Duke of Buckingham to Sir H. Marten, 22 Sept. 1627 (Cal. S.P.I., 1625/32, p. 271).

his death late in the following year.[1] He was knighted by the Lord Deputy St. John, and represented the borough of Tallagh (County Waterford) in the Irish Parliament.[2]

Sir Laurence's reputation as a public servant was by no means a happy one. He rendered much valuable service to the government, particularly as director of espionage activities in Munster, for which work he was, indeed, well-fitted by temperament. He was crafty, cunning and utterly unscrupulous, his guiding motive was frequently that of self-interest, and he was very unpopular amongst his colleagues.

In 1627 he was accused, together with the Lord Deputy, of taking bribes to permit the discharge of a Dutch wine-vessel.[3] During the preceding year his Admiralty accounts had been inspected by Sir Edward Villiers, whose suspicions had clearly been aroused, although he could find no open evidence of corruption.[4] Shortly before his death the Lord Chancellor complained about the mismanagement of Admiralty business, and proposed to "Introduce some system

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1. Lord Deputy to Secretary Nicholas, 15 Sept. 1628 (Cal. S.P.I., 1625/32, p. 387).

2. Parsons family pedigree (Parsons MSS.).

3. Evidence of the Burgesses of Clonakilty, 23 April 1627 (Cal. S.P.I., 1625/32, p. 226).

4. Sir E. Villiers to Secretary Nicholas, 27 April 1626 (Cal. S.P.I., 1625/32, p. 117).

into the chaos created by Sir Laurence Parsons, while he was enjoying my rights".[1]

On 26 June 1620 Sir Laurence received a patent for various lands around Birr, in the King's County, forming part of the recently confiscated territory of the O'Carrolls of Ely. Under the terms of this grant Birr was made into a manor, with the new name of Parsonstown, and Sir Laurence and his heirs were invested with full manorial privileges.[2] From the outset he displayed an active interest in the affairs of his new estates, and his reputation as a landlord and colonial administrator compares very favourably with that which he had acquired as a public servant.

II

The town of Birr, or Parsonstown, is always seen first from the brow of a hill. Down in the valley, the clustered roof-tops are dominated by the towers and battlements of Birr Castle. It is an interesting and perhaps symbolic impression, for the owners of the castle exercised a decisive influence in shaping the outward form and beauty of the town.

Many memorials are at hand to testify to the residence of successive members of the Parsons family. Of these by far the greatest number belong to Sir Laurence Parsons, later second Earl of

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1. Lord Chancellor to Secretary Nicholas, 29 Jan. 1629 (Cal. S.P.I., 1625/32, p. 117).

2. Patent to Sir L. Parsons, 26 June 1620 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 3).

Rosse, who succeeded to the property during the closing years of the eighteenth century. His orderly, classical taste is reflected in the broad malls, lined with graceful Regency houses and ornamental greens, the two Gothic churches, and John's Hall, copied from an architectural design which he found in Greece. He was also responsible for the erection of Oxmantown Bridge over the Camcor, taking its design from that of a bridge which spanned the Anio, in southern Italy.

At one end of Oxmantown Mall, facing the parish church, is the entrance to the castle demesne. The gate-house, its turrets and battlemented wall, are all the creation of Sir Laurence, as is, too, the layout of the parkland, through which the main avenue runs for several hundred yards before reaching the castle. The latter has changed little since Sir Laurence's day, for it was he who transformed an ancient baronial fortress into a pleasing modern residence in the Gothic style. The approach-way crosses a moat, now empty of water, and passes under a gate-house decorated with the arms of the Parsons family, and those of families to which they are allied by marriage. Across a green sward lies the great north front erected by Sir Laurence. Behind it, and towards the eastern extremity, may be seen the outline of an earlier portion of the building. Here a long fissure in the wall bears testimony to an assault by Jacobite cannon in 1691.

The old castle at Birr, which was built by the first Sir Laurence Parsons, faced south-eastwards towards the town, and was flanked on either side by the houses of the main thoroughfare. During the lifetime of Sir Laurence, second Earl of Rosse, these houses were pulled down, the property enclosed by a high demesne wall, and the residence re-built and re-aligned, with a new prospect of rolling parkland.

The main doorway leads to a long oak-panelled hall, on the walls of which hang portraits and tapestries which were already there in Sir Laurence's day. Over the fire-place are seen swords and cannon-balls, relics of the siege of 1691. Over the dining-room fire-place hangs a portrait of Sir Laurence's father, Sir William Parsons, in Volunteer uniform. Near it is one of Sir Laurence himself in Court dress of the early nineteenth century; in the background appears the palace of Westminster. He is shown as a tall and commanding figure, his features set into calm though resolute lines. The face is long and oval, the nose and chin delicately cut, the mouth faintly suggestive of power. The body is slender, the hands small. This, one feels, was a man of high principles and considerable determination; almost certainly a deep thinker, perhaps an aesthete. A larger, though less imposing portrait looks down upon the great staircase. Here Sir Laurence is wearing parliamentary robes over a

brown coat with huge embroidered buttons, still preserved amongst his effects in the castle. The features in this portrait are less distinct, the expression colder and more austere.

Other memorials of Sir Laurence are nearby. In a room at the rere of the south-west wing is a painting of his wife, Mary, with her two daughters, Jane and Alicia. In the salon is a small portrait of Henry Flood, which, according to family tradition, was painted while he was on a visit to Sir Laurence at Birr. At one end of the upper gallery is a bust of his favourite son, John Clere Parsons, reposing on the top of an oak chest; in this chest still remain John's papers and other effects, placed there by his father after he had died at an early age. In the museum, a small room in the eastern tower, is collected a large number of documents dating back to 1620, when the first Sir Laurence received a patent for lands around Birr. These include two volumes of the political writings of Sir Laurence, second Earl of Rosse, one volume of his poetry and many reports and letters.

Although it is unlikely that the view from the windows has altered much since Sir Laurence's day, there are two new landmarks, both the work of his son and successor, William, third Earl of Rosse; a huge stone framework that once mounted the Rosse telescope, for many years the most powerful instrument of its kind in the world,

with the aid of which William conducted important investigations into nebula; an ornamental lake, constructed to give employment to local peasantry during the Famine of 1848.

Of the portion of the town which formerly adjoined the Castle only one trace remains. On the opposite bank of the Camcor river is St. Brendan's Well, once the chief source of water for the town. Less than a hundred yards away, across the demesne wall, rise the outlines of a parish church and great refuge tower, built by the first Sir Laurence. Both are now in a ruined condition. The church is a double-gabled building, about sixty yards long, beneath which is a vault where members of the Parsons family are buried. The tower is some forty feet high, and decorated near the top with the arms of the first Sir Laurence impaled with those of his wife. It withstood determined sieges by the Confederates in 1642, and the Jacobites in 1690.

Part of the original main street still continues beyond the demesne wall, and is known as Castle Street. At the far end of Castle Street is the old market-place, from which another thoroughfare runs southwards across the Camcor; over the river is a bridge, on which are built a number of quaint houses. Northwards of the market-place is another routeway, which has since been extended

to form the present main street. The character of this part of the town is distinctly that of the eighteenth-century, the houses being faced with brick and set close together.

III

A remarkable feature of the history of the Parsons family of Birr Castle has been the happy relationship which has existed between each generation and the local community around them. They have produced no single instance of a harsh or intolerant landlord, and only once, when Sir Laurence Parsons, later second Earl of Rosse, aroused the disapproval of the midland aristocracy for his uncompromising advocacy of constitutional reform in 1798, was the family at all unpopular.

The interest of the first Sir Laurence Parsons in his estates is illustrated by a series of ordinances which he made to ensure the well-being of the inhabitants of the town. In 1626 he declared that, as he himself had expended large sums of money in paving the middle of the streets with stone, "it is the least that the inhabitants can doe to pave XII foote broad a (sic) well before theire houses yards gardens or plotts doe reach and touch upon the street."[1] In

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1. Ordinance of Sir L. Parsons, August 1626 (Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 385).

the same year he decreed that "noe single woman other than hired servants," was to serve in a tavern, on pain of being put in the stocks.[1] In 1627 he ordered that fires should only be lit where there was a stone chimney, defaulters to be banished from the town.[2]

The parish church, with its great refuge tower, was clearly intended to be the centre of the life of the community. He appointed a graduate of Trinity College as vicar, and took measures to ensure that the services of the established church would be carried on in a correct and dignified manner.[3]

Sir Laurence attempted to found a free school in the town, but failed for lack of government support.[4] He inaugurated the weekly Saturday market,[5] which has continued on that day ever since, almost without intermission. Under his influence the Huguenot family of Bigo set up a glass factory at Clonoghill, some two miles distant from the town, and their products earned a considerable reputation in all parts of Ireland for more than a century.[6]

When the first Sir Laurence died in 1627 he was succeeded by

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1. Ordinance of Sir L. Parsons, 17 August 1626 (Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 386).
2. Ordinance of Sir L. Parsons, 7 August 1627 (Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 387).
3. State of Diocese of Killaloe, 1 July 1622 (B.M.Add.MS.31,878).
4. Ordinance of Sir L Parsons, 1626 (Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p.46).
5. Cal. Pat. Rolls, James 1, Lxvi. 497.
6. Molyneux, View of Ireland, p. 89.

his eldest son, Richard, who died without issue seven years later. The property then fell to William, the second son.[1] William found himself confronted with the task of defending the colony in Ely O'Carroll during the Confederate rebellion of 1641. Having received an official appointment as governor of the district,[2] he raised a defence force, consisting of one troop of horse and one company of foot. The expenses of these he provided out of his own pocket, as no subsidy was forthcoming from the government.[3] The castle at Birr withstood a long siege by Confederate forces, but shortage of powder and provisions eventually forced Parsons to surrender to Preston.[4]

Birr remained in Confederate hands until 1650, when it was recovered by a Cromwellian army under Ireton.[5] William Parsons died in 1653, and was succeeded by his son, Laurence. The baronetcy dates from the time of this Laurence, the grant being made on 22 May 1662.[6]

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1. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 63.
2. Lord Justices and Council to W. Parsons, 12 Nov. 1641 (Parsons Anc. Docs., f. 76).
3. Case of Sir L. Parsons, 1693 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 135).
4. Deposition of C. Coote, undated (T. C. D. MS. F. 2. 7, p. 90).
5. Bellings, History of the Confederation, VII. 104 seq.
6. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 107.

A number of incidents occurred during the lifetime of Sir Laurence, the first baronet, which were to have unhappy results for several succeeding generations of the family. In 1687 Sir Laurence was obliged to absent himself in England because of the illness of his wife, and he entrusted the administration of his estates at Birr to an agent, one Heward Oxburgh.[1] Oxburgh came of native and Catholic stock, and his family appears to have been in possession of estates at Boveen, near Birr, all of which were confiscated under the terms of the Cromwellian settlement.[2] In character ambitious, cunning and unscrupulous, he saw in the difficulties of his employer a ready means of repairing the broken fortunes of his family.

When the Jacobites were in the ascendant during the Viceroyalty of Tyrconnell, Oxburgh used every means at his disposal to win the favour of the government. He raised a regiment of Catholic infantry under his own command, and defrayed their expenses out of the revenues of the Parsons estates. In 1689 he seized Birr Castle, to which Sir Laurence had now returned, on the pretext that it was being held as a garrison for the Williamites.[3] Sir Laurence had, indeed,

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1. Indenture between Sir L. Parsons and H. Oxburgh, 7 April 1687 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 117).

2. Book of Survey and Distribution, the King's County (R.I.A., Taylor MSS.).

3. Case of Sir L. Parsons, 1693 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 135).

allowed his home to be used as a place of refuge by many of the Protestant families of the neighbourhood, but he was in no position to entertain any warlike intentions, and Oxburgh's actions appear to have been dictated solely by selfish motives. When the Jacobite leader, Owen Moore, visited Parsons shortly afterwards, he was impressed by his peaceable attitude, and recommended that he be released forthwith.[1]

Not content with the seizure of the property, however, Oxburgh was already planning the complete destruction of his employer. One of the terms of surrender of Birr Castle promised that no capital charge would be brought against any member of the garrison. In complete disregard of this undertaking Oxburgh allowed a number of prisoners to be arraigned before Judge Lynch, at the King's County Assizes, where Parsons and two others were sentenced to death. They were removed for execution to the prison at Birr, and Oxburgh appears to have had every intention of carrying out the sentence. Fortunately, Parsons was able to obtain a series of respites from King James in Dublin, and the prisoners were finally liberated by the advance of a Williamite army during the autumn of 1690.[2]

The town remained in Williamite hands for the remainder of the war, despite a vigorous attempt by Sarsfield to regain it during the

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1. O. Moore to Earl of Tyrconnell, 8 March 1689 (Parsons Anc. Docs., f. 11).

2. Case of Sir L. Parsons, 1693 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 135).

following year. The castle withstood an assault by three cannon mounted on rising ground to the north of the town, while the church tower was defended by a platoon of English infantry under a subaltern named Ball.[1]

These events left many problems to be solved by succeeding generations of the family. The castle had been seriously damaged during its occupation by both the contending parties, and its condition deteriorated still further when it was used by the Williamites as a military hospital.[2] The resources of the surrounding countryside were severely depleted, and even the relieving Williamite army of 1690 was forced to support itself by pillage. In order to prevent the repetition of such conduct Sir Laurence agreed to make payments of money for the support of the garrison at Birr.[3] Yet by far the greatest misfortune was a legacy of debt which hung over the family since the middle years of the century, when William Parsons had found it necessary to defray the expenses of defence forces in Ely O'Carroll out of his own pocket. These forces were, in fact, placed on the official establishment, but little attempt was ever made to pay their expenses.

In 1648 the Irish government ordered the payment of various sums

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1. Story, Impartial History, p. 137.
2. Case of Sir L. Parsons, 1693 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f. 135).
3. Ibid.

due to Parsons,[1] but this does not appear to have been done, as four years later the Court for Compounding was asked to determine how much of the debt was still outstanding.[2] In 1663 the Commissioners appointed under the Act of Settlement decreed that Parsons was entitled to the sum of £1,112.[3] At about this time he received the neighbouring estate of Woodville, or Tullynisk, which still forms part of the Parsons property, in partial satisfaction for his claims.[4] Yet it would appear that considerable sums still remained outstanding, as in 1693 Sir Laurence set out his grievances in a remarkable petition to the Irish House of Commons. After rehearsing the services rendered by his grandfather in 1641, he complained of the repeated failures on the part of the government to make a settlement of his claims, "to the great Prejudice of your said petitioner, who have been(sic) deceived thereby to sell part of his Estate and the remainder is still encumbered with great Debte contracted by your Petitioner's grandfather and father on account aforesaid.[5]

IV

Sir Laurence died in 1698 and was succeeded by his eldest son,

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1. Order of Lords Justices and Council, 2 Aug. 1648 (Parsons Anc. Docs., f. 11).

2. Order of the Irish Council, 26 Aug. 1652 (Parsons Anc. Docs., f. 59).

3. Order of H.M. Commissioners, 10 Mar. 1663 (Parsons Anc. Docs., f.1).

4. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 249.

5. Petition of Sir L. Parsons, 1693 (Parsons Fam. Recs., f.207).

Sir William, the second baronet. Sir William contracted two marriages; first, with Elizabeth, daughter of Sir George Preston, bart., of Craigmiller in Scotland; after her death, with Elizabeth, eldest daughter and co-heiress of Sir George St. George, of Dunmore, in County Waterford. By the first of these marriages Sir William had an heir, also named William, who died during the lifetime of his father. This William had, however, left issue by his wife Martha, daughter of Thomas Pigott of County Cork, of whom Laurence, the eldest son, succeeded his grandfather at Birr, as third baronet, in 1740.[1]

Sir Laurence (the third baronet) also contracted two marriages. In 1730 he married Mary Sprigg, eldest daughter of William Sprigg, by whom he had an heir, William, who succeeded him in 1749, as fourth baronet.[2] William was the father of Sir Laurence Parsons, later second Earl of Rosse.

In 1742 he married Anne, only daughter of Wentworth Harman, of Moyle, in County Westmeath, and heiress of her brother, Cutts Harman, Dean of Waterford.[3] By this marriage he had a son, Laurence Harman, who was raised to the peerage as Baron Oxmantown in 1792, and later became Viscount Oxmantown and Earl of Rosse. When Laurence Harman died in 1807 the barony and the earldom (although not the viscountcy),

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1. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 157.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

passed by special remainder to his nephew, Sir Laurence Parsons of Birr, son of the fourth baronet.[1]

The eighteenth century brought more peaceful days for the Parsons family, who continued to play a prominent part in the affairs of the Irish midlands. Sir William, the second baronet, and the three baronets who followed him, all represented the King's County in the Irish Parliament.[2]

The community in which the Parsons lived was still a very limited one. Birr did, indeed, lie on the great routeway through the midlands from Munster to the North, where it traverses the narrow gap between the Slieve Bloom mountains and the Shannon, and there must have been frequent contact with troops and other travellers passing through. Moreover, since the time of the second siege in 1691, the town had been a military post with a permanent garrison of infantry, usually consisting of a company, though occasionally rising to battalion strength.[3]

Nevertheless, Dublin was more than eighty miles away to the east, and the way lay first over the Slieve Blooms, and then across a vast expanse of the Bog of Allen. Contact with the life of the capital must therefore have been relatively slight. In 1765 an attempt was made to improve communications with the midlands when an Act of

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1. Debrett, Peerage, p. 1006.
2. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 157.
3. Ibid., p. 159.

Parliament was passed authorising the construction of a road from Monasterevan, through Portarlington, Mountmellick, Rosenallis and Birr, to Lahinch on the Shannon. Sir William Parsons was appointed one of the trustees with power to erect turnpikes, and use the proceeds for the repair of the road.[1] The plan was never carried into effect.

The social life of the Parsons family was necessarily confined to their relations with a dozen or so landed families who inhabited the neighbouring districts of the King's County and North Tipperary. First among these were the Darbys of Leap Castle, descended from the former O'Carroll chieftains, in the female line. Their seat, once the centre of O'Carroll power, was a sixteenth-century fortress looking out across a deep valley towards the Slieve Blooms. In 1691 Jonathan Darby had been one of the two Williamites sentenced to death with Sir Laurence Parsons. His descendant, another Jonathan, had recently succeeded to the property, in 1776,[2] and was to oppose Sir Laurence, the second Earl, during the Union controversy.

At Glasderrymore, or Gloster, lived the family of Lloyd, which traced its descent from Cunedda, King of Gwynedd, in North Wales. During the middle years of the previous century a member of the family had built a gracious residence which still survives as one of the best remaining examples of the seventeenth-century manor-house in Ireland. John Lloyd, who held the property at the close of the

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1. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 159.

2. Burke, Landed Gentry of Ireland (1912 ed.), p. 22.

eighteenth century, became the father-in-law of Sir Laurence Parsons, second Earl of Rosse.[1]

Not far from Gloster lived the Westenras of Sharavogue, (soon to be allied by marriage with the family of the Earls of Huntingdon),[2] the Francks of Franckfort[3] and the Stoneys of Emell Castle,[4] all descended from Cromwellian planters. The Atkinsons of Cangort had been established in the King's County since the days of Elizabeth.[5]

An extensive property around the village of Kinnitty was held by the Droughts of the Heath, who had migrated there from County Carlow during the early years of the sixteenth century.[6] A junior branch of this family was established some miles away at Whigsboro', where they had erected a residence on the ruins of a former O'Mulloy castle.[7]

Few families of Gaelic stock remained, but there were at least two notable exceptions. The Enraght-Moonys of the Doon, near Ferbane, were descended in the female line from the Irish sept of O'Mooney, which claimed kinship with the Eoghanacht kings of Munster. Francis

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1. Pedigree of the Lloyd Family of Gloster (Lloyd MSS.).
2. Debrett, Peerage, p. 632.
3. King's County Directory, p. 328.
4. Ibid., p. 329.
5. Archdeacon Atkinson, History of the Atkinson Family, p. 1.
6. Burke, Landed Gentry of Ireland (1899 ed.), p. 123.
7. Ibid., p. 124.

Enraght was about to succeed his uncle, Owen Moony, at the Doon in 1779.[1] A branch of the O'Mulloys, the former rulers of Fercall, a territory adjoining that of the O'Carrolls on the north, lived at Eglish.[2]

Sir Laurence Parson's closest neighbours were three brothers of the Hackett family, who had recently purchased estates near the town. Simpson Hackett lived at Riverstown, just across the border of North Tipperary, William at Prospect and Michael at Elm Grove.[3]

Other neighbouring families were the Armstrongs of Gallen[4] and the Warburtons of Garrycastle,[5] both in the King's County; the Armstrongs of Mount Heaton[6] and Otway-Ruthvens of Castle Otway[7] both in North Tipperary.

It is by no means easy to estimate the extent of the Parsons estate during the later years of the eighteenth century. The Instructions for plantation in Ely O'Carroll ordered that the first Sir Laurence should receive 1,000 acres.[8] This amount would appear to have been greatly exceeded, since, under the patent of 1620, Sir

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1. Burke, Landed Gentry of Ireland (1912 ed.), p. 489.
2. King's County Directory, p. 327.
3. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 178.
4. King's County Directory, p. 323.
5. Ibid., p. 330.
6. Burke, Landed Gentry of Ireland (1899 ed.), p.7.
7. King's County Directory, p. 328.

Laurence was granted land in some twenty-one districts, lying within the O'Carroll barony of Ballybritt, and the neighbouring O'Mulloy barony of Eglish.[1] As the names of these districts may nearly all be identified with places situated a short distance from the town of Birr, it is reasonable to assume that the Parsons estates occupied a compact area extending north and east from Birr. The family received an additional 850 acres under the terms of the Cromwellian settlement,[2] although it was subsequently found necessary to sell some property to pay off debt. Sir William, the fourth baronet, added further estates in Tipperary and Mayo through his marriage with Mary Clere, most of which passed in due course to the younger brothers of Sir Laurence, second Earl of Rosse.[3]

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1. These were: In Ballybritt barony - Pornlagge, Ballinaragh (Boolinarrig), Ballyduff, Newtown, Clonaghalla (Clonoghill), Seffine, Derrinduff and Krunkill (Crinkle).
   In Eglish barony - Ballindown, Ballywilliam, Balliniego (Ballinagelsha), Ballykeally (Ballykelly), Coolagee (Carrigeen?), Ballinlegg, Shanbally, Garrigconne, Carrigedmond, Carrig Donnell, Garlum, Derrinlough and Durnagh (Dooris).

2. Book of Survey and Distribution, the King's County (R.I.A., Taylor MSS.).

3. Deed of assignment to Sir L. Parsons, 1 May 1774 (Ir. Reg. Deeds).

We have no accurate measurement of the area of the estates until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Sir William, son and heir of Sir Laurence , the second Earl, calculated it to be 16,914 acres.[1] Sir Laurence had, however, about 1812, estimated the value of his rents at "about £10,000",[2] a figure which falls remarkably close to that subsequently given by Sir William - £10,691.[3] As there was little fluctuation in prices during the intervening period, and as we have no evidence to suggest that Sir Laurence made any major alienations of property during his lifetime, it would appear that the area calculated by Sir William represents a fairly accurate estimate of the extent of the Parsons property at the close of the eighteenth century.

V

The Volunteer movement introduced new vigour to Irish public life. In its early stages the movement was largely one of military significance, dominated by a need to provide adequate measures of defence against possible invasion by France, once the latter had declared war on the side of the American colonies in the spring of 1778. The Irish administration found itself in a difficult situation;

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1. Rent roll of Earl of Rosse, 1853 (Rosse Estate Office MSS.).
2. Statement of finances by Earl of Rosse, undated (Parsons MSS.).
3. Rent roll of Earl of Rosse, 1853 (Rosse Estate Office MSS.).

the exigencies of the war had forced it to allow the withdrawel of a large part of the regular military establishment, while shortage of money prevented the recruitment of volunteer yeomanry and militia from amongst the country gentlemen, to whom in any event it was reluctant to entrust additional powers.[1] In these circumstances the initiative passed from the hands of the government. When, early in 1779, rumours of invasion began to circulate in Belfast, the inhabitants formed a volunteer defence force and their example was followed all over the country.[2] The first southern company of volunteers appears to have been formed, at about this same time, in Wexford.[3] In Mayo and Dublin companies were raised by Lord Altamont and the Duke of Leinster respectively. In Kilkenny 500 stand of arms was distributed amongst the inhabitants.[4] Soon nearly 60,000 men were in arms,[5] largely drawn from the Protestant landed classes and their dependants, although many Roman Catholics gave their support.[6]

This military organisation was not in itself an innovation. During agrarian troubles at the middle of the eighteenth century Irish landowners appear to have raised independent troops for their

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1. Gwynn, Life and Times of Henry Grattan, p. 60.
2. Grattan, Life of Grattan, 1. 342.
3. Diary of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.). The account of the Volunteer movement given by Gwynn (p. 54 seq.) is largely based on material drawn from this manuscript.
4. Grattan, Life of Grattan, 1. 343
5. Diary of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
6. Grattan, Life of Grattan, 1. 343.

own defence.[1] The novelty lay in the widespread enthusiasm which the movement aroused in almost every part of the country, and the potential threat of armed resistance which was presented to the Irish government.

The government was not slow to recognise the danger. In the course of a despatch dated May 1779, the Viceroy, Lord Buckingham, intimated that the Volunteers would not be used except in an emergency but that every effort would be made to avoid arousing their antagonism.[2] One month later he declared that "nothing has been omitted which either in my judgement or in those of my advisers, could with propriety and discretion be enforced to prevent their rise and increase."[3]

In these early stages of the Volunteer movement the Parsons family played a not inconsiderable part. Sir Laurence himself tells us that the foundation of the company in Wexford was due to the initiative of Ogle, a local member of Parliament, who wished to provide some amusement for his supporters and to indulge their inclination to wear scarlet uniforms. It happened that a Wexford landowner, named Tottenham, also possessed an estate near Birr, and under his influence a public meeting was held in the town at which it was decided to follow the example of the Wexfordmen. In April 1776 a light infantry company was formed with Laurence, then a youth of eighteen on holiday from school, as one of the subalterns. The plan

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1. Gwynn, Life and Times of Henry Grattan, p. 54.
2. Grattan, Life of Grattan, 1. 353.
3. Ibid., 1. 358.



SIR WILLIAM PARSONS, Bart. (d. 1791). IN VOLUNTEER UNIFORM.
Reproduced from a portrait at Birr Castle, by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.

was soon enlarged as public spirit was aroused by reports of the war in America, and before long two battalions were in arms. During the following summer the entire force was reviewed by Laurence's father, Sir William, who had been appointed general officer for the district.[1]

During the late summer and autumn of 1779 the character of the Volunteer movement underwent a remarkable change. From the state of national defence the Volunteers turned their attention to other current problems, notably those of an economic nature, and many companies passed resolutions in favour of free trade for Ireland. At first this was only part of a general trend in public opinion which had already manifested itself in pamphlets, and the resolutions of a large number of grand juries.[2] Yet, as time went on, the Volunteers came to exercise a more direct influence over the course of Irish political affairs. The initiative was seized first by the Dublin corps with the staging of two significant demonstrations; in October, when the House of Commons passed in procession to present an Address to the Viceroy in favour of free trade, the streets were lined with volunteers; shortly afterwards, on November 4, they marked the occasion of William III's birthday by a parade in College Green, where several cannon were decorated with placards demanding the redress of Irish grievances.[3]

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. Grattan, Life of Grattan, 1. 364.
3. Ibid., 1. 389 seq.


Sir
William Parsons
And the Birr
Volunteers
Feb.y 27 1776

From this time the prestige and influence of the Volunteers increased rapidly. Almost every member of the opposition in both Houses of Parliament was now included within their ranks. A large number of civil as well as military functions became their responsibility; they escorted judges, conveyed prisoners to gaol and maintained peace in the countryside.[1] Meetings of Volunteers in all parts of the country passed resolutions for the redress of Irish grievances, the greatest of these being the Dungannon Convention of 15 February 1782 which demanded repeal of Poyning's Law, a limited Mutiny Act, an independent judiciary and further relaxation of the laws against Roman Catholics.[2]

The midland Volunteers were closely concerned in these activities. Meeting at Birr, on 3 September 1781, under the chairmanship of Colonel Rolleston, they affirmed that Ireland was an independent kingdom bound only by laws made by the King, Lords and Commons of that land, and protested against Poyning's Law and the perpetual Mutiny Act.[3] On 20 March 1782 a larger meeting, composed of the representatives of seventeen corps, adopted the resolutions of the Dungannon convention, held one month earlier:

> That we view the virtuous endeavours of this kingdom to ascertain and establish her just rights and privileges with sincere joy, flowing from hearts inviolably attached to its true interests and happiness.

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, II. 124.
2. O.N.B., Henry Grattan.
3. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 160.

That we have reason to expect that the liberal spirit of Parliament towards the Roman Catholics of this Kingdom, by emancipating them from restraints, which we are happy to think are no longer necessary, will be attended with the most beneficial consequences to this country, as nothing can contribute so much to increase the prosperity and secure the independency of this kingdom, as a cordial union amongst its inhabitants of every religious denomination.

That, actuated by the most sincere loyalty towards our Sovereign, it is our duty to declare our determined resolution to support his Majesty with our lives, and fortunes, against the natural enemies of Great Britain and Ireland, and to defend his Majesty's kingdom of Ireland, against the enemies of our King and Constitution.

That we will co-operate with the other Volunteer associations in such measures (as) guided by prudence, and supported with firmness, we conceive may most effectually tend to restore and confirm the Constitution and Commerce of this Kingdom.[1]

The significance of these events was not lost on the mind of Laurence, now serving as a subaltern in the corps at Birr. Looking back long afterwards he saw in the Volunteer movement one of the chief formative influences of his early life. "Their spirit", he said of the Volunteers, "rose with their armament and discipline, and beginning only to amuse themselves, and proceeding to protect the country against France, they concluded by vindicating their constitution and liberties, and the usurpating of England".[2]

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1. Cooke, Pict. of Parsonstown, p. 161.

2. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, (Parsons MSS.).

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY LIFE, 1758-1782.

Laurence Parsons, later second Earl of Rosse, was born on 21 May 1758 in Birr castle, being the first child and heir of Sir William, the fourth baronet. His mother was Mary Clere, only daughter of John Clere of Kilbury, in County Mayo. Through his mother Laurence was descended from the ancient family of Clere of Ormsby and Bleckling, in Norfolk, whose ancestor, Edward Clere, of Cleremount, in Normandy, had come to England with William the Conqueror. A later member of the family, Sir Robert Clere of Ormsby, had married Alice, daughter of Sir William Boleyn of Bleckling, and an aunt of Queen Anne Boleyn.[1]

Three other children were born into the Parsons family, all of whom were boys. John Clere was born in 1760, William four years later, and Thomas Clere[2] in 1766.

Very little is known about life in the family circle during these early years. The Parsons boys probably received their early education from a tutor, but Laurence was eventually sent away to a private school kept by a master named Warburton, where he remained until he entered Trinity College at the age of eighteen.[3] No further

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 158.
2. Debrett, Peerage, p. 632.
3. Entrance Book of Trinity College, 1769-1825, p. 34 (T.C.D. Archives).

information is available concerning this school but it is likely that the master can be identified as Richard Warburton, who graduated from Trinity College in 1744.[1] This Richard was born in County Tipperary, where his father, the Reverend George Warburton, was a country clergyman and canon of Killaloe, the diocese to which the parish of Birr also belonged.[2] The Warburtons were probably connected with a family of the same name who resided on estates at Garryhinch, near Portarlington, in the King's County, as the latter used the names of George and Richard very frequently.[3] Thus, it seems probable that Laurence spent his schooldays at no great distance from home, and under a master whose family belonged to the midland society in which the Parsons moved.

Two events occurred during Sir Laurence's boyhood which he was to remember long afterwards, and which, according to his own testimony, exercised a profound influence over the course of his later life. The first of these took place in the spring of 1768, shortly after the Octenniel Bill had been passed by both Houses of the Irish Parliament. It was the first major victory for the opposition led by

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1. Alumni Dublinenses, p. 857.
2. Cotton, Fasti, 1. 489.
3. Burke, Landed Gentry of Ireland (1912 ed.), p. 746.

Flood and Lucas, which had striven for a limitation of the duration of Parliament as a necessary prelude to more far-reaching measures of reform. When Lucas introduced a bill for this purpose in 1761 it had been defeated by the united efforts of the great borough-owners. A similar bill in 1763 was rejected by the Irish privy council, and a further attempt two years later was shelved by the English Council, acting under the terms of Poyning's Law. In 1767 the administration of Lord Townsend decided to yield, partly because the borough-owners were seen to be an obstacle to efficient government, and partly because concession was urgently necessary to win back some of the powers recently sacrificed to the opposition by a bill which established the independence of the judiciary.[1]

Parsons was present in Dublin to witness the scenes of general rejoicing as the Viceroy returned from giving the royal assent to the bill in Parliament, his carriage drawn through the streets by the populace. The extraordinary intensity of popular feeling on this occasion may be seen from the description of another contemporary observer:

> The general joy and happiness rendered to all ranks of people by giving them their favourite Bill for limiting the duration of our Parliaments, are not to be expressed in words; to say that our long rooted jealousies and suspicions are removed and confidence restored to our rulers, from whom every wise and good

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1. D. N. B., Charles Lucas.

> law for the benefit of this kingdom may now be expected, is far short of those sensations entertained by a most grateful and loyal people. The citizens of this metropolis want some <u>new</u> mode to express themselves upon this happy event; illuminations, beacons, and other ordinary methods of showing their joy and gratitude to their king and worthy vicegerent, are inadequate to their feelings; and yet these have not been wanting ever since the return of the Bill and will continue during its legislative progress.[1]

Many years later Parsons looked back to the display of public feeling on this occasion as marking the beginning of a new movement towards constitutional reform. "The temporising politicians of England", he wrote, "short in their views as politicians in power are apt to be", had hoped by this concession to remove the nuisance of an aristocratic faction in Ireland; yet they failed to see that any power wrested from the aristocracy was clearing the way for a more popular opposition, based on the support of the professional classes and the country gentlemen.[2]

The second event, which occurred several years later during the spring of 1776, we have already noticed. Laurence, a youth of eighteen, lately released from school and not yet entered at Trinity College, came home to find the King's County full of interest in the Volunteer movement. He was enrolled[3] almost immediately as a subaltern in the Birr company, commanded by his father, Sir William

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1. <u>F. J.</u>, 13 Feb. 1868, p. 186.

2. Diary of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).

3. Above, p. 29 seq. No commissions appear to have been granted by the Volunteers, the officers being enrolled like rank and file.

Parsons.

The chief result of these Volunteer days was to leave Parsons for the remainder of his life a firm believer in the efficacy of voluntary armies. During the later years of the century, when the threat of invasion from France led him to criticise the defensive measures of the government with much severity, he asked repeatedly that responsibility for defence should be entrusted to the country gentlemen and their dependants. He always believed that standing armies were a danger to the liberty of the subject, and, by reason of their mercenary character, over-costly and inefficient.

II

Laurence entered Trinity College early in Hilary Term 1777, his name being placed on the Entrance Book as a Fellow Commoner.[1] The early strangeness of academic life must have been largely mitigated by the fact that he had as a companion John Warburton, son of his old schoolmaster, who entered during the same term.[2] The tutor of both youths was James Drought, a member of an old King's County family established on estates at the Heath, near Kinnitty, and one who was probably well known to Laurence's father. Drought was a man of high principles and strong character, who held aloof from the dissensions which were such a feature of college life during this period.[3] He

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1. Entrance Book of Trinity College, 1769-1825, p. 34 (T.C.D.Archives).
2. Alumni Dublinenses, p. 856.
3. Duigenan, Lachrymae Academicae, p. 30.

was also a scholar with wide interests; he became a doctor of divinity during the year in which Parsons entered college, and in the following year was appointed professor of laws and professor of Greek; he was also Archbishop King's Lecturer (in Divinity), and was later promoted to the chair of Divinity.[1]

Parsons must have found much to interest him in the Trinity College of the late eighteenth century. The buildings of the new West Front had recently been completed, and work had just begun on the new Examination Hall; the great Library had been in use since 1732, still raised above the ground on its stilt-like pillars; behind the Library the college park had been laid out into a number of pleasant walks, and the elm-trees planted in 1772 were already grown quite tall.[2]

Trinity College possessed at this time a number of advantages not shared by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Its academic life still remained very vigorous. Examinations were held regularly throughout the four years of the undergraduate course, and candidates were marked, on the whole, with justice and severity. During the freshman years they were required to answer in mathematics, Latin, Greek and philosophy; ethics, logic and physics were taken as additional

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1. Alumni Dublinenses, p. 246.
2. Dubl. Univ. Cal., p. 18.

subjects during the last two years.[1] The proximity of the Irish Houses of Parliament, across College Green, where students were encouraged to listen to debates from the public gallery, brought the university into close personal contact with the political life of the nation. The situation of the college, in the capital city, gave it the continued support and interest of its graduates, long after they had taken their departure from academic life.[2]

During this century the college was patronised widely by the Irish nobility and gentry, who had come to realise that a university education offered a desirable preparation for a career in government service. The presence within its walls of large numbers of high-spirited and proud young men threw a strain upon the disciplinary machinery of the college which it was not always able to meet. The years which Parsons spent in Trinity coincided with what was almost certainly the most unruly period the college has ever known.

A contemporary observer has written thus, concerning life amongst the students:

> The gownsmen were then a formidable body, and from a strong esprit de corps, were ready on short notice to issue forth to avenge any insult offered to an individual of their party who complained of it. They converted the keys of their rooms into formidable weapons. They procured them as large

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1. Examinations, 1771-97 (T.C.D. Archives).

2. Gwynn, Henry Grattan, p. 13.

> and heavy as possible, and slinging them in the sleeves or tails of their gowns, or pocket-handkerchiefs, gave with them mortal swinging blows. Even the fellows participated in this esprit de corps. The interior of the college was considered a sanctuary for debtors, and woe to the unfortunate bailiff who violated its precincts. There stood at that time a wooden pump in the centre of the front court, to which delinquents in this way were dragged the moment they were detected, and all but smothered. On one occasion, the lads had hauled a wretch whom they detected, to the pump, where he was subjected to the usual discipline. Dr. Wilder, a fellow, was passing by, and pretending to interfere for the man, called out, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, for the love of God, don't be so cruel as to nail his ears to the pump". The hint was immediately taken, a hammer a nails were sent for, and an ear was fastened with a tenpenny nail; the lads dispersed, and he remained for a considerable time bleeding and shrieking with pain, before he was released.[1]

Another striking instance of the laxity of discipline in the university was provided by the case of Mills, printer and publisher of the Hibernian Journal. Mills had permitted the publication of an attack on the characters of several members of the university, and earned, as a result, the enmity of the undergraduate body. On 11 February 1775 a party of students drove up to his door in a coach and called him out, on pretence of wishing to bargain for books. He was thereupon seized, thrust into the coach, and held down with pistols to his head while the party drove back to college. He was taken to the pump, and after being almost trampled to death was held under water until several of the fellows intervened to save him.[2]

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1. Dubl. Univ. Mag., XXI. 279.

2. Ibid.

This outrage was punished only by a mild admonition to one of the principal offenders. The others remained untouched, and openly exulted in their deed. The words of the admonition actually attempted to excuse what had occurred. It was drawn up by Dr. Leland, the historian, and began as follows:- "Cum constet scholarium ignotorum coetum infuriam admisisse in typographum quendam nomine Mills qui nefariis flagitiis nobiliora quaeque collegii membra in chartis suis lacessivit".[1]

Much of this disorder was due to the influence of the Provost, John Hely Hutchinson, who had been appointed to his office in somewhat unfortunate circumstances[2] in 1774. Hutchinson carried on almost ceaseless warfare with the majority of the fellows, who disliked him for his autocratic behaviour and lack of academic training.[3] Several months before Parsons entered college this warfare had assumed a more serious character, when Dr. Patrick Duigenan, the most implacable of the Provost's enemies amongst the

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1. Dubl. Univ. Mag., XXI. 279. "It being agreed that a body of foolish students inflicted an injury on a publisher named Mills, who had maligned the more honourable members of the college, by evil slanders in his newspaper".

2. Hutchinson appears to have entered into an intrigue with Sir John Blaquiere, who, as Secretary during Lord Harcourt's Viceroyalty, controlled patronage in Ireland. Duigenan, Lachrymae Academicae, p. 20.

3. Hutchinson had no academic qualifications, beyond a bachelor's degree, he was not in Holy Orders, and unlike his five predecessors, had not served as a fellow before becoming Provost. Duigenan, Lachrymae Academicae, p. 29.

fellows, and a fellow-countryman of Parson's from the King's County, published a scathing pamphlet entitled Lachrymae Academicae. This pamphlet is significant not only for the personal attack which it makes on the Provost, but also for the remarkably gloomy picture which it gives of the lack of college discipline under his administration.[1]

Social life amongst the undergraduates was full and strenuous. The most popular pastime was probably the drinking of rum punch. It was customary to return from the town just before the college gates closed at midnight, fill a kettle from the pump in the front quadrangle, and brew a mixture of rum and sugar. Cups and cans filled with this beverage were then handed round, and the company amused themselves by singing, until morning.[2]

One such student party has been described for us. It was held in the rubrics on a bitterly cold night in January while frost and snow lay on the ground outside. As morning drew near, and the merriment subsided a little, someone remembered that at the top of the same building lived Barrett, already recognised as an indefatigable scholar and a recluse. It was known that Barrett possessed insufficient blankets to keep himself warm during such inclement weather, and so, with kindly intent, the party moved upstairs to share with him some of their beverage. To their amazement, they found him still sitting up, absorbed in Greek, and apparently oblivious of the cold. Had they

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1. Duigenan, Lachrymae Academicae, p. 227 seq.

2. Dubl. Univ. Mag., XXI. 351.

not forced him to take a considerable portion of the rum punch, it is not unlikely that he would have died before morning.[1]

"Jackie" Barrett, who became a fellow while Parsons was a senior freshman, was undoubtedly the most colourful of all the characters who moved within college during this period. Barrett himself was well aware of his own qualities. While working for fellowship it was his custom to subject the scanty articles of furniture in his room to a mock examination, awarding a judgment to each in turn, such as "Male", "Minus recte", "Dic tu", etc. When, at length, he came to the one which symbolised himself, he would reply graciously, "Recte respondisti domine Barrett".[2]

Many other stories are told about Barrett, most of them illustrating a strange simplicity which seems to have formed part of his character. One story tells how he had two holes cut in the bottom of his door, one larger than the other. When questioned about them he said that they were intended to provide an entrance for his two cats, one of which was big and the other small. The questioner suggested that one large hole would have been sufficient for both animals, but to this the doctor replied, somewhat testily, "You silly man, how could the big cat get into the little hole"? He was taken aback, however, by the suggestion that the little cat could use the

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1. Dubl. Univ. Mag., XXI. 351.

2. Ibid.

larger hole, - "Egad, and so she could, but I never thought of that".[1]

Some years later Barrett is believed to have suggested a rather ingenious method of disposing of the clay and rubble which had been removed from the foundations of the new college buildings. "D'ye see me now, can't you dig another hole and bury that".[2] When he was appointed to the office of joint-Librarian the affairs of the Library became somewhat haphazard. It was his custom to hold a conversation while skimming rapidly through the volumes on the shelves. On one such occasion, when a book had been lost, and neither Barrett nor his fellow Librarian (Dr. Wilson), would accept responsibility for it , his discourse was reported as follows: "Dr. Wilson is - The Universal History - a very odd fellow - he puts up all the books in - The Tower of Babel - a place where no one can find them."[3]

III

Laurence entered Trinity College with the rank of Fellow Commoner. This gave him the highest social standing amongst the undergraduate body, with the exception of any occasional nobiles who might be admitted, in return for which he paid an increased half-yearly fee of fifteen pounds. The chief advantage of his rank, as its name suggests, was the privilege of dining with the fellows at high table; he was also

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1. Dubl. Univ. Mag., XXI. 351.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

allowed to wear a distinctive gown with sleeves and a velvet collar, and to take his degree one year before the normal time,[1] which, in fact, he did, in the midsummer of 1780.

His academic record, though creditable, gives no evidence of outstanding ability. In his first examination, at Easter 1777, he was judged valde bene in mathematics, and bene in astronomy, Latin and Greek.[2] In the following Whitsuntide he obtained a valde bene in astronomy, and a bene in the other three subjects.[3] At the Hilary examination of 1778 it was valde bene for Latin and Greek,[4] but by the following Michaelmas all four subjects were awarded only a bene, and an additional subject, logic, was dismissed with only a satis bene.[5] In the Hilary Term of 1779 he fell to mediocriter bene for Latin, and obtained only a bene for ethics, which he was now studying as a sophister.[6]

He took his degree as a Bachelor in Arts at the midsummer commencements held on 12 July 1780, when Dr. Stehpen Radcliffe presided

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1. Gwynn, Henry Grattan, p. 13.
2. Examinations, 1771-97 (T.C.D. Archives).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid

as Pro-Vice Chancellor. He was the last candidate to be presented, due to his rank as a Fellow Commoner.[1] Three years later he became a Bachelor of Laws, an honorary degree conferred on every member of the Irish Parliament at this time.[2]

If his academic career was undistinguished, Parsons was nevertheless making a name for himself in another department of university society, destined to exercise a powerful influence over the course of his later life. He had become a member of that remarkable body, the "Hist".

Founded at a great meeting in the Common Romm on 21 March 1770, the College Historical Society was descended from two earlier bodies, the "Club", founded by Edmund Burke in 1747, and the "Historical Club", founded by Barry Yelverton in 1753. Despite its name, the object of the Historical Society was not primarily the study of history, although historical examinations formed a regular part of its proceedings. Its chief interest lay in cultivating the art of public speaking, which its members considered to be the most important feature of a career in politics or the professions. The Society maintained friendly relations with the Provost and fellows, but was largely independent of their authority, and drew its members, partly

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1. Degrees, 1742-1834 (T.C.D. Archives).
2. Ibid.

from the senior undergraduates, and partly from the younger graduates, some of whom had already entered upon professional careers outside the walls.[1] When Parsons was admitted[2] on 11 November 1778 the "Hist" had already come to include in its ranks most men of ambition in the university, although it had not, as yet, equalled the traditions set by Burke, Grattan, Hussey Burgh and Yelverton, in the earlier societies. The decade about to begin, however, was undoubtedly the most glorious period in its history.

Parsons's name was numbered 174 in order of seniority, on the roll of members. Closely following it we find those of John Whitley Stokes, a distinguished and controversial figure in the life of the college at the end of the century, and Parson's lifelong friend; William Plunkett, afterwards Lord Chancellor; Standish O'Grady, afterwards Lord Chief Baron; James Saurin, Bishop of Dromore; Wolfe Tone, who, in later life, was much influenced by his political conversations with Parsons; Charles Kendal Bushe, Lord Chief Justice, and a vigorous opponent of the Union; George Beresford, Bishop of Kilmore.[3]

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1. (R.B. McD.), The College Historical Society, p. 3 seq.
2. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 275.
3. List of members of the Historical Society, 1795.

Laurence was at this time a junior sophister and therefore highly honoured to be admitted to the society at such an early stage in his academic career. The eligibility of junior sophisters for membership was still in question, and two years later Laurence himself is found seconding a motion to allow them to be elected.[1] Despite his youth, however, his impact on the society was swift and decisive. Within three months of his election he was raised to the office of Treasurer;[2] one month later he was appointed chairman of the examinations in history;[3] during the following session he was entrusted with the more onerous duty of presiding over a debate;[4] then, on 10 January 1781, he was invested with the highest honour the society could bestow, when he became its Auditor.[5]

Several factors contributed to such an immediate success. In the first place, Parson's speeches were of a high quality and created a very favourable impression. During the period from January 1780 to June 1781 he was awarded "Remarkable Thanks" for Oratory, at the conclusion of every term, and qualified for the award of a Silver

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 503.
2. Ibid., p. 308.
3. Ibid., p. 319.
4. Ibid., p. 483.
5. Ibid., p. 583.

Medal in Oratory.[1] At the end of the session 1780-81 he was called on to deliver the Closing Speech from the Chair, an honour granted only to selected speakers from among the medallists in Oratory.[2]

Moreover, Parsons displayed a sincere affection and loyalty to the "Hist" which can have been surpassed by few of his contemporaries. On many occasions we find him proposing amendments to the Laws which he believed to be in the better interests of the society. In January 1779 he suggested that medallists in Composition should be asked to submit a declaration saying that their work was original;[3] some months later he proposed that undergraduates who intended to answer at the forthcoming college examinations should be excused from the usual questions on history;[4] in the following year he tried to ensure that junior sophisters should be eligible for membership.[5] It seems significant that his name appears on almost every committee appointed

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 666.
   Then as now, members sent in oratory returns at the conclusion of every meeting. In any one term, 100 returns were necessary for the award of "Remarkable Thanks", and 150 for a silver medal.
   Laws of the Historical Society, 1795,p.9.
2. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 666.
3. Ibid., p. 306.
4. Ibid., p. 334.
5. Ibid., p. 503.

during this period, including one entrusted in 1779 with the task of regulating the unsatisfactory financial position of the society.[1] In February 1781 the society met in Parson's rooms, at his invitation, because their customary meeting-place in the Common Room was required by the Board for another purpose.[2]

Yet, the most striking instance of Parson's affection occurred during his first session, when, in January 1780, he presented the society with a ceremonial gown to be worn by the president at debates. A motion of thanks was passed unanimously, and on the next night of meeting Lescure, who was in the chair, addressed him in these words:

> Give me leave, Sir, to assure you, that I feel an additional satisfaction at being honoured with the chair on this night, as it affords me the pleasing opportunity of expressing in this publick manner, the very high sense I entertain of your distinguished merit.[3]

Although the speeches which Laurence delivered before the "Hist" have not been preserved, it is evident from the subjects of debate that his mind was already being trained to consider most of the political questions of the day. It is interesting, in the light of his later line of conduct, to find him in opposition to motions in favour of a standing army, a perpetual Mutiny Act, the admission of

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 345.
2. Ibid., p. 610.
3. Ibid., p. 433.

Roman Catholics to armed associations, and the royal power to dissolve Parliament.[1] While it would be unwise to attach too much importance to opinions formed at such an early stage in his career, it is significant that he had already become specially interested in economic matters, and was chosen as chairman for the debate on "Whether landed or commercial revenue should be an object for taxation".[2]

The training afforded by the"Hist" was, however, by no means confined to oratory and the fellowship of the more serious-minded members of the university. The several offices which Parsons held in the society, each demanded the exercise of a considerable measure of responsibility.

As chairman of the examinations in history it was his statutory duty to examine the candidates on the contents of some sixty to eighty octavo pages, usually taken from a work on ancient history, without referring himself to the printed text. He was required to make out a list of the candidates, in order of merit, to read it aloud, sign it and place it in the History Box. If he failed to take the chair promptly at six o'clock, which was the hour of meeting, he was liable to a fine of one shilling; if he showed himself to be ignorant

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, pp. 601, 648, 492 and 457.

2. Ibid., p. 466.

of the rules of procedure, the fine was five shillings. He himself was empowered to punish, at his discretion, all candidates awaiting examination on the history bench.[1]

As Auditor, he acted as the Comptroller of all other officers, with power to punish them by a fine not exceeding one half-guinea. He inspected and supervised the Journals, account-books and roll of Laws. It was his duty to nominate four members to take the chair at the meetings of the following month, and to appoint one member from amongst the medallists in Oratory to make speeches at the opening and closing of the session, in default of which he had to perform the task himself.[2]

The climax of Parson's career in the "Hist" came on the evening of 27 June 1781 when he delivered the closing speech at the end of the Twelfth Session. His speech was shorter than was customary on such occasions; the style was ponderous and stilted, after the fashion of the time, and fell far short of the standards to which he attained in later life; its chief merit lay in the message which it had to deliver, and the authority and self-confidence with which it was presented. Parsons asked for a closer study of the art of oratory, which he felt to be neglected by many of his hearers. Then he proceeded to enumerate the peculiar advantages which membership of the

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1. Laws of the Historical Society, 1795, p. 86.

2. Ibid., p. 11.

society gave to anyone wishing to pursue this study, in words which pay a remarkable tribute to the work of the "Hist" during this period:

> You have every assistance which Information, which Example and which Practice can afford. You are conversant in the Antients, you have studied their most celebrated performances; they are the models for Eloquence; you have been instructed in those sciences which illumine and exhalt the mind; which give Strength to Judgment and Prosperity to Reason. You derive from the situation of the College an additional assistance which neither of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge can ever attain, your vicinity to the Houses of Parliament and the Courts of Justice gives you an opportunity of hearing some of the most finished orators of the present Age; you are taught this art of Example, while the youth of the English universities can only learn it by Precept - And what I esteem as no less conducive to improvement, you have frequent opportunities in this Assembly of exercising and thereby strengthening and improving your growing abilities.[1]

He treated his hearers to a forthright denunciation of their failings. Students of divinity and law were singled out for particular blame, because, Parsons considered, public speaking formed an essential part of their professional training. Nor was his disapproval confined to oratory alone: "I cannot avoid mentioning, Gentlemen of the Historical Society, your negligence during this Session of History and Composition".

The tone of the speech was stern and didactic, yet there ran through it a note of deep affection for the society. The conclusion was warm-hearted, and even emotional:

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 666.

> I often flatter myself with the pleasing Reflection that many of my juvenile Acquaintance may on a future day be found as Able and Honest Advocates for their Country, as they have been sincere and warm Friends to him, who now from his heart wishes them every success in their Labours.[1]

IV

At about this time came Parsons's first intervention in Irish politics. The members of the patriotic opposition in Parliament, aware of the support which they now derived from Volunteer organisations throughout Ireland, and of the significance of the more recent victories of the American colonists, had just begun their first great campaign to win constitutional liberties. In 1781, led chiefly by Flood, they concentrated their resources on an attack on the Mutiny Bill, which, because of a series of unusual circumstances, had become a matter of some embarrassment for the government. Several soldiers had been court-martialled for desertion, but the judges declined to convict them on the grounds that there was no Irish Mutiny Act, giving official establishment to the army. The government was therefore faced with a choice between disavowing the English Mutiny Act, which had hitherto been applied to Ireland, or losing control of the army. In August they introduced a Mutiny Bill, with a clause limiting its operation to one year, but this clause was found to have been deleted when it was returned from London during the following autumn. Against a background of deep popular indignation Grattan introduced

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 666.

a motion for a limited Mutiny Bill, and when this was rejected, renewed his demands in a pamphlet highly critical of the government's arrangements.[1]

Parsons also published a pamphlet entitled Observations on the Irish Mutiny Bill, in which he showed his firm support for the cause of the opposition. The arguments which he put forward were not original, and were nearly all discussed by Grattan in greater detail. A government observer, writing a short time afterwards, described the pamphlet as "poor and juvenile", and obviously believed that it had little impact on public opinion.[2] Yet, the work is interesting, and perhaps significant, in that it shows the extent to which Parsons's mind had already become engrossed in two principles which were to play a dominant part in the course of his later political life - his fear of the physical power of the lower classes, and his distrust of a standing army.

Both these principles were closely connected in Parsons's mind, at this time. He believed that a standing army must inevitably contain a large majority of Roman Catholic soldiers, who would teach the profession of arms to their friends; this might lead in time to a catastrophe similar to that of 1641. At the same time a standing army represented an instrument of subjection to the English ministers,

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, II. 254 seq.

2. Cooke to Eden, 27 July 1782 (Auckland Correspondence, 1. 335).

since it was maintained at a strength out of all proportion to the population of Ireland, was in direct contradiction to the Bill of Rights, and tended to lead to the enforcement of law by violence, rather than by reason and moderation. "Large standing armies", he declared, "are not only dangerous as instruments of tyranny and of tyrannous measures, but they are pernicious as causes and authors of it. Many a man will be a tyrant with overwhelming arms that without it would not be a tyrant."[1]

During the summer of the following year a more exciting opportunity to engage in political life presented itself. Hussey de Burgh, one of the two representatives of the College in Parliament, was raised to the dignity of Chief Baron of the Exchequer, and his seat became vacant. Two candidates came forward to contest the election; Arthur Browne, a junior fellow, and Laurence Parsons.

Several factors would appear to have induced Parsons to stand for election on this occasion. He was almost certainly acting as the representative of a strong body of opinion amongst the members of the "Hist" which was anxious to give the society a greater influence in public affairs. Attempts had already been made to make the society into something in the nature of an annex to the Houses of Parliament, to which members of the latter might belong, and where they could express themselves with a much wider degree of freedom. On 21 March 1781 a somewhat remarkable motion had been submitted for the

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1. L. Parsons, Observations on the Irish Mutiny Bill, 1781 (Parsons MSS.).

consideration of members of the Historical Society:

1. That Members of Parliament shall be eligible to a seat in this society.

2. That every member of this society who is also a member of Parliament shall be indulged with a general leave of absence.[1]

The motion did not meet with widespread approval, as fears appear to have been entertained from the first that it would prove unacceptable to the College authorities. On the following night of meeting an amended motion was introduced which asked only that Members of Parliament be admitted as "Auditors" (in this instance, listeners), on certain specified conditions.[2] Before the matter could be taken any further, however, the Board of Trinity College intervened decisively. It sent a memorandum to the members of the "Hist" which politely informed them that they were an academic society, and must confine their membership to the university body; only such Members of Parliament as were still below the standing of Senior Bachelor (i.e., who had not graduated for longer than three years), could be admitted.[3]

Thus rebuffed, the society made no further attempt to proceed with the original motion. When put to the vote it was defeated.[4]

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 1776-81, p. 620.
2. Ibid., p. 623.
3. Ibid., p. 625.
4. Ibid., p. 629.

Nevertheless, the movement in favour of a closer relationship with Parliament went on. In the following June a committee was appointed to ascertain what steps were necessary to establish the right of students living in college rooms to be recognised as freeholders entitled to vote at parliamentary elections in the City of Dublin. FitzGibbon was asked for a legal opinion on this matter, and returned a favourable answer.[1] In December it was proposed that the representatives of the University in Parliament should be considered as honorary members, but the society, apparently mindful of the injunctions of the Board, decided not to proceed with this suggestion.[2] When, during the following July, a vacancy occurred for one of the University seats, it provided an excellent opportunity to further the ambitions of the society, and it is very likely that Parsons's name was put forward with this end in view.

Other issues were, however, in question at this election. One of the chief causes of friction between the Provost, Hely-Hutchinson, and the Fellows, was the ambition of the former to make the University into a "pocket" borough, whose representatives were nominated by himself. In 1776 his eldest son, Richard, had been put forward as a candidate, and was elected, although the Provost's partial conduct as returning-officer was the basis of a petition which eventually

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1. Journals of the Historical Society, 23 June 1782.
2. Ibid., 18 Dec. 1782.

succeeded in unseating him.[1] Since then, he had not intervened in University elections, although on this occasion (1782), his enemies amongst the Fellows had nominated one of their number, named Arthur Brown, as a candidate.

There is some reason for believing that Henry Flood was very favourably disposed towards the Provost. Both had been advocates for Irish legislative independence, and both were passionately devoted to the cause of free trade. When Hutchinson published his Commercial Restrains of Ireland in 1779, Flood hailed the work as a magnificent contribution to the case for Irish freedom, and is reputed to have said that if there were only two copies in print, he would gladly pay a thousand pounds for one of them.[2] More significantly, Flood appears to have supported Hutchinson in his fight against the Fellows. He expressed strong dislike for Tisdale, Attorney-General and parliamentary representative for the University, who was, until his death in 1776, the Provost's most implacable foe. Parsons himself tells us how, during a Visitation in 1775, made to investigate certain complaints which Tisdale had brought against the Provost, Flood entered the Hall whilst the trial was in progress, and pointing to Tisdale said "Look at that black stove in the corner - it is from him that all this heat proceeds".[3] Could it be that Parsons, already much under Flood's

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1. Proceedings in the case of the borough of Trinity College, 1791, p.6.
2. Maxwell, History of Trinity College, p. 128.
3. Sir L. Parsons, Early Life of Henry Flood (Parsons MSS.). Flood was evidently referring to "Black Phil", the name by which Tisdale was frequently known.

influence, allowed his name to go forward in this election, as the representative of a body of opinion more moderate than that of Browne and the Fellows?

Whatever the motives which impelled him to stand for election, however, Parsons undoubtedly possessed a number of important advantages in the contest which followed. The University seats were, in fact, controlled by the Corporation of the College, since an Act of James I laid down that electorate should consist of the Provost, Fellows and Scholars, so that the latter were in a position to exercise a powerful influence at elections.[1] The position of eminence which Parsons had attained in the affairs of the 'Hist' must have won him a large body of support amongst the scholars. At the same time, the fact that he had hitherto remained aloof from the struggle between Hutchinson and the Fellows ensured him the sympathy of a small number of uncommitted individuals among the latter, the most conspicuous of whom was perhaps, his own tutor, James Drought. Finally, he was very fortunate in the character of his opponent. Brown was a man of wild and impetuous nature. As an undergraduate, he had shown a disposition to engage in wild and lawless adventures, and had played a prominent part in the outrage committed on Mills, the publisher. Parsons did not find it

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1. Proceedings in the case of the borough of Trinity College, 1791, p. 6.

very difficult to discredit him therefore. Early in July 1782 an anonymous letter appeared in the Dublin Press, addressed to the College electors, the style and character of which give reason to believe that Parsons was closely involved in its composition, if he were not, in fact, the actual author:

> Your return of a Representative calls forth a more than ordinary degree of public attention. Not only a man of extensive learning and great abilities, but of unimpeached and unimpeachable moral fame, is the object that alone can be in character with the presumed wisdom and virtue of an Academic Body. Either to return a Member informed in the laws and constitutional principles of your country; or one who has been a notorious violator of those laws, and would be a solecism in the election-conduct of a University.
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> Let us, gentlemen, propose a case. Suppose a man should become a candidate to represent you in Parliament, who a few years since was so servile a tool as to commit a most daring and violent outrage on the peace of society - one, who could lead on a number of misguided young men to a citizen's house, beguile him from his shop, force him into a coach, convey him to a College, and pump him till he almost expired - one, who stood arraigned at the criminal's bar for the heinous offence, and whose guilt is on record in a court of judicature - say, gentlemen, would such a man be an honour to your choice - an act though base, is often gratefully remembered by those whose interest it is meant to serve. But if that self-same interest be now at work to seat in the senate him, who confined an obligation by grossly violating public peace, ought not many of you, gentlemen, blush to countenance, encourage and support it.[1]

The election was held on July 27. Parsons polled well, receiving forty-one votes as against thirty-three for Brown. As soon as the Provost had declared him to be elected Laurence went across College Green to the Parliament House, where, at four o'clock in the afternoon

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1. F.J., 9 July 1782.

he was sworn in as a Member of the Irish House of Commons.[1]

The victory belonged mainly to the Historical Society. Laurence remained an active member during the whole of the succeeding session, his name appearing regularly on attendance lists. In November he became a member of a deputation which waited on the Provost to complain of certain infringements of the privileges of the society in its rooms.[2] One month later he was elected for a second period of office as Auditor. This was in itself a memorable distinction, for never before or since, has it happened that a serving Auditor was also at the same time a Member of Parliament.[3]

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1. F.J., 27 July 1782.

2. Journals of the Historical Society, 20 Nov. 1782.

3. Ibid., 11 Dec. 1782.

It was still permissible for ex-Auditors to be elected for a second period of office, although this occurred very infrequently. Baker, who succeeded Parsons, on 23 April 1783, was also an ex-Auditor.



HENRY FLOOD (d. 1791).
Reproduced from a portrait at Birr Castle, by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.

CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICS 1782 - 1789.

The Irish House of Commons, which Laurence entered at the age of twenty-three, was a place of many powerful personalities but no clear party divisions. An opposition to the administration had, it is true, been growing up since the middle years of the century, but it still lacked cohesion and common purpose, and possessed no definite leader. The members of this opposition could be divided into two main bodies of opinion.

First, there were a number of persons who remained completely detached from the influence of the viceregal court, and from any political party in England. The most influential figure amongst them was Henry Flood, and many of the other leading members, including Grattan, Langrishe and Bushe, had received their first lessons in statecraft at his hands.[1] Grattan and Bushe had quarrelled with Flood because of his opposition to the cause of the American colonies, but he still commanded the loyalty of a small band of supporters amongst whom were Sir Henry Cavendish, Sir Edward Newenham, Charles Coote, and Denis Browne.[2] More significantly, he continued to win

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, I. 135.

2. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 189.

the support of a number of young members of promising abilities, including Laurence Parsons, his former rival Arthur Browne, and John Curran.[1]

Loosely allied with them, but in general more bitterly hostile to the government, was a group of members who proclaimed their attachment to Pitt, the Grenvilles and the English opposition. When at a later date Pitt came into power in England, these members entered into a close relationship with the English Parliament which was highly detrimental to the interests of the Irish opposition. At this time they still co-operated intermittently with Flood, without recognising that he had any special authority.[2]

Flood's quarrel with Grattan was the decisive factor which prevented him from winning a large measure of control over the opposition. Although he continued to exercise a powerful influence over his own personal followers, he was henceforward the leader only of a clique, and never succeeded in gaining a large volume of support from amongst the heterogeneous elements that surrounded him. A prominent observer of political affairs, writing some months after Parsons entered Parliament, estimated the position of the Irish opposition as follows:

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1. Charlemont, Memoirs, p. 281.

2. Ibid.

> A most miscellaneous, and therefore inefficient association, considering the parts and industry of those who composed it. Mr. Flood was generally at their head, and sometimes fancied that he was, when in fact, he was not, for nothing could be more opposite than his mode of thinking to the political creed of a few of these gentlemen. Several of this opposition acted, however, to my knowledge, from principles of sound patriotism.[1]

At what time Parsons first came under Flood's influence, we are unable to say. His earliest impressions were probably formed during his first year in college, when Flood was taking a prominent part in the struggle between Hely-Hutchinson and Tisdale. These impressions were almost certainly very favourable, since Flood stood out as a champion of order and dignity in the affairs of the university. There would have been further opportunities of listening to Flood, and other speakers, during his days in the Historical Society, for members of the latter kept in close touch with the proceedings of the Irish Parliament. We have already seen that his decision to contest the University seat may have been influenced by Flood's desire to weaken the rebellious faction amongst the fellows.

Moreover, in the drawing-room at Birr Castle may still be seen a portrait of Flood, which, according to Parsons family tradition, was painted while he was visiting Parsons at his home. If this tradition is correct, the most likely date of Flood's visit would lie between the summer of 1782, when Parsons entered Parliament,

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1. Charlemont, Memoirs, p. 281.

and the summer of 1784, after which Flood concentrated his attention on English politics and spent most of his time in England.

However, it is not difficult to discover the reasons which attracted Parsons to Flood. Writing in an unfinished Essay on the Early Life of Henry Flood he describes some of the qualities which he admired in Flood's character. Flood had a strong and resourceful determination, which refused to allow obstacles to stand in his way - "It being the cast of his mind to love struggling with difficulties, by which he was always excited, not dismayed." This had shown itself in his earlier efforts to overcome the disadvantages of a poor education, to perfect himself as an orator in the face of severe physical disability, and to refrain from speaking in Parliament until he had become a master of parliamentary procedure.[1] Parsons also admired Flood's style as an orator:

> He had overcome by great application the deficiency of his voice - for though it still continued deep and a little too nasal, it had surprising flexibility and uncommon strength and energy. His modulation, when he declaimed, was exquisitely beautiful and captivating - and by such delicate strokes as our great actors are distinguished by, he used to produce extraordinary effect.[2]

This last opinion was not shared by many of Parsons's contempories. Grattan refused to follow the oratorical style of his teacher, and his son in his biography criticised it as "too artificial", and

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Early Life of Henry Flood (Parsons MSS.).
2. Ibid.

"not a good model for a young man."[1] When Flood entered the English Parliament his speeches were badly received and met with much hostile criticism. Writing of this criticism, in later years, Parsons attempted to defend his leader:

> The fact is, that more was expected of him than any man could have fulfilled; that he was not, as I have since heard, liberally treated, there being an indisposition on both sides to a professed orator, and besides, his close sententious style was so different from the easy flowing, overloose bar manner of the English Parliament, that it would have required some time to habituate them to it, before they might be satisfied that it was not of an inferior character. Having spent a great part of ten years in his society, I can say that I do not think I ever heard a sentence from his lips that was not as polished and beautiful as the elaborate production of any other man's pen; and that having been often in company with those who have been esteemed the first men in this country, they all appeared to me decidedly his inferior.[2]

II

When Laurence Parsons entered the Irish House of Commons in July 1782 a memorable session was drawing to its close. For some time Grattan had stood forward as the main champion of the opposition. No sooner had the Volunteer Convention at Dungannon declared itself in favour of a limited Mutiny Act, and the Repeal of Poyning's Law, than he began to speak with a new authority. "Do you hesitate to weary the ears of His Majesty with your salutations", he warned ministers menacingly, "or do you wait till your country speaks to

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, 1. 135.

2. Sir L. Parsons, Early Life of Henry Flood (Parsons MSS.).

you in thunder"?[1] His motion for the adjournment, in March, was defeated, but the government majority had declined appreciably.[2]

The rise to power of the Rockingham Whigs in England helped forward the aspirations of the Irish opposition. The Duke of Portland was sent over as Viceroy during the spring of 1782, and accepted , in quick succession, the repeal of Poyning's Law, and a limited Mutiny Bill, for two years. Grattan professed himself to be well satisfied, and proposed that a large sum of money should be voted for the royal navy. His goodwill was reciprocated by the Viceroy in the speech with which he closed the session, when he spoke of "a spirit of constitutional liberty communicating itself from one kingdom to the other."[3]

However, the swiftness of the victory brought with it a large measure of disillusionment. Flood again seized the initiative, and placed himself at the head of a body of opinion which remained distrustful of the government, and demanded a renunciation of all English claims to legislate for Ireland. When, in September, Portland was succeeded by Temple, he extracted from him a Renunciation Act which placed the legislative independence of Ireland beyond doubt. With this victory the ascendancy passed from Grattan to

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1. P. R., 1781/2, p. 253.
2. Ibid., p. 262.
3. Ibid., p. 481.

Flood, and he became once again the dominant influence in the Irish opposition.[1]

When a new session opened on 26 July 1783 with the Earl of Northington as Viceroy, it was evident that Flood and his supporters were about to begin a new offensive. Flood had decided that legislative independence by itself was insufficient and unsafe; the defects which existed in the parliamentary system still provided a means whereby English ministers could control Ireland in their own interests. Accordingly he concentrated his resources on two new objectives; retrenchment of the public finances, and parliamentary reform.[2] As a first stage towards the realisation of these objectives he put forward a demand for a reduction in the size of the military establishment, which he felt to be over-costly and a danger to the liberty of the subject. During the two sessions which followed military affairs received his almost undivided attention. "I love the army as a body of brave and worthy men," he said in October, while proposing a motion for financial retrenchment, "but I would not sacrifice the kingdom to their benefit."[3]

The selection of the military establishment as the immediate object of attack represented an astute move on the part of the

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1. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 189.
2. Ibid.
3. P. R., 1783/4, p. 36.

opposition. It was not difficult to awaken a distrust of standing armies which had been such a consistent feature of the attitude of the country gentlemen since the constitutional conflicts of the previous century, and which had received new impetus with the growth and success of the Volunteer movement. However, the forces of the crown in Ireland were at this time in no position to sustain a policy of arbitrary government. Their efficiency and effectiveness had declined sharply since the Williamite wars, and it is perhaps not always realised what an easy target they presented for those who wished to criticise them.

The strength of the establishment had been normally fixed during the century at 15,000 men, which may be compared with the English establishment of 17,500, including nearly 3,000 invalids.[1] Yet a high proportion of the Irish forces consisted of cavalry, which, if excellent in its precision and appearance at drill, had not been trained in modern tactics of war.[2] Discipline was lax, and most of the troops were drawn from poor and disaffected sections of the population. During the following year (1784) it was found necessary to disband a regiment of infantry for misconduct.[3] In 1786 Courts

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1. C.J., 19 April 1763.
2. Fortescue, Hist. of the Brit. Army, III. 525.
3. Earl of Northington to Lord Sydney, 14 Feb. 1784 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/11/83). The 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards nearly suffered the same fate at the end of the century when they were sentenced to be disbanded for having disobeyed their officers. Duke of Portland to Earl Cornwallis, 12 Jan. 1799 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/85/55).

Martial were introduced to Ireland for the first time, following complaints made by the Viceroy.[1] During the same year, Orde, Secretary for Ireland, treated the English administration to a stern warning, after the refusal of his request to have regiments on the Irish establishment interchanged with those in England;

> I am convinced that the day will come when too late a repentance will be felt for giving way to the selfish objections of Colonels on the British establishment in preference to a measure of almost absolute necessity for the preservation of this kingdom in connection with Great Britain. These are not times to trust the defence of this country to provincial regiments raised among the disaffected and liable to constant sedition.[2]

In these events Parsons played little part. Apparently, he was following closely the example of Flood in refusing to speak until he had first made himself thoroughly familiar with parliamentary procedure. It seems significant, however, that when he made his maiden speech it was in support of Flood and on a subject directly concerned with military affairs. On 3 November 1783, during the debate on the Mutiny bill, he rose to suggest the need for a heavy reduction in expenditure, which he felt could best be effected in the military establishment now that the conclusion of the American war made powerful forces unnecessary. The speech was short, and contained little fire or passion, except perhaps, when Parsons alluded

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1. King to Duke of Rutland, 28 March 1786 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/19/69).

2. T. Orde to Sir E. Nepean, 10 March 1786 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/19/59).

to the comparatively large number of troops in Ireland, and asked, derisively, if it were intended to make the country into "a barrack to England."[1]

Very different was a speech which he delivered on the same subject several days later. On November 7 Flood introduced a motion to reduce the military establishment from 15,000 to 12,000 men, thereby, he believed, saving the Exchequer a sum of £100,000 per annum. Flood spoke from a sitting posture, as he was still recovering from the effects of a recent illness. This did not save him, however, from the wrath of government supporters. Their case was presented by two military officers, General Luttrell (afterwards Lord Carhampton) and Major Doyle, both of whom treated Flood with ill-concealed contempt. Luttrell even made an unseemly gibe about the colour of the waist-coat which he wore.[2]

Parsons came to the defence of his leader, speaking in tones of angry reproof. He first denied the assertion of his opponents that Ireland had an obligation to maintain an army in time of peace since England maintained a navy; the existence of such an army was, he claimed, unconstitutional and could serve no useful purpose, except to make Ireland "the barrack of England". Then he directed against Luttrell a personal attack of intense bitterness; the latter professed to voice the wishes of the people - yet of what people?; Parsons himself was expressing the sentiments of a learned and respectable

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1. P.R., 1783/4, p. 98.

society who were his constitutents - but who were Luttrell's constitutents?; "are they literate of illiterate, or has he any constitutents at all?" (an allusion to the fact that Luttrell sat for the "rotten" borough of Old Leighton).[1] Finally he denounced him for the gibe concerning Flood's waist-coat:

> I am not surprised that the affairs of the kingdom should go badly, when every little jester can find the way into Parliament. I do not come here with awkward attempts to be witty on the dress of the greatest man in the nation; it may do well enough for a cap and bells, but it is unbecoming the dignity of the Irish senate.[2]

Throughout the later stages of the debate on the Mutiny bill Parsons played a prominent part as Flood's supporter. In the course of a third speech on November 13 he developed the point that a standing army in time of peace was unconstitutional. "It is only on a principle of necessity," he declared, "that a standing army is at all tolerable."[3] Before the end of the session he had taken an active part in two other motions introduced by Flood's supporters - Newenham's bill for the more equal representation of the people in Parliament[4] and Curran's motion to affirm the right of the Commons of

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1. P.R., 1783/4, p. 98. Luttrell was already distinguished by his opposition to Wilkes in the Middlesex election of 1769, when Wilkes received the larger number of votes, but Luttrell was declared elected by resolution of the House of Commons. In addition to sitting in the Irish Parliament at this time, Luttrell also represented the "rotten" borough of Bossiney, Cornwall, in the English Parliament.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 131.

4. Ibid., p. 244.

Ireland to originate all bills of supply.[1]

Political affairs apart, it would seem that Parsons was already established on terms of close personal intimacy with Flood. During the summer of 1783, the latter decided to transfer his attention to English politics, which he felt to offer larger opportunities for distinction. The Duke of Chandos offered him election for the borough of Winchester, apparently hoping to win an ally against Fox on the India bill. According to Flood's own testimony, he made a payment of £4,000 for the seat, although this has never been corroborated. However, soon after election to Parliament, he made a speech on the India bill which revealed his intention of standing aloof from both the great English parties. This decision was highly displeasing to Chandos. When, in the following year, Pitt took office with a minority of votes, he determined to support him with all the influence at his command, and in defiance of his engagement with Flood, he nominated a kinsman, named Gamon, for Winchester.[2]

Deeply angered by what he considered to be a gross breach of faith, Flood tried vainly to persuade Chandos to alter his decision. A correspondence passed between them, in which the bearer of letters was Lord Bellamont. The latter, realising that Flood was unlikely to succeed in his efforts, yet anxious to retain his friendship, wrote evasive answers, giving little practical help or encouragement.[3]

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1. P.R., 1783/4, p. 335.
2. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 276.
3. Ibid., p. 292.

At this point Flood turned to Laurence Parsons, then living in London. On 19 May 1784 he sent him a letter with a request to read it before Chandos. This Parsons did on the following day:

> I feel sure you do me the justice to feel that no man can more lament the peculiarity of my situation respecting the Duke of Chandos than I do, or can be more disposed to accommodate his grace to every wish to rectify it. You know it is not the value of a seat, but superior feelings that actuate me. A necessity to vindicate those feelings in a manner inconsistent with the honour of the Duke I should esteem a very great misfortune; I wish, therefore (as you permit me so to do), to suppose it may be prevented; and if it should not, I will give, beforehand, every satisfaction to his grace for the liberty I must take, which my life can offer.[1]

The Duke gave Parsons another evasive reply. He asked that Flood would take no further action until fourteen days after the opening of Parliament, by which time an opportunity might have arisen to provide him with a seat. When, however, Parsons endeavoured to ascertain if he would be willing to return Flood for Winchester at the next election, provided the latter were content to remain unsatisfied till then, he declined to give any such undertaking.[2]

Further consultations took place between Parsons and Flood, as a result of which Parsons made a second visit to the Duke on June 12. He carried the same letter as before, this time with a message endorsed. In addition, Flood appears to have instructed him to endeavour to

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1. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 305.
2. Ibid.

arrange for the matter to be tried by personal combat, should the Duke remain obdurate.[1] The message endorsed, read as follows:

> The within letter signified, that, as matters then stood, Mr. Flood, if he were to deliver his sentiments, must declare, that the Duke of Chandos had acted dishonourably by him. It is with great pain that he feels this declaration is at length extracted from him.[2]

The Duke was little perturbed by this message and made yet another unsatisfactory reply; he was still prepared to render Flood every assistance in his power to procure him a seat in Parliament, but could do nothing further at this time. Parsons intimated that he might have something to add, hinting apparently at the possibility of a duel, but the Duke showed little inclination to accept this proposal. He offered, if Flood would appoint a deputy to act for him in his absence, to do what he could to provide him with a seat.[3]

The negotiations ended in failure, and Chandos made no further attempt to keep his promises. Yet Flood had apparently been impressed with the honour and integrity shown by Parsons. When, some months later, he made another attempt to enter the English Parliament, the latter was employed as his most intimate friend and adviser.

The election for the borough of Seaford, which Flood decided to contest, developed into a three-cornered fight against candidates nominated by Pitt and Fox. Recognising that it would be difficult to

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1. Ibid.,
2. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 305.
3. Ibid., p. 307.

overcome the resources of two such powerful adversaries, Parsons enlisted the help of an able young Irishman, named Burrowes, who was a final year student at the Inns of Court in London, and introduced him to Flood. Burrowes went down to Seaford, where he organised the constituency in Flood's interest; he did his work so well that the electors requested Flood to nominate a candidate for the second seat. Attempts were made to persuade Erskine, a renowned advocate, to stand, but he refused, and Parsons then agreed to come forward as a candidate. Both he and Flood were defeated, but after a series of petitions had been presented Flood was declared elected.[1]

This was Parsons's only intervention in English politics, prior to the Act of Union. It took place almost by accident, and without any real interest on his part, in affairs outside Ireland. Had he been elected at Seaford, it is conceivable that he would have become Flood's close supporter in English politics, and that much of his subsequent activities in the Irish House of Commons would not have taken place. Yet the careers of the two men now drew steadily apart, for while Flood concentrated his attentions on Westminster, appearing only occasionally in the Irish Parliament, Parsons remained in Dublin, pressing forward the ideals of his leader by every means in his power.

One further circumstance, although hardly conclusive, points to a close relationship between Parsons and Flood during this period.

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1. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 307.

Between 21 January 1769 and 21 January 1772 a series of letters appeared in the London Public Advertiser under the pseudonym of "Junius". The writer displayed bitter hostility towards the administration of the Duke of Grafton, formed in 1768, and clearly wanted the return to power of Chatham and his party. Beginning with a general attack on the ministry for their immorality and meanness, he proceeded to deliver a storm of personal abuse against Grafton, the Duke of Bedford and George III, and concluded with a bitter assault on Lord Chief Justice Mansfield. Beyond widespread anger, and a particular feeling of indignation against the attack on the King, the letters produced little effect. When Grafton's administration fell, in January 1779, he was succeeded not by Chatham but by Lord North. Yet the campaign was significant for two reasons. In the first place, the style of the letters showed considerable elegance and vigour; the writer had clearly been influenced by the work of several classical authors, which he had adapted to his own purpose. Moreover, the failure of efforts to discover the writer's identity led to much speculation and increased his influence.[1]

During the last years of the century, more than forty persons were accused of the authorship of the Letters of Junius. Among these were Grattan, Flood, Horace Walpole, Lord Chesterfield, the Duke of Portland, Edmund Burke and Chatham himself.[2] In 1812 the suggestion of Burke's authorship was revived by Daniel O'Connell for reasons of

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1. Memoirs of Sir Philip Francis, 1. 286 seq.

2. Ibid., 1. 298.

personal enmity, although Burke had already denied it with much vehemence.[1]

In 1816 all previous theories concerning the identity of Junius were greatly weakened by the publication of John Taylor's The identity of Junius with a distinguished living character established. Taylor advanced powerful arguments to show that the author of the letters was Sir Philip Francis, a former War Office official and colonial administrator. He pointed out that there was much similarity between the political and literary character of Francis and that of Junius;[2] that Francis had spent his early life in Ireland, a country with which the writer of the letters was clearly familiar;[3] that he was a fervent supporter of Pitt;[4] that as Chief Clerk in the War Office he would have acquired a close knowledge of military affairs, a subject to which Junius frequently alluded;[5] that there was similarity in style and handwriting between the two;[6] that when confronted with the evidence against him Francis had given an evasive reply and made no denial.[7] The case presented by Taylor has never been challenged

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1. Boswell, Life of Johnson, III. 90.
2. Taylor, Identity of Junius, p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 163.
4. Ibid., p. 101.
5. Ibid., p. 76.
6. Ibid., p. 230.
7. Ibid., p. 7.

effectively, although several writers at the end of the nineteenth century declined to accept it, notably Charles Dilke in his Papers of a Critic, published in 1875.

In 1812 when the suggestion of Burke's authorship was revived by Daniel O'Connell, Parsons intervened in the controversy. He wrote to Woodfall, publisher of the Public Advertiser, in whose possession were the original Letters of Junius, enclosing a manuscript which, he declared, would establish the true identity of the author and vindicate Burke's character. Although witholding permission for Woodfall to reveal the author's name, he urged him to make an examination of the manuscript and intimated that an article on the subject would shortly be published by a writer named Roche in the Quarterly Review.[1]

The manuscript which Parsons sent to Woodfall does not appear to have survived. Roche never published his article in the Quarterly Review, although he subsequently made some observations on the matter in an article which appeared in the Cork Magazine for September 1848. Yet it is clear that Parsons believed Flood to have been the author of the "Letters of Junius", and in later years he made no secret of this opinion.[2] Could it be that he received from Flood some highly confidential information which was not imparted to any other person?

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1. Earl of Rosse to G. Woodfall, 23 Aug. 1812 (B.M., Add. MS. 27, 781, f. 130).

2. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 83.

III

Laurence resumed active participation in Irish politics early in 1785. Although no longer in frequent contact with Flood he continued to press forward the latter's demands for financial retrenchment and parliamentary reform. Early in February he was provided with an opportunity for decisive action.

During the previous year a number of economic difficulties, notably the bad harvest of 1783/4, had produced a demand for protection to stimulate Irish industries. A committee of the House of Commons, appointed in March to inquire into the state of Irish manufactures, had issued a gloomy report - imports were far in excess of exports.[1] When a new session of Parliament opened in May an amendment was moved to the Address which drew attention to the distress which existed in the woollen, cotton and silk industries.[2] The Irish administration, anxious to avoid an outburst of popular ill-feeling, decided upon swift ameliorative measures; before the end of the year a series of ten commercial propositions were drawn up on the initiative of Orde, the Secretary, and Foster, Chancellor of the Exchequer, which would have allowed Ireland to conduct an import and export trade with England and the colonies free of excessive duties.[3]

The propositions were favourably received by Pitt and the

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, III. 232.
2. Ibid., III. 233.
3. Ibid., III. 239.

English cabinet. It was felt that the scheme for free trade with Ireland was founded upon "wise and liberal principles" of economic theory; that a "final settlement" of all commercial questions between the two kingdoms might now be achieved.[1] Yet an opportunity appeared to have presented itself to establish a large measure of constitutional control over the Irish Parliament. At the same time the likelihood of opposition from commercial interests in England made it desirable to win some important concession from Ireland. Pitt therefore informed the Irish government that the commercial arrangements could only be accepted if Ireland were to pay "A very moderate contribution" towards imperial expenses.[2] In January 1785 he made more specific proposals in the form of an eleventh proposition; Ireland was to contribute any surplus which might arise in the hereditary revenue of the Crown, the money to be used for the support of the royal navy, as the chief safeguard of trade.[3]

The choice of the hereditary revenue was an astute one. There would be little reason for immediate hostility in Ireland since a surplus could only appear in future years. The fact that the hereditary revenue would increase in proportion to an improvement in the state of Irish commerce might, however, be a means of compensating English merchants for any losses they might suffer once exposed to unrestricted competition from Ireland. Furthermore, the permanence

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1. Duke of Rutland to Lord Sydney, 13 Jan. 1785 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/16/40).
2. Pitt to Duke of Rutland, 7 Oct. 1784 (Beresford Corr., 1.41).
3. Same to same, 6 Jan. 1785 (Beresford Corr., 1. 55).

of the arrangement would constitute a bond between the English and Irish Parliaments and provide the former with opportunities to extend its influence in the future. Pitt's scheme did not, however, take sufficient account of the prevailing temper of Irish public opinion. Any proposal to transfer portion of the revenue to England would almost certainly have met with considerable opposition; the grant of the surplus in the hereditary revenue was peculiarly open to suspicion, since, apart from the absence of any guide to the amount of money which would be transferred, it presented an unmistakable threat to Irish constitutional liberty. The Viceroy (Rutland), well aware of the need to preserve Irish goodwill, attempted to persuade Pitt to drop his eleventh proposition, but without success.[1]

On February 11 the propositions were introduced to the Irish House of Commons, where they were subsequently passed after much hostile criticism from the opposition. In England Pitt found himself confronted with the opposition of Fox, the large trading towns and the Lancashire cotton manufacturers. Hoping to conciliate these interests he presented the propositions to the English Parliament with modifications which made them almost unrecognisable, and they were passed after a long and stormy debate. In their new form the propositions were received with bitter resentment in Ireland, and although they passed the House of Commons by a small majority, they were not pressed

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1. Duke of Rutland to Lord Sydney, 24 Jan. 1785 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/16/75).

forward by the government.[1]

During the debate in February Parsons emerged as an opponent of the entire set of eleven propositions as they stood, - "I do not like any one of them". Unfortunately, he failed to substantiate his objections any further, merely charging the ministers with having introduced the matter so abruptly that he had been unable to give it adequate thought.[2] It is unlikely that his economic ideas had at this time reached an advanced stage of development. He had not previously intervened directly in economic affairs, and the references to economics amongst his memoranda at Birr Castle all belong to a later date. Nevertheless it is probable that the bitter opposition to free trade which characterised his later opposition to the corn export bounty in the Irish Parliament, and the repeal of the usury laws in the imperial Parliament, was already present in his mind. His interest lay in agriculture, not in industry, and he may well have feared, with considerable justification as the depression which followed the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars was to show, that Irish agriculture could not compete successfully in a free British market. Moreover the attempt to transfer a portion of the Irish revenue to England must have appeared as a serious threat to his efforts to achieve financial retrenchment.

If Parsons did not engage in any arguments of economic theory, he did, however, make use of the occasion to deliver a further plea

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, III. 258.

2. P. R., 1785, I. 197.

for economy in public expenditure. His words are strikingly similar to those used by Flood two years before.

"The true system of economy", he declared,"would be to render our expenses equal to our revenue"; yet the present measure did not encourage the government to keep its expenses moderate, since there would always be a temptation to increase the revenue in order to please the English ministers. Finally, he returned to Flood's demand for a reduction of the military establishment as the best means of effecting an improvement in the state of public finances.[1]

During the three years which followed Parsons remained relatively inactive. When he spoke again, in January 1788, it was to engage in a more elaborate attempt to achieve financial retrenchment. The Duke of Rutland had recently been replaced by the Marquis of Buckingham, as Viceroy, and the Address to the Throne contained a number of favourable comments on the administration of the former. Parsons took grave exception to these comments, partly on account of a number of acts of the late administration of which he disapproved, and partly because they had made no attempt to improve the state of the public finances. He also expressed frank disappointment that the new administration had given no hope of a more enlightened policy, and had not mentioned economy in the Address. Did they intend to continue the same system of extravagance, or would there be some retrenchment? If retrenchment, why did they not declare it? The

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1. P. R., 1785, p. 197.

expenses of Rutland's administration had exceeded those of Lord Carlisle's (their predecessors) by £660,000 per annum. The new government had already made a survey of the public offices, and it would be little to their credit if they could not effect some economies.[1]

He rose soon afterwards to propose that the words referring to the Duke of Rutland's administration should be deleted from the Address. His intention was not, he declared, to make any reflection on Rutland's personal character, for which he had much respect; he merely wished to repudiate the faults of some of his ministers.[2]

Parsons could not, however, on this occasion, hope to receive much support or sympathy from the House. The opposition had no wish to create a hostile atmosphere so early in the career of a new administration from which it was hoped to win some concessions. Parsons's outburst appeared as a tactical error, capable of arousing the wrath of the government at a time when conciliation was very desirable. His references to the Duke of Rutland were generally resented, as the latter had won a large measure of popularity. The feelings of the opposition were expressed by Denis Brown, himself a former supporter of Flood:

> I saw the pain, the torture the House suffered when the honourable gentleman was speaking, and I am surprised they bore it so patiently: I am surprised that they did not, forgetful of order, rise and tear from his hands any paper which could tend to injure the honour of the man whom everybody loved.[3]

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1. P. R., 1785, p. 5.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 1788, p. 6.

The government did not consider it necessary to offer Parsons a comprehensive reply. FitzGibbon declared that his attack was "so very impotent, that the best way is to pass it by in contemptuous silence".[1] Parnell, however, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, denied his contention that the administration was now spending more than under Lord Carlisle; annual expenditure during the last two years of Carlisle's period of office amounted to £2,067,000; for the previous year, it had amounted only to £1,082,000.[2]

Clearly Parsons had allowed his pre-occupation with financial retrenchment to carry him too far. He had misjudged the temper and feelings of the House, and his references to the Duke of Rutland had been extremely unwise. More serious, the charges of extravagance which he brought against the late administration do not appear to have been prepared with any great care. He would have been wise, in these circumstances, to close the discussion as quickly as possible. Yet he rose to defend his position with even greater vehemence. His charges against the late administration, were, he declared, well founded, and he hoped to substantiate them on the following day; he believed himself to be justified in attempting to ascertain the intentions of the new administration; he would withdraw his motion concerning the Duke of Rutland, but would replace it by one affirming

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1. P. R., 1788, p. 6.

2. Ibid., p. 32.

the need for greater economy in the public finances.[1]

The House was in no mood to bear with him further. In considerable agitation Corry rose on behalf of the opposition to ask him to withdraw his motion, "and not press a subject repugnant to the feelings of every man who heard him." The Chancellor expressed surprise that Parsons should still challenge the evidence of the public accounts, and offered to go into the matter privately with him. Laurence, however, remained unconvinced; he would withdraw his motion, he said, but could not depart from the principles it contained; then, rather bitterly, to those members of the opposition who had opposed him, he asserted that he, at least, remained uninfluenced by hopes of office or emolument.[2]

On the following morning Parsons resumed the attack. He now put forward a new motion, carefully contrived to avoid mention of the Duke of Rutland, and placed the blame directly on his subordinates. Yet, as if already aware that his proposal would prove unacceptable, he treated the members to a long homily on the constitutional importance of the Address to the Throne. The peers and commons of Ireland, unlike those of England, did not enjoy the privilege of frequent access to the secretary. Addresses from Parliament, were, therefore, the only means of acquainting him with the state of the country. He

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1. P. R., 1788, p. 7.

2. Ibid., p. 8.

had no objection to the language of compliment, provided it was consistent with truth, but the language of the present Address was unsuited to the dignity of an assembly whose duty it was to superintend the government, not to flatter it - "It was the language of a levee, or of those who were in training for the council."[1]

Parsons's amendment ended in humiliating defeat. This did not discourage him, however, from carrying on a ceaseless offensive against the government for the remainder of the session. On January 31 he complained that taxation was too high, and drew unfavourable comparison between the taxation system of Ireland, and those of England and France.[2] Several days later he attacked the arrangements for the state lottery, particularly the practice whereby the Chancellor of the Exchequer made agreements for the purchase of large numbers of tickets by contractors, to the detriment, Parsons believed, of the national revenue.[3]

At this time, too, came the first sign of an open break with Grattan, which was to continue for the remainder of Parsons's career in the Irish Parliament. He never found it possible to forgive those who had once been Flood's enemies, and against Grattan in particular, he displayed a large measure of personal hatred and vindictiveness.

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1. P. R., 1788, p. 12.
2. Ibid., p. 40.
3. Ibid., p. 42.

On February 14 Grattan made a speech in which he attacked the exactions of many of the established clergy in claiming their tithes, and asked for a committee of enquiry. The speech which was delivered with intense feeling was one of the finest examples of his oratory, and stands as a powerful indictment of the evils of the eighteenth-century church.[1] For Parsons, however, it aroused only feelings of bitter resentment; he replied with a denial that there had been exactions, except by a small number of individual clergymen; Grattan's request for a committee of enquiry he believed to be impracticable, since it would take a long time to examine all the clergy in the south of Ireland; finally, he attempted to marshal all the forces of opinion within the established church, against his adversary:

> I will never consent to have the established church of this kingdom dragged like a delinquent to your bar, and arraigned, and evidences brought to asperse, perhaps to defame and to caluminate the ministers of the gospel - this would be an unseemly thing.[2]

The quarrel with Grattan was deepened by a number of events which took place shortly after this speech. In England the first serious illness of George III produced the question of a regency, and the Irish opposition took heart with the prospect of the return to power of Fox and the reform party, favoured by the prince regent. At the same time, circumstances seemed to favour a further vindication

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1. P. R., 1788, p. 230.
2. Ibid., p. 234.

of the independence of the Irish Parliament from the Parliament in England. When the government attempted to have the regent appointed by means of a bill to which he would affix the Great Seal of England, after being invested with authority by the English Parliament, a wave of intense feeling swept over the opposition. Acting largely under Grattan's influence they declined to sanction the government's proposals, and passed instead an address, which asked the regent to assume the government of Ireland. The recovery of the king, however, brought these efforts to an end, and restored the ascendancy to Pitt and his supporters.[1]

In these proceedings, Parsons played no part. It is at first sight difficult to reconcile this aloofness with the efforts he had previously been making to win parliamentary reform. Yet, if we remember the consistency with which, during the six years that followed, he pursued his quarrel against Grattan, and declined to co-operate with him on any political questions whatsoever, the explanation of his conduct on this occasion is not difficult to find. Parsons's loyalty to Flood's teaching had already forced him to take up a position of uncompromising independence in Parliemant which would not allow him to enter into any alliance with the latter's enemies.

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, II. 467.

CHAPTER FOUR

OBSERVATIONS ON THE BEQUEST OF HENRY FLOOD AND THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF IRELAND.

Flood died on 2 December 1791. An attempt to extinguish a fire at his home brought on an attack of gout, which quickly changed to pleurisy and caused his death. He left behind him a considerable amount of property. His Will, which was dated May 27 of the same year, directed amongst other matters, that certain estates in County Kilkenny which had come to him on his marriage to Lady Francis Flood, should pass, after her death, to the University of Dublin, and provide an endowment for the study of the ancient literature of Ireland.

> I will and direct, that on their coming into possession of this my bequest, on the death of my said wife, they do institute and maintain, as a perpetual establishment, a professorship of and for the native Irish or Erse language, and that they do appoint, if he shall be then living, Colonel Charles Vallancey to be the first professor thereof, with a salary of not less than three hundred pounds sterling a year, seeing that by his eminent and successful labours in the study and recovery of that language he well deserves to be so first appointed. And I will and appoint that they do grant one annual and liberal premium for the best and another for the second best composition in prose or verse in the said native Irish or Erse language, upon some point of ancient history, government, religion, literature, or situation of Ireland; and also one other annual and liberal premium, one for the best and another for the next best composition in Greek or Latin prose or verse on any general subject by them assigned; and one other annual and liberal premium, one for the best, and another for the next best composition in English prose or verse, in commemoration of some one of those great characters, either of ancient or modern nations, who have been eminently serviceable and honourable to their country, seeing that nothing stimulates

> to great deeds more strongly than great examples; and I will that the rents and profits of my said lands, houses, hereditaments and estates shall be further applied by the said University to the purchase of all printed books and manuscripts in the said native Irish or Erse language, whatsoever to be obtained, and next to the purchase of all printed books and manuscripts of the dialects and languages that are akin to the said native Irish or Erse Language, and then to the purchase of all valuable books and editions of books, in the learned and in the more polished languages.[1]

The intentions of Flood were never carried into effect. His Will was contested in the Court of Exchequer and the grant to the University was found to be contrary to the law of Mortmain.[2] A distant relative, John Flood, of Flood Hall, put forward his claims, and was adjudged to be lawful heir to all the property in question.

These judicial proceedings aroused much hostile criticism. It was denied that Irish literature was a subject worthy of academic study. At the same time it was suggested that Flood had aimed at restoring Irish to the position of the spoken language of the country.[3] Bitterly disappointed by these attacks on Flood's memory, Laurence Parsons came forward with a vigorous defence of his friend's intentions. His book, which was published in 1795, is evidence of one of the closest friendships of his career. Although primarily intended to be a defence of the bequest to Dublin University, it is also an impressive work of scholarship, founded upon long study. The treatment falls into

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 13.
2. W. Flood, Memoirs of Henry Flood, p. 393.
3. Ibid., p. 397.

two parts; the first of these, entitled "Observations on the Bequest of Henry Flood, Esquire," is a repudiation of the charges brought against Flood; the second, "A Defence of the Ancient History of Ireland", presents a case for the study of Irish literature.

Observations on the Bequest of Henry Flood.

Parsons made no attempt to examine any of the legal questions which were still to be decided by the courts. His purpose was, as he declared, simply to defend Flood's honour "From the aspersions of the ignorant and disingenuous".[1]

First he turned to the suggestion that Flood had aimed at restoring Irish to general use. Flood's aim, he declared, had been one of scholarship only; he had hoped that "Many curious and valuable records", which were contained in Irish literature, would throw light on an early period of world history, and relieve this country of unjust charges of ignorance and barbarism.[2] In support of his contention he pointed to the wording of the Will, which would certainly appear to give no grounds for believing otherwise. Had it been Flood's aim to restore Irish he would scarcely have relied on the work of the University alone, and it is unlikely that he would have bothered to extend his patronage to other languages as well.

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 23.

2. Ibid., p. 24.

Parsons then set out the advantages to be gained by the establishment of a collection of Irish manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College. Many valuable works were, he contended, "Mouldering in public and private collections on the continent, whither the ancient families of Ireland conveyed them in troubled times". Some of these were known to have been in Denmark during the reign of Elizabeth, and the Danish King had made an unsuccessful request to the English privy council to send over a scholar competent to translate them. Other manuscripts had been found, a short time previously, in the libraries of France, and in the Vatican. It was time, declared Parsons, to make a diligent search to find and preserve all that might remain.[1]

He had no doubt that the ancient Irish literature was of considerable historical significance. The imputation of hostile critics, that the Irish writings were merely fiction, a product of the minds of imaginative monks, was quite untrue. Indeed, he pointed out with considerable justice, that the Irish writings had never yet received an adequate historical examination, and that those who attacked them were not even acquainted with the language in which they were written. It had never been denied that Ireland had, over a long period, held the intellectual and scholastic ascendancy in Europe; was it likely that the chronicles which had been handed down from that time would

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 25.

be spurious and untrue.[1]

The pagan elements found in the early chronicles were, for him, proof that older, oral traditions had been assimilated and preserved by Christian writers. He made no attempt to deny the existence of myth. Yet, he was somewhat over-ingenuous in putting forward the claim that the Irish myths, unlike those of other countries, always tended to ascribe natural phenomena to supernatural agents; as an example of this, he pointed to the fog and storms which were recorded as having impeded the landing of the Milesians, and to their belief that these were due to some action of the Irish magicians. From this rather slender basis he went on to argue that the Irish manuscripts must contain a greater proportion of truth than any others.[2]

The account contained in the annals - that a colony from Scythia settled in Egypt, moved on to the western coast of Spain and from there emigrated to Ireland - was in every way reasonable to accept. The passage from Spain to Ireland was, for geographical reasons, a matter of no great difficulty. The scarcity of information about the earlier inhabitants was to be explained by the fact that they could only pass on historical knowledge by means of an oral tradition. The Scythians (or Phoenicians) were among the first people known to invent an alphabet, and it was reasonable to conclude that the Irish alphabet

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 28.

2. Ibid., p. 32.

derived from them. Unhappily, while thus far Parsons's argument is sound and convincing, he now committed the surprising blunder of supposing that the Irish alphabet consisted of seventeen letters only, and for this reason must equal in antiquity the Greek alphabet of sixteen letters, which had also been derived from the Phoenicians.[1]

Proceeding to examine the evidence of the cultural progress of the Irish Parsons fell into a number of grave historical errors. When speaking of the architectural glory of the round towers he suggested that they belonged to a period "Much more remote than the introduction of Christianity".[2] He believed that the disused coal-mine, at Ballycastle, in Antrim, where ancient mining implements had recently been discovered, was in operation at the same period.[3] He accepted a tradition, then current amongst the midland peasantry, that the wide expanse of bogland which covers central Ireland was once a fertile plain on which agricultural pursuits were skilfully maintained.[4] Yet, it is clear that none of these blunders were errors of judgment, but an acceptance of historical theories which prevailed in the eighteenth century.

Why did the classical histories of Greece and Rome make no allusion to the Irish? This, admitted Parsons, was a common objection

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 36.
2. Ibid., p. 46.
3. Ibid., p. 47.
4. Ibid., p. 48.

to the study of Irish literature, since the prevailing system of classical education tended to produce an attitude of mind which dismissed as unimportant anything which the classical writers failed to mention. The answer, he suggested, was that the Irish had lived in considerable isolation from the peoples of the continent, having no foreign wars except those with Britain and the northern parts of Gaul. Nor should this detract from the value of the annals:

> It is this very state of sequestration, in which they lived, that renders their history so curious and so interesting at this day: because it is so singular; because it represents society in so primitive a state, because it represents a populous nation in such simple habits: living so for such a long succession of ages; preserving their ancient customs and manners, unmixed with those of the other nations of Europe.[1]

Turning from these arguments Parsons submitted that no further justification for the study of Irish literature should be necessary, once such a man as Flood had declared himself to be in favour of it. The praise which he reserved for his friend was lavish, but unmistakably sincere:

> He was certainly one of the greatest men that ever adorned this country. His mind was the most capacious; his reason the most athletic; his judgment the most balanced; his erudition the most profound. His nature was too dignified to deceive others; his intellect too piercing to be deceived himself. Yet he, in the most solemn act of his existence, when he was going to leave a great memorial to all posterity of his unabating patriotism, and to make the termination of his life accord with all his actions when living, in which his country was his first and paramount object; for the prosperity of which he lived and laboured; and for the same ardour for

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 51.

> its fame was just about to die; he, I say, consecrated with his dying breath these venerable records, and embalmed them, and his own fame together, to all posterior ages; and thus, by such a conduct, at such a time, when he knew that nothing but truth could throw glory around his declining orb, and when there was an end of every inclination, which could cast obscurity upon truth, has given a testimony, which ought to satisfy uninformed men of the value of these ancient writings, though uncorroborated by all the high authorities that bear witness in their support.[1]

Yet, declared Parsons, Flood had been actuated by no petty nationalistic feeling. Although his primary object was the fame of Ireland, "The wide horizon of his intellect embraced the early history of the whole human race, which he hoped would be illustrated by the connection and comparison of these collateral testimonies". Thus he had arranged that money should also be made available for the purchase of writings in languages other than Irish, and for notable writings in any language whatsoever:[2]

> This was the extensive range of Mr. Flood's bequest to the public; having first manifested in his Will all the wise and tender anxieties and cares for those around him, for whom duty and affection taught him to provide; ---------- he then turned his eyes upon Ireland - Ireland, for whose prosperity and liberty and glory he had so many years ago so illustriously toiled, and which was now to be closed from his view for ever. His great spirit, while it was just hovering over the tomb, was still busied about the future fame of his country; it dictated those expiring accounts, which direct that the materials of learning, from all parts of the earth, should be from time to time collected and deposited in the bosom of our University. Thus founding for his country an everlasting pyramid of all the accumulated knowledge of man, which should out-top the works of all other nations, and by

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 65.

2. Ibid., p. 71.

> which every future genius of our island might climb to the summit of human intelligence, and take his towering flight. Lastly ---------- he orders that the most exalted examples of the most exalted men, that have ever improved and dignified human nature, may be applied to transfuse their virtues into the expanding bosoms of our youth; that thus, as it were, through the medium of his last will, his voice, though dead himself, might call continually from the tomb upon the aspiring offspring of every succeeding age to enable their minds, and spread glory over their country, by their knowledge, their talents, and their virtues.

Defence of the Ancient History of Ireland.

The second part of Parsons's work is less controversial and gives evidence of considerable scholarship and learning. He began by citing the various occasions on which Ireland was mentioned by the ancient Greek authors. The earliest of these was Orpheus in the Argonautica, who, when speaking of Jason and the Argonauts, said "Then they went by the island if Iernis" (which Camden, in his Hibernia, subsequently translated as "Ireland").[1] Other allusions were taken from the writings of Homer, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Herodotus and Pliny.

From what source did the Greeks gain their knowledge of Ireland? Parsons did not contend that there was any direct contact between the two countries, and he showed himself well aware that the Greek sailors did not venture so far from home. He suggested that knowledge of Ireland reached them by way of the Phoenicians. He pointed to the belief of Strabo, that a large part of the scenery of the Odyssey was placed in the Atlantic; again, he quoted Plutarch as saying that the

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 81.

island of Calypso, mentioned by Homer, was an island to the west of Britain.[1] He took a rather more interesting proof from Herodotus, then believed to be the earliest writer extant in Greek prose, who said "Of Europe no one knows, whether on the east, or on the north, the sea flows round it". It followed, thought Parsons, that Herodotus was aware that the sea flowed round the south and west; "And consequently that the Atlantic had been navigated from the pillars of Hercules to Ireland."[2]

When he went on to examine the connection of the Phoenicians with the British Isles Parsons brought forward a number of points of great significance. He believed, quite correctly, that the Cassiterides, or tin islands, from which the Phoenicians supplied the Mediterranean peoples with tin, referred to the British Isles. He then advanced the somewhat startling suggestion that the Greek name referred, not to tin, but to lead; according to Pliny, there were two kinds of lead, the black, and the white which was more precious and was called by the Greeks tin. It was certain, argued Parsons, that no trace of tin mining could be found in Ireland (and recent geological investigation has effectively borne this out). Yet, could it be that the trade of the Phoenicians was carried on not merely with the tin mines of Cornwall, but also with the lead mines of Ireland?[3]

The implications of this suggestion have never been answered. It

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 96.
2. Ibid., p. 99.
3. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 101 seq.

seems beyond reasonable doubt that the name Cassiterides refers to more than one island, and that the Phoenicians were at least aware of the existence of Ireland. Again, navigation from the Mediterranean to Ireland would not have presented any undue difficulties, and the Irish lead mines were readily accessible from the south coast. It would seem, even now, that Parsons had a strong case for believing that the early Phoenician traders had close contacts with Ireland.

He was less convincing, however, when he made the suggestion that the Irish were themselves a Phoenician colony. Following the opinion of Camden that language is "The most certain argument of the origin of nations", he relied implicitly on a linguistic proof.[1] He pointed to the conclusion of Colonel Vallancey (the scholar whom Flood had nominated for the chair of Irish in Dublin University) that there were considerable points of similarity between the Irish and Carthaginian languages; it followed, thought Parsons, that since the Carthaginians were known to be a Phoenician colony, the Irish must be a Phoenician colony also.[2] This reasoning is somewhat ingenuous, and falls into an error known to logicians as the falacy of the undistributed middle. Moreover, it was obviously unsafe to rely on the evidence of Vallancey alone.

When did the Phoenician colony first appear in Ireland? Parsons looked for his evidence in the religious state of the Irish immediately

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1. Ibid., p. 138 seq.

2. Ibid., p. 160.

before the advent of Christianity. He found no traces of image-worship, nor of any of the more advanced cults known to have been practised by the Phoenicians. This led him to believe that the emigration to Ireland took place before the full development of Phoenician religion, and he placed the date at about the time of Cadmus, or certainly before the Trojan war.[1] Clearly, this is a weak line of argument, since it makes the mistake of supposing that primitive peoples do not diminish, although they may increase, the number of their deities. Religious history, on the contrary, has usually shown a strong tendency towards centralisation. If the Irish did not worship a number of the Phoenician deities, this in itself would prove nothing concerning the date of an emigration. It might, however, give some grounds for the belief that the Irish were not a Phoenician colony at all.

The conclusion which Parsons wished to draw from these premises was now made evident. He pointed to the antiquity of the Irish language, and the historical value of a study of Irish literature:

> Since all these ancient memorials agree in representing the country in the same state of primitive civility; the annalists detailing it; the bards celebrating it; the laws exactly fitting it; the weapons and ornaments which are frequently found, corresponding with it; no doubt ought any longer to remain in the mind of an unprejudiced man of the great antiquity of the Phoenician settlement here, and the fidelity of the account given of it by the ancient Irish writers.[2]

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 164.

2. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 210.

The arguments of those who denied the antiquity of the Irish nation were passed by with a reticence which is very disappointing. Nevertheless, Parsons made a number of telling points against them. He believed that references hostile to Ireland, in the classical authors, were of no significance; the Irish civilisation was undoubtedly of a lower order than the civilisations of Greece and Rome, but this did not in any way detract from its richness and antiquity.[1] Again, much criticism had been dictated by reasons other than historical, since "general invectives against nations should seldom be much attended to".[2] A recent example of this had been the outburst of popular indignation which followed the publication of the poems of Ossian by James McPherson, a Scottish poet, with the claim that they were a translation of Gaelic oral traditions still current in the Highlands. Parsons did not accept the authenticity of McPherson's work, and clearly regretted that such an excellent opportunity had been given to those who were hostile to Gaelic culture to show their strength. He re-produced in full a recent paper by Dr. Young, a Senior Fellow of Trinity College, published among the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, in which Young attempted to show that the true nature of the Ossianic tradition was not as McPherson had given it.[3]

For Parsons to intervene directly in the Ossianic controversy was

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1. Ibid., p. 211.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, p. 211.

perhaps unfortunate since he was in no position to make any evaluation of McPherson's work. Yet he was merely following the opinion of the overwhelming majority of scholars during the later years of the eighteenth century.

In 1762 McPherson, whose previous attempts to produce original poems in Scottish Gaelic had been singularly unsuccessful,[1] published at London an epic poem in six books under the title of Fingal. The work, which described the invasion of Ireland by Swaran, King of Lochlin (Denmark), purported to be a translation of oral traditions still surviving in the Scottish Highlands and ascribed originally to the poet Ossian. A second edition was published at Dublin later in the same year. From the first, Fingal aroused much hostility amongst the English literary public. This was partly a measure of the low repute in which Gaelic studies were held during the years which followed the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. It was also due, however, to doubts which were entertained concerning the authenticity of McPherson's work.[2]

Writing a short time afterwards David Hume, a former friend and colleague of McPherson, presented a detailed argument to show that the Ossianic legends were the composition of McPherson himself. He pointed out that McPherson had hitherto failed to give any details concerning the sources of his information; that the Ossianic legends were too

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1. Laing, History of Scotland, IV. 434.

2. D.N.B., James McPherson.

copious and factual for oral preservation; that there was a notable absence of religious sentiment and the supernatural such as might be expected from the records of a primitive people; that the character of McPherson's other writings was not such as to inspire confidence, since he had committed grave blunders in a history of ancient Britain and a translation of Homer.[1] Hume's views were shared by Samuel Johnson, who in 1775 made a journey to the western isles of Scotland with the purpose of finding evidence of the social history of Scotland. Johnson formed the opinion that the material to be found in Gaelic oral tradition was of very limited extent; "I believe there cannot be recovered in the whole Earse language five hundred lines of which there is any evidence to prove them a hundred years old."[2] Other notable attacks on McPherson were made by William Shaw in 1775, and by Malcolm Laing when he published his History of Scotland in 1800. On behalf of McPherson came no real reply, but much angry abuse.[3]

Later investigation has tended to modify the hostility felt towards the Ossianic legends during the eighteenth century. A report of the Highland Society of Scotland, presented in 1805, declared that legends of Fingal and Ossian had existed immemorially in the highlands, fragments of which corresponded to parts of McPherson's work, although no one poem was identical in title or tenor with any of his

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1. Burton, Life and Corr. of Hume, 1. 471 seq.
2. Johnson, Journey to the Western Isles, p. 267.
3. D.N.B., James McPherson.

publications. It also suggested that McPherson had liberally edited the original source material, and included some passages of his own composition.[1] Writing a century later, in the Dictionary of National Biography, T. Bailey Saunders concluded that the general charge of forgery, in the form in which it was made in the eighteenth century, had not been sustained, although he declined to believe that McPherson had found a single great epic such as he claimed to have done.[2]

This treatise represents the first major work of scholarship in which Parsons engaged. His purpose had not been primarily an academic one, but merely to defend the honour of a close friend. As he himself admitted, with some humility, he brought to the task only a superficial knowledge of ancient Irish history, and no knowledge whatsoever of the Irish language.[3] Nevertheless, the completed work gives evidence of considerable familiarity with both primary and secondary authors. It displays well-developed powers of reasoning and elucidation. It has the merit, rare amongst historical writings of the eighteenth century, of presenting a well-knit central argument, unimpaired by literary embellishment or over-description. Despite its many weaknesses, it is proof of surprising intellectual activity during a period when the author was busily occupied with political events in Parliament.

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1. D.N.B., James McPherson.
2. Ibid.
3. Sir L. Parsons, Bequest of Henry Flood, p. 228.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STRUGGLE FOR REFORM 1789-1795.

The French Revolution brought a new spirit into Irish politics. Both Presbyterians in the North, and Roman Catholics in the south, watched the early victories of the revolutionaries with sympathetic interest. Popular ill-feeling against the injustices of the constitution grew, and began to assume a more aggressive form. For the moment the struggle of the patriotic opposition in Parliament was disregarded, and men turned their thoughts to other and more vigorous means of achieving their object.[1]

The members of the opposition were not slow to appreciate the dangers of the new situation. It was recognised that only a stronger and more cohesive parliamentary organisation could succeed in regaining the support of public opinion. For the first time the various elements of opposition came together in an organisation which had a common programme and some measure of central direction. This was the Whig Club, founded at a meeting on 26 June 1789, and including amongst its principal members Charlemont, Grattan, the two Ponsonby brothers, and Forbes. The objects of the club, as declared in the articles of association, were to press for a moderate measure of constitutional reform and to resist the intrusion of democracy and revolution into

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, III. 428 seq.

Irish political life; significantly, there were demands for a Place Bill, a Pension Bill and several minor reforms, but no attempt to obtain a reduction of the franchise. The model was clearly that of the Whig party under Fox in England, with whom there was from the first a very close connection.

Forty-seven persons joined the Club at the original meeting on June 26, and the number soon rose to more than one hundred, comprising almost all the members of the opposition in both Houses of Parliament. Yet, the name of Laurence Parsons was conspicuously absent.[1]

The reasons which led Parsons to remain aloof from his colleagues are not difficult to find. He had already formed the opinion that an organised opposition was undesirable and worked against the efficiency of Parliament.[2] He was still pre-occupied with the teachings of Flood, and could not be expected to view with sympathy a movement which was much under the influence of Grattan. Moreover, the events in France

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, III. 428 seq. G.P. Gooch falls into the error of supposing that Parsons was one of the leaders of the Whig Club. Cf. 'Great Britain and Ireland, 1792-1815' in Camb. Mod. Hist., IX. 693.

2. Political Notes of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.). His objections to an organised opposition were as follows:-
   1. It prevented the influence of arguments to be felt in debate.
   2. Leaders were not obliged to obey the instructions of their constituents.
   3. Power was monopolised by two or three party leaders.
   4. It accustomed men to act against the dictates of their true feelings.
   5. It might lead to the acceptance by Parliament of measures abhorrent to the majority of members.



SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE. IN PARLIAMENTARY ROBE
Reproduced from a portrait at Birr Castle, by kind permissio
of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.

impelled him to take a course of action more drastic than that envisaged by the other members of the opposition.

Parsons's attitude was revealed in the course of two speeches which he delivered during the early days of the session of 1790. Speaking in terms more stern and merciless than any he had hitherto used, he warned the government of the necessity of coming to terms with the popular demand for reform, and subjected the entire system of privilege in Ireland to the most devastating attack it had so far received in Parliament.

The first speech was delivered on February 1, against a government motion to appoint a number of new officials. Parsons first went to some pains to explain his independent position. "When the interests of my country are at stake," he declared, "I shall ever be ready to unite with my enemy - or differ from my friend." The dangers of the present situation forced him to speak out against the government. They had made no attempt to establish themselves in the favour of the people; before the American war, when governments were forced to concentrate their attention on the task of holding the country secure in the British connection, it was understandable that they were unpopular; yet the unpopularity of the present government was due to its own misdeeds, and this in itself presented a serious threat to the connection with England.

> I cannot conceive anything much more mischievous ------ than an arrogant system of administration which affects to despise - and which in the end may alienate - the affections of these two people. If the greatest enemy to the connection of these two kingdoms was plotting what would sap it most; if

> the evil genius of England was about to pronounce his last curse upon the empire for its final dissolution, it would be that an arrogant, self-sufficient, incapable and corrupt administration should triumph here, until it blasted every sentiment of affection for the English government, which remained in the bosoms of the Irish.[1]

The use of corruption as a means of effecting the purposes of government had steadily increased. Corruption affected every part of the constitution, and rendered the freedom won in 1782 of little value:

> Will his majesty's minister say, that the influence of the Crown ought to be increased in this country by mercenary means? And if this would be too base for him to say, can it be right for him to do? And if he attempts to do it, will not the independent gentlemen of the country resist him? I will ask those gentlemen, if the influence of the Crown is thus suffered to increase, what security they have for their recovered constitution? I will ask to what purpose is it, that you have made your parliament independent of the English legislature, if you suffer a mercenary influence to spread here, until it renders it dependent on the minister of that legislature? Yet, is it not notorious that such an influence has been increasing here continually since the year 1782? Let, then, this system of influence go on, and it will reduce you at last, even to a worse state, than that which you were in antecedent to the year 1782, for external usurpation is not so bad as internal corruption.[2]

Two weeks later Parsons spoke again in support of a motion by George Ponsonby, criticising the magnitude of the public expenses. On this occasion his attack was far more devastating. Fourteen places, he declared, had been created or revived since the last session, and all bestowed on members of the House. The government had never offered any excuse for its conduct; a number of appointments (in the

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1. P.R., 1790, p. 77.
2. Ibid., p. 21.

Ordnance Office) had been declared necessary because of the peculation of officials, but could it be that there were no honest men outside the confines of the House, and was the large sum to be paid as salary (six hundred pounds) any guarantee of honesty? No one could, in his heart, deny that these places had been created for the purpose of parliamentary influence.[1]

Parsons gave the ministers a number of stern warnings. They would do well to consider the dangers of flouting public opinion; it had been claimed that the people had expressed no dissatisfaction with the official arrangements; yet the people had no knowledge of them and who could say what course popular anger might take once it had been aroused. Again, the policy of the government could only result in a loosening of the ties which bound Ireland to England, and a greater feeling of hostility towards Pitt. If a minister became unpopular in England he must soon lose his power there. If a minister, though powerful in England, should become unpopular here, he must also fall, since, argued Parsons somewhat ingenuously, "This island is one of the great pillars of the empire upon which his power should partly rest, and without which it should fall." Pitt had already failed in Ireland on two notable occasions, and it would be well for him not to prepare the way for a third.[2]

Turning then to the other members of the opposition Parsons

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1. P.R., 1790, p. 240.
2. Ibid., p. 241.

warned them that the constitutional liberties gained in 1782 were in danger. Of what use could these liberties be, if the evil of foreign usurpation was merely replaced by that of internal corruption:

> If the people are to be overwhelmed by arbitrary laws --- and if the parliament is to be overwhelmed by corruption, what avail the acquisitions of 1782? I prize those acquisitions as much as any man, and therefore I wish to preserve them; but I wish to preserve them in all their plenitude and power and efficiency.[1]

The government had attempted to allay popular discontent by boasting of the prosperous state of the country. Yet what position did Ireland enjoy beyond that of a secondary kingdom - "An inferior member of a great empire, without any movement or orbit of its own." The connection with England gave many advantages, and if Ireland were well governed she would have little reason for discontent. The greatest advantage of this connection was that Ireland was not called upon to bear the expenses of an empire, and could therefore maintain an honest and frugal government at home. This advantage had been sacrificed by the conduct of the present ministers.[2]

These ministers had often behaved arrogantly, as if they believed themselves to rule an inferior people. It was unwise to underestimate the character of the Irish people; they "have the feelings of men, they suffer like men and they may be found to resist like men." No government could maintain for ever a system which denied opportunity

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1. P.R., 1790, p. 242.

2. Ibid.

to men of talent and honour. The ministers had been forced to yield to popular opinion during the American war, and it might be that they would have to yield with far greater humiliation now. The people still looked to the constitution of 1782 to provide them with a better government, and there would be widespread anger once they found that they had been deceived:

> We are an independent kingdom, true. We have an independent crown distinct from England, true. But it is a metaphysical distinction - a mere sport for speculative men - nothing in act or efficiency. Who governs us? English ministers, or rather, the deputies of English ministers, mere subalterns in office, who never date aspire to the dignity of any great sentiment of their own. Yet, all this we submit to, we are satisfied - we are content - and only ask in return for an honest and frugal government. Is it just - is it wise - is it safe to deny it?[1]

These two speeches mark a decisive change in the development of Parsons's political career. Hitherto he had made no serious attack on the government, apart from his activities during the debates on the Mutiny Bill. He had taken no part in the momentary triumph of the opposition at the time of the Regency question. Now, however, he spoke in tones that were unmistakably threatening and full of anger, and seemed to offer a large measure of justification for the growing strength of popular unrest.

Was Parsons at this time on the way to becoming a revolutionary? It was the opinion of Lecky, based on the evidence of his speeches alone, that of all the leading members in the Irish Parliament he

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1. P.R., 1790, p. 243.

approached most nearly to the ideals subsequently put forward by the United Irishmen. Lecky however, qualified his opinion with the admission that, in the matter of representation, Parsons's views were essentially moderate.[1] A further consideration is the fact that he had already formed a close friendship with Wolfe Tone, and Tone afterwards asserted that the development of his own separatist views was largely due to Parsons's influence:

> In forming this theory, which has ever since unvaryingly directed my political conduct, to which I have sacrificed everything, and am ready to sacrifice my life if necessary, I was exceedingly assisted by Sir Laurence Parsons, whom I look upon as one of the very, very few honest men in the Irish House of Commons. It was he who first turned my attention to this great question, but I very soon ran far ahead of my master. It is in fact to him I am indebted for the first comprehensive view of the actual situation of Ireland; what his conduct might be in a crisis, I know not but I can answer for the truth and justice of his theory.[2]

Unfortunately, this is the only reference which Tone made to his friendship with Parsons. His statement is insufficient evidence on which to base any conclusions regarding the latter's political ideas at this time. It would seem to make only two facts abundantly clear; that Parsons and Tone were no longer on terms of intimacy when the latter decided in favour of a revolutionary policy, and that Tone did not know what Parsons's sentiments towards the revolutionary movement were.

We are, however, in a position to engage in a far more exhaustive examination of Parsons's attitude from the personal memoranda in his

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, III. 20
2. Wolfe Tone, Life, 1. 32.

handwriting at Birr Castle. The most obviously extremist tendency amongst these writings is a frequently expressed distrust of the connection with England. In all probability it was to this Tone referred when he wrote of the "great question" to which Laurence had turned his attention. Yet it is clear that Parsons was not contemplating separation; the two states were, for him, "independent, co-pollent and co-imperial."[1]

Flood's two objectives, 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. Parsons suggested that there were a number of weaknesses peculiar to the Irish constitution which would be dangerous if not removed without delay; the people were less equally represented in the legislature than in England, because there were fewer electors in the boroughs; there was no clear distinction between the interests of the Crown and the aristocracy; the chief members of the government did not reside; there was a possibility that, if Ireland were one day to become more wealthy, her revenues might be used by the Crown as a revenue independent of the English Parliament. Still more important, however, was his fear of the consequences of disregarding the recent changes in public opinion. Far from wishing to use the anger of the people as a weapon against the government, as his speeches might appear to suggest, he was anxious to appease the people by granting some of their demands:

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1. Political Notes of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).

> To rule man as you would now rule him, you must annihilate man, for you cannot by any ingenuity of government or of misgovernment by any moral or immoral ordinance, or by any physical deprivations, disorganise and brutalize the image of the deity in this land, as to debase him to a fit subject for such misrule as yours --- I (was) among those unwilling to attempt reform in the present time, had doubts, was timid on the subject, --- but after much reflection, am at length persuaded, that things cannot remain long as they are, and that timely and radical change will prevent sudden and violent convulsion.[1]

Parsons undoubtedly wished any measure of reform to be both comprehensive and thorough - "It is not merely the Parliament but the people that requires reformation." Corruption had, he considered, become established in many departments of public life apart from the administration, and should be removed. 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. In an unfinished work on "Government" which he wrote about this time, he attacked the theories of democracy which had gained strength since the French Revolution, and argued against any extension of political power to the lower classes - "Tis better for a people that those who have been educated with the expectation of enjoying fortune and power

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1. Political Notes of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).

should possess them, than those who have not.'[1] In a pamphlet published in 1793 he attacked the use of force as a means of resolving political grievances: 'You may be insulted by the weakness or rashness of ministers; you may be inflamed by the frenzy or profligacy of incendaries; still, however, think that there is no grievance great or small which will not at last yield without a struggle to calm perserverance.'[2]

Lecky's judgement on Parsons would therefore appear to be a superficial one. While the language which Parsons used against the government was undoubtedly severe it did not necessarily imply any extremist sympathies. It is much safer to conclude that he had been influenced by fears of the prevailing state of public opinion, perhaps to an extent not shared by any of his colleagues in the Irish Parliament. His attitude was really one of extreme caution; he was anxious to appease popular unrest before it could assume more dangerous proportions; he did not contemplate any radical measures of reform, and still remained loyal to Flood's principles. When he began his attack on the government, so abruptly and so menacingly, in the spring of 1790, it was not because he was drawing close to revolutionary ideas, but because he felt it necessary to bring home to ministers by every means in his power the need to reform the constitution before the ascendancy of the upper classes had been endangered.

II

Parsons's career in Parliament suffered a severe setback by his defeat in the Trinity College election of 1791.[3] The death of his father, Sir William, however, during the same year, left one of the seats for the King's County vacant, and Laurence was elected to

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1. Sir L.Parsons, part of an unfinished treatise on government (Parsons MSS)
2. Sir L. Parsons, Thoughts on Liberty and Equality, p. 58.
3. See Appendix B.

succeed him.[1] He continued to represent the King's County in the Irish Parliament until the Union, and then in the imperial Parliament until his elevation to the peerage in 1807.

Although the attacks which he had made on the government were not immediately resumed Parsons came to play an increasingly individualistic role in Public affairs. When the members of the Whig Club, in an attempt to regain the support of public opinion, brought forward a number of measures of mild reform, he gave them no support. He took no part in the debates on opposition motions to limit the arbitrary use of fiats by the government, investigate the conduct of the Dublin police and restrain the creation of peerages and places in the civil service. Early in 1792, however, when the Whig Club turned its attention towards economic affairs, he was impelled to take decisive action.

George Ponsonby had introduced a bill to admit Ireland to free trade with the East Indies. The measure appears to have been brought forward without any real appreciation of its possible consequences, and some of the arguments used by Ponsonby's supporters were foolish and unreal. It was contended that since "by an eastern trade riches had flown into Great Britain," Ireland must become rich also, despite the fact that she had failed to keep pace with the recent industrial development of Great Britain; that sufficient specie for the new trade would be provided by English merchants, although no definite promises

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1. Gentleman's Magazine, 1841, pt.1, p. 535.

were forthcoming; that an example could be drawn from the eastern trade of the United States of America where, however, more favourable geographical and political conditions made comparisons with Ireland of little value.[1]

When government speakers expressed disapproval of the bill Parsons gave them his enthusiastic support. His views were chiefly determined by the restricted capital available in Ireland, and the need to use it to the best possible advantage. He considered that an eastern trade must lead to the export of capital in return for imported goods, an argument which seems undeniable so long as Irish industrial resources remained undeveloped. He pointed out that problems of distance would necessitate very considerable capital investment which would not bring an immediate return; that it was the opinion of Adam Smith that countries with little capital should purchase eastern goods from more powerful neighbours, thereby retaining their capital for essential works. So far Parsons's argument appears sound and reasonable; quite apart from the difficulty of procuring sufficient capital it is unlikely that the Irish market would have been sufficiently large to support a trade with distant countries, or that Irish merchants would have been able to compete successfully with the greater resources of England. Yet he weakened his case very considerably by an exaggerated description of the possible effects of competition between Irish and

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1. MacDowell, Irish Public Opinion, 1750-1800, p. 134.

Asiatic goods (since the latter must have included a large proportion of raw materials), and an attack on the trading classes as reputable judges of national economic policy. It might be true, as Parsons remarked, "that trade may be profitable to the merchant but injurious to the country," but it was unjust to suggest that the merchants had any predilection for foreign, as opposed to home investment, or that their views were any more determined by considerations of personal gain than those of any other section of the community.[1]

Parsons's speech was received with government applause, and manifest disapproval from the opposition. To many of Ponsonby's supporters it seemed to be a betrayal. One of them remarked, somewhat maliciously, that "there was more joy among them(the government) over one sinner that repented, than for ninety and nine just persons who needed no repentance."[2] It is certain, however, that Parsons had intended no betrayal. His determination to remain aloof from all party alignments had been declared in the opening words: "I am not connected with either party, but adhere to what I have always professed, that when I think the government right, it shall have my support, when wrong, my opposition."[3]

His independent position was displayed to an even more marked extent during the debates on the Catholic Relief Bill in 1793. For

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1. P.R., 1792, p. 101.
2. Ibid., p. 107.
3. Ibid., p. 101.

some time a feeling of resentment had been growing amongst leading members of the Roman Catholic community. The Catholic Committee, founded in 1791, was at once intended to give more organised presentation to the Catholic claims, and to exploit the difficulties of the government in the new revolutionary period. Towards the close of 1792 a meeting of the Committee, representative of all the counties of Ireland, presented a petition to the King in England which requested complete equality with other dissenters from the established church, and a speedy restoration "to the rights and privileges of our country."[1]

The petition was remarkable for two reasons. Although expressing disapproval of popular tumult as likely to prejudice the Catholic cause, it made clear the determination of the religious majority in Ireland to achieve some satisfaction for their "just and reasonable request." Again, it was sent direct to London, without recourse to the Irish government, from whom the petitioners anticipated only humiliation and degradation.[2]

In these circumstances the initiative passed to England, and a sharp difference of opinion followed between the two governments. Both were primarily intent upon preserving the Protestant ascendancy. To Pitt and his advisers in England it seemed that the threat of popular revolt in Ireland must be met with swift and comprehensive

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1. Circular of Catholic Committee, 1792 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/42/49).

2. Ibid.

measures of conciliation; "to give a candid and liberal consideration of the whole of this subject and to weigh well the consequences of leaving behind any sore part of the question." To the Viceroy (Westmoreland) and the Irish government it seemed that the situation was too explosive to carry out a policy of conciliation successfully.[1] Moreover, the fact that the petition had been presented direct to England raised questions of major constitutional importance. The Irish government considered that any new legislation should originate with them, and that Pitt behaved unconstitutionally when he gave instructions that measures for relief of the Catholics should be inserted in the Irish Speech from the Throne. They believed that any attempt to engage in conciliation now must be received by the Catholics as a signal victory over the ascendancy, and would encourage them to press for more extreme demands.[2]

The English administration, however, remained obdurate, and a series of recommendations sent across by Secretary Dundas in January 1793 were incorporated in Westmoreland's Speech from the Throne later in the same month, and subsequently introduced in the form of a bill by the Irish Secretary, Hobart. It was proposed to restore two important rights to Irish Roman Catholics; they were to be allowed to vote at parliamentary elections, and to serve on grand and common juries. In

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1. Earl of Westmoreland to Secretary Dundas, 9 Jan. 1793 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/42/65).

2. Secretary Dundas to Earl of Westmoreland, 7 Jan. 1793 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/42/128).

addition, they were to be permitted to carry arms, to hold commissions in the army and navy, and to be appointed to a number of minor offices.[1]

Parsons had no objections to the measure on grounds of religion. The record of his private life is proof of a benevolence towards his Roman Catholic neighbours rare amongst members of the ascendancy at this time. Moreover, writing two years later to protest against what he conceived to be an intolerant action on the part of a Catholic bishop, he affirmed his desire for a union of all religious groups in Ireland. It was for him a matter for congratulation that "some of our principal nobility and gentry assist in the Catholic chapels in Dublin to collect at their charity sermons, and the youth of our university go to Francis Street chapel and receive the paternal embrace with tears of joy."[2]

While he sympathised with the efforts of both government and opposition to ameliorate the condition of the Catholics, Parsons nevertheless felt considerable uneasiness lest the stability of the constitution should be impaired. It seemed to him that any extension of the franchise to the great body of the peasantry must result in a legislature no longer subject to upper class control, and dominated by extremist elements amongst the people. When, on February 18, he explained his position before the House the opening words of his speech struck home at his chief objection to the bill. An unlimited

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1. Secretary Dundas to Earl of Westmoreland, 7 Jan. 1793 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/42/128).

2. Sir L. Parsons to P. Burrows, 22 June 1795 (R.I.A., Burrows MSS.).

extension of the franchise to the Catholics would place the lower classes in a majority amongst the voters, and permit them to use this power against their landlords:

> By granting franchise then to the inferior Catholics, what do you do? You give franchise to a body of men in great poverty, in great ignorance; bigoted to their sect and their altars; repelled by ancient prejudices against you; and at least four times the number of you. You give them all at once the elective franchise, by which they will almost in every county in three provinces out or the four, be the majority of the electors, controlling you, overwhelming you, resisting and irresistible. I cannot conceive a frenzy much greater than this.[1]

He was careful to point out that he did not object to the measure on religious grounds. If these people were Protestants his attitude would be just the same, as he could not consent to "the overwhelming of the constitution by such a torrent." Perhaps, he suggested, the government had made the mistake of judging the situation by English conditions; in England the Catholics were not in a majority, and did not comprise the great mass of the lower orders.[2]

The government's proposals could only result in more extreme demands from the people. There would be an attempt to win a radical measure of constitutional reform, since the Catholics, once in control of the counties, would hardly be prepared to allow the boroughs to remain in Protestant hands. Furthermore, the Catholics of the south might enter into an alliance with the Presbyterians of the north. The present measure had been dictated not by clemency, but by fear, and

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1. P.R., 1793, II. 23.
2. Ibid., p. 32.

would set a precedent for other concessions far more alarming:

> I do not expect of the the house of commons of Ireland, that it should be wiser than any other assembly in the world, but I only implore it, that it may not immortalize itself for its folly. If you, a protestant house of commons, mean to give up your power to the catholics, do so; I shall acquiesce; but do it openly; it may be a magnanimous act, and take the credit for your magnanimity; avow it to the whole world; many and great heroes have resigned the ensigns of their authority, and sunk into the vale of private station; kings have laid down their sceptres; you may depose yourselves; do so; but say so; and let the world know that you are not ignorant of what you are about, and that it is a work of your free volition, and not of a fatuous ignorance and imbecility.[1]

Parsons now put forward a highly original suggestion. He proposed that the measure for Catholic Relief should be united with one for moderate constitutional reform. For the first time he made a statement of his own aims in the matter of reform, and introduced a number of definite proposals. These showed no revolutionary features, but were obviously designed to bring about only so small a change as the circumstances of the present emergency seemed to require. They embodied three main features. A plan already suggested by Pitt, to increase the number of county members, should be adopted, and two additional members given to each county and two to the City of Dublin; all large towns (such as Belfast) should be made into open boroughs, with a grant of the franchise to all freeholders; the total number of members of parliament should remain unchanged by the abolition of a sufficient number of "rotten" boroughs.[2]

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1. P.R., 1793, p. 28.
2. P.R., 1793, II. 28.

Finally, Parsons gave a warning to those who were prepared to consider more extreme measures of reform at this time. Only disastrous consequences could ensue from "tearing up all at once the whole foundations of our ancient constitution." He made a particular plea for the retention of borough representation, the advantages of which would appear to have escaped him hitherto; the boroughs ensured the presence in political life of a number of men of outstanding ability, such as were only infrequently found amongst the ranks of the merchants or country gentlemen who sat for the county seats.[1]

The House gave the speech a poor reception. Members of the government did not bother to make any formal answer to Parsons's suggestions. One government supporter (Hon. D. Browne) spoke derisively of his "multiplicity of matter" and dismissed his arguments as "very finely confused, and very alarming, and really above my recollection or powers of answering."[2] By yielding to the English ministers on the Catholic question Westmoreland's administration appears to have hoped to stifle further measures of constitutional reform. By granting the franchise to Roman Catholic peasantry, while withholding from Roman Catholics the right to sit in Parliament, it may have been intended to perpetuate and even extend the influence of the great aristocratic proprietors over the tenantry on their estates. Thus,

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 45.

democratic influence would be curtailed, and corruption could be employed to an even wider extent, to the detriment of movements for parliamentary reform. Parsons's memoranda of this time show him to have been aware of the danger of increasing aristocratic influence by widening the franchise, but he does not seem to have carried the suggestion to its logical conclusion, by asking whether the arrangements of the government for Catholic Relief, in 1793, were intended to provide further obstacles to the progress of reform.

Nevertheless, his speech on this occasion marks another important development in Parsons's political career. No longer was he content merely to threaten the government with the dangers of leaving the popular demand for reform unsatisfied. He had stated his aims clearly and unequivocally, and put forward a set of proposals designed to content the popular demands without making any dangerous alteration in the constitution. This change, from an attitude of essentially destructive opposition into one that was constructive, was the outcome of a more mature appreciation of the potentialities of the French Revolution evident in Parsons's memoranda at this time. He perceived that old political alignments were everywhere breaking down, and that a new situation was coming into being, in which the upper classes and the people challenged each other as mutual enemies:

> Formerly the divisions were between Protestant and Catholic - Whig and Tory - Country Party and Court Party - now between rich and poor - aristocrat and republican. If the people be taught that these interests are discordant and incompatible, they will conclude that the destruction of the one is essential to the success of the other, and if

> they proceed to open force with great numbers they may attempt the destruction of that party whose interests they suppose to be inconsistent with their own.[1]

Henceforward, Sir Laurence concentrated his resources on an attempt to prevent social strife in Ireland. His policy was marked by a firm belief in the stabilising influence of established institutions, and a determination to resist sudden and unwarranted change, both in internal and external affairs.

He made no immediate attempt to re-open the question of reform, and only spoke once during the sessions of 1793. This occasion was, however, unique, being the only one on which Parsons co-operated closely with the other members of the opposition during this period. A clause of the Militia Bill proposed to allow peers, or the sons of peers, to take up commissions in the militia in any county where they had residence, without producing evidence that they were qualified by the possession of property. This proposal was warmly resisted by William Ponsonby, Egan, Parsons and others, who suspected that the government intended to open up a new avenue of patronage at the expense of the country gentry.[2]

III

The session of 1794 opened inauspiciously. Sir Laurence recorded in his diary that 'a profound and awful silence reigned --- for some days.'[3] This was largely due to major considerations of foreign

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1. Political Notes of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. P.R., 1793, II. 419.
3. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 21 Jan. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).

policy since it was apparent that closer involvement in war with France could not long be delayed. The rise to power of the Terrorist regime in France, the execution of the king and the successful challenge to Austro-Prussian invasion from without and royalist rebellion from within, enabled the revolutionaries to embark upon the task of spreading their doctrines elsewhere in Europe. In England, French agents had encouraged the formation of societies capable of furthering revolutionary principles, and attempted to stir up resentment in the army and navy. On 1 February 1793,[1] several months after the cessation of diplomatic relations, war was declared.

Pitt and his advisers, grossly underestimating both French military prowess and the financial stability of the new French republic, made no preparations for a long conflict. A coalition was formed with Russia, Prussia, Austria and a number of lesser continental powers; several minor military victories were won in Europe and the West Indies, and Hood defeated the French fleet at Toulon. The French, however, showed unexpected powers of resilience. By the beginning of 1794 the Austrian and Prussian armies had been pushed back into Germany, and the Netherlands were threatened with invasion. Deprived of the hope of a successful diversion on the continent, Great Britain and Ireland found themselves confronted for the first time with the prospect of a direct threat of attack.[2]

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1. D.N.B., William Pitt.
2. D.N.B., William Pitt.

The Irish administration made resolute efforts to consolidate its position before the impending conflict. Corruption was used to gain several notable victories. The Earl of Shannon with his large party of followers, who had been in opposition since the Regency controversy, now went over to the side of government, and he was rewarded with the office of First Lord of the Treasury. O'Neill became a peer, and with two members who supported him left the ranks of opposition. A number of county representatives were won over by appointments to high rank in the newly-formed regiments of militia.[1]

For some time the members of the opposition felt sullen and dispirited in the face of this recent increase in official power. Parsons, while sharing their dismay, felt that the time called for decisive action. He believed that any continuation of the war could only result in disastrous consequences. He had already decided that wars impeded the growth of commerce and should be avoided where possible.[2] He was anxious to prevent any major crisis in foreign policy which might give an opportunity for greater social unrest at home. He was also fearful that too many troops would be sent for service abroad, and that the defences of the country would prove inadequate.

His first objective was to ensure that the true state of military preparedness should be made public. On January 28 he asked, in the

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 21 Jan. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Political Notes of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).

House, for a list of the regiments then under orders for foreign service.[1] This request was received with marked coldness by the government, and it was necessary for him to renew it a second time before the information was provided. At the same time, the ministers, no doubt hoping to prevent further attempts to extract information, insinuated that this request was dangerous since it attempted to expose the weakness of the country to the enemy.[2] On February 4 Parsons proposed that copies of treaties with foreign powers, which had already been made public to the English House of Commons, should be laid before the House. He was unable to proceed with this motion as Duquery, who was to have seconded it, was detained on business at the Courts of Justice, and the House, glad to avoid a discussion on so unwelcome a subject, adjourned before he could arrive. When Parsons brought forward his motion on the following day it was defeated by a huge majority.[3]

Parsons's disapproval of the official conduct of the war, while determined by motives that were undoubtedly sincere, came nevertheless as an acute embarrassment to the Irish administration at a time when they were engaged in controversy with ministers in England concerning matters of defence. To Pitt and his advisers it seemed that prospects of a French invasion of Ireland were not sufficiently alarming to

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 28 Jan. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).

2. Ibid.

3. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 4 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.). One of the government tellers for this division was Colonel Arthur Wellesley, afterwards Duke of Wellington. Grattan, Life of Grattan, III. 145.

justify the immobilisation there of a large body of combatant troops who might otherwise be used to fulfil the more immediate exigencies of the war. Repeated demands were made therefore on the Irish military establishment. In January of this year two regiments were withdrawn from Cork without any immediate replacement.[1] After further withdrawels in the following spring it was found that the rank and file of the entire establishment now numbered on 7,284 - made up of 1,657 cavalry and 5,627 infantry.[2] It proved particularly difficult to keep up the strength of the Irish regiments due to the activities of English recruiting agents (notably those of the Artillery), who could offer more attractive pay and conditions of service.[3] Moreover, the Irish military authorities were thwarted in their efforts to purchase arms and equipment since the Birmingham gunsmiths were more eager to do business in England.[4] After a series of complaints had been passed from the Irish administration to London the Viceroy requested permission to build up adequate forces of defence in place of "the more nominal

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1. Secretary Dundas to Earl of Westmoreland, 30 Jan. 1794 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/47/126).

2. Earl of Westmoreland to Secretary Dundas, 17 April 1794 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/48/91).

3. Secretary Dundas to Earl of Westmoreland, 2 and 3 Jan. 1794 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/47/9 and 21).

4. Secretary Dundas to Earl of Westmoreland, 30 Jan. 1794 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/47/126).

strength of an Establishment on paper,"[1] and an increased establishment was then sanctioned.[2]

In contrast to Parsons, Grattan and other leaders of the opposition showed themselves anxious to lessen the difficulties of the administration. Grattan wished to present a united front to the enemy. He felt that further discussion of the war should be discouraged as likely to lead to disunity and irresolution. He did not, however, give his support to the government blindly, but reserved the right to alter his opinions should the situation demand it: "As if circumstances could not change and make prosecuting the war at one time advisable and treating for peace advisable at another time."[3]

This attitude brought him into sharp conflict with Parsons, who judged that Grattan was attempting to shelter from an accusation of inconsistency should he at some later time wish to discuss the merits of the war. He was angered, not so much by Grattan's support of the administration, as by his apparent lack of principle. Writing some hours after Grattan had spoken he attacked his speech with much bitterness:

> It was figurative and indistinct, admitting of great latitude and graduated interpretation. I thought it undignified, representing this kingdom as such a dependent satellite, that it could only exist in its prisonary orb. I thought it injurious to the public sentiment in favour

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1. Earl of Westmoreland to Secretary Dundas, 17 April 1794 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/48/91).

2. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, III. 178.

3. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 5 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).

> of the constitution, as annexing to it tremendous pains and penalties. I thought it idle because England never called for it, neither did England ever say that she would rise or fall with Ireland. I thought it dangerous, because it will (be) construed by a government all the springs of which are worked by Englishmen, to authorise every hazard to this country, and the stripping it of all its arms and treasure, when England is supposed to be in any danger by which it is very likely that Ireland may fall and that perhaps soon in order that England may rise. But above all, I thought that the interpretation given to it, viz., that it should preclude our Parliament from all investigation of the war and blindly support England (sic) without enquiring into its causes or conduct, as a surrender of that independence we gloriously achieved in 1782.[1]

Parsons was not alone in his distrust of the official conduct of the war. He had renounced his position of political isolation to become for a time leader of a small group of supporters who shared his views. The other members of the group were Curran, Egan, Duquery and Browne.

A common opposition to the war was the only bond which held this group together. Curran retained his loyalty to Grattan and Ponsonby, and tried unsuccessfully to heal the breach between them and Parsons. The others found it impossible to continue under Grattan's leadership, and broke away from the main body of the opposition after Duquery, acting as Parsons's emissary, had made a last attempt to persuade him to alter his attitude to the war.[2] Apart from Parsons, the dominant personality was undoubtedly Curran. Despite a brogue, and unimpressive

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 5 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 7 Feb. 1794. (Parsons MSS.).

appearance, Curran was probably the most lucid and forceful speaker in the Irish Parliament, and had recently developed an original method of presenting his arguments which was very effective. Like Parsons, he had begun his political career under the influence of Flood, although he later entered into close relations with Grattan; his maiden speech, like that of Parsons, had been delivered in support of Flood's last campaign for reform, during the final session[1] of 1783. Of the other members of the group, Browne had opposed Parsons when he first stood for election to Parliament in 1783, and had been his fellow representative for the University[2] from 1783 to 1791.

Rumours were soon in circulation concerning the nature of Parsons's group. It was suggested that they had formed themselves into a new opposition party, in defiance of Ponsonby and Grattan; that they were in alliance with Fox and the English Whigs. Although these rumours were entirely without foundation they appear to have been believed by many men of consequence.[3]

Faced by evidence of a growing rapprochement between Grattan and the government Parsons decided to engage in a new offensive. Speaking on February 12 he declared that since the House refused to permit an enquiry into the conduct of the war, he wished to propose instead an inquiry into defence. To his surprise, he found the House to be even

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1. D.N.B., John Curran.
2. Ibid., Arthur Browne.
3. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 7 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).

more hostile than before; many members with whom he was formerly on terms of friendship would now scarcely speak to him. Evidently, the government had not been slow to profit from the rumours which were circulating concerning Parsons and his friends; as he himself remarked, "An undercurrent of calumny was everywhere beating against by character, and endeavouring to undermine it."[1]

On February 18 Parsons's fortunes took a turn for the better. The Chancellor of the Exchequer moved a vote of money to the Treasury for use in an emergency. This suggestion had already been recommended by Parsons to the Committee of Supply, and its acceptance was a notable deference to his views. At the same time Grattan signified through the mediacy of Vandeleur that he wished to come to an understanding with Parsons; he promised not to interfere with any measures Parsons might propose for putting the country into an adequate state of defence.[2]

Meanwhile, Sir Laurence had put forward a plan for the formation of independent companies under the command of the local gentry. The suggestion was consistent with his earlier preference for voluntary armies, and his desire to entrust all possible authority to the propertied classes. The government appears to have given the proposal serious consideration. When, however, Parsons asked the Secretary (Douglas) in the House for the official view on the matter, he was informed that a decision had not yet been reached. Angry that the

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 7 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Ibid.

government should delay at such an anxious time, Parsons decided to make one more attempt to focus the attention of the House on defence. It was obvious by now that such an attempt could only be made in the face of severe disapproval from both government and opposition alike. Parsons's questions to the Secretary had been given a poor reception, and even he himself was forced to admit that "I never found the House more adverse to any discussion. Every word struck them as if I was stabbing at their vitals. Murmurs, interruptions, gloom and consternation, on every bench." On February 19, after a conference with Duquery and Curran, he decided that the attempt would have to be made. The government was, however, well prepared for such a move. Parsons observed with alarm that even during prayers emissaries were passing through the ranks of the members, warning them against permitting any discussion of defence. The Secretary then rose to say that, after examination, the suggestion to establish independent companies had been found to be inexpedient. The situation now seemed hopeless and when Parsons's friends warned him that to persevere in his attempt must only result in exposing the strength of the government, and his own weakness, he decided, much against his own inclination, to yield.[1]

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 18 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.). The government was no doubt moved to reject Parsons's suggestion for independent companies, by the activities of a number of revived volunteer companies in Dublin at this time, which had shown strong republican sympathies. When, early in March, a formal declaration of war was made by France, they entrusted the country gentlemen with a large measure of responsibility in matters of defence, by extending the militia system to Ireland. Two other important defence measures, which would appear to have left little justification for Parsons's criticisms, was an increase in the standing army from 15,000 to 20,000 men, and an act banning the possession of firearms without licence. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, III. 178.

This failure increased still further the bitter enmity which Parsons felt towards Grattan. On the following day (February 20) Grattan introduced a motion to have the duties on goods imported into England from Ireland reduced to the same level as those imposed on English goods coming into Ireland. Obviously he was taking advantage of the state of co-operation which now existed between government and opposition to gain a measure which would be of unquestionable benefit to the Irish economy. Parsons, however, took a different view. He saw in Grattan's speech a sycophantic attempt to win popularity, and to cover up the consequences of his recent friendship with the government:

> He spoke like a lawyer hired to oppose his friend. Popularity was the fee, government the friend. A fee that will not be paid for this day's harangue, as I am certain, it will excite much popular disgust.[1]

When the Secretary rose to reject the motion Parsons noted that he heaped compliments on Grattan. "Nothing that passed between the two" he remarked, "had the air of debate. They might as well have brought battledores and shuttlecocks and played across the table." Duquery and Curran both supported the motion, but Parsons reported bitterly that he had "performed no part in the farce."[2]

Only once, during this period when he was concentrating his attention on the problems of the war was Parsons able to make any pronouncement on the subject of reform. On March 4 the House debated reform briefly, and apparently without any great enthusiasm. Parsons

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 20 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, 20 Feb. 1794 (Parsons MSS.).

observed that "the members were very unwilling to debate it. They seemed much more anxious to go to dinner." (It happened that the principal government members were due to attend a banquet that evening). Unhappily, the debate ended in general dissatisfaction since no progress was made in the matter of reform, and the members of the government were forced to remain in their places until after midnight.[1]

Parsons did not allow the opportunity to pass without making a further statement of his views, although he was well aware that he could make little impression on the House that evening. Beginning with a brief historical survey of the growth in the use of corruption in parliamentary institutions, he moved to a new, and more daring position. It was essential to find allies somewhere amongst the hostile ranks who listened to him, and Parsons determined to win them from a quarter least liable to be influenced by the government - the country gentlemen. He praised the Irish landed classes as "noble, generous and independent, and declared that only a vile system of government had made them to appear otherwise. Foreign administrators came to Ireland to tamper with them, and having done so, returned home to give them a bad reputation. Yet the country gentlemen possessed sufficient power to exercise a considerable influence over the working of the constitution, and one of the most salutary effects of reform

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1. Ibid., 4 March 1794.

would be to introduce more of them to the tasks of government:

> It is the gentlemen of power and property in the country that are its sinews, and any reform, which introduce more of them into its system, in the place of the feeble tendons of decayed boroughs, would render it more athletic, and more able to withstand concussion.[1]

IV

As the last session of 1794 drew to a close a new political situation presented itself in Ireland. Pitt had entered into a coalition with Portland and the Whig party, and under the terms of agreement between them Ireland was placed under the control of the latter. Meanwhile, pressure from the Roman Catholics for redress of their grievances had assumed more dangerous proportions. In these circumstances Portland persuaded Pitt to send over as Viceroy one who was already distinguished by his sympathy for the Catholic claims, - Earl Fitzwilliam.[2]

Shortly after Fitzwilliam's arrival, in January,[3] a petition was presented to him by the Catholic party, to which he returned a very favourable answer.[4] He entered into terms of close friendship with the leaders of the former opposition, and George Ponsonby, Grattan and Yelverton, in particular, came to exercise a powerful influence over his decisions. There followed a wholesale dismissal of those who had

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1. P.R., 1794, p. 100.
2. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, II. 365.
3. Extract from Privy Council Minutes, 4 Jan. 1795 (P.R.O.I., 508/18/17).
4. Earl Fitzwilliam to Catholic Committee, 1795 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/56/145).

served in the late administration of Lord Westmoreland; Beresford (Commissioner of the Revenue) was informed that he could not continue in office, but was offered a pension equal to his salary; Cooke (Secretary of War) and Hamilton (Secretary of the Civil Department) were also removed; Douglas, who had recently received a patent as Clerk of the Hanaper, was told that the patent had been revoked; Wolfe (Attorney-General) and Toler (Solicitor-General) were dismissed.[1]

These arrangements were no doubt intended to create a climate of opinion more favourable for carrying out reform. Yet, in Parsons's mind, there already existed ample reason for disquietude, and even alarm. He was angry that the new administration, still mindful of his attitude to the war, had failed to take any notice of him in their arrangements; they had even paid him a deliberate insult by not sending him a formal summons to attend the reading of the Speech from the Throne, although they sent a summons to both Curran and Browne. Moreover Parsons's hatred of Grattan and his supporters led him to entertain serious doubts about the intention of the government to carry out a programme of reform.[2]

On February 7 Sir Laurence rose to demand a statement of the government's intentions. He expressed the highest confidence in FitzWilliam, but hinted that Grattan and others who supported him might not now be so intent upon measures of reform, as when in opposition.

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1. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, undated (Parsons MSS.).
2. Diary of Sir L. Parsons, undated (Parsons MSS.).

Was it, for instance, proposed to abolish the places created for reasons of corruption at the close of Lord Buckingham's Viceroyalty (1790)? Did the ministers intend to introduce a system of Justice and equality to the trade between Great Britain and Ireland? He was quite ready to give his support for the war if he could be certain that reform would be undertaken at home.[1]

Opinion in the House remained hostile, particularly as it was believed that Parsons might be attempting to set conditions for the continuance of the war. The speech, however, drew from Grattan a vigorous defence of his position:

> What has fallen from an honourable baronet, --- induces me to say, and I am authorised to mention for the gentlemen with whom I have the honour to act, that the same principles which we possessed, while in opposition, continue to govern our conduct now, and that we shall endeavour to the utmost of our power to give them effect.[2]

Three days later a circumstance occurred which tended to increase Parsons's fears still further. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an addition of £993 to the Civil List to cover expenses formerly listed under other headings. Parsons objected strongly since he considered that this arrangement might be made into a precedent, and permit a violation of the government's undertaking to bring about a reduction in the civil establishment. He recalled the vehemence with which members of the government had, while in opposition, deplored the extravagance of successive governments, and called on them to

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1. P.R., 1795, p. 77.

2. Ibid., p. 82.

prove their sincerity forthwith by a reduction in public expenditure.[1]

Parsons's attitude would appear to have been somewhat unreasonable. It would have been a task of extreme difficulty for any administration with less than two months experience in office, to bring about a sizeable reduction in expenditure. It was unavoidable that a large proportion of expenditure should continue to be devoted to the purposes of the war. When Grattan appealed to Parsons to give the ministers a reasonable opportunity to prove themselves, he was forced to yield.[2] He did not again challenge matters of finance during this session.

The days of FitzWilliam's administration were, however, already numbered. His open encouragement of the Catholics had displeased Pitt, who, unknown to Fitzwilliam, had begun to plan for a union as the condition for Catholic emancipation. The Viceroy's dismissal of the former ministers had also called forth against him a dangerous body of opposition, both in Ireland and England. At length, he was forced to resign,[3] on 5 March 1795.

The news of FitzWilliam's impending departure reached Parsons as a severe shock. He realised that the collapse of the administration must mean an end to all hopes of winning reform in the immediate future. He was filled with remorse for his former suspicions, and began to do everything in his power to consolidate public opinion on the side of the Viceroy. As early as February 26 (when rumours of FitzWilliam's

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1. P.R., 1795, p. 91.
2. Ibid.
3. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, II. 365.

dismissal had just begun to circulate) he expressed in the House his dismay that the country should be deprived "at so awful, so interesting, and so critical a period of the auspices of a nobleman who came here as the harbinger and the hostage of her political salvation," and requested an explanation from the ministers.Ponsonby, on behalf of his colleagues, replied that an explanation must be deferred until a more opportune moment.[1]

Several days later when the truth of FitzWilliam's dismissal had been established beyond doubt, Parsons embarked on more resolute action. He suggested that the Irish Parliament should express in some forcible way its displeasure that measures necessary to conciliate the people had not been carried into effect. He suggested that the money bill should be limited to a period of three months.[2] On this occasion it is certain that Parsons could count on an almost unprecedented degree of unity amongst the members of the former opposition, in their disgust and disappointment at the dismissal of FitzWilliam. Yet the measure which he proposed stood little chance of acceptance. In the first place, it was unwise to advocate punitive measures at such an early stage in the controversy; George Ponsonby expressed the feeling of many members when he declared that the course of action proposed by Sir Laurence could only embarrass still further the position of FitzWilliam in England, and even make it appear as if he himself was responsible for it.[3] At the same time, any suggestion concerning the

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1. P.R., 1795, p. 133.
2. Grattan, Life of Grattan, IV. 188.
3. P.R., 1795, p. 147.

Exchequer was bound to be received with suspicion, and several speakers pointed out that there might be a considerable loss in public credit through any limitation of the money bill. Finally, Parsons made the rather tactless blunder of alluding with unmistakable sympathy to the Viceroy's efforts to introduce a measure of Catholic emancipation, and this drew down upon him the wrath of those members who opposed the Catholic claims. Ogle, speaking on behalf of these, intimated that he would have allowed Parsons's proposal to pass in silence, had it not involved the Catholic question: "Let the heavens be clad with darkness, let the sun deny his light, let the earth tremble beneath our feet, but let the Protestants be firm; let them not submit to intimidation."[1]

Parsons's motion was defeated by a large majority. The feeling of the House was, however, displayed by the acceptance, without a division, of a motion by Connlly expressing confidence in the conduct of the Viceroy.[2]

With the failure of FitzWilliam's mission, and his replacement by a rigid supporter of Pitt in the person of the Earl of Camden, it was clear that there could be little hope of winning reform in the immediate future. Parsons did not introduce the subject again for some time. He did, however, make one final attempt to bring the entire system of corruption into disrepute. In May Parsons proposed a motion of censure against the former Viceroy, Westmoreland. The latter had, he declared, violated the regulations made for the army in 1769, which stipulated

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1. Ibid., p. 151.

2. Grattan, Life of Grattan, IV. 189.

that there was to be an establishment of 15,000 men of whom 12,000 were to remain in the country for the purposes of defence. During the previous summer "at a moment the most critical for this country and for the empire" the Viceroy had withdrawn all but 7,00 men for foreign service, most of whom were raw recruits.[1]

Parsons had chosen his ground well. The case against Westmoreland was a strong one, and the opposition was by now more disposed to engage in measures of protest. A large number of members spoke in favour of Sir Laurence's motion, amongst them being Grattan, who made a plea for greater accountability of ministers to Parliament. The government at length saved the day by introducing a motion for the adjournment, which was passed by a large majority.[2]

This debate was noteworthy as being the first occasion on which a large number of personal attacks were made on Sir Laurence by supporters of the government. Barrington pointed out that Westmoreland had given him command of the King's County militia, and the succession to a peerage. Archdall remarked, more maliciously, that Westmoreland had, by his departure, allowed him to flourish alone in opposition.[3] Evidently Parsons's conduct during FitzWilliam's Viceroyalty had been watched with close attention, and the government was now aware of the lengths to which he was prepared to go to achieve his objectives.

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1. P.R., 1795, p. 369.
2. P.R., 1795, p. 369.
3. Ibid.

CHAPTER SIX

THE UNION 1795 - 1800.

During the months which followed FitzWilliam's dismissal the war with France entered upon a new, and more critical phase. The triumph of the Directory, the collapse of royalist resistance in the west, and the first victorious campaign of Bonaparte in Italy, enabled the French government to take up the struggle against Great Britain with renewed vigour. For the first time, they began to formulate plans for a direct attack on British territory; to many, including Hoche who was now in control of military strategy, it seemed that the situation in Ireland gave abundant reason for believing that the attack could most successfully be carried out there.[1]

Popular resentment against the failure of the Irish government to undertake some measure of constitutional reform had assumed dangerous proportions. The Society of United Irishmen, confident of the support of a large section of both Protestant and Roman Catholic reformers, had already decided in favour of an armed rebellion, and was prepared to receive aid from the French republic. Tone, FitzGerald and other emissaries, had visited France to lay before the Directory the state of the country, and the probability of widespread support for any French expedition which might be sent.[2]

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, III. 522.

2. Ibid., p. 498.

In December 1796 a force of 15,000 men was despatched from Brest under Hoche's personal command, but was forced to put back from Bantry because of bad weather.[1] The Irish administration was thereby saved from a major crisis; had the French landed, the adequacy of their measures for defence, and the strength of popular unrest, must both have been put to a decisive test.

For Sir Laurence Parsons the new danger from France came as an apparent confirmation of his fears concerning the war. He perceived the intention of the French to make Ireland the main theatre of military operations. He feared that any measure of French success in the country must result in the unloosing of powerful forces of popular discontent, which might well be capable of overthrowing the rule and property of the upper classes. In these circumstances he redoubled his efforts to persuade the government to devote more adequate resources to defence, and to endeavour to conciliate popular opinion. In contrast, however, with his activities of two years earlier, he proceeded cautiously, trying to avoid an open break with the government, and to achieve his purpose through peaceful means.

When the next sessions of Parliament opened, on January 17, he declined to take any decisive action. After a short speech on the Address, in which he congratulated the British government on their sincerity during the recent peace negotiations with France,[2] he

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, III, 522.

2. P.R., 1797, p. 274.

remained silent for a period of five weeks. During this time he was apparently hoping that the dangers of the new situation would make themselves felt, and that the government would find it necessary to introduce more effective measures for defence.

Yet no action came from the government, and on February 20 Parsons determined to take the initiative. In a speech which shows unaccustomed emotion he called upon the ministers to recognise the necessity of uniting all sections of the community in face of the common danger. The minds of many people had, he declared, been led astray by wild speculations, and the hope of benefits to be gained, should the French succeed in overthrowing the ruling powers in Ireland. Yet it was inconceivable that France would allow the establishment of an inedpendent Irish government, capable, perhaps, of one day allying with England against her. A French victory must inevitably be followed by the creation of an "iron tyranny," destructive to the interests of every class of Irishmen:

> It was the duty of the House to the people, and of the people to themselves and their country, to prepare to resist the worst of all deplorable calamities, a French invasion of the country; and if they suffered themselves to be persuaded to neglect or shrink from this great duty, the House would prove themselves a disgrace to the history of the times in which they lived, and the most unpardonable dupes that ever betrayed the confidence of a free nation, and the people prove themselves the most arrant fools that ever enjoyed the blessings of a free constitution.[1]

The government still refused to take any action. The Secretary, Pelham, was absent in London, and it may well be that Parsons had

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1. P.R., 1797, p. 310.

timed his outburst so that Pitt might be persuaded to take additional measures for the defence of Ireland. Yet Pelham returned a few days later without any appearance of having new proposals to offer.[1]

On February 24 Sir Laurence rose to make what he had hitherto seemed anxious to avoid, a definite proposal in the matter of defence. First, he drew a stern picture of the dangers of the military situation. Suppose the enemy again at Bantry, it would at first be possible to oppose them with only a small part of the total forces of defence. Thus, they would find little difficulty in gaining possession of a great port, such as Cork, where more invading forces could be landed. The Irish government would then have to await the despatch of reinforcements from England, but it was unlikely that England could supply sufficient troops to outnumber the French. Ireland must then become a battleground, in which two mighty armies contended for supremacy:

> Our lands will be laid waste - our towns burned or destroyed- and our people massacred, while these two potent nations are contending here for dominion. They will make your island a field of blood - a charnal house, the Golgotha of Europe - and all this, because we have not virtue and spirit to arm sufficiently our own people, and keep out the enemy.[2]

It was essential to defeat the enemy before they could obtain a foothold on Irish soil, and this could only be done if there were a defence force of considerable dimensions. Parsons was in no doubt

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1. P.R., 1797, p. 345.
2. Ibid.

where this force should be found; returning to his suggestion of two years previously, he asked the government to establish a large body of voluntary soldiers. He made no proposals for increasing the strength of the standing army, but moved that there should be a "considerable augmentation" in the ranks of the volunteer yeomanry.[1]

It would seem that Parsons was allowing his old enthusiasm for voluntary armies to obscure his judgment, as the arguments which he produced to support his suggestion contained a number of strange inconsistencies. He declared that the successes of the French in Belgium and Germany had been due to the failure of the Emperor to arm his people in time, although he admitted that these people had soon displayed considerable support for the invaders. He recognised that the discipline of the yeomanry was not high, but saw no reason why additional voluntary forces should not stand up to one of the best disciplined armies in Europe. He had long advocated economy in public administration, but was now prepared to sanction the expenses of 50,000 yeomen, at a cost of £20,000 per month. Finally his warning of the results of defeat, for the Irish upper classes, seems more than a little fanciful:

> They had seen the situation and sufferings of the French emigrants; that might deter the House from venturing too far in a dull security. But the French emigrants had this advantage; their situation had novelty in it, and this novelty procured them aid and comfort everywhere; their character too stood high throughout the world --- If the Irish nobility, or Irish legislators, are turned forth on

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1. P.R., 1797, p. 345.

> the world, where now will they find respect or assistance? The Irish character is not in such exalted reputation; they would pass through the world unknown and unregarded, --- the finger of scorn would point at them as men who had the means of defence in their hands yet let an enemy come upon them unprepared.[1]

The House received Parsons's suggestion with little sympathy, his motion being defeated by a huge majority.[2] Amongst the few who supported him was his old enemy, Grattan.[3] Apparently, the government had no inclination to entrust with additional powers a citizenry whose loyalty it already gravely distrusted.

Shortly after his defeat on the question of defence Parsons was confronted by what seemed to him to be a new blunder on the part of the administration. In 1757 the Irish Parliament had established an inland carriage bounty on corn, the chief effect of which was to improve the supply to Dublin and other ports.[4] In 1784, the year in which John Foster became Chancellor of the Exchequer, and largely through his initiative, a new Corn Law granted bounties for the export of corn and imposed corresponding import duties. The export bounty was not, however, to be payable at Dublin and the other ports specified in the Act of 1757, as it was considered that their interests were already adequately safeguarded.[5] Foster's Act enabled Irish

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1. P.R., 1797, p. 345.
2. Ibid., p. 357.
3. Ibid., p. 353.
4. O'Brien, Econ. Hist. of Irel. in the Eighteenth Cent., p. 113.
5. Ibid., p. 120.

agriculture to exploit the growing identification of England as a manufacturing country, to the detriment of English agriculture, and the long period of war at the end of the century which provided an abnormally good market for corn. With remarkable swiftness the character of Irish agriculture changed from pasture to arable, and the change was accompanied by an unprecedented measure of prosperity.[1]

The new arrangements did not operate with complete success. It was found that there were occasional shortages in Dublin and the other ports not affected by the Act of 1784, while a small excess of corn tended to produce a glut in the capital and to discourage farmers during the following year. In order to remove this defect it was now proposed to repeal the Act of 1757, thereby abolishing the inland carriage bounty, and to pay the export bounty at all the Irish ports including Dublin.[2]

Parsons opposed the measure with a number of arguments drawn from economic theory which seem now to be very defective. He was chiefly concerned with the interests of the midland landowners and their dependants. It seemed to him that the export bounty would provide insufficient protection for Irish farmers to prevent the flooding of the Irish market by English produce; that farmers in the midlands would be deprived of their market since only those near Dublin would be in a position to offer their produce at a price lower than that charged for imported English grain; that consumers would be placed at the mercy of a group of merchants in Dublin, who would hold

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1. D.N.B., John Foster.
2. P.R., 1797, p. 453.

a monopoly; that Adam Smith had already given his opinion against export bounties since they "tended to furnish food to the inhabitants of foreign nations, one of the most important aids to manufacture, to the depression of the home manufacture."[1]

Obviously Parsons had seriously underestimated the potentialities of the English market in the new industrial period. He failed to realise that English agriculturalists were no longer likely to reap important advantages by exporting their produce to Ireland. Moreover, in a full market the midland producers would not suffer any disadvantage by reason of their distance from Dublin, nor might they expect to receive a lower price for their produce. The same caution which characterised Parsons's efforts to preserve the political ascendancy of the upper classes is now made evident in his economic policy. He was anxious to preserve the largest part of national capital in the hands of the landed gentry and had no desire to see it transferred to merchants. Yet his caution, if carried to its logical conclusion, would have prevented Irish agriculturalists from taking full advantage of the opportunities at this time presented them.

His chief objection to the measure was not, however, economic but political, since he believed it to threaten the liveliehood and prosperity of a large section of the community at a time when conciliation was vitally necessary to arrest the progress of popular unrest. To the country gentlemen he addressed a special appeal. Could it be that they would accept a measure so highly injurious to them-

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1. P.R., 1797, p. 454.

selves and their dependants, one which amounted to a punishment, since it would induce "beggary and ruin on a large part of the farmers of the country." Or could it be that the influence of places and salaries had destroyed their virtue, and that the ministers could now proceed with whatever plans they chose, unchallenged.[1]

Speaker Foster, on behalf of the government, treated these arguments to a full and exhaustive reply. He paid tribute to Parsons's honesty and integrity, but denied the truth of his reasoning, which rested "partly in ignorance of the existing law, partly in a mistake of law, and partly in a misconception of the general principles of commerce." Parsons had been led astray by the writings of Adam Smith, and would have done better to read another economist named Smith,[2] "a more sensible man than Adam," who had written three pamphlets in favour of an export bounty on corn. Nor was it just to accuse the government of being inattentive to the interests of the people; the patience with which they had listened to Sir Laurence's lengthy arguments was itself proof of this.[3]

Thus defeated in his efforts to improve internal defence, and to conciliate popular ill-feeling, Parsons was forced to await in impotence the breaking of the storm of unrest. The government made

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1. P.R., 1797, p. 454.

2. Foster was apparently referring to Arthur Smith, who in 1883, published his Political Economy Examined and Explained, in which arguments in favour of export bounties were advanced.

3. P.R., 1797, p. 457.

little attempt to conciliate, but trusted in a policy of repression to remove all elements of opposition; the special powers conferred by the Insurrection Act[1] of 1797 were used to carry out many acts of violence among the already embittered peasantry. As a result, resentment grew, and the Society of United Irishmen made plans for a general rising backed by French aid. All hope of a rapprochement between the Society and the parliamentary reformers was now at an end; meeting, significantly, on the same day (19 February 1798), the United Irishmen committees of Ulster and Leinster passed resolutions affirming their determination to win complete emancipation, and promising to pay "no attention whatever to any attempt made by either house of parliament to divert the public mind from the grand object we have in view."[2]

It may well have been the spirit displayed in these resolutions which led Parsons to make a last attempt to bring about a change of official policy. Speaking in Parliament three weeks later he drew a very gloomy picture of the situation. Denied their demands for reform and Catholic emancipation the people had been easily misled. Their respect for law had been diminished by the constitutional abuses of the government, some of which had received parliamentary sanction. The policy of repression had merely exasperated their temper. He did not intend to propose any measure which would impair

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the eighteenth century, IV. 221.

2. Musgrave, Memoirs, p. 200.

the dignity of Parliament, or bind it to any particular course of action. He merely asked, that, in order to show its concern with the demands of the people, the House would resolve itself into a committee to consider the causes of the present discontent, and the most effective means of removing them.[1]

Parsons's motion was defeated. The government had now lost patience with his repeated strictures, and was determined to find some means of punishing him. This they accomplished by removing him from the command of the King's County regiment of militia, which he had held since 1793.[1] The regiment had recently been called to service, and formed part of the garrison of Dublin. It was suggested that discipline had become lax, due chiefly to "a mistaken lenity" on the part of the commanding officer.[3] Faced with a prospect of public humiliation Sir Laurence had no choice but to resign. In the course of a dignified letter to the Viceroy, Lord Camden, he communicated his decision, and expressed his own confidence in the correctness of his conduct:

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1. P.R., 1798, p. 215.

2. The King's County Regiment of militia, had been raised after the militia re-organisation of 1757. Shortly after Parsons took over the command, its effective strength consisted of twenty-five officers, forty-eight non-commissioned officers, and 369 men. There were eight companies, one of which consisted of grenadiers and another of light infantry. As was customary in both line and militia regiments during this period, one company was under the personal command of the colonel.

   Muster Roll of King's County Militia, 1794 (Parsons MSS.).

3. Grattan, Life of Grattan, IV. 343.

> I have the honour to inform your Excellency, that Major-General Lord Charles FitzRoy communicated to me yesterday a message which he had received --- from the commander - in-chief, representing that the discipline of my regiment was considerably relaxed since I took the command of it in this garrison, "through my mistaken lenity," and that I should either change my conduct, - which, with my sense of the duties of such a situation, I could not do, - or that I should give the power to the other field-officer, a concession to which no Colonel could submit. Conscious that this accusation is perfectly unmerited by me and the men under my command, I shall not stoop to take any further notice of it than to say, that as my object, when I was originally prevailed on to accept of the regiment, was to serve my country, and since those in superior authority have been persuaded that my commanding it has had the contrary effect, I shall not continue any longer in that situation; I must, therefore, request that your Excellency will accept of my resignation.[1]

The charges brought against Parsons appear to have had little foundation. When writing to the Earl of Charlemont, shortly after his resignation, Sir Laurence complained of having repeatedly requested Lord Charles FitzRoy to produce any evidence which he held against him, but this the latter had been unable to do. There had, indeed, been misconduct amongst the men of one company, but this company had been detached from his command one year previously. It seemed obvious, concluded Parsons, "that my removal was desired."[2]

Two circumstances certainly made it easier for the government to dismiss him. First, a precedent had recently been established in England, by the removal of the Duke of Norfolk from the command of the Yorkshire militia; the pretext on this occasion was that Norfolk

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, IV. 343.

2. Sir L. Parsons to Earl of Charlemont, 29 March 1798 (Charlemont MSS., II. 317).

had drunk a toast to the sovereignty of the people, but the real reason was that he had become obnoxious to the government on political grounds.[1] Second, amongst the officers of Parsons's regiment was Major Warren Westenra, a jealous, ambitious man, who wished to obtain the command for himself.

Parsons had appointed Westenra to his office when he raised the regiment. He held no very high opinion of the latter's character ("One of the most scheming men that I ever knew"), but he was no doubt influenced by the fact that Westenra was a neighbour, with estates at Sharavogue, near Birr, and that he was a nephew of General Cunningham, afterwards Lord Rossmore, commander-in-chief of Crown forces in Ireland. Westenra saw an excellent opportunity to further his own designs when Parsons became embroiled in political differences with the government. Observing that the gentler feelings of the colonel made him reluctant to use corporal punishment amongst the men (whipping with the cat-o-nine-tails being common in many regiments at this time, for quite trivial offences), he made this the basis of representations to the Lord Lieutenant against him.[2]

After Sir Laurence had resigned Westenra used all his influence to ensure that his successor would be L'Estrange, the former second-in-command, whom he apparently hoped to discredit in a similar manner. Parsons himself hoped that the regiment would be given to the Earl of

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1. Grattan, Life of Grattan, IV. 343.

2. Memorandum of Sir L. Parsons, undated (Parsons MSS.).

Charleville, but his wishes were overruled and L'Estrange was appointed. Westenra now attempted to stir up ill-feeling against L'Estrange in the regiment, and persuaded a number of officers to bring charges against him at a court-martial. The authorities had, however, at last become aware of his activities. L'Estrange was cleared of the charges brought against him, and the officers concerned involved in heavy costs, which Westenra made no attempt to pay for them.[1]

Meanwhile, Sir Laurence had retired to his home at Birr Castle, and took no further part in the political events of this year. Finding that French assistance was unlikely to materialise, the United Irishmen went forward with plans for a rising based on their own resources. In May revolts broke out simultaneously amongst the Presbyterians of Antrim and Down, and the Catholic peasantry of south Leinster. The military resources of the government, however, proved adequate to meet the situation. Within three weeks of the outbreak the Ulstermen had been decisively defeated at the battle of Antrim (June 7); in the south, the rebellion met with much success for a time in Wexford and Carlow, but then became disorganised, and was

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1. It would seem that the military authorities became aware that Parsons had been unjustly treated. During the court-martial of L'Estrange, Sir Laurence happened to meet Lord Charles FitzRoy on his way to the commander-in-chief (Cornwallis). FitzRoy intimated to Parsons that he now understood Westenra's plan, and Sir Laurence believed that he influenced Cornwallis against him (Westenra).

   Memorandum of Sir L. Parsons, undated (Parsons MSS.).

extinguished at Vinegar Hill (June 26).[1]

II

For Pitt, the Irish rebellion provided confirmation of fears which he had long entertained concerning the strategic dangers of a weak and discontented Ireland. He felt that the security of Ireland could no longer be left to the responsibility of a distant, and possibly insubordinate, administration in Dublin. As early as FitzWilliam's appointment, in 1795, he had been considering a Union of the two kingdoms as a condition for the settlement of Catholic claims. In 1798 he decided that suppression of the rebellion was merely a first stage in what must amount to a new and comprehensive settlement of the Irish question. He appointed the Earl of Cornwallis to be Viceroy, as one well fitted by temperament and experience to pacify an uneasy situation. Yet, before Cornwallis departed for Ireland in July, he informed him of his intention to bring about a Union at the first favourable opportunity.[2]

During the summer and autumn of 1798 Cornwallis sent across to Pitt a series of reports in which he estimated the chances of gaining a favourable reception if a Bill for the Union were transmitted to the Viceroy by the Duke of Portland. Early in the following year he set about the task of building up a party favourable to his plans. In this he was greatly assisted by the Secretary for Ireland, Viscount Castle-

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1. Lecky, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, V.460.

2. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, III. 158.

reagh, who had already formed the opinion that a Union with Great Britain would provide the best security for the propertied classes in Ireland. On January 22 the Viceroy formally introduced the measure to Parliament, in the course of his Speech from the Throne.[1]

The government's proposals were received with widespread demonstrations of hostility,[2] and united in a determined resistance all the various elements of the Irish Opposition. The Union was regarded as a threat to national dignity and independence. It seemed to annul the constitutional victory gained in 1782, and to renew the former subjection of Ireland to England. In a more immediate perspective, it seemed likely to arouse bitter resentment, and to plunge the country once again into civil war. These feelings were shared by Sir Laurence Parsons, and were expressed in a letter which he sent to the Earl of Charlemont, during November 1798:

> Having heard nothing further concerning this detested Union, I beg to indulge myself with hopes that it will not be attempted. I really sicken as I think of it, and am persuaded that, if accomplished, it would, if not accompanied be soon followed by a civil war and ultimate separation.
>
> Our neighbourhood is perfectly quiet, and the people seem to be as peaceably disposed as I ever remember them to be. If the government does not tamper with the country by attempting this hateful measure, I think everything will go on well as formerly.[3]

No sooner had the Viceroy introduced the measure to Parliament than the full resources of the opposition were brought to bear against the government. On the same day George Ponsonby proposed, and Parsons

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1. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, III.168.
2. Cornwallis to Portland, 16 Jan. 1799(P.R.O.,H.O.S.P.,100/85/87).
3. Sir L.Parsons to Earl of Charlemont, 5. Nov.1798(Charlemont MSS., II.337).

seconded, a motion which affirmed the right of the people of Ireland "to have a resident and independent legislature," such as had been recognised by the British Parliament in the settlement of 1783. This motion called forth one of the greatest struggles between two contending parties which the Irish parliament had yet known. On a division, the voting was at first equal, but because of a technical disqualification of one of the opposition voters[1] the government emerged victorious by 106 votes to 105. The opposition returned to the attack, however, with a more drastic motion, proposed this time by Parsons and seconded by Ponsonby, in favour of expunging the paragraph relating to the Union from the Address to the Throne. This motion was passed[2] by 109 votes to 104.

The debate on the second of these motions centred on a notable duel between Castlereagh and Parsons. Sir Laurence listened, with anger, to the arguments made on behalf of the government by Castlereagh, then he rose to answer them severally.

It was false to say that Ireland was too poor to maintain a separate government; the Viceroy had himself admitted, in the Speech

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1. Luke Fox, a rough, unprincipled lawyer, who professed to act with the opposition, voted with them in the division. He declared that he had accepted the Escheatorship of Munster, however, and his vote was not, therefore counted. It would seem almost certain that he had been bought by the government, since the writ was not moved for several days afterwards.
   P.R., 1799, p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 154.

from the Throne, that both commerce and revenue were increasing. It was foolish to suggest that the present measure would pacify the country, since it was opposed by all classes, and in almost every locality except Cork.[1] Castlereagh had declared that Ireland had obligations to England for military assistance during the recent rebellion; this was unfair, as Ireland had helped England during the Americal war. It could not be assumed that a Union would be followed by the settlement of many English merchants in Ireland; the country already enjoyed free trade, with the exception of the trade with England, and this had recently been promised by Castlereagh himself.[2]

Castlereagh had argued that "two legislatures co-equal and co-ordinate in the same empire are incompatible." Yet it was impossible that there could be any serious disagreement while England held such a large measure of control over the Irish parliament. To support this contention Parsons pointed to a number of controls which England still retained over the working of the Irish constitution; the possession of the same King, the right to create peers, the exercise of church patronage, the appointment of the Lord Lieutenant, the command of the army, and many others. Could it be, that despite these controls,

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1. P.R., 1799, p. 98. Parsons had no doubt in mind a recent resolution by the Common Council of Cork, expressing "heartfelt gratification to any measure tending more closely to connect the two Countries." The city was apparently influenced by a desire to curb agrarian outrages which had disturbed trade. Resolution of Common Council of Cork, Jan. 1799 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P., 100/85/19).

2. P.R., 1799, p. 99.

England was unsatisfied, and wanted to despoil Ireland of the constitution itself?[1]

Parsons displayed deep anger when he expressed the opinion that Castlereagh and his colleagues were prepared to betray their country. "You are blackened," he warned them,"and blackened for ever in the eyes of the people of Ireland." It appeared as if England, defeated in 1783, was determined to make a further attempt to extend her power over Ireland, backed this time by supporters within the Irish parliament itself. This drew from him an eloquent appeal for unity and resistance amongst members of the opposition:

> Annihilate the Parliament of Ireland, that is the cry that comes across the water. Now is the time. Ireland is weak. Ireland is divided. Ireland is appalled by civil war. Ireland is covered with troops. Martial law brandishes its sword throughout the land. Now is the time to put Ireland down for ever. Now strike the blow - who? Is it you? Will you obey that voice? Will you betray your country?2

Parsons's speech played a decisive part in the victory of the opposition in the second division. Castlereagh, clearly discomfited by his attack, could make no adequate reply. The speech with which he concluded the debate was the weakest which he made during the entire Union controversy. Having first declined to answer any of Parsons's arguments, he attempted to conciliate the feelings of the opposition by asserting that there was, as yet, no project for a Union, and that the government merely wished that the House would give the matter its consideration.[3] Explaining his conduct in a despatch sent to London

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1. P.R., 1799, p. 102.
2. Ibid.
3. P.R., 1799, p. 102.

immediately afterwards, he declared that it had been necessary to guard against defeat since the opposition might have proceeded to more extreme amendments, and that it had been difficult to withstand "the zeal and clamour" of his opponents which "gave them a manifest advantage."[1]

Public opinion had already shown its dislike for the Union proposals, and the victory of Parsons's motion was received with unrestrained joy. During the evening which followed Dublin was illumined by torches, the leaders of the opposition were toasted at public dinners, and congratulatory addresses were presented to them. Soon afterwards, their names were printed in red and circulated throughout the country entitled "The list of our glorious and virtuous defenders that every man may engrave their names and their services on his heart, and hand them down to his children's children."[2]

Parsons had undoubtedly earned a large share of the popular gratitude. He had stood forward as Castlereagh's chief opponent, and the successful motion had been submitted in his name. Yet, according to Grattan's biography by his son, he was not one of the chief heroes of the day; Charlemont, Parnell, Foster, FitzGerald, Saurin and Barrington were all acclaimed by the populace, but not Ponsonby or Parsons.[3] Is there any significance in this omission? Could it be that the younger Grattan, remembering that Parsons was his father's

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1. Castlereagh to Portland, 23 Jan. 1799(P.R.O.,H.O.S.P.,100/85/136).
2. Grattan, Life of Grattan, III.22.
3. Ibid.

enemy, declined to record the latter's triumph? Or did the Irish opposition, mindful of his independent activities in former years, refuse to give him a position of honour? These questions cannot be answered, but it is at least certain that at no time during the Union controversy did Sir Laurence forsake his independent line of conduct in Parliament.

III

The victory of the opposition, on Sir Laurence Parsons's motion, was merely the first engagement in a long struggle. Both sides continued to build up their forces. In the government party Castlereagh took over the chief direction of policy from Cornwallis, who had become despondent of success. Under Castlereagh's influence the widespread use of corruption was begun, aimed at winning all possible supporters for the Union. To illustrate his methods we may quote the example of the Earl of Ely, who had originally opposed what he considered to be "this mad scheme." Towards the end of this year Ely was found on the side of the government, together with the six members whom he controlled in the Irish House of Commons, and received a marquisate as a reward for his co-operation. Beresford agreed to support Castlereagh's intentions, but one of his sons remained hostile, and was forced to give up the sinecure appointment which he held as Inspector-General of Exports. Several prominent officials were dismissed for their opposition, including Parnell (Chancellor of the Exchequer) and FitzGerald (Prime Serjeant).[1]

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1. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, III. 168.

When the next session of Parliament opened, in January 1800, it was clear that a great struggle was about to begin. The initiative was taken by Sir Laurence Parsons on behalf of the opposition, when he introduced an amendment to the Address, expressing a desire to leave the constitutional position undisturbed. This amendment was defeated by 138 votes to 96. Thus, it was evident that Castlereagh had succeeded in making the official party masters of Parliament.[1]

Sir Laurence's speech contained some sharp criticism of the methods which Castlereagh had used to gain his ends. "It matters not, he told the members, "whether you, the representatives of this great nation, are turned out of that door by the sword of the army, or the gold of the Treasury, by a Cromwell or by a Secretary," - in either case, the sin against the constitution was the same. Not since the reign of James II had there been such an obnoxious use of corruption for political ends:

> Are we then to sit supinely here until his practices are matured? Are we to wait while we see the serpent collecting himself in his coils, only to spring upon us with greater violence, and not strike at him now? Are any measures to be kept with a government which is proceeding against your constitution by such foul means?[2]

There had been a tendency amongst the Irish upper classes to look up to everything English, and to belittle everything Irish, and this tendency had proved useful to Pitt to effect his own ends. Such a spirit was not found in England, even amongst the humblest peasants.

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1. P.R., 1800, p. 19.
2. Ibid., p. 7.

Why could not the Irish be equally patriotic? Two years of difficult circumstances should not have produced this apathy. The situation called for a return to the spirit of the Dungannon Convention, eighteen years before.[1]

Ireland had nothing to gain, and much to lose, from the Union. The peers, because of the attraction of the Crown, must become absentees. Thus would come to an end the policy which governments had practised for centuries, of controlling Ireland through the agency of great landed proprietors. A gulf would be created between landlords and people, such as had happened in France in the days before the Revolution. The new representatives in Parliament would be too far removed to enjoy the trust of their countrymen, and would soon become dissipated by the the life of the capital. Finally, the Union might bring about the very danger which it sought to avert, since only a resident Parliament could provide adequate security during a time of stress:

> Suppose any man of plain understanding met your peers and your one hundred members on the road to London, and asked them, what are you going there for? You answer "to preserve the peace of Ireland." Would he not say "Good people go back to your own country, it is there you can best preserve its peace; England wants you not; but Ireland does."[2]

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1. P.R., 1800, p. 7.

2. Ibid., p. 18. Castlereagh replied with a speech which again made no real attempt to answer Parsons's arguments. However, so hastily did he rise to his feet, after the conclusion of Sir Laurence's speech, that the Speaker was enabled to raise a general laugh by asking if he meant to second the motion.
H. Alexander to T. Pelham, 15 Jan. 1800 (Cornwallis Corr., III.162).

After their defeat in Parliament the members of the opposition concentrated their attention on gathering the force of public opinion behind them throughout the country. Their method was to organise a meeting of the principal inhabitants in every county, at which resolutions could be passed condemning the proposed Union. A circular letter was sent out over the signatures of Charlemont, Devonshire and William Ponsonby, and meetings were held successfully in Down, Louth, Meath and Cavan.[1]

In the King's County, the Duke of Devonshire, accompanied by Sir Laurence Parsons and Bowes Daly, the two members of Parliament, called on the High Sheriff, Jonathan Darby of Leap castle, and asked him to summon a meeting. This Darby refused to do. Parsons therefore decided to proceed with arrangements for a meeting on his own initiative, and requested a large number of county gentlemen to gather in the session-house at Birr, on Sunday[2] February 2.

The government decided to take immediate action. The High Sheriff attended the meeting in person, and ordered all the assembled gentlemen to disperse; when they refused he intimated his intention of compelling them to do so by force. After a brief interval a messenger arrived to say that a detachment of troops was approaching the session-house. The meeting hastily voted the resolutions against the Union, although there was no time to sign them, and those present left the building in a body. To their consternation, they found, moving

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1. Cornwallis to Portland, 27 Jan. 1800 (Cornwallis Corr., III.173).

2. Ibid., p. 173.

towards them, a column of troops, with four pieces of cannon in front, matches lighted and every appearance of being prepared for action. The commanding officer, Major Rogers, on being asked for an explanation, declared that he wanted only one word to blow them all to atoms.[1]

Some days later Sir Laurence drew the attention of Parliament to this affair. He himself proposed, and Bowes Daly seconded, two resolutions; the first condemned the use of violence to prevent a meeting of freeholders from petitioning Parliament as "a gross violation of the privileges of this House;" the second asked that Darby and Rogers should attend at the bar of the House to explain their conduct.[2]

The first resolution won little support, and Castlereagh was able to dismiss it as an "inflammatory trick." The second was, however, agreed to, and the two officials were summoned to appear before the House on the following Wednesday, February 12. The debate which took place then resulted in complete victory for the government. It was declared that there had been no attempt to prevent the meeting, but that the sheriff had allowed it, although he believed a meeting on a Sunday to be illegal, lest his interference should inflame the people; that the measures taken by Major Rogers were at the express command of the High Sheriff, who had ordered him to be in readiness to quell a tumult, should one arise; that Rogers had been instructed by the Viceroy to allow the meeting to be held without interruption. In all

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1. P.R., 1800, p. 143.

2. Ibid.

this there is more than a suspicion of collaboration, as if the government had produced a carefully-prepared scheme to defeat the complaints of its opponents. Nevertheless, the immediate effects were considerable. Sir Laurence was forced to admit that, the facts having been ascertained, Darby and Rogers might withdraw. The government was, however, determined to exploit its victory to the fullest extent. A series of motions were forced through, deeply humiliating to the opposition, which gave approval to the conduct of Darby and Rogers, and affirmed that no attempt had been made at Birr to prevent the right of petition.[1]

This debate was remarkable for the new tone which it introduced into the conduct of the Union controversy. Finding themselves at last established in a position of strength the supporters of the government displayed an arrogance and warmth of feeling, which were to mark their activities for the remainder of the session. Cornwallis, in a report to Pitt, congratulated himself on their "high tone, which I hope may have good effect thereafter."[2]

At about this time Castlereagh appears to have attempted to eliminate Parsons's influence by discrediting him among the other members of the opposition. A rumour was circulated that Sir Laurence had at one time supported the project for a Union, and had stated his approval in the course of a memorandum still in the possession of Castlereagh.[3]

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1. Cornwallis to Pitt, 13 Feb. 1800 (Cornwallis Corr., III. 190).
2. Ibid., p. 190.
3. Cornwallis to Pitt, 20 Feb. 1800 (Cornwallis Corr., III. 196).

Parsons brought the matter before Parliament on February 20, and made a speech in which he strongly denied the authenticity of the rumour. He was answered by Castlereagh, who declared that shortly after the arrival of Lord Cornwallis in Ireland Sir Laurence had come to him to affirm his belief in a Union, and that he had substantiated this opinion in a memorandum sent to the Viceroy a few days afterwards. Castlereagh went on, however, to make a number of rather unplausible explanations; he had not mentioned the matter before, because, being busy at the time when Parsons's memorandum arrived, he had locked it away without perusing it, and the paper had only recently been rediscovered; the document was not signed by Sir Laurence Parsons, nor was it in his handwriting, but the writer described himself as commanding the King's County regiment of militia, and alluded to a number of matters of discipline in which Sir Laurence had been involved.[1]

Castlereagh's explanation would seem to make it very doubtful that Sir Laurence had any connection with this memorandum. The case is still further weakened by the fact that the document is not to be found anywhere amongst the Cornwallis MSS. Further problems are raised by Castlereagh's allusion to the author as commanding the King's County regiment of militia, and to his concern with certain disciplinary matters; it happens that Sir Laurence had resigned the command of the regiment four months before Cornwallis came to Ireland; again, a number of other persons were implicated in these matters of

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1. Cornwallis to Pitt, 20 Feb. 1800 (Cornwallis Corr., III. 196).

discipline, notably Warren Westenra, who was at this time engaged in a scheme to remove the next command-officer, L'Estrange. In these circumstances, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the government was attempting to bring a charge against Parsons which it could not substantiate. Perhaps Castlereagh's memory had failed him, in confusing Parsons with another who had professed support for the Union? Could it be that the other was Westenra, who had certainly abundant reason for wishing to win the good graces of the administration at this time?

Yet, these circumstances apart, is there any justification for believing that Sir Laurence was, at any time, sympathetic towards the project for a Union? His memoranda at Birr Castle contain no references to the matter whatsoever. There are a number of statements which show his appreciation of the value of the connection with England, but nothing to point to a desire for closer constitutional relations. Remembering the bitterness with which Parsons attacked the shortcomings of the Irish administration in matters of defence and parliamentary reform, as largely due to the disinterestedness of English ministers in Ireland, and the fact that he was one of the first members of the opposition to embark on active hostility to the Union, it is impossible to believe that Castlereagh's charge was more that an unworthy and quite unsubstantiated attempt to blacken him in the eyes of his own colleagues.

Meanwhile, Castlereagh went forward with his plans, confident in his ascendancy over the opposition. On February 5 he introduced a

number of resolutions in favour of a Union, in the Commons. These resolutions were sent up to the Lords, on March 1, without a division.[1]

In this final chapter of the Union controversy Parsons once more played an important role. The leaders of the opposition decided not to challenge a division on the resolutions, because they were aware they had been defeated, and that no purpose would be served by displaying their weakness to the public. Meeting together at the house of Lord Charlemont they decided to make no formal protest against sending the resolutions to the Lords, and that their representatives should not appear in the House at all. The task of delivering whatever protest might prove possible was given to Sir Laurence Parsons, apparently because his independent line of conduct was well known, and distinguished him from the opposition leaders.[2]

This was the last occasion on which Sir Laurence addressed the Irish House of Commons. In a speech which was short and dignified, and showed nothing of the grief and bitterness with which his heart was full, he intimated that the opposition had renounced the struggle. Castlereagh did not bother to reply. By ten o'clock on the same evening, the resolutions had been passed, and the Irish Parliament had brought an end to its own existence.[3]

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1. P.R., 1800, p. 3.
2. Cornwallis to Portland, 22 Mar. 1800(Cornwallis Corr., III.215).
3. Cornwallis to Portland, 22 Mar. 1800(Cornwallis Corr., III.215).

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER THE UNION, 1801 - 41.

The Union brought important changes in the character and extent of Irish Political life. The main scene of events now moved to London, where Irish influences were less likely to make themselves felt. In place of the more than one hundred peers and three hundred commoners who formerly sat in the Irish Parliament, Ireland was represented in the imperial Parliament by twenty-eight peers and one hundred commoners. Thus many distinguished figures were forced to disappear permanently from public life. The policy of corruption, which had been used to such devastating effect during the Union controversy, continued to exert a powerful influence over the first elections to the imperial Parliament. The Irish representatives in the House of Commons contained remarkably few anti-Unionists amongst their number; William and George Ponsonby, Sir John Parnell, John Foster, Sir Laurence Parsons and Bowes Daly (who now represented Galway town instead of the King's County) were all elected;[1] Henry Grattan declined to offer himself as a candidate, although he accepted an English borough seat some years later;[2] John Philpot Curran and Arthur Browne did not again sit in Parliament.[3] Among the supporters of the government were seven peers, including viscount Castlereagh, four of Castlereagh's close relatives, and three members of the

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1. House of Commons List, 22 Nov. 1804 (P.D., 1. xvii).
2. D.N.B., Henry Grattan.
3. Ibid., John Philpot Curran and Arthur Browne.

Beresford family.[1]

Organised opposition to the new constitutional settlement was no longer possible, nor was it attempted. In the first session of the imperial Parliament the Irish Martial Law Bill, a measure capable of arousing considerable controversy, was successfully introduced by Castlereagh with little opposition from Irish members. The bill sought to perpetuate legislation made by the Irish Parliament in 1798, during the viceroyalty of Camden, which permitted acts of rebellion to be summarily tried by military officers. William Ponsonby, Sir Laurence Parsons and Sir John Parnell all contented themselves with denying that the state of Ireland offered any justification for the continuation of martial law. Ponsonby asked for a policy of popular conciliation which might heal divisions in Ireland; 'let them (the Irish people) feel all the blessings of a good government; if this policy were adopted, the affections of the Irish people would be restored.'[2] With remarkable swiftness the fever of political activity which had consumed a large part of the Irish upper classes during the Union controversy spent itself and died away. Most of the country gentlemen took no further part in political life. An official observer, returning from the midlands, reported that 'the dispositions of the country are in the most favourable state that government could wish, the upper class desirous to be at rest, the inferiors thinking of their business.'[3] Lord Oxmantown, Parsons's uncle, summed up the

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1. House of Commons List, 22 Nov. 1804 (P.D., 1. xvii).
2. P.D., 1. 1038.
3. W. McKenna to ——, 24 Jan. 1805 (P.R.O.I., 528/199/6).

prevailing spirit by saying: 'We have had a delightful season and bountiful harvest and if the French don't come we shall continue in perfect peace and quietness.'[1]

Other factors, in both foreign and domestic affairs, tended to reconcile the Irish upper classes to the Union settlement. The main feature of the war during the early years of the nineteenth century was the failure of an attempt to build up a military alliance with Austria, Russia and a number of lesser continental powers. The Treaty of Luneville, which gave France control of Italy and the Austrian dominions west of the Rhine, and the determination of Russia to pursue a policy of armed neutrality, both made it impossible to conduct a successful military diversion against Napoleon. When peace was declared at Amiens (1801) it was clear that this could only be a brief breathing space before a more direct clash between Great Britain and France. The resumption of hostilities early in 1803 brought a new strategic situation; Great Britain and Ireland were faced by a powerful threat of invasion, the obstacle to which lay in continued British control of the seas.[2] Pitt had already discerned the vital role which naval power must play in the coming struggle; 'in the wreck of the continent and the disappointment of our hopes there, what has been the security of this country, but its naval preponderance? And if that were once gone, the spirit of the country would go with it.'[3]

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1. Lord Oxmantown to ——, 29 Sept. 1801 (P.R.O.I., 518/108/4).
2. D.N.B., William Pitt.
3. P.D., 1. 916.

The royal navy had always been a peculiarly English institution in the control of which Ireland had been allowed no share.[1] It could not escape Irish observers how much their safety depended on the protection afforded by England in the period of naval warfare about to begin.

At home, while no widespread expression of disapproval followed the Union, an uneasy distrust prevailed between different sections of the community. The fears of the country gentry lest there should be a repetition of the violence of 1798 were kept alive by the activities of a commission appointed to examine the claims of suffering loyalists. In 1802 this commission prepared twenty-one lists of claims which had been finally decided and twenty-one lists of others which required further revision.[2] The Catholic party was disillusioned by Pitt's inability to honour his undertaking to re-open the emancipation question after the Union, and many of their leaders, such as Keogh, Secretary to the Catholic Committee, became sympathetic to the separatist ideals of the United Irishmen.[3] Emmett's ill-fated attempt on 23 July 1803, while of little military or even political significance, nevertheless heightened

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1. It was suggested, as one of the arguments in favour of maintaining a large military establishment in Ireland, that as England maintained the royal navy entirely at her own expense, Ireland should have a particular responsibility in military affairs (P.R., 1783/4, 1.98). One of the objections to Orde's commercial propositions, in 1785, was the fact that the Irish hereditary revenue would be used to defray naval expenses, although Ireland would not share in the control of the navy (Pitt to Duke of Rutland, 6 Jan. 1785 (Beresford Corr., p. 55)). When, as in 1794, units of the royal navy operated in Irish waters they were not placed under the control of the Irish government, and the admiral received his instructions direct from London(Secretary Dundas to Earl of Westmoreland, 30 Jan. 1794 (P.R.O., H.O.S.P.,100/47/126).

2. Report of Commission for suffering loyalists, 4 Dec. 1802 (P.R.O.I., 519/126/4).

3. Madden, United Irishmen, III. 596.

tension and did much to underline the latent dangers of revolt. An official report of this period estimated the general situation as follows:

> The rebellion of 1798 was so far suppressed as to give the country an appearance of internal peace; yet it cannot be said to have been completely subdued. Many of the principal instigators and contrivers of that rebellion and even some of the chief actors in it remained; and although many of them were in custody, and others had fled, yet they found means to maintain such communication with their associates through Ireland as to keep alive the spirit of disaffection with the hope of exciting future disturbance. Without foreign aid but little expectation of success could be entertained; therefore the agents of the disaffected in France were active, and industriously raised in the minds of their friends in Ireland an expectation of invasion.[1]

The changed circumstances after the Union were apparently responsible for a remarkable change in the course of Sir Laurence Parsons's political career. While retaining considerable freedom of movement in the imperial parliament he made no further attempt to challenge the new constitutional settlement, or to oppose the policies of the Irish administration. Henceforward, he co-operated closely with the government, and turned his thoughts for the first time towards an appointment to public office.

This development first became evident in 1804 when Parsons intervened, on the side of the government, in two debates of peculiarly Irish interest. The first of these resulted from a motion to enquire into the payment of officials on the Irish civil establishment, where a number of irregularities were alleged to have taken place. Parsons denied that there was any cause for enquiry, and declared that the

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1. Cf. 'Vindication of Lord Hardwicke's Administration in Ireland,' undated, in Madden, United Irishmen, III. 589.



SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE.
Reproduced from an engraving at Birr Castle, by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.

conduct of the administration had been just.[1] The second was the debate on the Irish Militia Bill, a measure which had frequently received his strictures in the past. He had no criticisms to make now, however, and expressed unqualified approval of the official arrangements for defence, since the Union:

> Gentlemen seemed to consider Ireland as if it were another and remote country beyond the Atlantic; whereas the true way to view that matter was to consider the channel between England and Ireland as a mere canal, by which a communication was to be constantly kept up between them.--- Nor could he omit this opportunity of observing that Ireland was never better taken care of by sea or land than at the present time.[2]

In both these debates Parsons acted in close agreement with his former adversary, Castlereagh. This alliance became even more apparent during the chief debate of the session, when Wilberforce introduced his motion for the abolition of slavery. Castlereagh supported Parsons's request for a more gradual abolition of slavery, as less likely to prejudice the interests of commerce.[3] The rivalries of the Union controversy had clearly been transcended, and Parsons had entered upon his career in the imperial Parliament with substantially new objectives.

It might, perhaps, appear as if Parsons had forsaken both his earlier advocacy of parliamentary reform, and the arguments which he had used during the Union controversy. Unfortunately, his writings at Birr Castle give no indication of the motives which influenced his

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1. P.D., 11. 124.
2. Ibid., 11. 137.
3. Ibid., 11. 544.

political conduct at this time. It would seem not unreasonable to assume, that, as in 1794 and 1798, strategic and military considerations were uppermost in his mind. He can hardly have failed to realise that in the changed circumstances of the war after the Peace of Amiens the safety of Ireland depended on the protection afforded her by England at sea. He must have seen that in seeking to defeat the forces of popular unrest in Ireland the interests of the British government and Irish upper classes were the same. The Union had not seriously curtailed the liberties of the upper classes, nor had it been accompanied by renewed civil strife; it had come, however, to offer stronger guarantees for the preservation of the established social order in Ireland. Parsons's conduct was not, in fact, inconsistent with his earlier activities in the Irish Parliament; he was influenced still by a determination to maintain the position of the Irish landed classes, to whom the Union now appeared as a useful asset. Moreover, any attempt to project the Union controversy into the imperial Parliament must have been not merely futile, but would have won him the distrust of that part of the Irish community which he was most anxious to serve.

These considerations apart, personal motives probably disposed him to play a less controversial part in public life, and to hope for a career in office. His marriage to Alice Lloyd, in 1797, and the birth of a young family during the years which followed the Union, introduced a settling influence into his affairs. He was now coming increasingly under the influence of his uncle, Laurence Harman Parsons,

who was responsible first for placing him in line of succession to a peerage, and then for obtaining his first appointment in the Irish administration.

Laurence Harman Parsons, half-brother to Sir Laurence's father, had inherited from his mother considerable property in County Longford. He represented Longford in the Irish Parliament for many years without achieving eminence in political affairs. In 1792, he was raised to the peerage as Baron Oxmantown. Although an opponent of the Union, he was chosen as one of the original Irish representative peers in the House of Lords. In 1802 he was appointed Chancellor of Dublin University, but received no further advancement in public service.[1] Disappointment at his own lack of success, and having no son to succeed him, he appears to have concentrated his hopes on his nephew, towards whom he showed a large measure of affection.

When Laurence Harman was created Baron Oxmantown the patent contained, at his own request, a special remainder of the title in favour of his nephew, Sir Laurence Parsons. In 1795 he became Viscount Oxmantown, although on this occasion there was no remainder, and the viscountcy therefore became extinct on his death. In 1804 he was offered an Earldom, which he accepted on condition that there should again be a special remainder to Sir Laurence.[2] This remainder was incorporated in the patent for the Earldom of Rosse, which was granted on 3 February 1806. Sir Laurence himself made the final arrangements

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1. Complete Peerage, XI. 165.
2. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 20 Aug. 1804 (Parsons MSS.).

for the patent, acting as his uncle's agent in London.[1] He succeeded to the earldom and the barony on the latter's death [2] in April 1807.

Laurence Harmen showed himself anxious to establish his nephew in a position in the Irish government. During the summer of 1804 he carried out a series of negotiations with the Viceroy, Lord Hardwicke, and the Chief Secretary, Sir Evan Nepean, as a result of which Sir Laurence was offered an appointment as one of the lords of the Treasury in Ireland. Oxmantown (as he then was) appears to have hoped for a more important position, and blamed Nepean for lack of attention to his interests.[3] Yet, it was on his advice that Sir Laurence accepted the offer, in March 1805, and was shortly afterwards sworn a member of

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1. Lord Oxmantown to Sir E. Nepean, 29 Jan. 1806 (P.R.O.I.,530/218).
2. Sir L. Parsons to - Metcalfe, 27 April 1807 (Parsons MSS.).
   This was not the first occasion when these titles were held by members of the Parsons family.
   In 1681, Richard, only son of Sir William Parsons, the Lord Justice of Ireland, received patents as Baron Oxmantown and Viscount Rosse. His son Richard, who succeeded him in 1702, became Earl of Rosse in 1718. When his son, a third Richard, died without heirs in 1764, the titles became extinct. The title of Rosse was taken from New Rosse, in Wexford, where Sir William had received lands in the Stuart plantations. Oxmantown was part of the City of Dublin north of the river, inhibited originally by the Norse or Ostmen; it is not clear how the Parsons family came to be connected with this district. Complete Peerage, XI. 165. Although the Birr branch of the family was never connected with either of these places, Laurence Harman was anxious to reinstate himself and his nephew "in the very old titles of his family." Lord Oxmantown to Sir E. Nepean, undated (Parsons MSS.).
3. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 27 Aug. 1804 (Parsons MSS.).

the Irish Privy Council. "Your firmness," wrote Oxmantown to his nephew, "blending with your conciliating manner, your rectitude of conduct, and the purity of your intentions, will command their esteem and co-operation."[1]

The Treasury at this time still exercised both political and financial functions. The former was the responsibility of the First Lord, assisted by a number of junior lords, of whom Parsons was one; these were chiefly concerned with superintending the work of the Patronage Secretary, and the Government Whip in Parliament. Financial duties were discharged by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, assisted by the Financial Secretary, who was responsible for the estimates of all revenue departments, and for votes of credit.[2] Thus, while Parsons's duties must have been largely of a political nature, he was able to gain some experience of revenue matters which he himself admitted to have been of considerable value during his subsequent career at the Post Office. The Irish Treasury enjoyed a reputation for efficiency, and at least one Chancellor of the English Exchequer (Vansittart) praised it highly.[3]

Oxmantown continued to press his nephew's claims to higher office before Pitt and other members of the government.[4] Yet it was not

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1. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 11 July 1805 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Encyclopaedia of the Laws of England, VII. 445.
3. Earl of Rosse to Viceroy, 12 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/2).
4. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 27 Aug. 1804 (Parsons MSS.).

until November 1809, eighteen months after his uncle's death, that Sir Laurence was appointed to an important position in the Irish administration, when he became joint Postmaster-General.[1]

II

The task which confronted the second Earl of Rosse (as he now was) at the Irish Post Office was not an easy one. He did not enjoy undisputed authority; until his own dismissal, in 1822, Post Office affairs were administered by two joint Postmasters-General, among whom the senior was his colleague, Lord O'Neill. While O'Neill was content to leave most routine matters in Parsons's hands, it was necessary to consult him before making any important decisions of policy. Parsons was also unfortunate in the character of the senior member of his staff, Sir Edward Lees, Secretary of the Post Office. Lees had risen to prominence by his military services at the battle of Bunker Hill; later he had accompanied Townshend to Ireland as private secretary to the Lord Lieutenant, and subsequently served in the War Department and Post Office.[2] In 1804 Townshend had procured him a baronetcy.[3] He was insolent and insubordinate, largely dominated by self-interest, and remained hostile to Parsons's efforts to introduce reforms. Moreover, while Parsons's immediate predecessor, Lord Clancarty, had carried out a number of minor improvements during his short period of

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1. Earl of Rosse to Viceroy, 12 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/2).
2. Marquis Townshend to Lord Pelham, 9 Sept. 1802 (P.R.O.I., 520/129/41).
3. Burke, Peerage (1912 ed.), p. 1152.

office (1808/9) business was still transacted in an antiquated and inefficient manner, which contrasted sharply with that of the Treasury, from which Parsons had come. Chief authority was exercised not by the Postmasters, but by the Secretary, who issued all warrants for payment on his own signature alone. There was no recognised system of accounting. Many ledgers and documents had been removed, while others were defaced or mutilated. A short time afterwards the Receiver General of the Post Office reported that no auditing of accounts was possible for the years prior to[1] 1808.

The Irish Post Office was responsible both for mail services between Ireland and Great Britain, and for the conveyance of mail within Ireland itself. The former were maintained by means of a number of sailing-vessels, which plied between the Pidgeon-house at Dublin and Holyhead, often with long delays in transit.[2] Mail was sent inland on nine coaches which left Dublin daily for various centres throughout the country; further distribution was effected by postboys, travelling on foot or on horseback.[3] This system, adapted originally from one in force in England, had never worked satisfactorily under Irish conditions.

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1. Report of Receiver-General of the Post Office, 9 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/2).
2. Parsons himself reported how, on one occasion, he and his family with their servants and carriage, boarded a vessel at the Pidgeon-house, only to find that its sailing had been delayed until the next day, to facilitate several senior members of the government. When Parsons made strong representations to the Viceroy (Hardwicke) however, the vessel was allowed to sail. Sir L. Parsons to Viceroy, 8 Jan. 1805 (B.M., Add. MS. 35755,94).
3. Statement of letters despatched by the Irish Post Office, 13 June 1825 (Parsons MSS.).

Poor roads prevented the coaches from travelling at a speed greater than four Irish miles per hour, and resulted in many accidents. There was a shortage of drivers capable of handling large vehicles drawn by four horses, and many of the drivers suffered from the effects of alcohol. The number of travellers was insufficient to make the coaches an economic undertaking, and Irishmen objected to travelling by night as the exigencies of the mail-service sometimes required. Unlike England, where inn-keepers usually contracted for the supply of horses along each route, the Irish Post-Office was forced to enter into long-term agreements with contractors, who provided coaches, horses and all other equipment.[1] More serious than these obstacles, however, was the prevalence of highway robberies. During the period 1812/1817 there were no fewer than twenty-four reported cases of robbery, involving almost all the principal services in the country.[2]

Parsons's first objective was to introduce a revised and much more efficient system of accounts. His arrangements, which came into force on 3 January 1810, appear to have been based on the practice of both the English Post Office and the Irish Treasury. In future all payments were to be subjected to a system of "Check and Control." Vouchers must be produced on every occasion, sworn to by the heads of the departments concerned, and laid before the Commissioners of Accounts

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1. Answers to Objections made to the Irish mail coaches, undated (B.M., Add. MS. 40278, f. 100).

2. Reports to the Chief Secretary, 1812/17 (P.R.O.I., 556/416, 559/438 and 563/460).

at the end of the year.[1] All warrants were to be submitted by the Secretary to one of the Postmasters-General for his signature, and this provision was later extended to require the signature of both Postmasters, since Parsons wished to exercise a personal supervision over all expenses.[2] At the same time he inaugurated a vigorous programme of financial retrenchment, which resulted in an annual saving[3] of £10,000.

These measures appear to have been highly successful. In 1816 the Receiver-General reported that he had been enabled to recover a sum of £500 from an officer who had defaulted previously, and declared that such an offence could not be committed again. Parsons himself said of his department, during the same year, "I venture to predict that --- it is now most perfect in all its parts, and that it never was so until I came into office."[4]

In 1813 he endeavoured to improve the arrangements for the conveyance of mail to England. In order to shorten the voyage, mail was to be despatched from Howth instead of Dublin. There were to be three vessels, carrying only a small number of passengers, and no carriages and horses. The vessels were to be constructed in such a way that

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1. Report of Receiver-General of the Post Office, 9 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/2).
2. On one occasion, while absent in London, Parsons found that O'Neill had made a disadvantageous agreement with contractors which would result in a loss of £60,000 to the Post Office. Earl of Bosse to Duke of Wellington, 4 June 1822 (B.M., Add. MS. 37299, f. 178).
3. Ibid.
4. Report of Receiver-General of the Post Office, 9 Feb.1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/2).

there could be no access to the cargo, and coaches were to be provided with an iron safe, for the safety of government despatches.[1] Mail services from Howth were carried on for a period of several months, but ceased when objections were raised by the English Post Office.[2]

Parsons's efforts to improve internal mail services were more successful. An Act of Parliament, passed in 1818, with his enthusiastic support, required grand juries to levy large sums of money for the improvement of mail-coach roads.[3] As a result of the improvements effected by this Act he was enabled to increase the average speed of the coaches from four, to five Irish miles per hour, and make more satisfactory agreements with the contractors.[4]

These reforms met with considerable opposition from the Secretary, Sir Edward Lees. The latter was particularly hostile to Parsons's requirement that all warrants should bear the signature of both Postmasters-General, since this imposed a considerable check on his own authority. When the regulation was introduced in August 1812 he

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1. Sir E. Lees to Chief Secretary, 23 July 1813 (P.R.O.I., 554/398).
2. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 7 Aug. 1813 (B.M., Add. MS. 40299, f. 53).
   The chief objection of the English Post Office was that Parsons had levied a charge of two pence on letters despatched from Howth, to defray additional expenses. This they held to be illegal and an unfair advantage over their own services.
   Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 27 July 1813 (B.M., Add.MS. 40228, f. 273).
3. Same to same, 27 April 1818 (B.M., Add. MS. 40276, f. 195).
4. Earl of Rosse to Duke of Wellington, 4 June 1822 (B.M., Add. MS. 37299, f. 178).

wrote to assure Parsons that he had given "immediate directions" to have it carried out, although he went on to complain that it would increase the work of his own department. Parsons afterwards noticed that the regulation did not appear on the minute-book, and caused it to be entered in June 1813, when it was signed by both Postmasters-General. Lees, however, took no notice of the regulation, and continued to issue warrants on the authority of one of the Postmasters alone. During the last months of 1815 Parsons detected fifty-two payments which had been made on the authority of O'Neill alone, and eighteen on that of himself alone.[1]

Deeply angered though he was by this conduct, he did not take any action against the Secretary until he found the latter to be implicated in even more serious offences. Early in 1816 it was discovered that Lees had made considerable overpayments to an accomplice amongst the mail-coach contractors. When the list of payments on the Post Office establishment was sent to the Accountant-General, Prior, for his approval, he observed a number of discrepancies, and, suspecting dishonesty, returned it to Lees with a request that the signature of the Superintendent of the Mail Coaches should be affixed to every statement. In making this request he was merely following a procedure already adopted by the English Post Office, where the Superintendent's signature was always affixed. Lees however declined to comply, and after a number of further protests, the Accountant-General agreed to sign.[2]

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1. Earl of Rosse to Viceroy, 12 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/2).
2. Same to same, 19 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/4).

Not content with this victory, and probably hoping to dissuade Prior from engaging in further investigations, Lees made representations against him to the Postmasters-General, as a result of which Parsons signed a minute which expressed mild disapproval of the Accountant-General's conduct. The Secretary, still dissatisfied, then sent a letter to Prior in which he conveyed, in Parsons's name, a heavy censure for his failure to carry out instructions. Prior was not intimidated by these tactics. During the course of a private interview with Parsons he communicated to the latter full details of Lees's overpayments to the contractors.[1]

In February 1816 Parsons made a formal complaint against Lees' conduct to the Chief Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, and demanded an enquiry. "Unless the Postmasters-General have a Secretary on whose truth, fairness, correctness and knowledge of business they can rely," he declared "this important department cannot be properly conducted."[2] No action was taken against Lees by the government. He remained in his position for the remainder of Parsons's tenure of office. Indeed, there is some reason for believing that the proceedings on this occasion only served to damage Parsons's reputation amongst his superiors. Peel was led to believe that Lees had not been confined to his proper sphere of duty, and that there had not been a sufficient

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1. Earl of Rosse to Viceroy, 19 Feb. 1816 (P.R.O.I., 563/461/4).
2. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 7 Feb. 1816 (B.M., Add., MS. 40252, f. 294).

measure of control over him.[1] From this time, probably, dates a disfavour afterwards shown by Peel towards Parsons.

Other circumstances contributed to increase this disfavour. The Chief Secretary was angry that the Earl did not attend Parliament more regularly, and made few appearances at the Vice-Regal court.[2] His patience was sorely tried by a long series of requests for offices, which Parsons made on behalf of his two younger brothers and other relatives.

When in 1822 Parsons was removed from office, it was almost certainly due to Peel's influence. Among new arrangements for the Irish administration it was decided that the office of Postmaster-General should be discharged by one person only. It was made clear to Parsons, that as he was junior to O'Neill, he would be expected to resign. Parsons objected strongly to such a dismissal. In the course of a letter to the Duke of Wellington, he pointed out that he had been responsible for performing the greater part of the duties of the office, that he had carried out a number of important reforms, and that there must be disastrous results for the Post Office if it were left in the sole charge of O'Neill, since most of the work must then fall on Lees, who was unfitted for responsibility - "I think it is of great importance to the public that a person accustomed to business and with diligent habits should have a control over him."[3]

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1. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 19 Feb. 1816 (B.M., Add., MS. 40252, f. 404).
2. Same to same, 13 April 1918 (B.M., Add. MS. 40276, f. 35).
3. Same to Duke of Wellington, 4 June 1822 (B.M., Add. MS. 37299, f. 178).

Parsons's efforts were unsuccessful. In July, Wellington wrote to confirm his dismissal. The Earl asked for alternative employment, in which he might "again endeavour to be useful to the government," adding with a sense of material grievance, that unlike most other revenue officials, he was not entitled to a retiring allowance.[1] No further appointment was, however, offered to him.

Parsons's period of office as Postmaster-General, while marked by many unhappy incidents, was certainly one of the most significant episodes in his career. Work in one of the departments of revenue could not fail to be congenial to one whose earlier activities in the Irish Parliament had been closely concerned with matters of finance. Moreover, the desire for financial retrenchment, which Parsons had learned from Flood, and pressed forward relentlessly for many years, could now be given a large measurement of practical fulfilment. In the reforms which he carried out at the Post Office he was showing evidence of the order and dignity which he wished to introduce to the financial system at large.

Parsons left one lasting memorial to his work. The General Post Office in Dublin, the construction of which began during the summer of 1814, to a design by Francis Johnston which Parsons had approved,

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1. Earl of Rosse to Duke of Wellington, 12 July 1822 (B.M., Add. MS. 37299, f. 290).

   Parsons subsequently asked for a pension for his wife, to lessen the charges on his son's estate, after his death. Although received favourably at first, this request was never granted. Earl of Rosse to Dowager Countess of Rosse, 8 Jan. 1824 (Parsons MSS.).

was completed during his tenure of office.[1] For some time it had been evident that more commodious Post Office premises in Dublin would have to be found. Yet the building erected on Sackville Street in cut Portland stone with an ornamental portico supported by doric columns, was a work of considerable architectural merit, well in keeping with the improvements which the Earl was already making on his own estates at Birr.

III

The principal question which agitated Irish politics during the years which followed the Union was that of Catholic emancipation. For some time, public opinion remained remarkably undisturbed; the failure of the Young Ireland Movement, to which many Catholic leaders had given sympathetic support, and Pitt's inability to re-open the emancipation question in face of the King's disapproval, produced an apathy which was slow to disappear. Yet a new spirit was introduced to the Catholic party in 1805, when Daniel O'Connell, an able and enthusiastic lawyer, assumed a prominent position in the affairs of the Catholic Committee.[2] Under O'Connell's influence the Committee drew up a series of petitions, asking for redress of their grievances. In 1810 O'Connell became chairman of the Committee, and he at once gave it a more representative character by summoning delegates from each of the four provinces of Ireland.[3]

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1. Sir E. Lees to Viceroy, 17 Mar. 1814 (P.R.O.I., 556/416).
2. An organisation formed by a number of leading Roman Catholics in 1804, to promote petitions.
3. Cf. G.P. Gooch 'Great Britain and Ireland 1792 - 1815,' in Camb. Mod. Hist., IX. 693.

The Irish administration watched this development with a large measure of anxiety. It seemed that O'Connell was endeavouring to create new and more effective machinery for the expression of popular discontent, and was issuing a powerful challenge to the Union settlement. Largely on the advice of Saurin, the bitterly anti-Catholic Attorney-General, they invoked the provisions of the Convention Act of 1793 to dissolve the Catholic Committee.[1]

Parsons was in full agreement with the government's action. Speaking in Parliament soon afterwards he declared himself "far from being disposed to think harshly of the Catholic body" and upheld their right to engage in petitions. Yet he made it clear that he considered the representative character of the Catholic Committee to be a threat to public order, and incompatible with the safety of the constitution.[2] In 1812, when FitzWilliam attempted to obtain some amelioration of the condition of the Roman Catholics, by introducing a motion for an enquiry into the state of Ireland, Parsons opposed him, with a defence of the measures taken by the government. 'The numbers of the discontented may be great,' he declared, 'the ranks of the disloyal may be numerous, but Ireland is safe.'[3]

It is certain that Parsons was at no time influenced by motives of religious bitterness. Apart from his parliamentary utterances,

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1. Cf. G.P. Gooch 'Great Britain and Ireland 1792 - 1815,' in Camb. Mod. Hist., IX. 693.
2. P.D., 2 Series, XIX. 12.
3. Ibid., XXIII. 408.

the enlightened policy which he pursued towards Roman Catholics on his own estates was ample proof of tolerance and goodwill. His attitude was largely dominated by the deep-rooted fear of social upheaval which had marked the later part of his career in the Irish Parliament. As O'Connell's movement came to command a wide measure of popular support, and was accompanied by a new wave of agrarian outrages, Parsons's fears increased, and impelled him to resist any attempt to compromise with the Catholic claims.

In 1822, when Canning introduced a motion for Catholic emancipation, Parsons expressed his feelings in the course of two remarkable letters to Peel. The recent disturbances in Ireland were, he asserted, both political and religious in character. The Roman Catholic religion had been used as a means to unite the lower orders in a conspiracy to overthrow the Protestant ascendancy, property and established church. While many outrages could be explained by the injustice of landlords, it had been noticed that Protestant tenantry remained quiet.[1] The Catholic priesthood had, he admitted, attempted to restrain the excesses of their people, but it was dangerous to allow power to rest in their hands; "is it fit that the peace of the country should depend upon their wile, and are our lives and property to be held in such a tenure."[2]

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1. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 23 April 1822 (B.M., Add. MS. 40346, f. 215).
2. Same to same, 24 April 1822 (B.M., Add. MS. 40346, f. 225).

During the following year he sent to the Earl of Liverpool, then prime minister, an original and somewhat daring plan to extend government influence over the Irish Roman Catholics. The death of Pieu VII had made it necessary to hold an election to the papal throne. Parsons suggested that the British Government should make use of all the influence at its command to ensure the election of a pope friendly to British interests, who might exercise a tranquilising influence over Irish affairs. "Why," he asked, "should England alone of all the powers of Europe have little or no influence in the election of the pope, who in his ecclesiastical capacity has so much as seven millions of British subjects." He himself had met an Italian nobleman, a minister to the Duchess of Parma, who was visiting Ireland, and who had expressed his willingness to further British interests in this matter.[1]

Liverpool received the suggestion graciously, although he was not prepared to carry it further. He agreed that it was desirable to elect a pope favourable to British interests, but considered that the government did not command sufficient influence in the Church. He promised to instruct the minister at Florence to attend to the matter.[2] Parsons's hopes were eventually shattered by the election of Cardinal Annibale della Genga as Leo XII. The new pope suffered from chronic

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1. Earl of Rosse to Earl of Liverpool, 12 Sept. 1823 (B.M., Add. MS. 38296, f. 267).

2. Earl of Liverpool to Earl of Rosse, 12 Sept. 1823 (B.M., Add. MS. 38296, f. 333).

ill-health, and was never, during the eight years of his pontificate, in a position to exercise a powerful influence in political affairs.[1]

During the following summer Parsons made an attempt to gather the resources of the midland gentry against emancipation. In a letter to Saurin, the Attorney-General, he proposed that Judge Norbury should use his influence with members of the Grand Jury, when next he went on circuit:

> As Lord Norbury goes our Circuit, and as he is perfectly acquainted with the Gentlemen of our country, a hint to him may be of use. He is in the habit of talking individually to them in his Chamber at Philipstown; and if he were to impress upon them the consequences of the measures, viz - that however they may think otherwise, the Catholics would, in spite of them, elect Catholic members, and then have the nomination of the Sheriffs, and in many instances perhaps of the judges; and that the Protestants would be put in the background as the Catholics were formerly, I think he would bring the effect of the measure home to themselves, and satisfy them that they could scarcely submit to live in the country if it were passed.[2]

This suggestion, the only unconstitutional measure which Parsons ever advocated, gives some idea of the anxiety which filled his mind at this time. His motives were certainly honourable; he desired to preserve public order and to take precautions against the danger of popular unrest. Yet the attempt to use the judiciary for political purposes, if prosecuted, must have resulted in a highly dangerous precedent, and undermined much of the independence of the judiciary itself. Parsons's plan was, however, soon discovered by his adversaries.

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1. Montor, Lives and Times of the Popes, VIII. 275.
2. O'Connell Corr., 1. 180.

Saurin sent the letter to Norbury, who stuffed it in the lining of an armchair. By a strange mischance, the chair was sent, soon afterwards, to an upholsterer, who found the letter and placed it in O'Connell's hands. O'Connell made skilful use of it as propaganda against the government.[1]

In the events which immediately preceded the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1828, Parsons was closely involved. As will be described in a later chapter, a number of incidents occurred in his own neighbourhood, which tended to confirm his worst fears of the effects of O'Connell's agitation. When, after emancipation, O'Connell directed the thoughts of his supporters towards winning repeal of the Act of Union, Parsons continued to oppose him. A counter-movement to O'Connell's emerged under the leadership of the Duke of Leinster, who was supported by a number of prominent Irish peers, including the Earls of Rosse, Portarlington, Clonmurry, and Enniskillen and Viscount de Vesci. Their aims, as set out in a document known as the 'Leinster Declaration,' in 1830, were to maintain the permanence of the British connection and to oppose the excesses of O'Connell's movement as prejudicial to the best interests of Ireland.[2]

Parsons spoke only infrequently in the imperial Parliament. He disliked travelling to London, since it interrupted family life and the intellectual pursuits in which he was at this time closely engrossed.[3] Nevertheless, his speeches give a revealing picture of the

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1. O'Connell Corr., 1. 180.
2. Ibid., 11. 229.
3. Earl of Rosse to Miss Burgh, 13 Aug. 1820 (Parsons MSS.).

economic ideas which had now reached full development in his mind. He continued to champion the interests of the landed classes in Ireland with particular reference to the new circumstances which followed the Union settlement.

In 1811 the state of the currency gave rise to alarm when it was found that the price of gold had increased more sharply than the rate of foreign exchange, and a parliamentary commission recommended that the Bank of England should resume payments in gold at the end of two years. This recommendation proved unacceptable to the government, which forced through a bill declaring bank-notes to be the equivalent of gold, and punishing refusal to accept them at their face value as a misdemeanour.[1]

Parsons stood out as one of the chief government supporters in the House of Lords. He considered the findings of the commission to have been grossly exaggerated; there had not been any depreciation of the currency, nor had the number of bank-notes in circulation become excessive. He put forward an economic argument of considerable wisdom and importance; to restrict the circulating medium would not necessarily increase its value, and must produce ill-effects for both industry and agriculture. Clearly Parsons had Ireland much in mind, where the shortage of specie had long constituted a serious barrier to the wider development of trade; indeed, he went on to suggest that the government's measure be extended to Ireland, where many tenants in the north had been forced to pay their rent in bank-notes which were

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1. P.D., 2 Series, XX. 817.

discounted by landlords.[1] In the broader perspective of economic theory his reasoning seems fully justified. Any attempt to restrict the circulating medium must have resulted in increased costs and an attenuated market, with consequent retarding effects on the growing expansion of British trade.

In 1812 differences arose with the United States concerning British attempts to restrict the commerce of neutral countries with France. The 'Orders in Council,' made by Portland's cabinet in 1807 as a reply to Russia's adhesion to the Berlin Decrees, had resulted in considerable interference with neutral shipping. Faced with the prospect of a serious disruption of American trade the rising force of middle-class industrialist opinion brought its influence to bear on the direction of national policy for the first time, and the Orders were repealed. The step came too late, however, for the United States had already issued a declaration of war, and hostilities continued for three years at sea and in Canada.[2]

For Parsons, the circumstances of the time called for firm and unremitting measures of retaliation. Speaking in Parliament, he urged the government to do everything possible to break Napoleon's Continental System, as the first necessity of British foreign policy.[3] He was not prepared to conciliate the United States, nor did he share English industrialist fears concerning American trade. It would seem

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1. P.D., 2 Series, XX. 817.
2. D.N.B., George Canning and Henry Brougham.
3. P.D., 2 Series, XXI. 1069.

that the prospect of a permanent closure of the continent to British trade, with the heavy reduction in British capital which this must bring, filled him with alarm. Moreover, the existence of a great economic fortress, comprising the entire continent of Europe, was a direct contradiction to his desire for free and unrestricted commerce between nations. He had already decided that commerce could alone ensure peace, and a growing measure of international goodwill:

> Commerce has taught the means of peaceably acquiring wealth. It has made the world one great community, established an intercourse between all its parts new and distinct and it has taught the strength, views and interests of every nation to all others - it has thereby enabled nations to unite for peaceable purposes with more facility and more certainty of preserving their object.[1]

When Parsons had previously opposed a policy of war, as in 1794, it was because of the damage which he felt war must cause to commercial interests. He appears to have been deeply influenced by the belief of Adam Smith that the prosperity of nations was interdependent, the riches of one being not necessarily won at the expense of another.[2] In his personal memoranda, he argued that acts of belligerency must generally result in loss to the perpetrator, since 'it cannot be the interest of one state to injure another, unless that one meditates

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1. Sir L. Parsons, part of an unfinished treatise on government (Parsons MSS.).

2. 'The wealth of a neighbouring nation, though dangerous in war, is advantageous in trade. A rich man is likely to be a better customer to the people in his neighbourhood than a poor man; so is likewise a rich nation. The manufacture of a rich nation may be dangerous rivals to those of their neighbours; but the competition is advantageous to the great body of the people.' Smith, Wealth of Nations (abridg. ed.), p. 185.

injuring it.'[1] To advocate more stringent measures of war against France in 1812 might seem inconsistent with this earlier form of pacifism. Yet he had already decided that wars, if unavoidable, must be fought with all available resources - 'The best government is (that) which has the most pacific dispositions and the most warlike abilities.'[2] The threat to British economy seemed sufficiently grave and sufficiently urgent, in 1812, to justify any retaliatory measures which were possible.

The last, and most significant contribution of Parsons to economic discussion came in 1826 when he intervened in the controversy concerning the Usury Laws. Since the conclusion of the war with France (1815), a rapid growth in population which produced an increased demand for imported foodstuffs, and the appearance of a number of new and undeveloped markets abroad, had stimulated a powerful movement in favour of free trade amongst the manufacturing classes. The treatise of Adam Smith, published in 1786, destroyed the arguments in favour of prohibitions which had governed international trade throughout the eighteenth century. A generation earlier, Condillac, Mercier and other economists of the French physiocratic school had demonstrated the advantages of unrestricted international trade, particularly in the matter of corn. English free trade, in the form in which it

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1. Sir L. Parsons, part of an unfinished treatise on government (Parsons MSS.).

2. Ibid.

emerged during the post-Napoleonic period, postulated a hatred by industrialists of the agricultural community, since it was felt that the high price of corn kept wages high, and prevented the adequate exploitation of markets abroad.[1] The attempt to repeal the Usury Laws, thereby realising merchants and bankers from all restriction on the full exploitation of their capital resources,[2] was intended to increase the prosperity and social prestige of the trading classes, and to place them in a considerably stronger position in relation to agriculture.

Parsons viewed the proposal with deep anxiety, presenting as it did such a powerful challenge to the security of the landed classes. In the course of a pamphlet addressed to 'The Nobility, Gentry and all Landed Proprietors,' he argued that repeal must be followed by a greatly increased rate of interest, which would concentrate wealth in the hands of the commercial bankers, and make them, in effect, the new aristocracy. The prosperity of the landed classes, he believed, rested upon two closely-related safeguards - the Corn Laws and the Usury Laws. Free trade, whether in money or corn, must be resisted.[3]

These views are consistent with the belief in the political and economic leadership of the landed classes which Parsons had long maintained. His opinion that the landed classes, by reason of their training and commitments, could alone bring stability to political

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1. D.N.B., Adam Smith and Henry Brougham.
2. The legal rate of interest had been fixed at 5% by 12 Anne, stat. 2, c. 16. A parliamentary commission appointed to examine the Usury Laws in 1818, recommended that they be repealed. Encyclopaedia of the Laws of England, XIV. 409.
3. Pamphlet of the Earl of Rosse, 1826 (Parsons MSS.).

institutions, had been accompanied by repeated defence of their economic interests; his opposition to Ponsonby's India bill in 1792 and Foster's amendment to the Corn Law in 1797 had been dictated largely by class motives. Again, remembering the suspicion with which Parsons had regarded any attempt to enrich the Irish merchants at the possible expense of agricultural interests, and the bitter attack which he had made on the merchant class in 1792, it is not difficult to understand the deep-rooted hostility with which he must have viewed the threat from English manufacturers after 1815.

Wider issues were now, however, at stake in Ireland. The Union settlement, in its economic aspect, rested upon the ability of England to provide an assured market for Irish corn. The prosperity which followed the Corn Laws continued after the Union until the end of the Napoleonic wars. With peace came an attenuated market and a sharp fall in prices which brought much hardship. At this time emerged the threat to the Corn Laws from English industrialists, which, if not directed specifically against Irish agriculture, must cause it particular harm.[1] The intense dismay with which these developments were received by economic observers in Ireland may be seen from the observations of the Reverend H. Major, writing as early as 1815:

> Evil as the present system is, who can tell what the consequences may be if hereafter, on the return of a general peace, Irish corn shall be denied in the British market that preference to which it is undoubtedly entitled? The tradesmen and manufacturers of England will object to purchase corn at a higher price from Ireland than they shall be able to procure it from different parts of the Continent; nor in all probability will

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1. O'Brien, Econ. Hist. of Irel. from the Union to the Famine, p. 200 seq.

> the legislature compel them to do so. Under this circumstance, the specie we receive for our exports becoming still less than the specie we are necessitated to part with for our imports, the virtual balance of trade will be turned against Ireland more fatally than we find at present; and we shall probably behold the approach with accelerated pace of the impoverishment and depopulation of Ireland.[1]

Parsons's pamphlet of 1828 was intended for an upper class readership and made no particular reference to the situation of Ireland. Yet it is reasonable to assume that he had the threat to Irish agriculture fully in mind, and shared the general feeling of dismay.

After the death of his favourite son John, in 1829, which came as a great personal loss, Parsons showed little interest in politics, and only rarely appeared in Parliament. His last speech, delivered in 1833, is interesting for the remarkable insight it gives into his feelings during these years in the Imperial Parliament. The occasion was the debate on the Church Temporalities Bill, which contained a clause for the abolition of a number of Irish bishoprics. Parsons objected strongly to the measure, partly because he considered it to be an invasion of the rights of the established church, which he had already shown himself anxious to defend, and partly because it seemed to be a breach of the Union settlement, in which precise arrangements had been made for the bishoprics of the Church of Ireland. The Union, he suggested, differed from other statutes in that it was an agreement made between two countries, the inviolability of which had

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1. O'Brien, Econ. Hist. of Irel. from the Union to the Famine, p. 200 seq.

been pledged by the British Parliament. To challenge this agreement, was to provide an excuse for the disaffected elements in Ireland to engage in renewed agitation. Finally, he looked back to his earlier days of opposition to the Union, in words which, for the first time, seem to imply disillusionment and even regret:

> We who opposed the measure at the time, objected to it because we saw it must increase the number of absentees. We saw that we should lose, by its being carried, the benefits arising from the residence of the principal proprietors of the soil - we saw there were other evils likely to flow from the measure; but we did not anticipate that we should lose our Board of Treasury, our Board of Customs and Excise, our Boards of Stamps, of Imprest Accounts, our Barrack Board, our Board of Inland Navigation, our Board of Works and almost all our public establishments; but least of all did we anticipate that we should lose ten of our Bishops. --- When Ireland entered into the compact, she was co-equal and co-ordinate with England; she possessed a Parliament as independent as that of England. Give her back that Parliament; but until that were done, their Lordships had not the power to alter a compact to which two countries had agreed.[1]

This was the only occasion when Parsons spoke with a large degree of passion in the imperial Parliament, and his speech recalled much of the spirit which had animated the earlier part of his career. Disappointed in hopes of office and emolument, he apparently felt himself free to engage in criticism of the government. His words make an interesting commentary on the motives which had guided his conduct since the Union. He had co-operated faithfully with the Union settlement, and had come to accept it as a safeguard against the dangers of popular unrest. Yet it is clear that he remained

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1. P.D., 3 Series, XIX. 1086.

firmly attached to Irish interests, and had withdrawn from none of the arguments which he had used during the Union controversy. Perhaps for the first time, he realised the extent to which many of these arguments had proved justified.

IV

The period which followed the Union was marked by a considerable extension of the Parsons influence in the Irish midlands. Since the early days of the eighteenth century no member of the family had been entrusted with a powerful position in local administration. Both Sir Laurence and his father, Sir William, had acted in opposition to the government, and this prevented them from receiving official appointments. During Sir William's lifetime, the office of Custos Rotulorum in the King's County had been given to the Duke of Devonshire who possessed a small property in the county, although he did not reside there.[1]

The Custos Rotulorum was the key figure in Irish local administration at this time. Nominated under the King's sign manual, he still performed the original duties of the office as the principal Justice of the Peace, and keeper of records in the county, but had come to be looked on as an official rather than a judge; as nominator of the Clerk of the Peace, an officer who performed important functions

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1. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 20 Mar. 1815 (B.M., Add. MS. 40244, f. 170).

during elections, he exercised considerable influence over political affairs in the County.[1]

Parsons was well aware of the potentialities of the office. When in 1815 Devonshire was laid low by what proved to be his last illness, he wrote to Peel requesting the next appointment as Custos Rotulorum for himself.[2] As Peel proved unsympathetic to this request, however, and appears to have shown a preference for the Earl of Charleville (the only other peer in the county) Parsons wrote to him again, to put forward his claims in greater detail. Lord Charleville he believed to be 'a very worthy and honourable man,' for whom he had much respect, but he considered him less fitted to serve the interests of the Crown than himself; Charleville possessed a smaller property in the county, had no connection with the local members of parliament, and had been defeated on the only two occasions when he presented himself as a parliamentary candidate.[3] Probably for these reasons, and because he still held an official appointment as Postmaster-General, Parsons was chosen to succeed Lord Devonshire when the latter died, later in the same year.[4]

The victory was a notable one, since Charleville was a rival of some consequence. He had played a prominent part in repressing the

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1. Encyclopaedia of the Laws of England, IV. 470.
2. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 4 Mar. 1815 (B.M., Add. MS. 40244, p. 27).
3. Same to same, 20 Mar. 1815 (B.M., Add MS. 40244, f. 170).
4. Gentleman's Magazine, 1841, pt. 1, p. 535.

1798 rebellion, and earned the goodwill of government for his services; he was one of the original Irish representative peers elected after the Union; he enjoyed a considerable reputation as a scholar and antiquarian, and shortly before this time had become President of the Royal Irish Academy; moreover, if his property in the King's County was a comparatively small one, he possessed estates in Limerick also.[1] From this time forward Parsons was able to exercise the chief influence in the affairs of the King's County, unchallenged.

He was also increasing his influence over the local representatives in Parliament. His marriage in 1797 to Alice Lloyd had won the alliance of one of the chief families in the South of the King's County. When he was raised to the peerage, in 1807, he was able to ensure the election of his brother-in-law, Colonel Lloyd, to succeed him as representative for the King's County, and Lloyd voted according to Parsons's directions in all parliamentary divisions. In 1827, when Lloyd retired from political life, he put forward his eldest son, William, Lord Oxmantown, as a candidate, but although William was elected and sat in parliament until 1835, he never displayed much interest in political affairs, and gave his chief attention to scientific studies at home. Thomas Bernard, the second member for

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1. Charles William Bury, had been created a baron in 1797, a Viscount three years later and Earl of Charleville in 1806. His seat was at Charleville Forest, near Tullamore.
   Complete Peerage, III. 141.

the county, appears to have also allied himself with Parsons, although outwardly preserving an appearance of independence. In the neighbouring county of Longford the influence of the first Earl of Rosse, and later that of his widow, the Dowager Countess, was sufficient to return Sir Thomas Fetherston, who had instructions to support Parsons in Parliament.[1]

During Parsons's last years, when growing ill-health forced him to spend most of his time in retirement at Brighton, the chief direction of family policy passed to his son, William. The latter already held appointments as Lord Lieutenant of the King's County and Colonel of the county regiment of militia during the lifetime of his father, and played a prominent part in preserving the peace when religious and agrarian disturbances broke out[2] in 1828. He never shared the political interests and aspirations of his father, but his work as a scientist earned him a prestige and influence never before attained by any member of his family.

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1. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 20 Mar. 1815 (B.M., Add. MS. 40235, f. 170).

2. Gentleman's Magazine, 1841, pt. 1, p. 535.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LANDLORD.

For a long time after he succeeded to the family property in 1794 Sir Laurence displayed little interest in the running of his estates. Political affairs in the capital continued to demand his undivided attention. He lived almost continuously at Number 1, Clare Street, on the corner of Merrion Square, leaving the administration of his property at Birr in the hands of an agent.[1]

Only once did he pay an extended visit to his estates. In the spring of 1794, after repeated defeats in Parliament, and having recently been removed from the command of the King's County militia, he retired to Birr Castle, there to console himself for political misfortune. Yet, even then, the life of a country landlord held little attraction for him, and he flung himself instead into a strenuous programme of intellectual toil. His indifference to the rural scene around him is expressed in the words of a poem, written during this time:

> The King of Storms hath the skies,
> And Spring on zephyr hither hies
> From his tepid southern cave,
> Across the steep Atlantic wave.
> Hence from the town, and let me hail,
> By Brosna's stream, or Woodville's dale,
> The grateful guest, or as I see
> The opening flower, the leafing tree,
> Holding sweet converse with the day;
> The schemes of states forget away.

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1. Statement of accounts by Abraham Creighton, February 1800 (Parsons MSS.).

No chosen legion I command.
The spear no longer fills my hand.
My brows then let the olive shade,
Nor Mars my peaceful door invade;
But thou, Philosophy, whose eye
Pierces all Nature's mystery,
Come pass with me the studious hours,
Tracing her hidden laws and powers.[1]

Sir Laurence was not, however, permitted for long to enjoy his intellectual pleasures undisturbed. A hostile body of opinion had been forming against him, amongst the other landowners of the King's County. To some extent this was an expression of resentment at his continued disinterest in local affairs; it was also due to suspicions of his recent conduct in Parliament, and a belief that he secretly sympathised with the revolt of the United Irishmen. This feeling was made more intense by his conduct immediately after returning to Birr; he used his influence to have the provisions of the Insurrection Act less stringently applied against the midland peasantry,[2] and succeeded in saving from transportation several persons sentenced by courts-martial, including two from the neighbourhood of Birr.[3]

A motion of censure against Sir Laurence was passed by the Grand Jury of the King's County, meeting at Birr. At about the same time the Protestant inhabitants of the town drew up a petition against him, and this was signed by a large number of people, including Peter Singen the public bellman, who was chaired through the streets as a

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1. Poem of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. Sir L. Parsons to Viscount Castlereagh, 30 July 1798 (P.R.O.I., 620/27/2).
3. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 95.

mark of derision to Sir Laurence. Singen's signature was affixed to the document as 'Lord Maxwell,' and this introduced an element of farce into the proceedings, which discredited the petition. Unfortunately, neither the Grand Jury resolution, nor the petition of the townsmen appear to have survived, and their contents must remain a mystery. The government took no action in the matter, apparently because Sir Laurence no longer presented any problems for them.[1]

Irritating as this situation must have been, particularly when he reflected that no such indignities had been inflicted on his ancestors, Sir Laurence also found himself confronted with dangers of a more direct nature. The local corps of yeomanry made no secret of their dislike for him, and on a number of occasions he narrowly escaped violence at their hands. On one of these, his coach was stopped at the Five Alley on the way to Dublin, and he was forced to undergo the humiliation of sending for a pass, before being allowed to proceed on his journey.[2]

Sir Laurence's long defence of the Irish Parliament, during the Union controversy, did much to diminish ill-feeling against him at home. He was chiefly responsible for organising resistance to the Union proposals amongst the gentlemen of the King's County, and he summoned the meeting in the session-house at Birr which was summarily dismissed by Major Rogers and his artillery. When Parsons rose to

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 96.
2. Ibid.

complain of the matter before the Irish Commons it was significant as being the first occasion on which he introduced local affairs to Parliament, and the first on which he spoke with the full force of public opinion in the King's County behind him.

II

As in his public life, the Union brought important changes in Parsons's life at Birr. From now on he spent most of his time at home, except when official duties called him away to Dublin or London. He re-organised his estates, transformed Birr Castle into a noble gothic residence, and surrounded it with parkland, laid out in a pleasing style. He re-planned the town of Birr, giving it a distinctive form and beauty which it still enjoys. Most important of all, he began to play a keen and decisive part in local affairs.

Many reasons may have contributed to Parsons's changed way of life. It is likely that with middle-age (he was now forty-two) had come a new sense of responsibility towards his dependants. This was probably developed by his marriage, two years earlier, to Alice Lloyd. Again, his defeat on the question of the Union and its accompanying disillusionment, dispelled for a time his interest in politics, and forced him to find an alternative outlet for his energies in affairs at home. Finally, the lessons of 1798 had almost certainly not been forgotten, and Sir Laurence was determined to restore something of the happy relations which had previously existed between his family and their neighbours at Birr.

The financial state of the Parsons property gave much cause for anxiety. A statement of accounts in Sir William Parsons's handwriting at Birr Castle tells us that the value of his rents for the half-year ending November 1798 was £1,192 odd, of which £999 had been paid. This certainly does not represent a state of any great affluence: nor do the annuities paid from these rents to Sir William's children - £250, to Laurence, and £75 to each of his two younger brothers.[1]

During the harvest of 1800 Parsons took measures to increase the value of his rents. He instructed his agent to see that all tenants in arrears, who possessed corn, should sell it and use the money to clear their debts. He pointed out that there was a tendency amongst the peasantry to speculate; they liked to hold back their corn until the last possible moment, in the hope of receiving a higher price; yet in this they were frequently disappointed, entailing a loss both to the landlord and themselves. Parsons did not contemplate any harsh measures against his tenants, however. In only one instance were the occupants of a farm to be evicted, and then for what appears to have been a very good reason: 'I believe them to be an ill-disposed set,—— they seem, hitherto, to have played upon my gentleness towards them, and either idled their time, or wasted their earnings without enriching themselves, or fulfilling their contracts with me.'[2]

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1. Statement of finances by Sir W. Parsons, November 1788 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Sir L. Parsons to T. Parsons, 8 Sept. 1800 (Parsons MSS.).

More than a decade after the Union we find that there had been a considerable increase in the income of the estate. In 1812, when making arrangements for his son's minority in the event of his own death, Parsons estimated the annual income from his rents at more than £10,000; after making allowances for various expenses and for allowances to other members of the family, he calculated there would remain a surplus of £3,513; there was, however, a debt (probable occasioned by his building operations and other improvements) which would require twelve annual instalments of £3,000, to discharge.[1] This remarkable increase in the value of the rents may partly have been due to more efficient administration by Sir Laurence; yet it must be largely explained by the fact that this was a period of unprecedented agricultural prosperity, due to the military requirements of the Napoleonic wars.

It is not possible to examine the operation of the estates in closer detail, since the earliest records in the Rosse Estate Office date from the time of Sir Laurence's son William, the third Earl, who engaged in a large-scale re-organisation during the years which followed the Great Famine. It is likely that Sir Laurence had little interest in the practice of agriculture, and that he left most of the routine administration in the hands of his agent. Moreover, he can hardly have carried out any experiments of a revolutionary nature, since Arthur Young, who visited the midlands at this time, described

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1. Statement of finances by Sir L. Parsons, undated (Parsons MSS.).

the tenants of the King's County as poor, inefficient and severely handicapped by lack of capital.[1]

First among many building works in which Sir Laurence engaged were the improvements which he made to Birr Castle. During the early part of his life the Castle still retained the form of a fortress, which had undergone a number of lengthy sieges during the wars of the seventeenth century. Sir William, his father, appears to have made some slight structural alterations, but the character of the building remained essentially unchanged. It faced southwestwards, towards the town, and was surrounded on either side by the houses of the main thoroughfare, portion of which still remains, and is called Castle Street.[2]

The first of Sir Laurence's tasks was to demolish the houses which adjoined the Castle. Then he completely re-planned the building, leaving a large portion of the original structure unchanged, but erecting a new, and far more graceful north-west front, which looks out unto a prospect of rolling parkland. The park was laid out in much of its modern form, and surrounded by a great battlemented wall, some fifteen feet high, with a gate-lodge flanked by a number of ornamental turrets.

There is excellent reason for believing that, in this work of re-construction, Sir Laurence acted largely as his own architect. In

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1. Young, Tour in Ireland, p. 170.

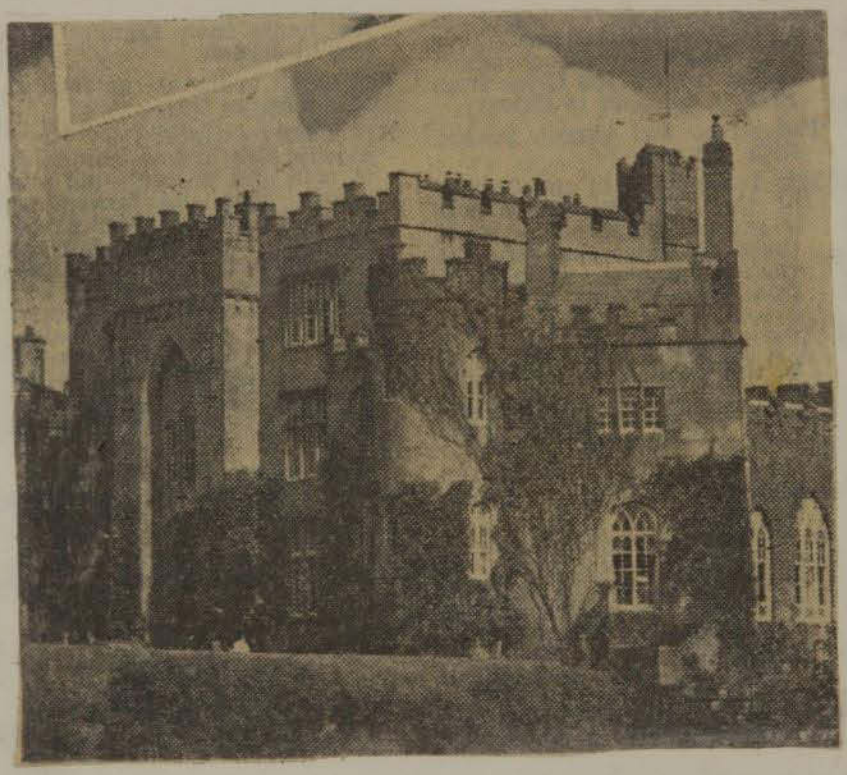
2. Wakefield, Account of Ireland, I. 45.

September 1800, shortly after the alterations to the Castle had been begun, he wrote to his brother Thomas, to answer certain criticisms which the latter had made concerning the plans; he defended the plans with considerable skill and display of architectural knowledge, and promised to seek the opinion of a professional architect during the following spring.[1] This would seem to make two points abundantly clear; that the re-building of the castle was begun before a professional architect was consulted, and that Sir Laurence himself possessed some architectural knowledge. Some time later, after operations on the Castle had been completed, a further clue is provided. Francis Johnston, a celebrated Irish architect, in the course of a letter to a client, gave a description of various buildings which he had planned and erected in the King's County; he denied having any part in the alterations to Birr Castle, which, he said, had been carried out by a certain John Johnston, who died[2] in 1816. There can be little doubt that he was referring to the John Johnston whom Laurence afterwards employed on the building of the new church at Birr, and who, in fact, died in 1812, not 1816. Thus it would appear that the services of a professional architect were called on at a later date and that his work was considered satisfactory.

Whatever the part played by Sir Laurence in its construction, the Castle presents an aspect of grace and dignity well in keeping with

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1. Sir L. Parsons to T. Parsons, 8 Sept. 1800 (Parsons MSS.).
2. F. Johnston to J. N. Brewly, 29 Feb. 1820 (Parsons MSS.).



BIRR CASTLE

The north-west front.

his character. The front gives an impression of a minutely balanced system of towers, flankers, battlements and embrasures. At the eastern extremity appear the outlines of the older section of the building. The centre of the new structure is formed by the shell of a great tower, added to the western end of the old castle by the first Sir Laurence Parsons. The main entrance to the old castle, through the base of this tower, has been blocked up, and on this level are now situated the kitchen apartments. The entire first floor of the tower is occupied by the hall, which is approached by a graceful flight of steps and a vaulted vestibule. To the right of the hall is a suite of four rooms, all magnificently-proportioned, and leading one to the other; the finest of these is the drawing-room, which overhangs the river Camcor; opening off the drawing-room is the salon, which is octagonal in shape. To the left of the hall is the great staircase, built of oak from the Parsons estate, which rises gently through a series of landings in a surprisingly narrow well. The upper floors of the residence are characterised by long, vaulted galleries, running end to end, from which the appartments open to front and rere.

A contemporary writer has given us an interesting description of Parsons's home after the alterations had been completed. Then, as now, the main doorway was decorated by the family coat-of-arms; on either side of the vestibule Sir Laurence was in the habit of massing geraniums and evergreens. The hall must have been considerably darker, for the great window at the far end was fitted with stained





BIRR CASTLE

The drawing-room (left) and the main gallery (right) showing bust of John Clere Parsons in the background.

glass, as was a smaller window over the door. The walls were already panelled with oak, and hung with a series of ponderous tapestries, which remain there to this day. The tapestries represent a number of incidents in the life of Quintus Sertorius, a Roman General during the civil wars under Sylla.[1]

In the salon Laurence had placed a bust of the Duke of Wellington, which has since been moved next-door to the drawing-room. Many of the present collection of family portraits were already hanging on the walls. In the dining-room, in the place of honour over the fire-place, was a portrait of Sir William Parsons, Lord Justice of Ireland in 1641, and brother of the first Sir Laurence of Birr. This was a gift to Laurence from a distant relative, Lord Neterville; it now hangs in another place, in the same room. Other portraits included one of Sir Arthur Savage, by Holbein, and one of Queen Anne Boleyn, who was connected with the family of Laurence's mother.[2]

In the vicinity of the Castle a wire suspension-bridge led across the river to the pleasure-grounds on the farther bank, at a place where a suspension bridge still stands. Lower down the river were a number of handsome wooden bridges, but there is no mention of two stone-arched bridges which are found there today. The park was already thickly planted with trees, and a part had been set aside for gardens,

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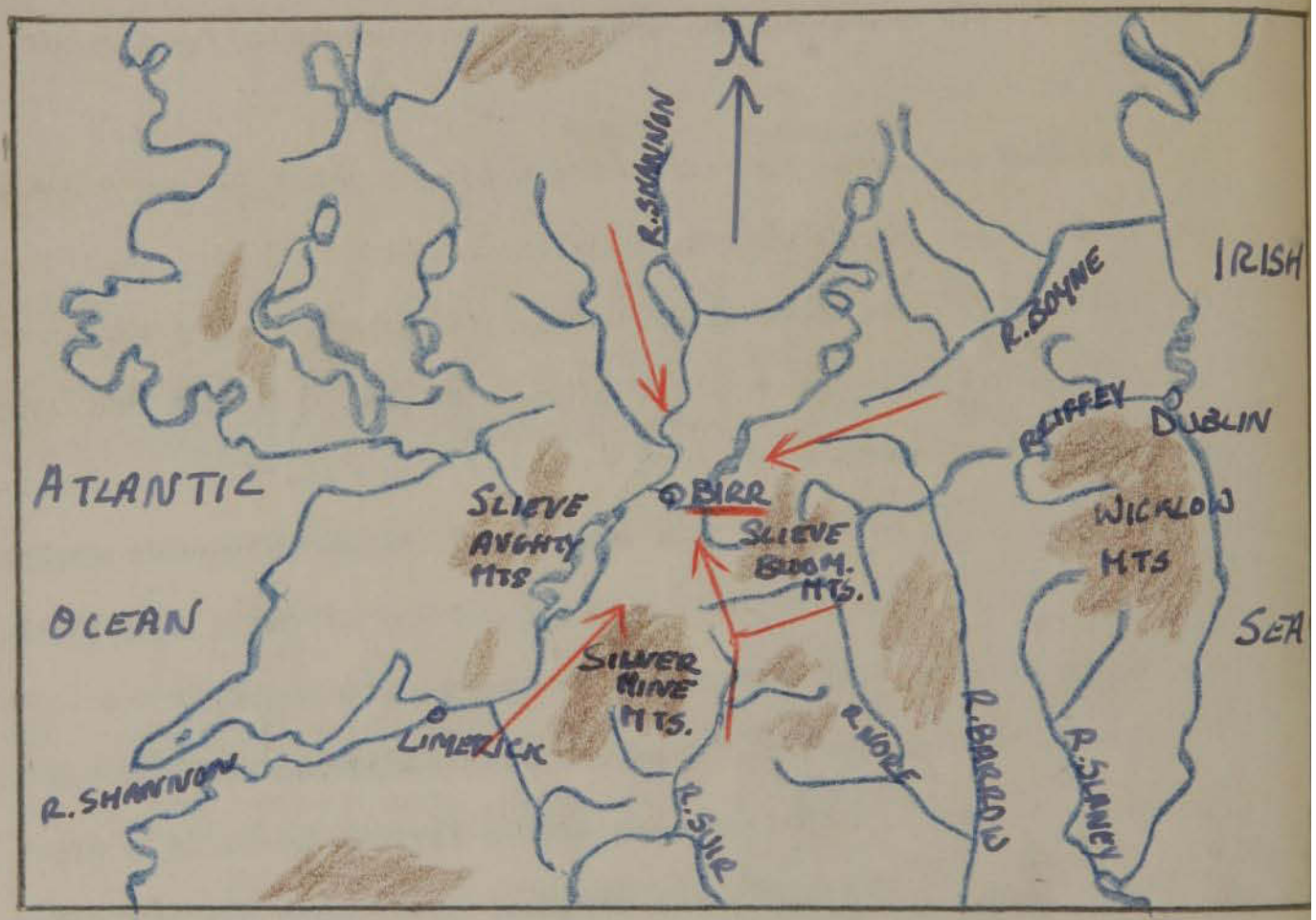
1. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 166.

2. Ibid., p. 168.

MAP SHOWING THE

MAIN ROUTES THROUGH

THE MIDLANDS of IRELAND



——→ — · ROUTES

SCALE; 1:2,000,000

CIRCA 1800

apparently in the place where the market-gardens are found now, as the writer speaks of an approach along a long avenue, lined with trees.[1] We possess no accurate description of the layout of the parkland, but it is almost certain that the Earl had given it much of its modern form; the earliest surviving map of the estate, drawn in 1853, shows that the essential features of the modern demesne had already been laid down.[2]

At the time when he was re-organising his own property Parsons was also engaged upon even more ambitious plans for the town of Birr. During the previous two centuries the fortunes of the townsmen had been singularly unhappy. They had unsuccessfully petitioned the Crown, in 1640, to have the seat of county administration transferred there from Tullamore.[3] During the wars of the seventeenth century the position of the town on the main routeways from north Munster into Leinster, at the point where they converge on the narrow gap between the Slieve Blooms and the Shannon, made it a place of considerable strategic value. In 1641 and 1689 the inhabitants found themselves attacked by hostile armies, and forced to leave their homes and occupations for a long period. After the conclusion of the Williamite

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1. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 170.

2. Maps of the estates of the third Earl of Rosse, 1853/6 (Rosse Estate MSS.).
The area of the demesne was computed to be 132 acres, and that of the entire estate 16,914 acres.

3. Petition of the freeholders of the King's County, 21 Jan. 1640 (Parsons MSS.).

wars they were required to support successive garrisons of troops, some of whom engaged in widespread pillage.[1] For these reasons the commercial life of the town had sharply declined. Two industries which had once been of considerable importance - a Huguenot glass factory which had supplied the whole of Ireland, and a woollen manufactory - had completely disappeared by the middle of the eighteenth century.[2] The external appearance of the town suffered also, and one perceptive visitor spoke contemptuously of 'the dirty town of Birr.'[3]

In making new arrangements for the town Parsons did not consider any measures for promoting industrial prosperity. Although in public life he showed himself chiefly interested in matters of a financial or economic nature, he did not render active assistance to even one industrial enterprise in his home neighbourhood.[4] The industrial life of the town showed no sign of recovery during his lifetime, and the only enterprises of any importance were a number of distilleries,[5] two of which still survived at the end of the century.

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1. Case of Sir L. Parsons, 1691 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Molyneux, View of Ireland, p. 15.
3. Lewis, Topographical Dictionary of Ireland, II.455.
4. The only occasion on which he appears to have associated himself with a local industry was when the Irish Linen Board made efforts to encourage linen manufacture in the town. Parsons became patron of a spinning-school, directed by an inspector of the Linen Board, but he showed little interest, and the industry soon disappeared. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 233.
5. Lewis, Topographical Dictionary of Ireland, II. 455.

Parsons was chiefly concerned with the external appearance of the town, which he wished to transform into a proud and graceful place of residence. In achieving this object he was helped by two very important advantages. In the first place, most of Birr and its neighbourhood still formed part of the Parsons estate; by a judicious grant of leases he was able to encourage others to engage in an ambitious programme of building. Again, the military movements of the seventeenth century had impressed the Irish government with the strategic importance of the territory of Ely O'Carroll; throughout the eighteenth century Birr remained a garrison town; in 1806 a new barracks was built nearby, at Crinkle, with capacity for about two battalions of infantry.[1] Thus, Parsons could count on the continued presence in Birr of a large number of military officers, most of whom would demand expensive houses and a high standard of living.

The modern town of Birr may be seen to fall into two parts, each with its own character and distinctive features. First, there is the old town, marked by narrow streets and the remains of Georgian houses. It centres on Castle Street, once the main thoroughfare, runs southwards over the old bridge, where houses stand in an unusual position above the water, and extends northwards as far as the Duke of Cumberland's monument, erected[2] in 1747. These limits roughly

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1. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 220.

2. Ibid., p. 243.



JOHN'S PLACE AND HALL, BIRR

BIRR

John's Hall and monument to William, third Earl of Rosse (above).

Oxmantown Bridge and Roman Catholic Church (below).



R. C. CHURCH, BIRR

determine the extent of the town which existed at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[1]

Extending northwards and eastwards from the Cumberland monument, however, is an area of open spaces, terraced Regency houses, and a number of fine public buildings. This part of the town is largely the creation of Sir Laurence Parsons. Its best features are found in Oxmantown Mall, named from the second title of his peerage, and John's Mall, named in memory of his favourite son, John. The former consists of a long terrace, faced by trees and an enclosed walk, and flanked at either end by Saint Brendan's Church and the gates of the castle demesne. The houses of John's Mall are divided by large ornamental plots; in a prominent position is John's Hall, now the headquarters of urban administration, and by far the most interesting memorial to the work of the second Earl. Laurence did not, however, confine his attention to personal example, and the erection of a number of buildings of considerable architectural merit; he showed himself ready with advice and loans of money to any others who were prepared to build.[2]

Work on John's Hall appears to have been begun in 1829, the year following the death of Parsons's son, and was finished about four years later. During this time the scope of the original plans was considerably extended. Parsons seems to have at first intended to

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1. A census taken in 1820, showed that there were 1,073 houses, with 5,427 inhabitants.
   Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 235.
2. J. Compton to Earl of Rosse, 30 Mar. 1821 (Parsons MSS.).

erect a building of stark simplicity; it was to have windows only on the east side, little interior decoration, and a utilitarian fireplace of the pattern then used in military barracks. The finished work, however, had several features which reflected both dignity and good taste; there was a portico with four ionic columns, tall, elegant windows, cut-stone facing, and a pleasing scheme of interior decoration. The total cost was just short of £1,100, a figure nearly double that of the original estimate.[1]

The new parish church of St. Brendan, which faces down Oxmantown Mall towards the gates of the Castle demesne, was erected in 1815. The old church, built by the first Sir Laurence Parsons in the early seventeenth century, had almost certainly become too small for the Anglican population of the town. Moreover, its simple, ungraceful lines must have seemed unworthy of the new town which Parsons was creating. In 1808 a resolution of the Vestry directed that arrangements be made either to enlarge the existing church or build a new one, but no decision was reached in the matter.[2] Two years later Parsons endeavoured to persuade them to decide in favour of a new building, and offered a site at the end of Oxmantown Mall.[3] His proposals were accepted, and in the following year the Vestry appointed the Earl and his younger brother Thomas to act as Treasurers, with chief responsi-

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1. Account of expenditure on School House at Parsonstown, 31 Jan. 1833 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Vestry minutes, 19 April 1809 (Birr Parish Church MSS.).
3. Ibid., 20 Aug. 1810 (Birr Parish Church MSS.).



BIRR

Parish Church of St. Brendan.

bility for supervising the work of the building.[1] During the years which followed Parsons displayed a keen interest in the project; he appointed John Johnston, who had advised on the re-building of Birr Castle, as architect, and when the latter died, in 1812, obtained leave from the Vestry to continue with his design;[2] he also expended large sums of money out of his own pocket, and in 1819 was still owed £486 by the Vestry.[3]

The cost of the church was originally estimated[4] at £5,000, but about £8,000 was, in fact expended. The main feature of the building is a tower, nearly 100 feet high, which stands at the western extremity, and, like the remainder of the building, is supported by a series of buttresses, each of which terminates in a pinnacle. In the intervals between the buttresses are placed pointed doors and windows; ornamental battlements run along the edge of the roof. The impression of the whole structure is dignified and pleasing; it presents nothing of the ostentation and over-accentuation so characteristic of gothic churches of this period. There is only one important defect; the vestry-room is ridiculously small for the business of a large and important parish; yet, provision for a larger chamber would undoubtedly have interfered with the harmony of the design.[5]

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1. Vestry minutes, 19 April 1811 (Birr Parish Church MSS.).
2. Ibid., 7 Oct. 1812 (Birr Parish Church MSS.).
3. Ibid., 12 April 1819 (Birr Parish Church MSS.).
4. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 172.
5. Ibid.

The interior of the church differed in a number of ways from that which it presents to-day. The entire western gallery was occupied by the Earl of Rosse's pew. This was hung with scarlet drapery, and on the ceiling was the Parsons coat of arms in relief. Behind the pew was an ante-chamber, now used as a vestry room, fitted with a fire-place and approached by a private staircase. Over the ante-room was an organ loft, which does not appear ever to have been occupied by an organ. During the life-time of the second Earl music was provided by an amateur orchestra. When, during the later years of the century, an organ was purchased, it was placed close to the position of the present organ, in the chancel. The huge east window was already there, although it had not yet been fitted with its magnificent set of glasses. The arched ceiling had not then been constructed, and much of the spacious effect of the interior must have been lost by the appearance of a simple, flat roof.[1] There was a wooden pulpit, covered by a canopy.[2]

Laurence did not, however, confine his interest to the provision of a place of worship for his fellow Anglicans. Probably the most significant and far-reaching part of his work at Birr was the assistance he gave to the Roman Catholic inhabitants in their efforts to build a church. When the subscription list was opened Parsons headed it with a gift of £100; he also gave the ground on which the church was

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1. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 172.
2. Vestry minutes, 27 Oct. 1818 (Birr Parish Church MSS.).

built, and arranged that the foundation stone should be laid by his son and heir, Lord Oxmantown, this being the first public act of the young man's life. At the same time he encouraged other Protestants to be equally generous, and many subscribed to the fund. This open-hearted conduct produced a powerful effect on the Roman Catholic townspeople, coming, as it did, at a time when religious ill-feeling in the country ran high. Their gratitude was expressed in the course of a remarkable address, presented by the clergy and people in 1817.

> We feel and acknowledge the value of your Lordship's residence amongst us, and we have great pleasure in observing the virtues of your Lordship descending to your children, and that, under your example and advice, that the first public act of Lord Oxmantown's life, was the laying of the foundation stone of our chapel.
>
> And we hope and trust that the tie and connexion, formed between your Lordship's family and this town and parish, will continue with reciprocal feelings of good will towards each other to the latest generation.[1]

The reply which Parsons made was equally remarkable for its well-expressed desire to maintain concord between the various religious communities at Birr:

> Your friendly Address has been particularly gratifying to me. It has always been my anxious wish to preserve harmony and goodwill amongst all the inhabitants of this town, and I am persuaded that the concord which has prevailed among them has much contributed much to its prosperity as well as to their individual happiness. Any little assistance which I have given towards the erection of your new Chapel, was but a deserved return for your uniform kindness to me and my family, and I trust with you that the same attachment and reciprocal good offices will long continue.[2]

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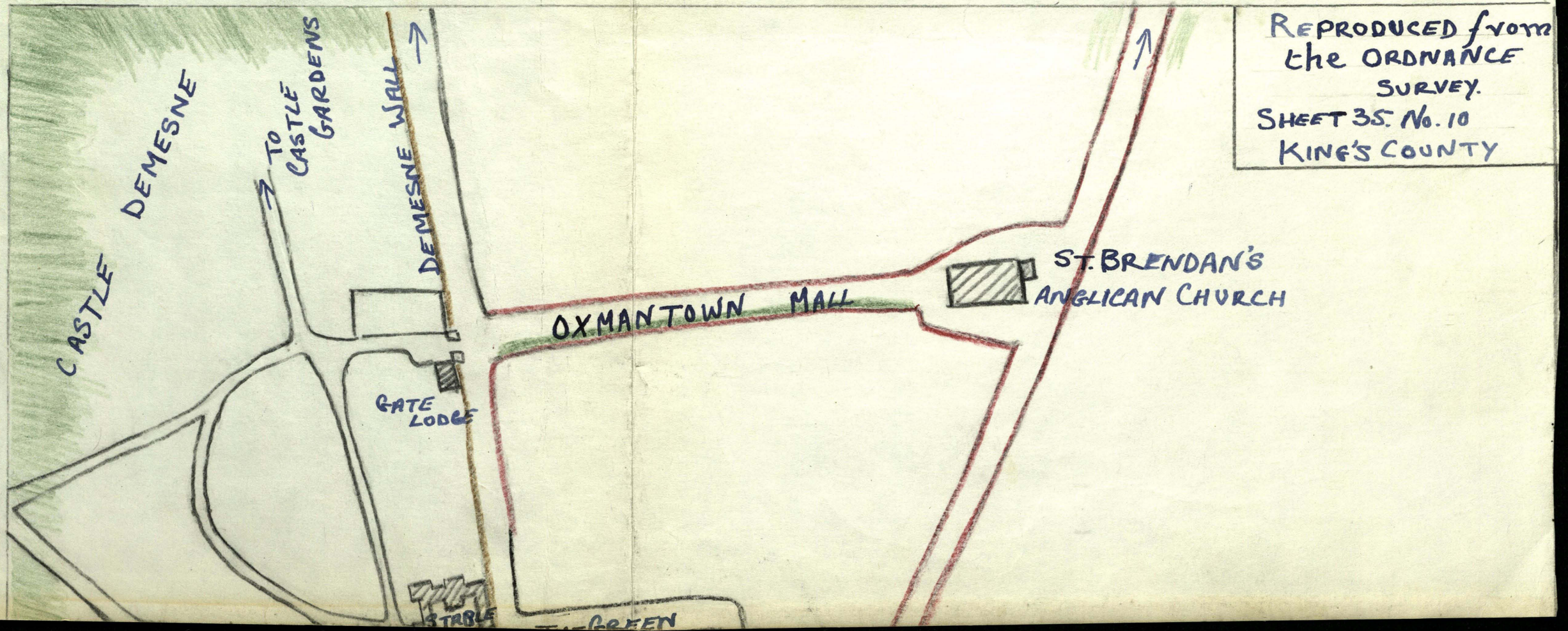
1. Address of the Roman Catholic clergy and Chapel committee, 1817 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 175.

The church, although erected by a committee whose decisions were probably not directly influenced by the Earl, was worthy of the town which was growing up around it. The foundation stone was laid on 1 August 1817, and the work was finished on 1 August 1824, exactly seven years later.[1] There is a spire, rising nearly 125 feet above the principal entrance, and below the spire is a series of gothic pinnacles, battlements and pointed windows. The shape is cruciform, and it was at first intended to place the high altar at the intersection of the transept and nave. The interior remained unfinished until the middle of the nineteenth century, and its appearance was for some time marred by the presence of cast-metal pillars supporting the roof. Unfortunately, a number of architectural blunders were committed; the building faces west, rather than east, as is customary, it has always been too small to seat its normal congregation, and the buttresses are not sufficiently deep to harmonise effectively with the remainder of the gothic structure.

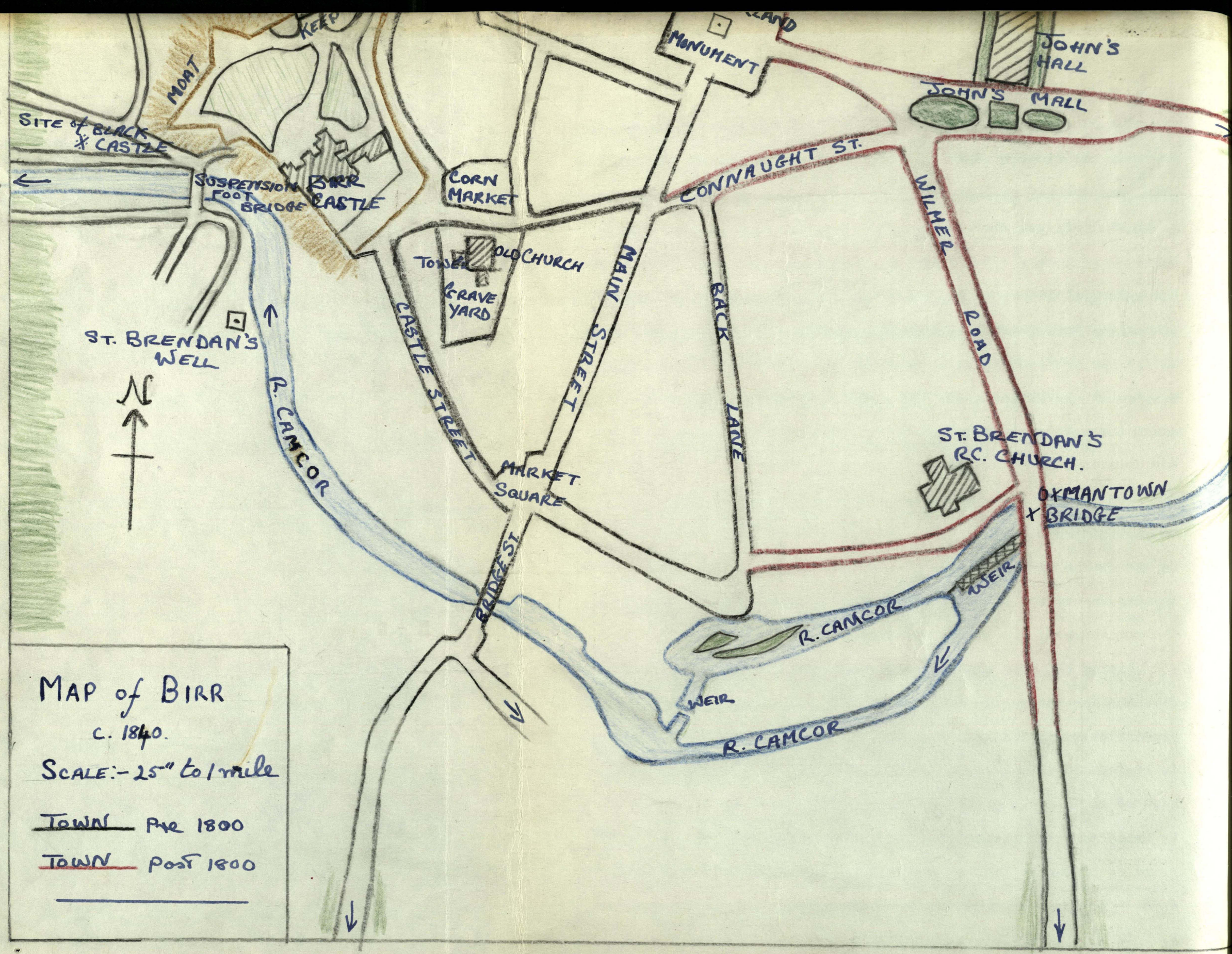
During the same year in which work began on the Roman Catholic church a new bridge was built across the river Camcor nearby. Parsons himself chose the design, copying that of a bridge across the Anio, in Italy, and it was named Oxmantown Bridge, in honour of his son. Much of this bridge still remains, although its arches were lowered, by grand jury presentment, in 1855. The bridge soon became a favourite place of promenade for the townspeople, and on Sunday evenings in the

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1. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 173.



REPRODUCED from the ORDNANCE SURVEY.
SHEET 35. No. 10
KING'S COUNTY



MAP of BIRR

c. 1840.

SCALE:- 25" to 1 mile

TOWN Pre 1800

TOWN Post 1800

summer the orchestra from the nearby church played there.[1] Other public works carried out in the town during this period included a new session-house, a Wesleyan chapel and a tree-lined walk along the banks of the Camcor near Oxmantown Bridge.

One result of the extension and re-planning of the town was the loss of much of its former patriarchal character. A large proportion of town property passed out of the hands of the Parsons estate. Many new residents arrived, most of whom were officers and government officials who lacked much of the traditional attachment to the local landlords. Nevertheless, close relations between the town and the estate continued. The terms of the patent to the first Sir Laurence, in 1621, still remained in force; the Earl appointed a seneschal for the manor of Parsonstown, and the seneschal's court was held every month in the session-house at Birr.[2]

III

The later years which Laurence spent at Birr were marked by growing popularity, and a close friendship with the inhabitants. Nevertheless, two incidents occurred which caused him a large measure of anxiety and unhappiness.

The first of these, generally known as 'The Siege of Birr,' or 'The Birr rebellion,' took place in 1820. Ill-feeling between the religious groups had for some time been growing throughout the

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 103.

2. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 220.
Although the seneschal's court still remained, the power of holding court leet and frankpledge, also granted by the patent of 1621, had fallen into disuse.

country, and a number of disturbances had taken place in the neighbourhood of Birr. Much alarmed, the Protestant inhabitants of the town decided to take measures do defend themselves. A public meeting was held, with Parsons in the chair, at which it was decided to set up an armed body, known as 'The Parsonstown Loyal Association.' Some days later they drew up a declaration, which promised aid to the authorities in time of emergency, and affirmed their willingness to give up their arms if called upon to do so.[1]

Meanwhile, the wife of a local printer, named Legge, determined to take advantage of the general excitement to improve her own circumstances. She was a woman of no little imagination and cunning, in addition to more than ordinary lack of scruples. Beginning in January 1820 she delivered to the Earl of Rosse, in the Castle, a series of documents purporting to be threatening letters, which, she declared, had been given to her husband by an acquaintance among the Catholic Ribbonmen. Amongst other details the letters spoke of the proposed murder of the Earl, and a number of principal inhabitants of the town. Then, on February 28, she brought a letter intended for Parsons himself, which read as follows:

> My Lord, as a sworn Ribbon Man I am bound to keep my oath, but conscience tells me as a Christian I ought to save the lives of my fellow brethern, as far as I can without breaking that oath, so I have taken the earliest opportunity of informing your Lordship of the dangerous state you and your Town's Men stand in; I am informed your castle and town will positively be attacked on Wednesday night towards day

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 108.

> if there be not something done to prevent it in time. Your life and Lord Oxmantown (sic) and the life of every man who has any power is particularly aimed at.[1]

On the next day Mrs. Legge returned again with a letter which contained even more ominous tidings. It suggested that there were traitors amongst Parsons's servants, and amongst the servants of other local gentlemen. Five hundred armed men had been assembled within one mile of the town during the previous night, and had only dispersed because of a false alarm, given by the writer of the letter. On all these visits to the Castle Mrs. Legge played her part with consummate skill. She insisted on keeping her face covered to avoid recognition by the servants, and even appeared to faint with fear whilst relating details of the impending massacre. The effect of her work on the Earl and his family was all that she could have desired; Parsons implicitly believed her reports, and took elaborate measures to defend himself; his wife, the Countess, was in a state of considerable suspense, expecting every moment to see her husband and children fall victims to the blows of an assassin.[2]

Birr Castle was no longer capable of withstanding a siege, due to Laurence's reconstruction. Hastily he ordered the huge windows to be blocked up with stone and mortar. The masons were selected with exptreme care, and he excluded any who were Roman Catholics, since they might be in sympathy with the Ribbonmen. The armed body of local inhabitants was kept in a constant state of preparedness, and two

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 110.
2. Ibid., p. 112.

pieces of cannon, which had remained at the Castle since the days of the Volunteers, were brought out and manned. An urgent request for assistance was sent to the government by the Earl and local magistrates, and in response to their appeal a battalion of infantry was rushed to Birr from the barracks at Templemore, some nineteen miles away. One of the officers of this battalion has given us a graphic picture of the tension which prevailed;

> When arrived in Roscrea, we expected to get some rest and refreshment, but to our great disappointment, we were ordered to proceed with unabated rapidity to Birr, which we reached in about four hours, after a march of nineteen miles. We there saw consternation depicted on every face. Most of the people had some kind of arms or other, and in the square were two pieces of artillery ready primed, and with lighted matches.[1]

At length, however, Mrs. Legge overreached herself. When pressed to disclose the name of her informant amongst the Ribbonmen, she made the mistake of naming one whose character was known to be above reproach. Suspicions were aroused, and she made matters worse by producing further letters in an altered, angry tone, which denounced all who might take part in an investigation. Finally, a number of account-books were found, which bore the same handwriting as the letters, and a committee of enquiry, composed mainly of local magistrates, was set up to investigate the matter.[2]

The meetings of this committee were held in the bed-chamber of a local lawyer, who was recovering from the effects of an accident, and to him we are indebted for a full account of the affair. After

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 111.
2. Ibid., p. 112.

depositions had been made on oath by the Earl of Rosse and several prominent inhabitants, the details of the hoax were laid bare. No prosecution was, however, brought against Mrs. Legge. It would appear that Parsons was anxious to take proceedings against her, but Sir Jonas Green, the celebrated Irish lawyer, and afterwards Recorder of Dublin, who was consulted, gave it as his opinion that a prosecution would not be successful; some unusual point of law influenced his decision, but we do not know what this was. It was fortunate that the affair did not have more serious consequences, but its immediate effect was to destroy much of the harmony and understanding which Parsons had striven so hard to promote between the two religious communities in Birr.[1]

The second incident took place a few years later, in 1828. O'Connell's campaign to win Catholic emancipation was at its height, and one of the most impressive tactics which he employed was the gathering of huge concourses of his supporters, to hold meetings and march in military order through the countryside. A number of these marches had already been held in parts of Tipperary, not far removed from Birr, and a large contingent from the King's County took part in a demonstration held at Roscrea in September 1828. The O'Connellites now decided to embark on a much more provocative course of action; they proposed to carry out a march through Shinrone, a small town lying six miles south of Birr, and famous for its uncompromisingly Orange

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 113.

and anti-Catholic feelings.[1]

Shinrone lay in the centre of a pocket of Protestant influence laid down by extensive settlements during the Jacobite and Cromwellian plantations. The town already possessed a number of Orange Lodges and a yeomanry arsenal, and was accustomed to fly the Orange flag on appropriate anniversaries from the ruined castle of Cloughmoyle, at the southern end of the main street. The march of a large number of Catholics through the streets could only be received by the inhabitants as a dire disgrace, and when the news of the proposed demonstration reached them they immediately prepared for battle. Doors and lower windows were barricaded, sashes were removed from the upper windows to make embrasures for musketry, and a huge store of arms was collected at Cloughmoyle.[2]

In these circumstances, the Irish government took immediate measures to preserve the peace. On September 27 a despatch reached Birr Castle from the Viceroy, the Marquis of Anglesea, ordering Lord Oxmantown, as commanding officer of the King's County militia, to proceed to Shinrone with a competent body of soldiers and police, and to resist the march of the O'Connellites by force, without parley.[3]

Had this order been carried into effect the result must have been a large-scale massacre, which would have left a long legacy of religious bitterness throughout the Irish midlands. The plans of the O'Connellites had been carefully made, they were already on the march and their

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 192.
2. Ibid, p. 193.
3. Ibid.

spirits were high. The peasantry from the King's County were to march through Birr, where they were to be joined by the people of the town and surrounding parishes, who stood ready with banners and a band of musicians mounted on the undercarriage of a post-chaise. The Galway O'Connellites were to march through Portumna, and to unite with those from North Tipperary at Borrisokane. The people of Kilkenny, the Queen's County and north-eastern Tipperary, were to advance through Roscrea, while those from south Tipperary would descend from the mountains at Cloughjordan. All were wearing green sashes, hat-bands and other emblems, and were determined to inflict on their enemies at Shinrone a lesson which would not easily be forgotten.[1]

A fortunate chance at length averted the catastrophe. One of O'Connell's supporters in Dublin, whose identity we cannot discover, learned of the government's intentions, and the same post which carried the orders to Lord Oxmantown also brought a letter from him to the Catholics of Birr, warning them of their peril. The Bishop of Killaloe, Dr. Kennedy, who was at this time resident in the town, determined to take all possible measures to save his people. He summoned a meeting of the parishioners of Birr at their new church, and persuaded them to take no further part in the demonstration.[2]

Thousands of O'Connellites from the surrounding counties were, however, already descending on Shinrone, and it seemed a task of no little difficulty to stop them. Dr. Kennedy decided to try. Taking

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 194.
2. Ibid., p. 198.

with him Thomas Cooke, to whom we are once again indebted for an account of the affair, he departed in a post-chaise for Roscrea, where a meeting was hurriedly summoned at the church; the parishioners of Roscrea showed themselves less willing to abandon the demonstration than those at Birr, but they eventually yielded to the Bishop's remonstrations. After a brief rest at Roscrea Kennedy and Cooke set out in the early hours of the following morning to turn back the other bodies of marchers. Their efforts were completely successful, although one band of drunken and unruly peasantry actually penetrated to within one quarter mile of Shinrone, and only dispersed when the Bishop turned his post-chaise across the road and reasoned with them.[1]

Inestimable as the results of Dr. Kennedy's mission undoubtedly were in maintaining the peace and harmony of the Irish midlands, there is reason to believe that the affair had even more far-reaching consequences. Cooke himself tells us that the Earl of Rosse afterwards declared, on a number of occasions, that the Duke of Wellington had informed him of his appreciation of the conduct of the Bishop in averting bloodshed, and that this played an important part in his decision to grant Catholic emancipation, later in the same year.[2]

The part taken by the Earl and other members of his family was in keeping with the tradition of religious harmony which he had long striven to maintain at Birr. Lord Oxmantown carried out the orders

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 206.

2. Ibid., p. 207.

he had received by marching to Shinrone with two line regiments of infantry and a large force of police, and was no doubt prepared to open fire on the marchers if they resisted him. Nevertheless, it is significant that he ordered an Orange flag, which the inhabitants of Shinrone had hoisted over the town, to be removed, as an unnecessary provocation, and even threatened to withdraw his troops if the Orangemen did not behave themselves. His uncle, Colonel Lloyd, the Earl's brother-in-law, whose home at Gloster was nearby, had already used his influence to restrain their excesses.[1]

Parsons's death in 1841 came at the end of a long period of happy relations with the people of Birr. There is no evidence to suggest that he committed even one act of injustice or oppression. Although his career as a landlord began amid unpopularity never known by his ancestors, it ended with his family established in a position of great popular esteem which his descendants have retained to this day. To them he left an Irish country town distinguished by unusual grace and beauty, and a spirit of harmony and good-fellowship amongst the inhabitants, rare in smaller communities of nineteenth-century Ireland.

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 204.

CHAPTER NINE

FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

Remembering the indifference to affairs at home which Laurence showed during the early part of his career, it is surprising to find that his wife was a member of one of the neighbouring families of the King's County. On 1 May 1797 he married Alice, daughter of John Lloyd of Gloster, and sister of a companion of his college days. This was the first and only occasion when the head of the Parsons family has chosen his bride from his own county.

The Lloyds had lived at Gloster since the middle of the seventeenth century. Captain Trevor Lloyd, an officer of the Crown forces in Ireland, married in 1639 Rose, only daughter and heiress of Edmund Medhop, Clerk to the Irish House of Commons, and owner of large estates at Toma, in the King's County. By this marriage Trevor had a son, Medhop, who later succeeded to his grandfather's property at Toma, and also received a grant of lands at Glasderrymore (now Gloster). Medhop built a residence at Gloster where his descendants still lived at the end of the eighteenth century.[1]

Although the Lloyds were amongst the more recent additions to the landowners of the King's County, they were probably closer to the Parsons, in terms of social prestige, than any other neighbouring

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1. Pedigree of the Lloyd Family of Gloster (Lloyd MSS.).



ALICE, WIFE OF SIR LAURENCE PARSONS, SECOND EARL OF ROSSE, WI
HER DAUGHTERS, JANE AND ALICIA.
Reproduced from a portrait at Birr Castle, by kind permissi
Of the Earl and Countess of Rosse.

family. Unlike most planter families of the seventeenth century they had a long and honourable pedigree, being descended from Cunedda, king of Gwynedd, in North Wales. Captain Trevor Lloyd was the younger son of Evan, whose achievements as a Welsh local administrator and captain-general of the Crown forces in Ireland, are still commemorated by an inscription in the parish church at Llanarmon, in Carnarvon. Their house at Gloster, now one of the finest remaining examples of a seventeenth century Irish manor-house, must have been the best residence in the neighbourhood until Sir Laurence Parsons re-built Birr Castle.[1] Thus Sir Laurence's marriage offered him an excellent opportunity to increase the influence of his family in the King's County, and the point was not lost on his future father-in-law who wrote to congratulate him in the following words:

> The occasion from whence I derive this mark of your regard is a domestic event that has warmed my heart and I trust it will be considered by every branch of our family as the most auspicious that could have happened. It is likewise particularly encouraging to think that a measure so highly acceptable to many should at the same time have improved the private comfort of he from whence it springs.[2]

Alice seems to have been a worthy object of his affections. A portrait at Birr Castle, painted about a decade later, shows her with her two daughters. Her face is pleasing, though not beautiful; her features are soft and rounded, her eyes gentle and intelligent, her figure slightly above average height; there is no appearance of fragility

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1. Pedigree of the Lloyd family of Gloster (Lloyd MSS.).
2. John Lloyd to Sir L. Parsons, 15 August 1797 (Parsons MSS.).

nor of the ill-health which accompanied most of her married life; there is, however, a remarkable impression of intellectual power, which may give some support to the Parsons tradition that it was from the Lloyds that the scientific ability shown by later members of the family was derived.

Five children were born to Laurence and Alice. William, the eldest, was born on 17 June 1800; John Clere followed on 17 August 1802, and Laurence on 2 November 1803; there were also two daughters, Jane and Alicia.[1]

The early years of Laurence's married life coincided with an eventful time in his political career, and he lived almost continuously in Dublin, at Number 1 Clare Street, on the corner of Merrion Square. After the Union he spent most of his time at Birr Castle, although it appears that he made at least occasional visits to England, since William, his eldest son, was born at York.[2] During the year 1805 Lady Parsons contracted a serious illness, and Laurence took her to London to be examined by doctors there.[3] The doctors prescribed sea-bathing, and the family accordingly spent the summer of 1806 at Clontarf, where Sir Laurence was able to perform his duties at the Irish Treasury, while his wife was taking the waters.[4] Unhappily

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1. Burke, Peerage, p. 1939.
2. Alumni Oxonienses, III. 1076.
3. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 29 May 1806 (Parsons MSS.).
4. Blackrock was at this time a more fashionable resort than Clontarf, but Sir Laurence avoided it because of the presence of large numbers of people.
   Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 29 May 1806 (Parsons MSS.).

bathing did not effect a cure, and Lady Parsons remained an invalid for the rest of her life. For this reason the family now remained almost continuously at Birr, with the exception of a period of several months in 1812 when official business brought Sir Laurence to London, where they rented a house in Kensington Gore, looking towards Hyde Park.[1] From time to time Sir Laurence was forced to leave home to attend to official duties in Dublin or London, and he appears to have regretted these interruptions to family life very deeply. On one occasion, as he sailed homewards on the mail packet from Holyhead to Dublin, he wrote some verses which express a deep tenderness for his wife and children:

Let the rude West upheave the waves
Until old Ocean foams and raves,
And tosses high, and dashes low,
With headlong dip, the struggling prow;
Nor Tempest I, nor Ocean heed
While to my heart lov'd home I speed.
For one fond roof there shelters all
I value most on Earth's wide ball.

Let me again my fire-side see,
And happy, smiling family,
Alicia there just budding glows,
With beauties of the youthful rose.
Jane ever witty, ever gay,
Charms the joyous hours away.
Laurence, obliging, courteous, mild
In mind's a man, in years a child.

With taste, and sense, and thirst for fame,
John promises an honor'd name;
While all who are old, and all who are young,
Instruction quaff from William's tongue.
The mother views, well-pleased, the while
Their happy faces, round her smile.
There centre all her cares and joys,
Aloof from fashion's glittering toys.
These are the gems in which she shines,
Brighter than Golconda's mines.[2]

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1. Sir L.Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons, 1828 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Poem of Sir L. Parsons, December 1819 (Parsons MSS.).

It is certain that the family circle at Birr Castle was an extremely happy one. As Sir Laurence's sons became older he took a close interest in their education. He did not, like many members of the Irish aristocracy during the period which followed the Union, send his sons to one of the great public schools of England, but decided that their education should be conducted at home, and largely under his own supervision.[1]

For this purpose he appointed a succession of tutors, all of whom were young graduates of Trinity College. He also obtained the services of an unknown Frenchman, who had previously acted as tutor in the household of a German nobleman, and whose lively disposition made him very popular with the Parsons boys.[2] On one occasion, when no tutor was available, the Earl took charge of their lessons himself, with much success as we may see from his own description:

> It was Homer. With what delight I used at that time to enjoy this exercise. I most carefully read over every morning the part which they were to say, and examined every peculiar expression carefully, with the assistance of ———— lexicon. I was particular in making them acquainted with all the niceties of the language and in grounding them accurately in the grammar. And they received my instruction with such pleasure that a looker-on would have thought that we were engaged in the most agreeable pastime.[3]

The only criticism which may be brought against life in the Parsons household is that it was very restricted, and the children had little contact with the outside world. The Earl does not appear

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1. Sir L. Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

to have engaged in lavish hospitality, and probably the only important visitor to stay at Birr Castle during this period was Sir Robert Peel, who was invited there in 1817, while Chief Secretary of Ireland, in the hope that he would help to obtain situations for Parsons's two younger brothers. Thus, the children had to rely mainly on the companionship of their parents; all the family met for breakfast and, a most unusual feature, spent the evening together.[1]

In these circumstances it is not surprising to find that the intellectual development of the Parsons boys was extremely rapid. While the family was living in London in 1812 the Earl sent them to St. Thomas's School in Kensington, where their work was very satisfactory. In 1815 he considered entering them at Harrow as day scholars, and even made enquiries about renting a house there,[2] but the project was never carried into effect. When the two elder boys entered Trinity College during Hilary term 1819, the system of private tutors was continued; the boys came up to Dublin to take their examinations and then returned home to study.[3] Their examination results were highly creditable, and a relative, the Dowager Countess of Rosse, wrote to congratulate their father in these terms:

'It must be a double satisfaction to you, who have paid such uncommon attention to their education under your own inspection, which no doubt prompted them to double diligence,and now to see it so well rewarded.'[4]

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1. Sir L. Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. Headmaster of Harrow School to D.Kelly, 22 Feb.1815 (Parsons MSS.).
3. Sir L. Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
4. Dowager Lady Rosse to Earl of Rosse, 13 July 1819 (Parsons MSS.).

The success of his sons produced a new problem for Parsons. Was he justified in keeping them at home any longer, at the risk of denying them better teachers and facilities elsewhere? Wisely, he decided early in 1821 to transfer them to Magdalene College, Oxford, where they graduated with distinguished records two years later.[1]

Of the three boys, John was pre-eminent both in character and ability. His health was poor from childhood, yet he took part in boyish games with considerable courage and vigour.[2] He was able to keep pace with the academic progress of his brother William who was two years his senior, and the Earl sent both of them up to the university at the same time. After going down from Oxford John studied law for a year at the Inns of Court, in London,[3] and his father apparently hoped that he would be able to take up a career at the Bar. Unfortunately, increasing ill-health prevented these hopes from being realised, and he died in 1828, aged twenty-six.[4] During his last years John made several visits to London to study parliamentary affairs at close hand. On the last of these visits, in the early summer of 1827, he wrote an exhaustive treatise on the corn laws which was never published.[5]

William, Lord Oxmantown, the eldest son and heir, appears to have been overshadowed during his early years by his more outstanding brother. His first intervention in public affairs came during the

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1. Alumni Oxonienses, III. 1076.
2. Sir L. Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
3. Alumni Oxonienses, III. 1076.
4. Sir L. Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
5. J.C.Parsons to Earl of Rosse, 16 April 1827 (Parsons MSS.).

summer of 1822, shortly before he left Oxford, when he addressed a memorandum to a parliamentary commission then engaged in an investigation of various aspects of the public revenue.[1] This work may well have been undertaken on the advice of his father, who no doubt wished to interest William in economic matters, since they had been the foundation of his own political career. A flattering reply from the commissioners was, however, the only result which the memorandum achieved, and although William was elected a Member of Parliament for the King's County during the following year, he never interested himself seriously in political life and withdrew from it altogether[2] in 1834. Instead, he turned his attention to experimental science, a field in which he was soon to attain eminence. In 1827, while John was visiting London, William wrote to ask him to bring back scientific journals and materials, and declared himself to be busy with experiments, of which the most successful had been the construction of a steam-engine of his own design.[3]

Laurence, the youngest son, seems to have possessed less ability than either of his brothers. He was sent up to Trinity College two years later than William and John and remained to take his degree there, since the Earl did not consider it worthwhile to transfer him to Oxford.[4]

II

The death of his son John, in August 1828, was the greatest

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1. Lord Oxmantown, Memorandum to the Parliamentary Commissioners of the Revenue enquiry, August 1822 (Parsons MSS.).
2. D.N.B., William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse.
3. Lord Oxmantown to J.C. Parsons, 15 July 1827 (Parsons MSS.).
4. Alumni Dublinenses, p. 655.

sorrow of Parsons's life. John had never enjoyed good health. As a boy of five, he had suffered a severe pulmonary infection, after being exposed to a rainstorm while walking in the grounds of Birr Castle. This illness left a weakness in his digestive organs, and eventually produced an attack of rheumatic fever from which he died.[1] Much distracted by his loss Parsons continued for some time to torture himself with mental pictures of his son's high qualities:

> A better son a father never had. His anxious wish at all times was to say and to do whatever he thought would be most agreeable to me. Yet, with his great mildness of manner he had ever an ardent ambition to distinguish himself in everything that was laudible and lofty, as well as in the lesser manners and acquisitions which adorn a gentleman, and render him acceptable to friends and strangers.[2]

The neighbouring families of the King's County rallied round with their sympathy. Lady Charleville, somewhat concerned lest Parsons should impair his own health through grief, wrote to implore him to turn his mind to other matters:- 'The present state of the country affords such a source of serious reflections that it cannot be an idle speculation for such a mind as yours, to consider and advise in.'[3] Crofton, chaplain to the Dowager Countess of Rosse, commended to him 'The most powerful of all Earthly consolations, when you reflect that he possessed those qualities which constitute the Christian character.'[4] Yet by far the most moving expression of sympathy came from Maria

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1. Sir L. Parsons, History of John Clere Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. Ibid.
3. Countess of Charleville to Earl of Rosse, 16 Nov. 1828 (Parsons MSS.).
4. Rev. M. Crofton to Earl of Rosse, 28 Aug. 1828 (Parsons MSS.).

Edgeworth, to whom he had communicated his feelings at some length:

> I feel it as one of the strongest and most touching proofs of regard that you could give me, that you thus opened your heart to me. And I am sure, painful as it was, there was yet a pleasure in dwelling upon the subject in recalling all his merits and talents, and amiable and attaching manners - all the hopes and just expectations you had fondly formed of such a son. We in this family, at least, understand what family affection is, quite enough to feel for you, and full well I know how certainly, how necessarily, it always happens to the survivors to blame themselves for some circumstance or other relative to the last illness, or to some preventive measure, which might have been taken. My dear lord, this is the constant course of affection, and really the proof of its tenderness lies in this sort of reproach. As your mind heals, you will perceive this to be as I tell you.
>
> It was the will of God. This sense of submission must be the same to high and low, simple and learned. Then do not my dear lord, add unjust self-reproach to the anguish you feel, for the loss of your beloved son. Simply say to yourself, it was the will of God. It is all that in such afflictions the strongest Reason and Nature can say to human feeling.
>
> How happy it is for you to have left such a son as Lord Oxmantown. Consider this, consider how few parents, how few of the rich and the noble, have such obliging an eldest son, distinguished among men of literature and science, instead of among boxers, gamblers etc.
>
> I hope I have not passed the bounds to which your gratifying confidence invited me.[1]

For several months Parsons spent his time writing an account of the life of his deceased son. Then, apparently convinced by his friends of the futility of such a task, he turned his attention to the creation of more lasting memorials. One of these was his work

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1. Maria Edgeworth to Earl of Rosse, 3 Sept. 1828 (Parsons MSS.).

on the Christian Revelation, which led him to engage in careful study for five years, and eventually took the form of a major theological discourse. Another was the new school-house which he erected for the town of Birr, calling it 'John's Hall.'

Other affairs, close to the family circle, had already caused Parsons much unhappiness. Of his three younger brothers two had continued to reside in the neighbourhood of Birr. William had taken Holy Orders in the Church of Ireland, and Parsons made determined efforts to procure a suitable benefice for him. In June 1804 he wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Hardwicke, asking for the Deanery of Clogher;[1] a year later he requested the Deanery of Dromore;[2] a series of appeals to various members of the government followed, all to no avail. William was never appointed to any office in the Church of Ireland, and he spent the remainder of his life on a small property attached to the Parsons estate at Tullynisk or Woodville, about one mile from Birr. Here he built a fine residence which still survives, the original house on the property having been destroyed during the insurrection[3] of 1641.

John, the next brother, had qualified in law at Lincoln's Inn after graduating from Trinity College,[4] and in 1803 was appointed

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1. Sir L. Parsons to Earl of Hardwicke, 4 June 1804 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Earl of Rosse to Earl of Liverpool, 2 Aug. 1812 (B.M., Add. MS. 38,249, f.9).
3. Cooke, Picture of Parsonstown, p. 249.
4. Alumni Dublinenses, p. 655.

Assistant Barrister of the King's County, which office he held until his death[1] in 1825. The Earl made many requests to have him promoted to a higher situation, but with no greater success than in the case of William. In 1815 he asked for a Judgeship on the Bench of Appeals,[2] two years later a Serjeantship,[3] and in 1818 the position of Counsel to the Commissioners of Revenue.[4] On the last of these occasions Peel, the Home Secretary, revealed some of the reasons for the repeated rejection of Parsons's requests, when he wrote in the margin of the Earl's letter a cutting observation on his failure to attend Parliament and the Vice-regal court.[5]

Despite these misfortunes John enjoyed a highly successful, although somewhat turbulent, career as Assistant Barrister of the King's County. The most important part of his duties consisted in presiding over the Court of Quarter Sessions, and this involved him in a series of painful incidents. During the summer of 1822 a man named

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 101.
   The functions of the Assistant Barrister, later known as the County Court Judge, as defined by 32 Geo. III, c. 25, were chiefly concerned with Civil Bills. Further acts during the early and middle nineteenth century invested him with a wide measure of jurisdiction in contract and tort, ejectment, probate and lunacy. Encyclopaedia of the Laws of England, VII.445.
2. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 4 Dec. 1815 (B.M., Add. MS. 40,250, f. 19).
3. Same to Same, 2 Sept. 1817 (B.M., Add MS. 40,250, f. 21).
4. Same to Same, 4 Mar. 1818 (B.M., Add. MS. 40,274, f. 249).
5. Sir R. Peel to Earl of Rosse, 6 April 1818 (B.M., Add. MS. 40, 274, f. 298).

Menton lodged a complaint against a widow named Kirley, for wages which he claimed were due to him. The case was heard at Petty Sessions, and the magistrate ordered the widow's only cow to be seized under warrant. She immediately appealed to the next Court of Quarter Sessions.[1]

When the appeal was heard at Quarter Sessions it was discovered that the order of the convicting magistrate had not yet been returned, and the case was therefore adjourned until the next meeting of the court, three months later. Upon this adjournment eight members of the Bench retired to the magistrate's room, where they passed a resolution that no appeal should have been heard before the order from the convicting justice had been received. Parsons, who wished to give a hearing to the widow's claims, was left sitting on the Bench with one other magistrate who supported him. When he refused to join his colleagues they passed a further resolution summoning a meeting of all the magistrates of the county, to elect a new chairman to replace him.[2]

There can be little doubt that underneath these proceedings lay an attempt on the part of the other magistrates of the King's County to remove Parsons from his position as Assistant Barrister, and replace him by one of themselves. A long and bitter controversy ensued, during the course of which Thomas published an able reply to his critics. When the next meeting of the Quarter Sessions began on October 10

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 114.

2. Ibid., p. 115.

both sides were prepared for a struggle. However, it transpired that the two litigants had settled their differences, and the ostensible cause of contention was thus removed. A prefunctory attempt was made to weaken Thomas's authority by voting the Earl of Rosse into the chair in his place, but most of the magistrates were now anxious to avoid controversy, and he was eventually allowed to retain his position.[1]

Despite these events Thomas's death, three years later, was received with considerable regret and arrangements were made to erect an elaborate memorial. The subscription-list was opened at a public meeting held in Birr, and in a short time more than £200 had been collected. Subscriptions were received not only from inhabitants of the King's County, but from many who lived far away, including Daniel O'Connell. It was decided that the memorial would take the form of a stone obelisk to be constructed according to a design by Bernard Mullins; it was to resemble the Wellington Testimonial in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, although smaller and more beautiful, and to be erected on rising ground southwards of the town, at Scurragh.[2]

The ceremony of laying the foundation-stone was performed on 3 May 1827. A procession of more than seven thousand people made its way pompously through the streets of the town. Among the chief participants were the high-sheriff of the King's County, members of parliament, the entire grand jury, and the secretary of the memorial

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 116.

2. Ibid., p. 120.



STRETTON HALL, CHESTER

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committee, Thomas Cooke, to whom we are indebted for his account of the affair. At Scurragh the foundation-stone was laid by the high sheriff, using a silver trowel. Yet despite such lavish preparations work on the memorial proceeded slowly. The contractor made long delays, and funds were exhausted before the obelisk was complete. It remained in an unfinished state for some years, until the masonry was removed by unscrupulous persons and used in the construction of another building in Birr.[1]

III

Outside his immediate family circle Parsons's closest friends were his relatives, the first Earl and Countess of Rosse. The Earl showed a deep interest in his nephew's public career, and was influenced largely in his acceptance of patents of nobility by the consideration that the latter would succeed to them as his male heir. When, shortly after the Union, he gave up his house at Number XXII, St. Stephen's Green, and went to live at Stretton Hall, Chester,[2] he relied on Laurence to look after his property at Longford and other interests in Ireland.

The letters which passed between the Earl and Laurence are strikingly warm in tone. In January 1805, while Laurence and his wife were visiting London, Lord Oxmantown (as he then was) wrote to say that he was travelling specially to meet them, and asked Laurence to

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1. Cooke, History of Birr, p. 120.

2. Stretton Hall was formerly the English residence of Thomas Conolly of Castletown, County Kildare, better known as 'Squire Tom.' It appears to have passed into Rosse's possession after Conolly's death in 1803. (FitzGerald, Lady Louisa Conolly, p. 181).

arrange accommodation for him in the same hotel, preferably without a drawing-room, 'as by that means I shall have more of your company.'[1] When Laurence's wife contracted her first serious illness, during the summer of 1806, Oxmantown made lengthy enquiries for her, declaring himself to be 'truly concerned.'[2] Laurence performed many commissions for his uncle in Ireland, sending him books, carriage-horses and other requirements. He nearly always stayed at Oxmantown's home at Stretton Hall, Chester during his journeys to and from London.[3]

The Earl died suddenly in April 1807 at a hotel in New Bond Street, London. Sir Laurence, who happened to be in London at the time, was entrusted by Lady Rosse with the task of making arrangements for her husband's funeral. This produced a very embarrassing situation. Sir Laurence felt it to be in Lady Rosse's interest that the funeral should take place as soon as possible, since she was still living in the hotel where her husband's body lay. Yet it was customary to defer a funeral until after the opening of the deceased's will, an act which he was unwilling to perform in the absence of Lord Lorton, who had married the Earl's only daughter. An express messenger was sent to summon Lorton, but it was anticipated that he could not arrive for several days.[4] Much perplexed as to what he should do, Parsons turned

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1. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 14 Jan. 1805 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Same to same, 29 May 1806 (Parsons MSS.).
3. Ibid.
4. Sir L. Parsons to Metcalfe, 27 April 1807 (Parsons MSS.).

for advice to Metcalfe, his deceased uncle's lawyer. Metcalfe's advice was peremptory; the will must not be opened until after the arrival of Lord Lorton, whatever the suffering to Lady Rosse in the meantime. Sir Laurence was therefore forced to wait.[1]

During the years which followed Laurence devoted himself unsparingly to the task of looking after the interests of his uncle's widow. He continued to make frequent visits to Stretton Hall during his journeys to and from London.[2] Lady Rosse wrote to ask his advice on a wide variety of topics - the choice of a butler,[3] payment of her coachmaker,[4] selection of tenants for her estates,[5] and rewards for her chaplain and close companion, the Reverend Michael Crofton.[6] On each of these problems Parsons sent her a long and considered reply, but he was clearly suspicious of the influence which Crofton was gaining over his aunt, and warned her not to discuss his own affairs with him.[7] He did his best to further her wishes in the matter of

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1. Metcalfe to Sir L. Parsons, 22 April 1807 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Earl of Rosse to Dowager Countess of Rosse, 22 Sept. 1818 (Parsons MSS.).
3. Dowager Countess of Rosse to Earl of Rosse, 18 May 1807 (Parsons MSS.).
4. Same to same, 20 Oct. 1810 (Parsons MSS.).
5. Same to same, 5 Sept. 1816 (Parsons MSS.).
6. Same to same, 20 Oct. 1819 (Parsons MSS.).
7. Earl of Rosse to Dowager Countess of Rosse, 8 Jan. 1824 (Parsons MSS.).

patronage, and even attempted to obtain promotion in the navy for Crofton's younger brother.[1]

Despite these services Lady Rosse did not display any marked feelings of gratitude towards her nephew. As she grew older, and was increasingly dominated by Crofton's influence, she became fanatically religious, and rather ungracious towards other members of her family. In 1827 after Parsons's son John had visited her on his last journey to London, she wrote to the Earl to complain bitterly of his conduct; John had continued travelling during Sunday, and had only spent a short time at Stretton Hall. She did not bother to consider that he was hastening to perform important business in London.[2]

A more serious matter was Lady Rosse's attitude towards her will. The first Earl of Rosse would appear to have given Laurence the impression that, after the death of his widow, his money would pass to Lord Lorton and his estates to Parsons. This impression was strengthened by various declarations made by Lady Rosse herself, at her husband's death-bed, and, on several occasions, at Stretton Hall. Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1818, she made it known that she intended to leave all her possessions to her daughter's family. Keenly disappointed, Parsons wrote to ask for an explanation in words of mild reproach,[3] but it is much to his credit that, despite his feelings on this occasion, his friendship with Lady Rosse remained unbroken.

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1. Earl of Rosse to Earl of Liverpool, 21 July 1819 (B.M., Add. MS. 38,278, f. 292).
2. J.C. Parsons to Earl of Rosse, 16 April 1827 (Parsons MSS.).
3. Earl of Rosse to Dowager Countess of Rosse, 15 Nov. 1818 (Parsons MSS.).

Apart from his relatives Parsons formed a number of friendships with people who shared his intellectual interests. One of his oldest friends was John Whitley Stokes, once his colleague in the College Historical Society, and later a distinguished natural scientist and fellow of Trinity College. Stokes had never shown much deference to College discipline, and had been heavily censured after Lord Clare's Visitation in 1798 as a promoter of revolutionary tendencies amongst the students.[1] During the autumn of 1815 he found himself in a much more difficult situation, which required all the assistance which Parsons could provide, to save him.

Stokes was an uncompromising Low Churchman, and had lately begun to absent himself from the College chapel because of scruples which he had, concerning certain portions of the liturgy. The Provost (Elrington), who was much annoyed by Stokes's conduct, introduced a series of regulations which threatened with expulsion any fellow who did not attend chapel regularly. These regulations placed Stokes in a highly invidious position. He had a wife and nine children, who must suffer considerable hardship if he were deprived of his emoluments as a fellow; nevertheless, he was a man of sincere piety who could not yield easily to something which he felt to be wrong, and he therefore refused to obey the Provost's order.[2]

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1. Trin. Coll. Rec. Vol., p. 43.

2. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 29 Oct. 1815 (B.M., Add. MS. 40,248, f. 289).

Deeply concerned for his friend, Parsons at first made resolute efforts to persuade him to adopt a more reasonable attitude. He wrote to ask the help of William Wilberforce, and received from him a number of arguments aimed at removing Stoke's scruples, but these the latter declined to accept. Parsons then endeavoured to persuade the Provost and Senior Fellows to give Stokes time to re-consider his decision, or at least to allow him to retire on a pension.[1] He wrote to a large number of influential persons who might be able to bring pressure to bear on the Provost, amongst them being Sir Robert Peel. To Peel, he opened his heart on the matter at some length. Stokes he declared to be a mild, but deeply religious man, who 'sticks at difficulties at which others less conscientious would not;' he had kept his scruples to himself and had not tried to influence others; the regulations under which he was threatened were unknown in both the English Universities. 'It is,' wrote Parsons, 'really a most severe case. To threaten a quiet and good man, who has been for near thirty years a fellow of the College, with a wife and nine children, habituated to the comforts of an income above twelve hundred a year, to turn him out in his old age to indigence, because he has some latent and conscientious scruples.'[2]

Parsons's efforts proved unsuccessful. In the following June Stokes was forced to resign his fellowship, although he retained a

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1. Earl of Rosse to Sir R. Peel, 29 Oct. 1815 (B.M., Add. MS. 40,248, f. 289.

2. Ibid., 21 Jan. 1816 (B.M., Add. MS. 40,252, f. 34).

lectureship in Natural Science, and was elected at a later date to the Regius Professorship of Physic.[1]

During his later years the Earl formed friendships with three ladies of considerable literary abilities, all of whom were connected with the Irish midlands; the Countess of Charleville, Maria Edgeworth and Miss Burgh. With the last of these he became particularly intimate; we cannot identify her with certainty, but it is likely that she was a grand-daughter of Ullyses Burgh, Bishop of Ardagh, and a cousin of William Downes Lord Chief Justice of Ireland[2] from 1802 to 1820.

The friendship began about the spring of 1820, when the death of Lord Downes took place. Parsons wrote a rather formal letter to Miss de Burgh in which he recorded his appreciation of the intellectual abilities of the late Lord Chief Justice.[3] Soon, he was writing to her in much more intimate terms, and exchanging books.[4] In the following summer, as he travelled to London to make one of his infrequent appearances in the House of Lords, he sent her news of a new literary work on which he was then engaged,[5] and wrote a remarkable description of a voyage across the Irish Sea on one of the mail steamers which had recently been introduced:

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1. Trin. Coll. Rec. Vol., p. 43.
2. D.N.B., Ulysses Burgh.
3. Earl of Rosse to Miss Burgh, 20 March 1826 (Parsons MSS.).
4. Same to same, 2 May 1820 (Parsons MSS.).
5. This was a description of 'The Antiquities of London.' The work was never published, nor does any trace of the manuscript survive.

> The sea was smooth and our passage was like a party of pleasure - all the company seated on the deck, some reading, for there are pleasant books belonging to the vessel, some ladies working, some playing backgammon. Also, a Welsh harper, like Avion, at intervals charming the fishes, which, of course, followed us in schools, and sported on the surface of the water. The sun being, part of the day, very hot, a handsome canopy or awning overspread us. At 12 o'clock, we met a Liverpool steamboat. These vessels at sea have a singular appearance, being attended by a tail of thick smoke, some hundred yards long, undulating in the atmosphere. At two, we met the steamboat from Holyhead, went close to her, and spoke with her. We were eight hours and a half. But though so pleasant in fine weather, when the sea is rough one must ever on these vessels, pay the usual penalty of sickness. However, that may be avoided by waiting for a moderate wind, no matter from what quarter it blows, or for a calm. In short, the disagreeableness of the passage is at the most much mitigated by the certainty of arrival in a short time.[1]

As he grew older Parsons became increasingly pre-occupied with intellectual matters, and engaged in a number of works of scholarship, among which only the Christian Revelation was published. Apart from his prose writings he composed a large number of poems, most of which are concerned with events in his private life.

His poetry is unpleasing to read, the style being heavy and sententious, and the author pre-occupied with moralisation and sentimentality. He is undoubtedly sincere in all that he says, but the effect is wearisome, and at times, rather trite. Parsons's lines show little of the easy grace and flow so typical of many early nineteenth-century poets. Instead, they have a sound technical competence, characteristic of the Augustan poets of the later eighteenth century, who always laid the chief emphasis on form. The effect is not improved

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1. Earl of Rosse to Miss Burgh, 13 August 1820 (Parsons MSS.).

by his unfortunate experiment in metre; in place of the ten syllables, normally used in the heroic metre of his day, he introduced a greater number of unaccented syllables, leaving only five accented. This system, he believed, must produce a more flowing and varied measure; yet he failed utterly to achieve this result, since his lines are jagged, graceless, and at times, of very faulty scantia.

The most significant feature of Parsons's poetry, particularly when we compare it with his work on the Christian Revelation, is its strongly-expressed belief in man's supremacy over nature. This, unlike his style, is characteristic of the early nineteenth century. A good example of Parsons's work is provided by the poem which he wrote in 1812, shortly before leaving Birr Castle for a long period of residence in London:

> Dear towers farewell, where many a happy day
> Of infant life, I have joyous passed away.
> And thou, lov'd stream, farewell: thy sparkling tide
> From morn till eve, I fondly played beside.
>
> Yet on my mind come now a glimmering ray,
> To higher objects, lights the rising way.
> Where leaving far beneath, these infant toys,
> Thro' breaks and crags, I'll mount to nobler joys.[1]

On another occasion, as he was detained by snow in North Wales while on his way to London, he wrote a description of a storm on the Irish Sea, during the previous evening:

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1. Poem of Sir L. Parsons, 1812 (Parsons MSS.).

Now we mount the high wave's top,
  Now unto the ocean's bed we drop.
Yet still our bark, with well-built sides,
  On the wild sea securely rides.
Shall a few planks and canvas sail,
  Oer tides and tempest thus prevail,
And man his route persisting keep
  Athwart the drear and trackless deep?
Yes, Man, by his progressive toil,
  All natures obstacles shall foil.[1]

IV

By far the happiest feature of Parsons's declining years was the success which attended the scientific studies of his eldest son and heir, William, Lord Oxmantown. William engaged in many experiments, the most successful and far-reaching of which were his attempts to improve the reflecting telescope, which began as early as 1827. Choosing his assistants from among his father's workmen at Birr, the necessary machinery and implements were all made at home. In 1829 he invented an engine for grinding and polishing specula by steam power, and after many laborious attempts decided on an alloy suitable for his purpose. Many difficulties presented themselves in making castings of an extremely brittle metal, and it was not until 1839 that a speculum was successfully cast and mounted.[2]

Thus, the greater work of William's career, the construction of the Rosse telescope at Birr Castle, was well under way during the lifetime of his father. In the year after Sir Laurence's death work was begun on two giant specula, which were mounted later between two

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1. Poem of Sir L. Parsons (Parsons MSS.).
2. D.N.B., William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse.

huge supporting walls, still to be seen several hundred yards north-west of the castle. The tube of the telescope was fifty-eight feet long, and seven feet in diameter; Dean Peacock told how he had been able to walk through it with uplifted umbrella, and Dr. Robinson compared it, when erect, with one of the round towers of Celtic Ireland. Observations with this instrument began in February 1845, and William concentrated his attention on the examination of nebula. The results of his investigations were placed before the Royal Society, in papers delivered in 1850[1] and 1861.

William became a member of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1824, and the Royal Society in 1831. He was president of the Royal Society from 1849 to 1854, and was awarded a royal medal in 1851. He was also a knight of St. Patrick, Chancellor of Dublin University, Visitor of Maynooth College and a member of the senate of the Queen's University. He was chosen to preside over a meeting of the British Association, at Cork, in 1843, and was made a knight of the Legion of Honour at the close of the Paris Exhibition[2] of 1855.

All the surviving Parsons children married during the lifetime of their father. In 1835 Jane married Lieutenant Arthur Knox, of the Life Guards, and heir to an estate in County Mayo; as her dowry, she received some property which the Earl held in that county.[3] In the following year William married Mary Field, co-heiress to an estate

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1. D.N.B., William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse.
2. Ibid.
3. Indenture between Earl of Rosse and Lieut. A. Knox, 19 Dec. 1835 (Ir. Reg. Deeds).

in Yorkshire; thus began a connection between the Parsons family and Yorkshire, which was extended later in the century by the marriage of William's son and heir to an heiress of the Hawke family. One month later Laurence married Elizabeth, eldest daughter of the Earl of Norbury, whose property lay at the far end of the King's County. In 1837, apparently with the Earl's disapproval, Alicia married Edward Conroy, son of Sir John Conroy, the lover of Queen Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent.[1]

V

In his personal habits Parsons was dignified and simple. His tailor's bill for the three years before 1800 amounted to £167 - scarcely an exorbitant sum for one who was living in Dublin during most of this period. He dressed most frequently in blue cloth which he wore with white vests and breeches, and a scarlet or black cape. He maintained an establishment of two postilions, two footmen and a groom, all of whom were dressed in the green livery still worn by servants of the Parsons family.[2]

He displayed little interest in the sporting pastimes so popular amongst Irish country gentlemen of his day. He was president of a body known as the 'King's County Social Hunt' (apparently the forerunner of a number of packs of foxhounds which appeared in the County during the second half of the nineteenth century), but this was almost certainly an honorary position.[3] His uncle, the first Earl of Rosse,

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1. Burke, Peerage, p. 1939.
2. Statement of Accounts by Abraham Creighton, February 1800 (Parsons MSS.).
3. Circular of King's County Social Hunt, 4 Feb. 1796 (Parsons MSS.).

once alluded to his lack of prowess as a horseman by describing him as 'not at all a jockey,' although he admitted that Sir Laurence's servants usually provided him with carriage-horses of a very high quality.[1]

During his last years Parsons's health declined sharply, and in 1838 he went to live at Brighton, where he resided continuously until his death[2] on 24 February 1841. His body was taken back to Birr, and buried in the vault under the old church where lay all the previous heads of his family, since the first Sir Laurence Parsons settled in the town, two centuries before. He has no public memorial, although a marble plaque in the chancel of the new church of St. Brendan records his virtues and some of the chief events of his life. Yet few men have left a better memorial than the home which Parsons loved and where he spent an increasingly greater proportion of his time as he grew older. He laid down the essential lines of the modern Birr Castle, and it has changed remarkably little since his day. In the atmosphere of a gracious and peaceful home, which still survives there, lies the strongest and most enduring evidence of his life's work.

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1. Lord Oxmantown to Sir L. Parsons, 3 June 1806 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Gentleman's Magazine, 1841, pt. 1, p. 535.

CHAPTER TEN

THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION.

Although Parsons's original purpose was mainly to provide a memorial to his son, his work eventually took the form of an extended theological discourse. It was begun during the autumn of 1829, and published almost exactly five years later, in November 1834. During this time he withdrew himself almost completely from public life, and engaged in a vigorous programme of study. His theme, 'An argument to prove the truth of the Christian Revelation,' was no doubt inspired by his efforts to relieve the bitterness of his loss, but the work shows little trace of emotionalism or religious fervour. It draws its main support from the conclusions of contemporary scientific investigators, which he discussed with remarkable competence and knowledge.

The timing of the work is significant. It was published one year after Bakewell's Philosophical Conversations, and fourteen years earlier than Darwin's Origin of the Species. Thus, it belongs to a period which saw the emergence of the theory of natural evolution, as enunciated by Bakewell and formulated by Darwin. Parsons's thought is essentially that of an age of transition, when old moral values were being replaced by new. Although he accepted the main features of the traditional account of the Christian revelation as given in the Bible, he subjected them to a searching examination for scientific truth. In this, he was following directly in the tradition of Malthus,

Buffon, La Place, Erasmus Darwin, Lamarck and other writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, all of whom brought scientific knowledge to bear upon philisophic problems. His own contribution to their tradition was to make one of the first systematic attempts to assemble the evidence of scientific investigations, in support of orthodox Christian belief.

The chief theological feature of the work, as its title might suggest, is a strongly-marked reaction against the Deist philosophy of the eighteenth century. Parsons could not accept the Deist belief that God, having created the world, exerted no further influence over his handiwork. He was anxious to show the close personal influence of the deity in operation at every stage in the history of mankind. The implicit acceptance of an 'argument by design' is characteristic less of the nineteenth than of the eighteenth century, and owes much to the work of the opponents of Deism, as synthesised in the writings of Paley.[1]

Parsons's first objective was to disprove the Aristotelian belief that the world had existed in its present state through all eternity, independent of divine power. His argument was selective and entirely of a scientific nature. He declined to notice the belief of Lamarck that life had originally begun by the power of attraction, without the intervention of any central force, or of La Place that this central force was a nebulosity so diffused that its existence can

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1. 'One general plan laid down, and that plan varied with the varying exigencies to which it is to be applied.'
Paley, Natural theology, p. 20.

with difficulty be conceived.[1] He relied on the conclusions of La Place and Cuvier that the world had once existed in a fluid state, and pointed out the existence of primary rocks which bear no traces of either animal or vegetable life.[2] From these premises he went on to make a number of important deductions:

First, that man and other forms of animal life must at some time have been placed on the earth by a power greater than any known on earth.

Second, that the power which was responsible for making man and the animals, must also have made the earth, which is adapted to their support and sustenance.

Third, that the same power, having made the earth, must also have made the sun, moon and other celestial bodies which can be discovered in the universe.[3]

Parsons's first deduction is obviously the most significant, since both the others follow directly from it. It is weak, in the light of contemporary geological research since it fails to answer Lamarck's belief that there was not a precise moment when life began, and that the earth possessed a power within itself, capable of producing life.[4] Moreover, like most of his contemporaries, Parsons did not attempt to investigate the problems of the relationship between

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1. Kirby, The power, wisdom and goodness of God, 1. xx.
2. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 14.
3. Ibid.
4. Kirby, The power, wisdom and goodness of God, 1. xx.

the deity and that part of the universe invisible to man.[1] He merely made a number of statements about the powers of the deity, and his part in the work of creation:

> That as this being had the power to make all things, he is all-powerful.
> As he had the knowledge to make all things, he must know all things, therefore he is all-knowing.
> That as he made all things with a wisdom surpassing human conception, he must be all-wise.
> That as from him proceeded all the intelligence which we see in man, he must himself be supremely intelligent.
> That as he is thus all powerful, he can do as he wills.
> That as he is all knowing and all wise, he can never be in error.
> That thus knowing whatever is wisest and best, and having the power of doing it, he can never have any inducement to do any thing that is not just and good, and therefore his justice and goodness must be as unlimited as his power and wisdom.
> But the being who is thus all powerful, all knowing, all wise, all just, and all good, is God.
> And as the same design, as well as the same law is manifested throughout in the construction of the universe, by the same perfect harmony that prevails through the whole, without any collision among its numerous and complicated parts and movements, it was one being that made the whole. And thus we arrive at this great conclusion that, as there is through the whole but one design, and one law, so there is but one God.[2]

Thus far, Parsons's argument remained scrupulously detached from any considerations of doctrine. He was intent merely on proving that the world owes its existence to the action of a supreme being. He made no break with the Deist belief, that, the supreme being having once made man, then took no further interest in his progress on earth, leaving him entirely to his own devices. Yet at this point the chief aim

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1. Paley did not consider that astronomy was a science of any theological significance. 'We are destitute of the means of examining the constitution of the heavenly bodies. The very simplicity of their appearance is against them. We see nothing but bright points, luminous circles, or the phases of spheres reflecting the light which falls upon them.' Natural Theology, p. 251.

2. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 15.

of his work was at last made apparent; it was to trace the process by which the deity has revealed his will to man, using the chronology of Christian history from the life of Moses to the conclusion of Christ's mission on earth.

This revelation was, Parsons believed, a special privilege granted to man, which distinguished him from the other animals, just as from a different standpoint the Aristotelians argued that man was distinguished by his ability to reason, while the animals only possessed the lower power of instinct. Revelation and reason were both necessary if man was to learn the purpose which the deity wished him to fulfil. Neither was self-sufficient, but each was the complement of the other; without revelation, reason could only bring man to a state of hopelessness and insecurity, such as that exemplified in the writings of Cicero; without reason, man had no means of ascertaining that the proofs given by divine revelation were sound and authentic.[1]

1. THE WRITINGS OF MOSES.

The argument which Parsons put forward to prove the divine inspiration of Moses's description is in many ways weak and unconvincing. He assumed that Moses and his predecessors could not have possessed any scientific knowledge whatever; that the accuracy of Moses's statements, in so far as they have since been confirmed by scientific investigation, could not have been due to human knowledge; that the

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 19.

only possible explanation of his accuracy is that provided by divine revelation.[1] This argument is obviously far less acceptable now, in an age which has come to consider the scientific achievements of ancient peoples with no little respect. Yet it is in line with the main trend of scientific thought during the early nineteenth century, which was moving, through various theories of evolution, towards Darwinism.

In attempting to prove the authenticity of Moses's statements Parsons was on stronger ground. He made what was almost certainly the first attempt to bring the results of scientific investigation to the support of the traditional account of the Christian revelation.

He first discussed the order of events on the creation, as described by Moses. Moses's opening words 'Darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters,' were supported by the conclusions of the French naturalist Cuvier, who found that the earth had originally existed in a fluid state.[2] Again, the statement 'And God said, let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place and let the dry land appear' was explained by the fact that continents and other land masses had been raised from the sea by volcanic action and that the same mass of water as before had become concentrated in other parts of the earth.[3] The origin of vegetable matter <u>after</u> the emergence of land masses had

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1. Sir L. Parsons, <u>Chris. Rev.</u>, p. 25.
2. Ibid., p. 26.
3. Ibid., p. 33.

been attested by Cuvier, Humboldt and other naturalists who had described certain rocks as primary, because they were raised from the water before animal or vegetable matter existed.[1]

The creation of light, before sun, moon and stars, had for many years been a chief reason for criticising the Mosaic account. In the absence of deeper scientific knowledge it was assumed that all light must come from the sun, and that no light existed before the sun had been created. Parsons was able to show, with a considerable display of scientific learning, that light is produced by many substances other than the sun, and that light was itself necessary before animal and vegetable life could be produced. However, he spoiled an otherwise excellent argument by intruding the suggestion that before the creation of the sun, the earth may have received light from other bodies in the universe which are now invisible to man.[2] Such a theory would, in fact, deny the interdependence of the solar system, and made an even more dangerous implication that the earth is older than the sun.

The creation of marine life, before that of land animals, was, he suggested, confirmed by recent experiments of genetics carried out by Humboldt. Why, he asked with no little perception, had Moses divided the animal creation into two stages? It could only be assumed that the deity had decided to provide mankind with a means whereby the truth of his revelation might one day be proved. At this point, Parsons approached more closely to Darwinism than anywhere else in his

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 35.
2. Ibid., p. 40.

treatise. Yet he failed to make the decisive discovery that a definite system of progression underlay the creation, first of marine life, then animals, and finally man himself.[1]

Parsons's attitude may be compared with that of a number of eminent contemporary theologians, whose work was published at about the same time, under the title of the Bridgewater Treatises.[2] Whewell approached more closely than Parsons to Darwinism since he perceived a system of progression from the simplest animals at the foot of the scale to man at the summit; he did not, however, venture to examine the sequence of progression further.[3] Roget declined to accept the existence of a system of progression and believed the development of species to have taken place along parallel lines.[4]

Parsons considered that the creation of man took place in precisely the manner which Moses described. He never doubted the fact that there had been two original parents of the entire human race, and he produced a number of rather unconvincing arguments to support his belief. Cuvier had estimated that human remains were to be found

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 54.

2. The Bridgewater Treatises resulted from the bequest of Francis Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater (d. 1829) who bequeathed a sum of £8,000 to the Royal Society for 1,000 copies of a work on 'The power, wisdom and goodness of God as manifested in the creation.' Eight writers were subsequently commissioned to take part in the work.
Whewell, Astronomy and general physics considered, l. ix.

3. Ibid., l. 4.

4. Roget, Animal and vegetable physiology considered, p. 44.

over a much smaller portion of the earth than were the remains of other animals; this was a proof that mankind must have begun as one family.[1] True, there were differences of colour and shape between men in different parts of the world, some of which were already known to Moses; Parsons possessed sufficient scientific knowledge to see that these differences were the result, not of separate species, but of a number of environmental influences such as climate and vegetation; yet he never considered it necessary to ask why Moses avoided the subject so completely, and he dismissed his reticence as merely another argument in favour of the truth of the revelation, since without divine knowledge Moses would never have dared to propagate an opinion so little supported by the evidence then before men.[2]

From the Creation Parsons turned his attention to the great flood. He attempted to support the authenticity of Moses's description with a number of arguments based on geological research, all of which must now be considered to be premature and unsound. Among these, he put forward the conclusions of Cuvier that the flood must have reached to the height of the highest mountain, that by the laws of fluidity all the earth must have been covered, and that the survival of any animal life must have been due to divine intervention alone. It did not occur to him that land animals might have appeared after the period when the earth was covered with water, and that they might have

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 59.
2. Ibid., p. 63.

evolved by a definite system of progression, out of animal life in the sea.[1]

He accepted the Mosaic account of the Ark, and its contents, in every detail, and indeed, discussed it with no little gravity - 'It was certainly very difficult to construct a vessel of such great dimensions, but - - there was no law of nature violated in making such a vessel. Everyone knows that a great wooden vessel will float, and if properly made, that it will bear a great burden.'[2] He believed that not merely had animal life survived the flood, but that there had only been one group of survivors. A similar conclusion had already been reached by Cuvier, although Cuvier believed that animal life had continued on one piece of ground which remained immune from the water. Yet Parsons, although he had previously accepted a large number of Cuvier's theories without difficulty, never produced any adequate reasons for disagreeing with him on the question of the Ark. He also failed to consider the possibility that there might have been several arks, or several pieces of dry ground. He did, indeed, observe the presence of distinct species in various parts of the world, and rightly perceived that there must be a deeper reason for this than environmental influences. The only reason he could offer was that new species must have come into being as part of a second animal creation after the flood, and he again missed the point that all land life

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 77.
2. Ibid., p. 83.

might have come into existence after the flood.[1]

What was the date of the creation? It is a measure of the distance which still separated Parsons from Darwin that he should have attempted to answer this question at all. His calculations were based once more on the investigations of Cuvier, who believed that the flood had taken place some four or five thousand years previously. He attempted to support the statement of Moses that the creation had occurred 1,600 years earlier than the flood, by pointing to the absence of human remains in antediluvian deposits, as evidence that man had not long existed on the earth at this time. However, he failed to see that this evidence could more satisfactorily be used to prove the complete absence of man at the time of the flood.[2]

At no point in his treatise did Parsons come close to perceiving that the process of creation might have taken place over a very long period, perhaps one outside the normal bounds of chronology. He did, indeed, recognise that the length of a day, in Moses's account, might be disputable, but he gave the matter no further consideration. His scientific knowledge never led him to question the traditional conception of the creation as a series of events in history, and something whose date could be measured with a large degree of accuracy.[3]

Thus far, Parsons had attempted to bring scientific arguments to support the Mosaic account of the origins and early history of the world. When he turned to consider the evidence which Moses gave as a

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 97.
2. Ibid., p. 108.
3. Ibid., p. 53.

contemporary observer, it is disappointing to find that he did not attempt to support it with any historical criticism. Two German scholars, Eichhorn and De Wette, working at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries respectively, had already examined the value of the Old Testament as historical literature, and De Wette had subjected the Mosaic account to a measure of documentary criticism.[1] Parsons contented himself with bringing forward a number of arguments to show the reliability of Moses as a witness; his earlier statements had already been borne out by science; he could not have successfully mis-represented so many events which were well known to his fellow Israelites; the supernatural occurrences which he described were no less credible than the earlier use of the supernatural in the creation.[2]

Only the story of the Commandments received closer treatment. Parsons perceived the importance of the transition from polytheism to monotheism, evident in the opening words of Moses's law, - 'I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have none other Gods but me.' Religious thought had at last arrived at a position when it was reasonable to accept the existence of one omnipotent creator, the maker of all mankind. Moses had no political advantages to gain when he replaced the innumerable deities of Egypt with one God; nor would the phenomena which he described on Sinai have been easily achieved without supernatural aid. The incident was decisive as marking the moment when

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1. J.G. Eichhorn, Introduction to the Old Testament (Gottingen, 1780/3) and W.M.L. De Wette, Die Beitrage zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament (Berlin, 1806/7).
2. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 158 Seq.

God decided to impart the truth of his omnipotence to man.[1]

The first four Commandments all set out the deference due to an omnipotent being. The remainder laid down basic principles to govern the relationship of one man to another. They had one feature in common which distinguished them from all previous legislation, and from the other laws of Moses; they were to be universal in effect, and applicable to all sections of mankind. This universality in the Commandments, Parsons believed, gave them a peculiar strength, and made them a permanent basis for the conduct of all human society.[2]

2. THE JEWISH PROPHETS.

Between the first covenant which God made with man through Moses, and the second covenant which he made during the course of the mission of Jesus Christ, Parsons saw a period when God made little manifestation of his power on earth, but imparted his will through the declarations of a series of prophets, among whom Moses was himself the first. The message presented by these prophets had a twofold purpose; to provide a deeper explanation of the Mosaic law; to prepare mankind for the reception of a second covenant through Christ.[3]

In contrast with his treatment of the Mosaic accounts, Parsons brought a large measure of historical criticism to the support of the later prophecies. The chronicles of Josephus confirmed Moses's prophecy of the destruction of the Jews by a hostile army;[4] Moses's

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 176.
2. Ibid., p. 179.
3. Ibid., p. 185.
4. Ibid., p. 192.

description of the dispersion of the Jews throughout the world had been consummated after the fall of the Roman empire;[1] his warning that Judah would be the only tribe to survive, had been fulfilled by the departure and ultimate disappearance of the other tribes into captivity in Babylon.[2] Yet, all the prophecies looked on for fulfilment to the one central event of the coming of the Messiah.

Parsons devoted particular attention to the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Moses had said, 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a law-giver from between his feet, till Shiloh (the Messiah) come, and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.' It was certain that despite conquest by Rome, the Jews had maintained the main features of an independent government down to the time of Christ. The real end to their independence had come sixty years later, when the temple and other buildings at Jerusalem were destroyed by Titus. Similar prophecies in Isaiah and Micah, concerning the birthplace of the Messiah, and his descent from the house of David, had also been fulfilled.[3]

Parsons extended his examination of these prophecies with the interesting, and apparently original, suggestion that the attitude of the Jews at the time of Jesus's birth was itself evidence of their belief that the prophecies had been fulfilled. Herod's action in ordering the destruction of young children at Bethlehem, as related in

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 195.
2. Ibid., p. 197.
3. Ibid., p. 200.

St. Matthew's gospel, was a reflection of his fears concerning the possible consequences to himself of the coming of the Messiah. Moreover, Herod did not act completely on his own initiative, but had taken council with the chief priests and the Sanhedrin; thus, it might be assumed that some at least of his fears were shared by the rulers among the Jews. Parsons's suggestion is certainly worth considering, although he did not develop it further. It is indisputable that Herod and the rulers had many reasons for wishing to rid themselves of the rumour of the birth of the Messiah, without necessarily accepting its validity; the existence of the rumour was itself a potential threat of rebellion. Yet it seems important that they should have considered the matter with such special attention.[1]

In discussing the prophecy of Daniel, that seventy weeks would elapse between the restoration of the temple at Jerusalem and the death of the Messiah, Parsons made what was to be his only departure from a strictly literal interpretation of the Old Testament. He suggested that a 'day' might be taken to mean a period of one year. Taking a decree of Artaserxes in 457 B.C. as marking the restoration of the temple, he developed a somewhat ingenious argument that from this event to the death of Christ, a period of five hundred years had elapsed, and that this period would correspond almost exactly with the number of 'days' (or years), mentioned by Daniel. Obviously, Parsons's calculations are only approximate, since the number of days

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 204.

in seventy weeks is 490. Again, it would seem that he overestimated the significance of the decree of Artaxerxes, as the work of re-building had already begun under Cyrus. We can only conclude that the prophecy of Daniel remained unproved.[1]

Parsons recognised the significance of the teaching of John the Baptist as marking the final stage in a series of prophecies leading to the coming of the Messiah - 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' Yet he also stressed the essentially local character of John's mission, since it bore striking resemblance to a custom, common amongst eastern rulers, of sending an emissary along the road before them to announce their coming. John's purpose was to warn the Jews that the covenant which God made with them through Moses was about to be replaced by a second covenant made through the Messiah.[2]

3. THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST.

Parsons did not set out to produce an historical examination of Christ's mission on earth. He made little attempt to corroborate the story of the Scriptures by other contemporary evidence, and he completely ignored large portions of Christ's career, including his domestic background and early life. His only purpose was to show the operation of divine revelation through Christ's work and teaching, and to explain its meaning. For his purpose, it was sufficient to have

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 208.
2. Ibid., p. 215.

seen that Christ's mission coincided with the descriptions of a long line of authentic prophecy, and that it was preceded by the first revelation of God made through Moses.

He devoted his chief attention to the supernatural power which Jesus appeared to have used on many occasions during his mission. Parsons had little doubt that Christ's miracles were performed with supernatural aid; he never seriously considered the possibility that he might have been using the ordinary forces of nature. Nor did he believe the supernatural to be a distinct force which Jesus could call to his aid at will, but rather as something which was part of his physical being, and which governed the normal acts of his daily life. Thus, he was probably unique in ascribing the incident of the expulsion of the money-changers from the temple to supernatural agencies, since, he declared rather naively, such an act would have been beyond the physical capacity of one man acting alone. Again, Jesus's intellectual ability was augmented by the supernatural; when for instance, he made the statement 'My Father worketh <u>hitherto</u>' (or 'worketh <u>continually</u>' as in the Revised translation), he was affirming the continuous nature of divine revelation, something previously unrealised by man.[1]

Typical of Parsons's views concerning the supernatural was his examination of the miracle performed at the wedding-feast in Cana of Galilee. His assessment of the circumstances seems reasonable. Christ had just embarked upon the active period of his mission, his

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1. Sir L. Parsons, <u>Chris. Rev.</u>, p. 237 Seq.

disciples were newly-won to his support, and it was desirable to confirm their loyalty by an act of indisputably divine origin; the wedding-feast offered a particularly favourable opportunity, since bread and wine were the most familiar of all domestic objects, and there must have been many witnesses present to attest the deed:

> Here then, just at the commencement of the ministry of Jesus, we have a most conspicuous miracle, such as no human means could have accomplished, wrought in attestation of his divine mission. A miracle of the truth of which the senses of those present could bear decisive testimony; their sight, their smell, their taste all concurring to prove the reality of the miracle, and that in such a manner, and about objects so familiar as water and wine, that no suspicion could lurk in their minds of any deception.[1]

Other miracles were examined with equally close attention, but Parsons displayed a particular interest in those occasions when Jesus healed the blind. His scientific perception was baffled by the problem of sight, for which he could find no physiological answer. Like Paley before him,[2] he considered sight to be a miracle beyond the power of human understanding, and it was for this reason that Christ concerned himself with it so frequently. Parsons's attitude is revealed by his discussion of the healing of the blind man at the gate of the temple. Christ had chosen a particular work of healing which would win him the greatest possible support amongst the people; the validity of the deed was beyond all doubt, since a careful enquiry had been made by the Sanhedrin, who were hardly likely to be prejudiced

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 223.
2. Natural Theology, p. 20.

in favour of Jesus; it was performed on the sabbath-day, since Jesus apparently wished to make use of an opportunity to reprimand the Jews for their over-rigid and superstitious adherence to their laws.[1]

Yet, it would seem that Parsons was not justified in making the suggestion that the power to heal blindness was one of the attributes of the Messiah, as foretold by prophecy. The passage from Isaiah 35.5 on which he based his argument ('Behold your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened'), does not necessarily carry a literal meaning.[2]

Parsons believed that Christ's use of the supernatural had a twofold significance. Firstly, it was a means of propaganda to convince the Jews of the truth of his mission. Secondly, it was to remind them of the miraculous account of the creation, as presented in their own sacred scriptures, and to present a chain of supernatural evidence of divine revelation throughout history. The first suggestion appears to exaggerate the part played by publicity in Christ's work, while the second is valueless if we discount the traditional Mosaic story of the Creation; moreover it is strange that Parsons never examined the supernatural as evidence of divine love and providence.[3]

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 253.
2. Ibid., p. 237.
3. Ibid., p. 256.

Why did Christ never succeed in winning more than a small section of the Jews to his support? Parsons produced two reasons which must still be considered convincing. In the first place, the supernatural was no novelty to them, since they were familiar with many everyday occurrences for which no explanation could be found, other than the intervention of evil spirits. Thus, use of the supernatural did not of itself provide a proof of divine power. Secondly, Christ was at all times careful not to over emphasise the divine nature of his mission; this was partly because he was careful not to arouse hostility until it became unavoidable, and partly because he wished to leave much for his followers to comprehend through faith. In making this second point Parsons was following directly in the tradition of Locke, who had already reached a very similar conclusion: 'It was not fit that Jesus should open himself too plainly or forwardly to the heady Jews, that he was the Messiah; that was to be left to the observation of those who would attend to the purity of his life, the testimony of his miracles, and the conformity of all with the predictions concerning him.'[1]

The final episode in Christ's career, his resurrection from the dead, led Parsons to engage in the most searching historical criticism of his work. Having compared the evidence given in the gospels with that in the Pauline epistles, he examined a number of contemporary, and nearly contemporary sources, all of which made references to the

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 261.

resurrection. Amongst them were the little-known epistles of Clement and Polycarp, both of which were written during a time of religious persecution, and probably for this reason, stressed the expectation of a future life, founded on the resurrection of Christ.[1]

Here Parsons reached his conclusion. The deity, having made such an unmistakable revelation of his will, from the Creation down to the mission of Jesus Christ, would not have allowed his interest in humanity to end abruptly. His will was still at work in the world, his purpose still explaining itself, before the eyes of men:

> It is no more than justice to this sacred argument to maintain, that after these facts, it would perhaps demand a still longer evidence to prove, that such superintendence was withdrawn than that it was continued. And if so, instead of calling for more powerful proof than is usually expected in the affairs of this world, to establish the miracles of Jesus, it may also be said that it would require less; it being more probable that the Deity should have continued his active superintendence upon the earth, until there was some evident completion of his great design, as predicted and expected, for the instruction and government of mankind, by a final revelation of his will, than that he should have abandoned them, and left them to wander still in doubt and obscurity.[2]

Parsons's work was favourably received by his contemporaries. One eminent theologian praised him for his 'striking remarks' on the progress of science.[3] A literary critic admired his style, which he found to be 'remarkable for perspicuity and ease.'[4] Yet the work had no long-term effect on the course of theological thought; it was

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1. Sir L. Parsons, Chris. Rev., p. 404.
2. Ibid., p. 407.
3. Bickersteth, Christian Student, p. 471.
4. Lowndes, British Librarian, p. 1002.

superseded by more advanced scientific writings, amongst which Darwin's Treatise is of chief importance. It had one brief revival at the end of the nineteenth century, when an amateur theologian and architect, Edward Lacy Garbett, published a new edition in an effort to support some unusual ideas which he held concerning the powers of anti-Christ.[1] Garbett's views did not, however, receive any large measure of popular support.

Parsons's pre-occupation with the Deist controversy made his work one of limited popular appeal. In the new intellectual climate of the early nineteenth century, the Deists already stood condemned; it was seen that human nature and reason are evolved products, and that to think in terms of an innate lumen naturale to which God revealed himself perfectly at the beginning of creation, was to work with static ideas. In this, as in other departments of his intellectual life, Parsons was still influenced by the movements of the eighteenth century, and found it impossible to grasp the implications of the ideas which unfolded themselves during his later years. His cautious intellectual conservatism is not surprising when compared with the principles which dominated most of his political life.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate that the work appeared almost simultaneously with the more exhaustive Bridgewater treatises, a factor which can hardly have failed to dwarf it in popular esteem. His scientific knowledge does not compare in extent with that of Whewell,[2]

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1. Published at Lond[illegible]; 1892.
2. Astronomy and general physics considered (London 1833).

Roget,[1] Kirby,[2] and Kidd,[3] and he was farther removed from the theories of Darwin than Whewell. Yet in attempting to bring scientific information to the support of orthodox Christian belief he was helping to create a rapprochement between theology and science which became steadily more important as the century went on. If his conclusions are now largely valueless, his method is still significant.

The work shows something of the extent of Parsons's studies at a time when political life no longer held any attraction for him, and when intellectual pursuits alone provided compensation for personal sadness at home.

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1. Animal and vegetable physiology considered (London,1840).
2. The power, wisdom and goodness of God (London,1835).
3. The adaptation of external nature to the physical condition of man (London, 1833).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSION.

When Laurence Parsons entered the Irish Parliament, at the age of twenty-three, it must have seemed to many of his contemporaries that a highly successful career lay before him. He possessed a number of advantages very desirable in Irish political life during the eighteenth century; he was heir to a comfortable estate; his family had played a distinguished part in Irish affairs for nearly two centuries; he was a graduate of Trinity College, where he had been a conspicuous figure in the life of the Historical Society; he had displayed an early interest in political matters by the publication of his pamphlet on the Mutiny Bill.

How much had he accomplished at the time of the Union, eighteen years later? He had made a total of fifty-four speeches, intervening on every major question of the period, except the Regency Bill. Yet he could not claim even one decisive victory. His efforts to further Flood's objectives of financial retrenchment and parliamentary reform had met with unrelenting hostility; his proposals on Catholic Emancipation, the war with France and the Corn Laws had been largely discredited by the subsequent course of events; his fight against the Union had ended in failure; moreover, his relations with other members of the opposition were distant, and at times openly hostile.

The explanation of Parsons's failure is to be found in his

unwavering loyalty to the teachings of Henry Flood. Unlike Grattan, Langrishe, Curran and others, who broke away from their early attachment to Flood, Parsons remained Flood's close friend and sympathiser for the remainder of the latter's life, and afterwards endeavoured to press forward his political principles long after they had become inexpedient. Before the French Revolution Parsons's advocacy of financial retrenchment and parliamentary reform was a wise attempt to extend the integrity and independence of the Irish Parliament. Yet the Revolution introduced new elements into Irish political life, the significance of which Parsons never fully appreciated. He failed to see that the opposition must achieve a far greater measure of cohesion and common purpose if it were to justify itself in the eyes of newer and more extreme forces of popular unrest. By standing apart from the more organised opposition which emerged from the Whig Club, in 1791, and owed its leadership to Fonsonby and Grattan, Parsons was weakening the best chance of winning a measure of reform, and impeding the formation of a strong, united opposition, the absence of which was, in the last resort, the real reason for the government's success in the Union controversy.

The results on his own career were disastrous. Although for a brief period he found himself at the head of a small minority group who opposed the war, he continued for the remainder of his days in the Irish Parliament, isolated and with very little influence. Even during the Union controversy he never really identified himself with

his colleagues of the opposition.

Parsons's attitude has sometimes been misunderstood. Lecky saw him as the most nearly revolutionary figure in the Irish Parliament. Others, remembering his friendship with Tone, have suspected him of secret sympathies with the United Irishmen. Yet it is certain that these views were mistaken. The one consistent principle that motivated Parsons's conduct throughout his life was his deep-rooted belief in the right of the upper classes to monopolise political authority, and his fear of the disastrous consequences which might follow any successful attempt to wrest that authority from them. After the outbreak of the French Revolution he increased his efforts to win reform, because he felt it to be vitally necessary to come to terms with the new state of public opinion. His attitude was, in fact, one of extreme caution; he feared the dangers of the popular movement more acutely than most of his contemporaries, and was very anxious to conciliate its demands.

The same motives dominated his economic policy. He wished to stimulate agriculture as the main foundation of the prosperity of the Irish landed classes. His thinking was frequently determined by strongly sectarian considerations; he opposed Ponsonby's India bill largely because it would have concentrated a great part of the public capital in the hands of merchants, and his hostility to Foster's abolition of the inland carriage bounty on corn was due to a fear that the midland producers would be placed at the mercy of Dublin middlemen.

Yet he showed himself well aware of the wider opportunities offered to Irish agriculture as the industrial age unfolded itself in England, although he was frequently too cautious to make full use of them.

The Union settlement, which, in its economic aspect, rested upon the willingness of England to provide an assured market for Irish agriculture, forced him to take up a stronger position. His opposition to the movement for repeal of the corn laws was certainly in line with the great body of Irish economic opinion, which viewed with dismay any attempt to weaken the protected position of Irish agriculture. Yet Parsons and his compatriots were trying to perpetuate the economic ideals of a generation earlier which believed that restraints on trade were necessary and good; they could not hope to stand in the way of the tenets of an age in which all obstacles to full trading development were being rapidly removed. Before his death the issue had been finally decided; the National Anti-Corn Law League, founded in 1839 under the influence of Cobden and Bright, brought a more vigorous organisation to the free trade movement which succeeded first in winning instalments of tariff reform, and then in 1846, repeal of the Corn Laws.

Other aspects of Parsons's economic policy were more progressive. He was deeply influenced by the writings of Adam Smith, to whom he often turned for support in parliamentary debate. In particular, he was impressed by Smith's belief that the prosperity of nations was interdependent, the riches of one being not necessarily acquired at

the expense of another. This led Parsons to advocate a closely-knit international community of trading nations which, unlike most of his contemporaries, he felt to be not inconsistent with the existence of restraints where necessary.[1]

Parsons's pacifism, which was completely economic in form, probably also derived from the same considerations. He made no condemnation of war on humanitarian grounds, nor did he oppose armaments as such, however much he might deprecate their abuse by arbitrary governments. When he opposed war, as in 1794, it was because he feared the economic disruption which it must bring: 'It cannot be the interest of one state to injure another, unless that other meditates injuring it.' Yet he was capable, in 1811, of advocating more stringent military measures when he felt these to be necessary in the interests of trade.

The Union which, symbolically perhaps, divided Parsons's life into two nearly equal chronological periods, also drew a sharp dividing line across the course of his political career. His activities in the imperial parliament seem at first sight inconsistent with his earlier opposition to the union. Nevertheless he was still motivated by fear of popular unrest, and the greater intensity of ill-feeling among the peasantry brought him to see the Union as an important safeguard to the Irish landed ascendancy. Like many of his contemporaries among the Irish upper classes, Parsons was impressed by the care

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1. Sir L. Parsons, unfinished treatise on government (Parsons MSS.).

and resolution with which imperial administrations met potential dangers in Ireland. Moreover, while he still remained loyal to Flood's political teaching, his loyalty was tempered now by a sense of expediency not evident before. Several personal factors, notably the influence of his uncle, family responsibilities and the grant of titles of nobility, all contributed to this change. When Parsons assumed public office, first at the Irish Treasury, and then at the Irish Post Office, it provided him with an opportunity to engage in measures of administrative reform, well in keeping with Flood's teaching. This opportunity he did not neglect, and the remarkable success of many of his reforms was the chief reason for his dismissal, since it led to the jealousy and disapproval of colleagues.

The Union also brought an important change in the character of his intellectual pursuits. His earlier writings had all been concerned with purely political topics. In addition to a large body of memoranda on most of the chief questions of the day, he produced four pamphlets; Observations on the Irish Mutiny Bill, a defence of Flood's bequest to Trinity College, a brief treatise on liberty and equality and an argument in favour of the right of minors to vote in Trinity College elections. After the Union, however, he engaged in no more political works, with the exception of a short pamphlet on the Usury Laws, in 1826. Instead, Parsons concentrated his attention on poetry, a number of unfinished prose works on personal subjects, and at length, his treatise on <u>The Christian Revelation.</u> At all times a scholar by inclination and temperament, he found relaxation from the stresses

and disappointments of public life in intellectual pursuits. His work was not adventurous, and apart from scientific matters owed little to the intellectual movements of the early nineteenth-century; his style remained that of the Augustan poets, his philosophy that of Paley and the anti-Deists.

His work as a landlord and local administrator belongs almost entirely to the post-Union period, when political events had ceased to interest him deeply. Although much of his public career was concerned with questions of economic importance he never displayed any interest in schemes to improve the material circumstances of his dependants. The administration of his estates was left in the hands of an agent, and there is no evidence to suggest that Parsons introduced any major changes. He did not attempt to foster local industries. Instead, he concentrated his resources on what was, for him, the more congenial task of transforming the town of Birr into one of the most pleasing residential centres in the Irish provinces. While financial difficulties prevented him from carrying through this work entirely on his own initiative, he infected others with his enthusiasm, and the town remains to this day a worthy memorial to his taste, generosity and orderly discrimination.

Since the most far-reaching part of his work was performed at Birr, it is not surprising to find that Parsons's influence over the life of his own family was a powerful one. Happy in his role as a husband and father, he spent all available time in his home at Birr

Castle. His sons were not sent away to school, and only went across to Oxford when it seemed unavoidably necessary. The entire family enjoyed an intimacy and personal contact, rare in the aristocratic households of nineteenth-century Ireland. He had also a keen sense of family tradition, which showed itself on several occasions, and is well expressed by the following extract from his memoranda:

> Thus the gentleman's son is raised. He is early taught that the true character of gentleness is being kind and meek and benevolent towards those in inferior situations. That it is those most used to power that make the mildest use of it. That it is the note of an upstart, to be oppressive, overbearing, impertinent. And so education takes its effect and forms the mind.[1]

To the tradition of the Parsons family Laurence brought his own distinctive contribution. His predecessors at Birr had been, without exception, efficient administrators and popular landlords. These qualities continued to be displayed by his descendants, but they were accompanied now by a record of academic achievement which had not been evident before. For this, the atmosphere of scholarship which prevailed in Parsons's home, and the encouragement which he gave to the studies of his sons, must have been in large measure responsible.

The scientific investigations of Laurence's eldest son, William, have been considered in an earlier chapter. When William died, in 1867, he was succeeded by his eldest son Laurence, as fourth Earl of Rosse. This Laurence, also a scientist, was successively Chancellor of Dublin University, President of the Royal Dublin Society, President

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1. Memorandum of Sir L. Parsons, undated (Parsons MSS.).

of the Royal Irish Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society.[1] His younger brother, Charles Algernon, invented the steam turbine, and established an engineering works at Heaton, near Newcastle-on-Tyne, for the manufacture of turbines, dynamos and electrical equipment.[2]

Laurence's son William, who succeeded as fifth Earl in 1908, was prevented by military commitments from engaging in works of scholarship. He served with the Coldstream Guards in the South African War, and the Irish Guards in the Great War, 1914-18, when he died from wounds. His son, Michael Laurence Harvey, the sixth and present Earl, is Vice-Chancellor of Dublin University, Chairman of the Georgian Group, a Fellow of the Royal Antiquarian Society and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy.[3]

One of the most striking features of the career of Sir Laurence, the second Earl of Rosse, is the high reputation which he enjoyed amongst his contemporaries. There is no record of an attack on his personal character by any of his political adversaries. Many of them were eager to pay him tribute, even in the heat of controversy. Sir

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1. Complete Peerage, III. 141.
   It is interesting to observe that one of the original thirty-eight members of the Royal Irish Academy, who attended the first meeting on 25 July 1785, under the presidency of the Earl of Charlemont, was Laurence Parsons, subject of this present work. Almost every succeeding generation of the family has been associated with the Academy.
   Roll of Members (R.I.A. MSS.).
2. Complete Peerage, III. 141.
3. Ibid.

John Blaquiere, who opposed him during the debates which followed FitzWilliam's dismissal, declared that 'he was very well persuaded that the hon. gentleman meant well to his country; the general character and conduct of the hon. gentleman was an earnest of his good intentions.'[1] Speaker Foster, whom he challenged on the Corn Bounty in 1797, admitted that 'to the motives of the hon. member --- he gave full credit --- he did not believe that he ever uttered a sentiment or opinion in that House which he did not believe to be just and well-founded, and was sure he had never wilfully misstated a fact in his life.'[2] A contemporary observer has given a critical description of Laurence, during his early years in the Irish House of Commons:

> This gentleman is the eldest son of a Baronet of considerable respectability, and of great popularity in the county which he represents. Educated in the University of Dublin he early distinguished himself by regularity of conduct, by a sedulous attention to literary pursuits, and by a winning affability of deportment that conciliated the affections of all. Thus qualified, the University elected him, when yet young, in life, one of her representatives; and his subsequent conduct fully justified the propriety of her choice.
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> His voice is strong, distinct and deep, more adapted to impress with force than to captivate with sweetness: and his language simple and flowing, though seldom figurative, is ever correct. His action is indeed ungraceful, but often forcible; and though possessing a good person, his manner is stiff, perhaps awkward: In reasoning, he is close, compact, and argumentative; with more scholastic precision than form, and with more condensed strength than outside show of argument - not easily confused, not easily embarrassed by the captious objections of petulance or the insolent interruptions of official importance. His matter is always good, solid and weighty; not skimmed from the surface, but drawn from the depths of his subject; not flimsy and frippery, not the tinsel of a superficial declaimer, but the

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1. P.H., 1795, p. 137.
2. P.H., 1797, p. 457.

> sterling ore of a well-informed speaker. Although, possibly, not sufficiently animated, and too languid in debate, Mr. Parsons has yet energy, and fire, and spirit; and on one celebrated occasion nobly evinced their power by confronting and confounding the daring bully of Administration; one who had been formerly selected, from his supposed intrepidity, to brave the vengeance, whilst he betrayed the rights, of the people of England. In all public questions Mr. Parsons has uniformly acted with integrity and honour becoming the representative of spirited youth and virtuous age: and has secured, what next to the approbation of his own mind must be most dear to him, the applause of genius, of learning, and of virtue.[1]

In deeper perspective, Parsons appears as a man of high principles, integrity and single-minded devotion, struggling courageously against the constitutional evils of his day. Much of his work ended in failure, but this does not detract from the value of his attempt. From amid the turbulent record of eighteenth and early nineteenth century politics few, if any, of his contemporaries emerge so honourably, and so well.

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1. (Scott), Principal Characters of the Irish House of Commons, p. 29. The 'daring bully of Administration' was Luttrell, whom Parsons challenged in 1783, after he had made an insulting attack on Flood, during the debate on the Mutiny bill.

APPENDIX A. THE TRINITY COLLEGE ELECTION OF 1791.

One of the main features of the dispute between Hely-Hutchinson and the Fellows of Trinity College, was the attempt of the former to bring the University representation in Parliament under his own personal control. Unlike the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where parliamentary representatives were elected by university officials and graduates, the members for Dublin University in the Irish Parliament were still, under the terms of an Act of James I, chosen by the corporation of Trinity College, which consisted of the Provost, twenty-two Fellows and seventy Scholars. Thus it was always possible for the Provost to exert a large measure of influence in support of any candidate whom he favoured.

In the election of 1776 Hutchinson successfully brought about the selection of his eldest son, Richard, although the latter was subsequently unseated as the result of a petition. The grounds of the petition were that the Provost, in his capacity as returning officer, had exerted pressure over the electorate.[1]

In 1791 he put forward his second son, Francis, in opposition to the two sitting members, Browne and Parsons. During the election Browne received sixty-two votes, Parsons forty-three and Hutchinson thirty-nine. The Provost thereupon insisted on a re-scrutiny, when the results were Browne fifty-one, Parsons thirty-four and Hutchinson thirty-six. The reduction in Parsons's total was due to the disqualification by the Provost of a number of his votes, as the persons concerned were minors. Parsons had, in fact, received the support of an overwhelming majority amongst the senior members of the College (all but four of the Fellows having voted in his favour), but it happened that a large number of his supporters amongst the Scholars

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1. Report of Procs. in the borough of Trin. Coll., 1791, p. 6.

were under age, and Hutchinson had been quick to perceive and make use of this advantage.[1]

Parsons and his supporters brought a petition before the Irish House of Commons, and the matter was subsequently investigated by a special parliamentary committee. The case of the petitioners rested upon three main contentions; that since minors were accepted as full members of the Corporation of the College, they should therefore be allowed to vote; that the Provost had used information contained in the Entrance Book to determine the age of voters, and that this evidence was invalid; that the Provost had brought pressure to bear upon certain members of the electorate by promising them appointments within his disposal.[2]

The second two contentions were not significant, since the petitioners failed to bring sufficient evidence to support them. The real question at issue concerned the right of minors to vote at College elections. After a large body of evidence had been heard from both sides, Counsel for the Provost succeeded in establishing that the claim had never at any time received formal recognition since the grant of representation to the University under James I, and that on at least one occasion (in 1740), it had been disallowed by resolution of the Irish House of Commons.[3] Largely because of these considerations, the petition was rejected, although only by the narrow margin, of the chairman's casting vote.[4]

Parsons did not, however, give up the struggle. Soon afterwards he published a pamphlet, in the course of which he presented a number of arguments against the committee's decision, which may be summarised as follows:

1. The Charter of James I, which authorised the Provost, Fellows and Scholars to elect two parliamentary representatives, did

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1. Report of Procs. in the borough of Trin. Coll., 1791, p. 9.
2. Ibid., p. 10.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
4. Ibid., p. 178.

not contain any disqualification of the right of minors to vote.[1]

2. Whereas attainment of the age of twenty-one years was normally required as evidence of sufficient maturity to vote, a comparable qualification in the University was election to Scholarship, which in itself signified the attainment of maturity.[2]

3. The University franchise differed from that in other corporations, in that it began sooner, and ended sooner, lasting only for the period of five years during which a Scholarship was held.[3]

4. Those who through outstanding ability obtained scholarship at an early age, should not be penalised by being deprived of the franchise for part of their period of office.[4]

5. As Scholars were members of the University Corporation, they must be capable of taking part in all acts performed in its name.[5]

6. Common Law did not contain any denial of the right. Blackstone did, indeed, declare that minors could not act as electors, but he based this opinion on a statute of William III which did not apply to Ireland. This was a matter on which Irish and English law diverged.[6]

7. At previous College elections the returning officers had always admitted the right of minors to vote, although, Parsons admitted, they had sometimes disallowed it on a re-scrutiny.[7]

In conclusion, he appealed for a special and privileged position for the University, which would enable it to fulfil its function as a place of higher education:

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1. Proof that minors have a right to vote (in Trin. Coll.), p. 1.
2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. Ibid., p. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 5.
5. Ibid., p. 6.
6. Ibid., p. 20.
7. Ibid., p. 30.

> It is not whether we should serve this candidate, or that candidate, that we should consider on this occasion, but whether we should wish to extend or contract, the inducements to literary acquirements. The cause of the University should, in every instance, be considered as the cause of the nation. On every occasion, great or little, we should have its interest at heart. Upon its exertions, the renown of our island in a great degree depends. To pervert its institutions, or dispose of its honours and rewards for the petty purpose of furthering an electioneering interest, would be a crime against the rising reputation of this country. This island is improving rapidly every day, and must look forward to a literary renown, which I am sorry to say it cannot yet boast. That renown, which makes a people conspicuous in the history of mankind, which makes the smallest states sometimes more famous than the greatest empires, and bids their glory survive, when their law, government and dominion are no more.[1]

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1. Proof that minors have a right to vote. (in Trin. Coll.), p. 34.

APPENDIX B. LETTER TO PARSONS FROM THE MARQUIS OF LANSDOWNE.

The career of William Petty, first Marquis of Lansdowne, shows a number of striking similarities to that of Sir Laurence Parsons. Like Parsons, Petty began political life under the influence of a powerful parliamentary personality (the Earl of Chatham), whose principles he continued to advocate from an independent position, long after Chatham's death. Again, he was also distinguished by attempts to win a far-reaching measure of constitutional reform; speaking in support of Burke's reform bill, in 1782, he called on the administration 'to introduce a general system of economy not only in the offices mentioned in the bill, but into every office whatever.' He was a consistent opponent of war which, like Parsons, he felt to be detrimental to commercial interests; he denounced the war against the American colonists (while by no means supporting their cause), and opposed the war with France in 1794 for almost precisely the same reasons as Parsons. Moreover, while Petty's character was much less attractive than that of Parsons, both men shared the same distrust of political parties, and both allowed the effect of their intellectual powers to be frequently mitigated by want of tact and poor handling of men.[1]

Although most of Lansdowne's career was concerned with affairs in England, he showed considerable sympathy for attempts to reform the constitution of Ireland, with which country he was closely connected by ties of ancestry and property. In 1779, shortly after he had taken his seat in the Irish House of Lords as Earl of Shelbourne, he introduced a vote of censure on the administration for their neglect.[2] There is no evidence to suggest that Petty and Parsons ever met, but the former

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1. D.N.B., William Petty, first Marquis of Lansdowne.
2. Ibid.

was apparently impressed by the efforts which Sir Laurence was making to win reform in the Irish Parliament. In the spring of 1796, shortly after FitzWilliam had taken office, he sent Parsons a letter, in which his own views on the Irish situation were set down at some length.

During the early part of the letter Petty argued the necessity to engage in reform gradually, without making any sudden upheaval in the constitution. Although more immediately concerned with FitzWilliam's desire to introduce Catholic emancipation, he asserted the general principle in words which bear a remarkable resemblance to those which Sir Laurence had already used in his personal memoranda:

> I was early in life strongly impressed with the truth of Mr. Locke's principles regarding toleration and government. I have in consequence always wished well to the emancipation of Ireland, and the Catholics, and have contributed as far as lay in my power to both, but I own I should have been for proceeding more gradually, first upon the principle which has been universally acknowledged in all ages and in all countries, of the danger attending too sudden changes, next to give some (sic) to spread instruction and something like property among the poor of all descriptions to make them properly susceptible of such large influx of liberty.[1]

Like Parsons, Petty was clearly afraid of the potential threat which would be presented by the lower classes, once they had been organised for political purposes. This led him to put forward a plan, designed to pacify and improve the lot of the peasantry in Ireland, the chief features of which may be summarised as follows:

1. The government should lend to every barony the sum of £1,000, which would be issued to local peasantry at low rates of interest, to enable them to grow wheat and other expensive crops.

2. A Board of Agriculture should be set up in every county, with power to award premiums for efficient methods of farming.

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1. Lansdowne to Parsons, 6 Mar. 1795 (Parsons MSS.).

3. The Phoenix Park should be given over to experiments in the breeding of cattle.

4. A good Grammar School should be set up in every county.

5. A 'great school' should be established in each of the provinces, where both modern and ancient languages would be taught.

6. The University of Dublin only wanted examinations in Modern History and Political Economy, to make it preferable to those of Oxford and Cambridge, and to many on the continent.[1]

Petty admitted that these arrangements must be 'incredibly expensive,' but he pointed out that large sums were already being expended on useless armies - an argument that was certainly close to Parsons's heart.[2] Yet, probably for reasons of cost, Parsons made no effort to support the plan, and there is no evidence to suggest that he was ever in contact with Petty again.

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1. Lansdowne to Parsons, 6 Mar. 1705 (Parsons MSS.).
2. Ibid.

APPENDIX C. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliographical Note.

A large part of this work is based on material derived from the Parsons MSS. in the possession of the Earl of Rosse, at Birr Castle. These MSS. may be divided into five main sections:

I. The earliest documents in the Parsons collection are preserved in two cloth-bound volumes. The first of these, which is entitled 'Parsons Family Records,' contains 255 folio pages and includes a large number of documents belonging to the seventeenth century, the earliest being a patent granting lands in Ely O'Carroll to the first Sir Laurence Parsons in 1620. The second volume, 'Ancient Documents of the Parsons Family,' has ninety-four folio pages, and comprises documents belonging to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Micro-film copies of both volumes are available in the National Library of Ireland.

A number of documents concerned with the arrangements made by the first Sir Laurence for the administration of the town of Birr, which were examined by Thomas Cooke at the beginning of the last century, do not appear to survive.

II. A large body of letters, memoranda, financial statements and architectural drawings belonging to Sir Laurence Parsons, second Earl of Rosse, together with a number of official documents relating to the Irish Post Office. This is by far the most numerous and prolific section of the Parsons MSS. and has been very well preserved. Portion of Sir Laurence's diary for 1794 was used by S.L. Gwynn (Henry Grattan and his Times) in his examination of the Volunteer movement, and this is the only part of the Parsons MSS. to have been published.

III. Four cloth-bound volumes in which appear political memoranda, the drafts of several literary works, and poetry, in the handwriting of the second Earl. The MS. of his pamphlet on the Irish Mutiny Bill has proved of particular value, as no printed copy of the work appears

to be still in existence. A small scarlet-cloth volume contains copies of most of his poems, and a remarkably interesting account of the events which preceded his dismissal from the command of the King's County militia in 1798.

IV. Correspondence and scientific papers of William, third Earl of Rosse. Only a few of these documents are, however, relevant to the purpose of the present work.

V. Correspondence of John Clere Parsons, second son of the second Earl of Rosse. These documents are found in a wooden chest at the west end of the main gallery, where they appear to have been originally placed by Sir Laurence himself, shortly after his son's death.

The present Earl and Countess of Rosse have both taken a deep interest in the task of preserving the Parsons MSS. Papers discovered in many parts of the Castle have been brought together in a room in the north-east tower, known as the 'Museum,' which has been set aside as an archives-room. Lady Rosse has placed a number of the more important documents in protective cellophane covers, and this has proved a highly successful method of preservation.

The extent of the material available in the Rosse Estate Office has proved disappointing. There are no rent-rolls, or regular statements of accounts, before the middle years of the nineteenth century. The only documents belonging to an earlier period are some miscellaneous deeds, dating from 1736. As contemporary descriptions of Irish agriculture, notably Young's Tour and Coote's report to the Royal Dublin Society, make remarkably little reference to the Parsons property, it has not been possible to engage in an adequate examination of the operation of the estate during Sir Laurence's lifetime. A series of estate maps, drawn for the third Earl of Rosse between 1853 and 1856, are of a high quality, and have been very helpful.

The Parsons MSS. have been supplemented by material from a number of other local archives. The register of marriages, baptisms and deaths, in Birr Parish Church, is incomplete for this period, and does

not appear to have been regularly kept. The vestry minutes are more satisfactory, and have yielded some interesting information on the part played by Sir Laurence in the arrangements for the building of the new parish church. The Lloyd MSS. in the possession of Major T. Lloyd, formerly of Gloster, include few documents which are relevant to our purpose; yet, the 'Pedigree of the Lloyd Family of Gloster,' is a magnificent genealogical work from which much useful information has been derived. Major A. Atkinson, formerly of Cangort, possesses a typescript work entitled 'History of the Atkinson Family of Cangort,' by his ancestor, Archdeacon Atkinson, which gives a description of the establishment of one of the other early planter families in the district.

Information on Sir Laurence's early career has been obtained from documents in a number of different archives in Trinity College, Dublin. Amongst these, the Journals of the Historical Society have been of particular value, although they contain less detailed reports than it became customary to insert during the following century. Details contained in the Entrance, Examination and Degree Books, have also been helpful, and I am indebted to Captain Shaw, Assistant Registrar, for his painstaking explanation of the terminology and symbolism used in these volumes. Amongst the MSS. in the College Library, MS. F. 4. 18, a series of late seventeenth-century Irish pedigrees, on which much genealogical research, including the works of O'Hart, has been based, gives a defective account of the Parsons family.

Parsons's political career is well illustrated by the reports of his speeches which appear in the Irish Parliamentary Register and in Parliamentary Debates, 1, 2, and 3 Series. Apart however, from the Charlemont MSS. which contain a number of valuable references, he is mentioned only infrequently by contemporary writers. It is particularly disappointing to find that Wolfe Tone, having attested to his friendship with Parsons during the early part of his political career, should have failed to mention him again. We find no comment by Cornwallis or Castlereagh on his opposition during the Union controversy, nor by Peel or Wellington concerning his views on Catholic emancipation.

Parsons's activities as Postmaster-General for Ireland are well documented by the British Museum Add. MSS. and by the MSS. in the Public Record Office of Ireland.

We are fortunate to possess an excellent description of events at Birr by a contemporary observer who was himself implicated in many of them. This is contained in two works by T.A. Cooke, a local lawyer and antiquarian. Cooke's History of Birr (published later in the century by his son, T.L. Cooke), contains a graphic account of several important incidents during Sir Laurence's lifetime, while his Picture of Parsonstown, although less informative, gives a valuable description of Sir Laurence's architectural improvements. Cooke's work has been supplemented by the topographical works of Wakefield, Lewis and Young.

Parsons has received very inadequate attention from secondary authors. Lecky examined his speeches on constitutional reform in 1791, and Catholic emancipation in 1793, but showed only a superficial knowledge of the motives which lay behind them. Gooch, in Cambridge Modern History, Vol. IX, erroneously assumed that he was a member of the Whig Club. MacDowell in Irish Public Opinion, 1750-1800, mentioned him frequently and used a remarkably interesting letter which he wrote to F. Burrows on the subject of Catholic freedom, now found amongst the R.I.A. Burrows MSS. Yet in Public Opinion and Government Policy in Ireland, 1801/8, the same author mentioned him only once, in connection with local affairs, and incorrectly described him in the index as the fourth Earl of Rosse. Curtis dismissed him in one footnote. All failed to appreciate the significance of the independent position which Parsons maintained amongst the Irish opposition.

Information on social life in Dublin has been derived from the works of Miss D. Maxwell, M.J. Craig and S.L. Gwynn, and also from an interesting opening chapter in Sir Frederick Falkiner's little-known Foundation of the Hospital of King Charles II. Extensive use has been made of the genealogical compilations of Burke, Debrett and Cocaigne, and of a number of articles in the Dictionary of National Biography.

S Y N O P S I S.

A. ORIGINAL SOURCES.

(I) Manuscript Material.

DUBLIN

Public Record Office of Ireland.

Irish Registry of Deeds.

Trinity College archives.

Trinity College Library.

College Historical Society.

Royal Irish Academy.

BIRR

Birr Castle.

Rosse Estate Office.

St. Brendan's Parish Church.

MSS. of Major T. Lloyd, formerly of Gloster.

LONDON

Public Record Office.

British Museum.

(II) Printed and Calendared Material

Record Publications.

Records of Parliament.

Irish Manuscripts Commission.

Irish Record Commissioners.

Historical Manuscripts Commission.

Other Printed Documentary Material.

Contemporary and Nearly Contemporary Histories and Tracts.

B. MODERN WORKS

General.

Dublin and University Life.

Birr and Neighbourhood.

Scientific.

Genealogical and Biographical.

A. ORIGINAL SOURCES

(1) Manuscript Material

Ireland.

DUBLIN

Public Record Office of Ireland

Carton 511.
Carton 520.
Carton 522.
Carton 530.
— Correspondence of the Earl of Hardwicke.

Carton 534.
Carton 541.
Carton 550.
Carton 554.
Carton 556.
Carton 559.
Carton 563.
Carton 588.
— Miscellaneous documents of the Irish Post Office.

Irish Registry of Deeds

Vol. 372.
Vol. 380.
Vol. 491.
Vol. 560.
Vol. 573.
Vol. 1835.
Vol. 1838.
— Miscellaneous deeds.

Trinity College archives

Entrance Book, 1769-1835.

Examinations, 1771 - 1797.

Degrees, 1742 - 1834.

Trinity College Library

MS. F. 4. 18. Irish family pedigrees.

College Note Books, 1777 and 1781.

College Historical Society

Journals, 1778 - 1782.

Secretary's Law Book and Declaration Book, 1795.

List of Members, 1795.

Royal Irish Academy

Books of Survey and Distribution.

Burrows MSS. (Parsons to P. Burrows).

BIRR

Birr Castle

Parsons Family MSS., 1595 - 1689.

Ancient Documents of the Parsons Family.

Pedigrees of Parsons and Clere families.

Political writings of Sir L. Parsons, second Earl of Rosse. 4 Vols.

Essay on the early life of Henry Flood by same.

History of John Clere Parsons by same.

Poems of same.

Correspondence of same.

Miscellaneous accounts of same.

Architectural drawings of same.

Muster roll of the King's County regiment of militia, 1793/4.

Miscellaneous documents of the Irish Post Office.

Miscellaneous accounts pertaining to the erection of St. Brendan's Church, Birr.

Memorial of the Roman Catholic clergy and people of Birr parish, 1834.

Correspondence of John Clere Parsons.

Rosse Estate Office

Miscellaneous deeds, 1736 - 1887.

Estate maps, 1853 - 1856.

Rules for Lord Rosse's estates, 1847 and 1853.

St. Brendan's Parish Church

Register of marriages, baptisms and burials, 1772 - 1838

Vestry minutes, 1764 - 1870.

MSS. of Major T. Lloyd, formerly of Gloster

Pedigree of the Lloyd family of Gloster.

England

LONDON

Public Record Office

Home Office records relating to Ireland (H.O. 100. 122 and 123).

British Museum.

Add. MS. 27781 (Parsons to G. Woodfall).

Add. MS. 31229 (Parsons to A. Marsden).

Add. MS. 35676 (Parsons to the Earl of Hardwicke).

Add. MS. 35748 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 35750 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 35754 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 35755 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 37299(Parsons to Lord Wellesley).

Add. MS. 38249 (Parsons to Earl of Liverpool).

Add. MS. 38253 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 38278 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 38296 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 38573 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 38575 (Same to same).

Add. MS. 38252 (Memorandum of Sir L. Parsons).

Add. MS. 38195 (Parsons to Sir R. Peel).

Add. MS. 38191 (S. Perceval to Parsons).

Add. MS. 40221 (Correspondence of Sir R. Peel).

Add. MS. 40221 (The same).

Add. MS. 40222 (The same).

Add. MS. 40228 (The same).

Add. MS. 40229 (The same).

Add. MS. 40230 (The same).

Add. MS. 40235 (The same).

Add. MS. 40236 (The same).

Add. MS. 40238 (The same).

Add. MS. 40242 (Correspondence of Sir R. Peel).
Add. MS. 40244 (The same).
Add. MS. 40246 (The same).
Add. MS. 40248 (The same).
Add. MS. 40250 (The same).
Add. MS. 40251 (The same).
Add. MS. 40252 (The same).
Add. MS. 40260 (The same).
Add. MS. 40269 (The same).
Add. MS. 40270 (The same).
Add. MS. 40271 (The same).
Add. MS. 40272 (The same).
Add. MS. 40274 (The same).
Add. MS. 40276 (The same).
Add. MS. 40277 (The same).
Add. MS. 40278 (The same).
Add. MS. 40346 (The same).
Add. MS. 40192 (Parsons to Lord Whitworth).
Add. MS. 40251 (Parsons to W. Gregory).
Add. MS. 40254 (Parsons to Revd. T. Hamilton).

(11) Printed and Calendared Material

Record Publications

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Calendar of State Papers relating to Ireland, 1509 - 1670 (24 vols., London, 1860 - 1911).

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Calendar of Parsons wills and administrations, 1417 - 1801 (London, 1802).

Calendar of Leicestershire wills and administrations, 1695 - 1649 (London,1902).

Calendar of Marriage licences for Leicestershire, 1570 - 1729 (London, 1910).

Register of the Freemen of Leicester, 1196 - 1930 (London,1937).

Records of Parliament

A. IRELAND

Irish Parliamentary Register, 1782 - 1800.

A Report of the debates in both Houses on the Roman Catholic Bill, 1792 (Dublin, 1792).

The Proceedings of the Parliament of Ireland, 1793 (3 vols., Dublin, 1793).

Reports of the secret committees, 1797.

Report of the Proceedings in the case of the borough of Trinity College, Dublin, 1791.

List of the Members of both Houses of the Irish Parliament who voted on the motion for an Address to his Majesty acceding to the discussion of a plan for a legislative Union with Great Britain, 1799 (Dublin, 1799).

The Statutes at large passed in the Parliaments held in Ireland (20 vols., Dublin, 1786 - 1801).

B. GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Parliamentary Debates, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Series.

Index to Acts extending and relating to Ireland from January 1801 to July 1815 (London, 1815).

Barrow, (J.H.), ed. The mirror of Parliament, 1828 - 1837 (19 vols., London, 1838/41).

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