

## The Earls of Thomond and their Burial Monuments 1543-1741

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The earldom of Thomond was in existence for almost two hundred years. During that period eight O'Briens held the title of earl of Thomond. However, not every title holder erected a burial monument and only four tombs of this Gaelic lineage, in whole or in part, survive. These aristocratic tombs reflect the style and fashion of their periods and the elite position these titled men held in contemporary society.

Murchadh Ó Briain, first earl of Thomond (1543-51), succeeded his brother Conchubhar to the lordship of Thomond in 1539. Initially Murchadh continued to assert the independence of the Dál gCais but by 1541 the reality of the military situation compelled him to adopt a more pragmatic approach. In negotiations with Sir Anthony St Leger he agreed to recognise the sovereignty of the king of England and to surrender the territory of Thomond in return for a charter of his lands and a title in the English peerage. Travelling to London in 1543 he was created first earl of Thomond and baron of Inchiquin but with right of succession to his nephew Donnchadh, who became first baron of Ibracken. As part of the agreement Murchadh promised to renounce his Irish title, to speak the English language, to wear English clothes and to assist with the spread English law and custom in the lordship of Thomond. Although he had recognised Henry VIII as head of the church, Murchadh continued to practice the religion of a traditional Catholic. Drawing up his will in June 1551, he left the grain harvest of Clonroad to the Franciscan friars and asked for his body to be buried in Ennis friary:

*In primis do et lego animam meam deo patri omnipotenti, beatæ Mariæ, et omnibus sanctis, corpusque meum sepeliendum in Ecclesia de Enish in tumbo quem ego feci in choro eiusdem Ecclesiæ [I give and leave my soul to God my almighty father, to the Blessed Mary and all the saints and my body to be buried in the church of Ennis in the tomb which I have made in the choir of the same church.]<sup>1</sup>*

The first earl's tomb was built into the south wall of the choir near the high altar, partly blocking a choir window (see Fig. 1). Today it is known as the Inchiquin tomb. Burial close to the high altar was a sign not only of sanctity but also of social status. The tomb's narrow dimensions indicate that this was a space for which there was much competition. The internal width is a mere 178cm, hardly sufficient space for a body to be laid flat. To compensate two low recesses were cut into the wall at floor level to provide extra room for head and feet. A heavy canopy with a sloped roof and a frontal of ten ornate ogee-headed panels surmounts the structure. Perhaps the tomb's most attractive feature is the

<sup>1</sup> John Ainsworth (ed.), *The Inchiquin Manuscripts* (Dublin, 1961) no. 1480; See also Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'A Comparative Study of the Wills of the First and Fourth Earls of Thomond' in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 34 (1992) pp 48-63.



**Fig. 1** The vacant Inchiquin Tomb of Ennis Friary; burial place of first earl of Thomond, 1551 (Photo: courtesy of National Monuments Service).

miniature groining and floral decoration on the underside of the canopy. On the back wall and on the internal side walls are delicate depictions of carved foliage in low relief. The tomb displays no religious iconography, which is strange, considering that the earl committed his soul to the protection of God, the Blessed Virgin and all the saints. Neither does the memorial follow any established pattern of sixteenth-century funerary design and therefore is a one-off in the Irish tomb building tradition. In subsequent decades the tomb became the burial place of the barons of Inchiquin, who were Murchadh Ó Briain's direct descendants. The original tomb chest has long disappeared and in the early nineteenth century the vacant monument was appropriated for burial by the Priestley family.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Westropp, 'Ennis Abbey and the O'Brien Tombs', in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 25 (1895) pp 150-2.

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Donnchadh Ó Briain, second earl of Thomond (1551-53), succeeded his uncle Murchadh to the lordship. Donnchadh, an admirer of the English establishment, married Lady Helen Butler, youngest daughter of the eighth earl of Ormond. The house of Ormond was noted for its long years of loyalty to the monarchy of England. Donnchadh with his wife initiated the building of a new mansion house in the English style at Clonroad.<sup>3</sup> However, his installation as earl caused much contention among the senior branches of the O'Briens, who found themselves excluded from succession to the lordship under English law. Eventually the dissenting O'Briens attacked the stronghold of Clonroad at night grievously wounding Donnchadh, who died of his injuries in April 1553. He was laid to rest like all his ancestors in the church of Ennis friary.

Donnchadh's sudden death did not permit the erection of a burial monument; instead he was interred in an old tomb in the chapel of St Michael, where many of his predecessors had been buried. St Michael's was an ornate side chapel built onto the southern wall of the nave in the late fifteenth century. The tomb was contained within a vaulted niche in the chapel's western wall. The lower portion consisted of a decorated tomb chest, while the niche's upper portion was filled with an elaborate screen of flame-like tracery (see Fig. 2). Unfortunately only portion of the tomb survives but the monument was typical of the canopied wall-tomb tradition of the west of Ireland, complete examples of which may be seen at Dungiven, Co. Derry, Strade, Co. Mayo and Kilconnell, Co. Galway.<sup>4</sup>

Conchubhar Ó Briain, third earl of Thomond (1558-81), did not succeed to the earldom immediately after the death of his father. His uncle Domhnall, ignoring the claims of his nephew under English law, was inaugurated leader of the Dál gCais, according to Irish practice. The energetic Domhnall remained in power for five years before he was eventually ousted by the lord deputy, the earl of Sussex, who in 1558 restored the castles of Bunratty, Clare and Clonroad to Conchubhar Ó Briain and installed him as the third earl. Conchubhar completed the mansion house begun by his father at Clonroad. But he turned out to be a weak and vacillating leader. Despite owing his position entirely to the English interest, he opposed the introduction of English law courts into Thomond. As a consequence he spent a year exiled in France. On his return he had to accept the operation of the assize courts in his territory and also agreed to have his eldest son Donnchadh educated at the court of Queen Elizabeth. When he died in 1581 he was buried in the Franciscan friary in the same tomb as his father.

The tomb of the two earls is alluded to by the Franciscan Luke Wadding in 1634: '*In sacello S. Michaelis consurgit mausoleum comitum praedictorum ex marmore polito subtus concameratum* [In the chapel of St Michael rises the tomb of the said earls [of Thomond], made of polished marble under a vaulted arch].<sup>5</sup> Anthony Mac Brody, who had ministered as a friar in Ennis during the 1640s records a similar message except he reports that the chapel was dedicated to St Francis: '*In ornatissimo sancti Francisci sacello sepultura est, Comitum Tuomoniae* [In the most ornate chapel of St Francis is the tomb of the earls of Thomond].<sup>6</sup> It is possible that Mac Brody was mistaken in the name since the altar of St Francis is located in the nave. In any event both writers agree that the earls were buried in the chapel, which is the only one attached to the church of the friary.

<sup>3</sup> Tadhg Ó Donnchadha, *An Leabhar Muimhneach* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1940) p. 393.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'Canopied wall tomb of Ennis Friary 1460-70', in *The Other Clare*, 20 (1996) pp 20-4.

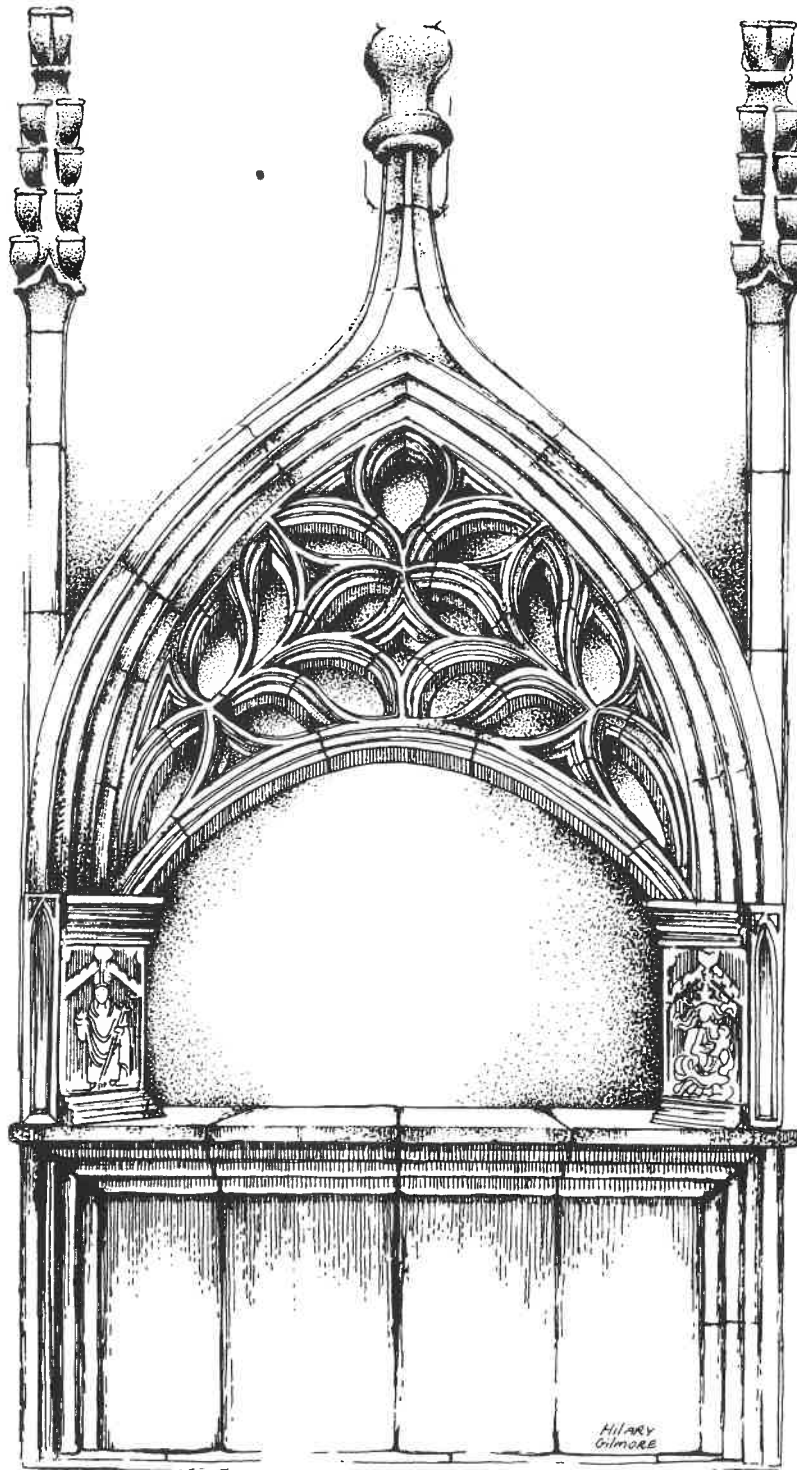
<sup>5</sup> Luke Wadding, *Annalles Minorem* (Rome, 1731-41, 2nd edition), viii, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Bruodino, *Propugnaculum Catholicae Veritatis* (Prague, 1669) p. 968.



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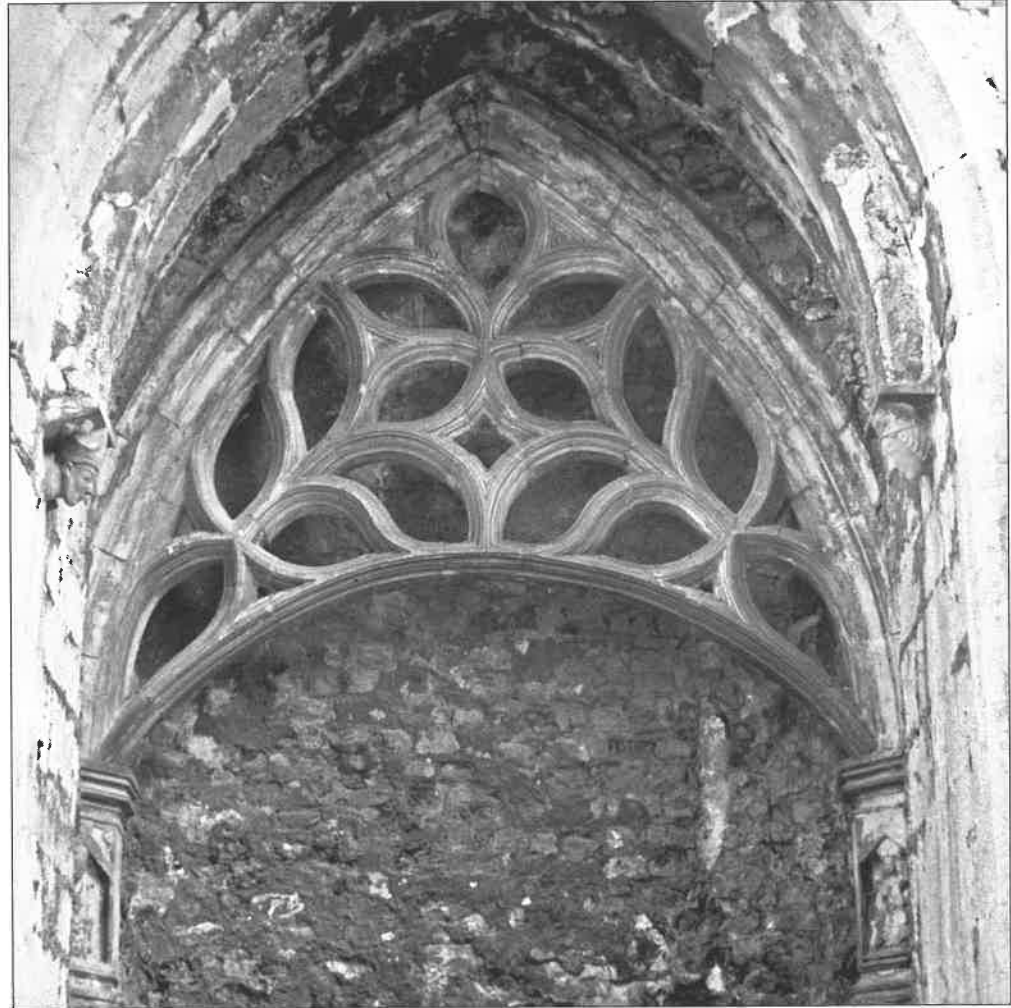


**Fig. 2** A reconstruction of canopied wall tomb in St Michael's chapel, Ennis Friary  
(Drawing: courtesy of Hilary Gilmore).



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**Fig. 3** Flamboyant tracery screen fixed underneath the bell tower of Ennis Friary  
(Photo: courtesy of National Monuments Service).

The portion of the tomb that survives is the tracery screen that once decorated the upper portion of the wall tomb (see Fig. 3). Preserved today high above the ground under the southern arch of the bell tower, it consists of a framework of flamboyant tracery, supported on two short pedestals into the faces of which have been cut pentagonal niches. The niche on the left is filled by a bishop carrying a cross staff and the one on the right by the crowned figure of the virgin carrying the Christ child. It is a superb piece of work and while the sculptor is unknown, he has carved his mark, a roundel of rich foliage, on the inward face of the virgin and child pedestal. The religious significance of the carvings is clear, the virgin and the church would protect the deceased, would pray for his soul and intercede on his behalf in heaven. Conchubhar Ó Briain, the occupant of the tomb, was the last earl of Thomond to be buried in Ennis Friary. The tomb of the two earls remained intact and undisturbed during the Nine Years War, 1594-1603, and throughout the

confederate wars of the 1640s. However, when the Cromwellian army occupied Ennis in September 1651, the English soldiery on entering the friary destroyed the interior of the church by tearing down the religious images and smashing the unprotected tombs.<sup>7</sup> At some stage the tracery screen of the Thomond tomb was rescued and placed for its safety under the arch of the bell tower, where it still remains.

Donough O'Brien (Donnchadh Ó Briain), the fourth earl (1581-1624), was one of the few people of sixteenth-century Thomond, who could speak, read and write the English language.<sup>8</sup> His education at the court of Queen Elizabeth had made a tremendous impression on him. He became an admirer of English culture and civilization and set about with considerable energy in Anglicising his lordship. Unlike some of his predecessors he was a man of ability. His education ensured that he could function as an agent of government and as a competent military leader. During the Nine Years War he was the staunchest ally on the English side and played a major role in the defeat of the Ulster lords at Kinsale. Central to his policy of Anglicisation was the dispossession of the native inhabitants of Thomond and their replacement by English and Dutch settlers.<sup>9</sup> He caused much anger and distress among his own people. Contemporaries described him 'as truly English as if he had been born in Middlesex' and 'had drawn more blood of his own people than is to be believed'.<sup>10</sup> For his better security he moved his principal residence from the mansion house of Clonroad to the castle of Bunratty. In March 1615 he was rewarded for his services to the crown by being made president of Munster. Drawing up his will, in November 1617, and breaking with tradition, he asked to be buried in St Mary's cathedral, Limerick:

I charge my son Henry to repair, finish and make up my tomb at Limerick and to lay upon it my picture in alabaster, in robes and in the top of the tomb all pieces of armour as is upon Sir Francis Vere's tomb in Westminster; and two earls and two barons to be the supporters of the said uppermost stone as the said Sir Francis his tomb is erected and also to hang an bedeck the said tomb (by order of heraldry) with my coat of armour and all other rights due and appertaining to an earl.<sup>11</sup>

Sir Francis Vere, one of the leading military commanders of his age, spent many years fighting the Spanish on the continent. His tomb in Westminster Abbey is a large monument of alabaster and black marble, which was inspired by the tomb of Count Englebert of Nassau in the cathedral church at Breda in Holland.<sup>12</sup> The monument is a free standing table tomb consisting of two platforms. On the lower slab, raised slightly off the floor, is the alabaster effigy of Sir Francis lying on a carved cushion. The upper slab, supported on the corners by four kneeling knights, displays the sculpted armour and weaponry of the deceased (see Fig. 4). Sir Francis Vere died in 1609 and Donough O'Brien would have seen his tomb on one of his many visits to London. The only difference he stipulated for his own monument was that two of the human figures supporting the upper platform

<sup>7</sup> 'Diary of Parliamentary forces' in J.T. Gilbert (ed.), *A Contemporary History of Affairs in Ireland, 1641-52* (Dublin 1879), iii, p. 250. See also the Considine memorial in the nave of Ennis Friary, where it states that the tomb was rebuilt in 1686 following the Cromwellian destruction: *post destructa fuit Cromvelli marte furentis et reparata*.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Palmer, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001) p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> Bernadette Cunningham, 'Donnchadh O'Brien, fourth earl of Thomond and the Anglicisation of the Thomond lordship', in Matthew Lynch & Patrick Nugent (eds), *Clare History and Society* (Dublin, 2008) pp 73-6.

<sup>10</sup> Palmer, *Language and Conquest*, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Ó Dálaigh, 'Wills of First and Fourth Earls of Thomond', *N.M.A.J.*, 34 (1992) pp 61-2.

<sup>12</sup> D.J.B. Trim, 'Francis Vere (d.1609)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) lvi, p 295.



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**Fig. 4** Tomb of Sir Francis Vere chapel of St John the Evangelist, Westminster Abbey  
(Photo: courtesy of Spitalfieldslife.com).

should bear the rank of earl and the other two the rank of baron. The earl's choice of funerary monument is significant. He clearly did not envision himself as an administrator or politician but primarily as a soldier and military leader. In keeping with the Protestant ethos the tomb was secular and devoid of religious imagery. At a time when most noblemen were proud to advertise on their tombs the pedigrees of their ancestors the Thomond monument was unusual in that there was no display of O'Brien's formidable lineage, a defect, which as we shall see, his son and heir Henry attempted to remedy.

The man most likely to have carved the Thomond tomb was Alexander Hills, a tomb builder of Holborn, London. Hills was employed by Richard Boyle, earl of Cork in 1620 to construct his own family monument at St Mary's church, Youghal.<sup>13</sup> Boyle, a close friend of Donough O'Brien, would have known that he was in the process of constructing a tomb at Limerick. Although using the same builder, the monuments both men commissioned were very different. The Youghal tomb celebrates family and commemorates Boyle, his two wives and their sixteen children. In Limerick, on the other hand, the earl

<sup>13</sup> Clodagh Tait, *Death Burial and Commemoration in Ireland 1550-1650* (London, 2002) p. 102.

of Thomond intended that he alone would be represented on the monument. Following his employment by Donough O'Brien, the 'mason carver' Alexander Hills remained in Ireland, and in 1642 resided at Kilnecally (*Cill na Cailli*, 'nuns' church) in the parish of Killone, just south of Ennis.<sup>14</sup>

The Thomond tomb was sited near the north wall of the chancel in St Mary's cathedral. To make way for the monument and vault underneath, the ornate tomb of Conchubhar Ó Deadhaidh, Bishop of Limerick 1400-34, was first cleared away and his effigy, in order that it would not compete with the new O'Brien monument, placed on an inferior tomb chest on the opposite side of the chancel.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the erection of the monument did not comply with the original instructions of the earl; and that his wife, Lady Elizabeth Fitzgerald, was commemorated. The only elements of the Thomond tomb currently surviving are the mutilated effigies of the earl and his wife, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. She had predeceased her husband, dying in January 1618. While the effigy of the earl shows him lying on his back, his wife is portrayed lying on her right side. It is likely therefore that the figure of the earl lay on the lower tier of the monument with his wife's figure on the upper tier. O'Brien left no instructions for the portrayal of his wife, so if her effigy occupied the upper platform, there would have been little space available for the display of the earl's arms and armour. Donough O'Brien, fourth earl of Thomond, died at Clonmel, 5 September 1624, and was interred a few days later with little ceremony in the cathedral church at Limerick.<sup>16</sup> His monument bore a Latin inscription crediting the earl with the attributes of Mars (war and agriculture) and Mercury (commerce and communication):

*Dicatum est hoc monumentum in felicissimam memoriam prænobilis viri Donati O'Brien, Comitis Thomondiae, Baronis de Ibrackan, Momoniæ præsidis nec non serenissimæ Majestatis a secretioribus per Hiberniam Consiliis, qui ab antiquissima & imprimis honorata familia (quondam hujus ecclesiae fundatoribus) ornatissimus areptus honores non minus suam posteritatem summa ipsius virtute decorandam curavit; qui tam in Marte quam Mercurio eximiae fidelitatis et dignissimi meriti equale testimonium præbends ab Elizabetha regina; regeque Jacobo, in vicissimis monarchiis, cumulatissimis honorum acervis, præ sui temporis heroibus insigniebatur. [This monument is dedicated in happy memory to the most noble man Donough O'Brien, Earl of Thomond, Baron of Ibracken, President of Munster, who engaged with his most serene majesty in secret consultations about Ireland; who from the most ancient and especially honoured family (formerly founders of this church), acquired the worthiest distinctions and by his diplomacy and courage restored no less than the whole of his posterity; who to both Mars and Mercury, deserving of equal merit, had particular fidelity, according to the testimony of Queen Elizabeth and King James, and being close to the monarchs, several honours were bestowed on the great man, more than many of his time.]<sup>17</sup>*

Henry O'Brien, fifth earl of Thomond (1624-39), was educated at Eton, Oxford University and Trinity College Dublin. He made Bunratty his principal place of residence.

<sup>14</sup> Deposition of Alexander Hill, November 1642, Trinity College Dublin, MS 829, 050r.

<sup>15</sup> Clodagh Tait, 'The Earl and the Bishop: Further Light on the Thomond and O'Dea Monuments in St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick', in *N.M.A.J.*, 42 (2002) pp 7-9.

<sup>16</sup> Tait, 'The Earl and the Bishop', pp 7-9.

<sup>17</sup> John Lodge, *The peerage of Ireland*, revised by Mervyn Archdall (Dublin, 1789) ii, p. 35.

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While he maintained good relations with the lord deputy, the Earl of Strafford, in Dublin, he contributed little to the politics of the period. Having no male heir, his main pursuit in life became the raising of large sums of money as dowries for his five daughters so that they could marry into the English aristocracy. He heaped huge debts upon the earldom and squandered much of the inheritance. In his will he left orders for an elaborate funeral and instructed his executors:

To cause my own statue, carved in robes, sword and crownet, to be erected and placed standing at the head of my father's statue from the ground up, and my brother's statue, according to his degree, standing at my father's foot, and that they cause my grandfather and great grandfather's statue to be erected upon the broad stone that is fixed over my father with an altar between them kneeling on both sides thereof in their parliamentary robes, swords and crownets, according to their degree, and this and all needful reparations fitting for the further beautifying of the monument at Limerick.<sup>18</sup>

Henry's instructions only make sense in the context of the Thomond monument being of similar construction to the Vere monument at Westminster abbey. Clearly the effigy of the fourth earl's wife would need to be removed from the upper platform to make room for the two kneeling statues of his grandfather and great grandfather. Henry was aware of the importance of the public display of family lineage and of the odd situation whereby the genealogy of his distinguished ancestors was absent from the monument. To remedy this, he attempted to portray his pedigree back to Donnchadh, second earl of Thomond, who was his direct ancestor, and to omit any reference to the first earl, who was of the Inchiquin O'Briens. Under this arrangement no female member of the lineage would be commemorated. However, it is extremely unlikely that any alteration was made to the monument. In the first instance no money was set aside in the will for its renovation and the earldom was in such straightened circumstances following the profligacy of Henry that it is unlikely that Barnaby, his successor, would spend scarce financial resources on enhancing the family memorial. In any event the outbreak of the 1641 insurgency would have brought all thought of operations to a halt. In April 1639, three weeks after drawing up his will, Henry, earl of Thomond, died and was buried in the O'Brien vault under the chancel of Limerick cathedral.

Barnabas O'Brien, sixth earl of Thomond (1639-57), like his brother Henry, was educated in England from an early age. In 1605, aged fourteen, he matriculated from Brasenose College, Oxford, and later attended Lincoln's Inn, London, where he received a legal training. With the assistance of his father in 1614 he made overtures of marriage to Elizabeth, only daughter of the earl of Ormond. These, however, were rejected, Ormond having loftier ambitions for his daughter.<sup>19</sup> In the end Barnabas opted to marry Mary, daughter of Sir George Fermor, a country gentleman of Northamptonshire in the English midlands. She had previously been married to the Scottish peer, Robert, Lord Crichton of Sanquhar, a convicted murderer, who was hanged in 1612 for the assassination of John Turner, a London fencing master.<sup>20</sup> In time this lady would come to wield a disproportionate influence over the Thomond household and on the family's decision

<sup>18</sup> Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'An inventory of the contents of Bunratty Castle and the will of Henry, fifth Earl of Thomond, 1639', in *N.M.A.J.*, 36 (1995) p. 162.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Ohlmeyer, *Making Ireland English* (London, 2012) p. 175.

<sup>20</sup> M.J. Bowman, 'Robert Crichton (d.1612)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) xiv, p. 187.

to make England rather than Ireland their place of permanent domicile. The marriage ceremony took place in the bride's home parish of Easton Neston in July 1615. Evidently the couple had no ambition to live in Ireland and they set up residence at the manor of Great Billing in Northamptonshire, which they occupied sometime prior to 1628.<sup>21</sup> Great Billing was just fourteen miles north of Mary Fermor's home at Easton Neston and allowed her regular contact with her family and kinfolk. Her husband Barnabas conducted whatever business he had in Ireland from Great Billing. Perhaps in the 1620s he did not envisage any real prospect of succeeding to the earldom as his brother Henry was married with children. All that changed, however, when Henry failed to produce a male heir.

Barnabas came to live at Bunratty following the death of his brother in 1639. There is no evidence that he was accompanied by his wife and children. Conditions in county Clare were quite disturbed. Henry, the fifth earl, had continued the policy of his father of dispossessing native landholders in favour of newly arrived settlers. By 1640 the most prestigious castles and residences were occupied by English and Dutch Protestants, who also farmed some of the most productive farmland of the county.<sup>22</sup> News of the Ulster rising circulated at the fair of Quin in November 1641. Irish landholders, despairing of ever acquiring legal title to their properties under English law, joined the insurrection. The earl of Thomond attempted to maintain law and order by appointing captains and raising companies of soldiers but he was clearly out of his depth and lacked the facility to lead or to govern. He convened a public meeting at the courthouse of Ennis in January 1642 where he appealed to the gentry and commonality of the county to remain loyal to the king. He broke down and wept on the bench at the prospect of rebellion.<sup>23</sup> However, it is questionable whether he could have had any influence over the people, or whether he could even communicate with them without the aid of an interpreter; he must have appeared an odd and remote figure. Barnabas remained aloof for much of the following period, shut up in his castle of Bunratty giving whatever help he could to dispossessed English settlers. In March 1646, lest the castle fall into the hands of the Irish confederates, he surrendered it to a force of English parliamentarians before returning to his wife and family in Northamptonshire. He was the last O'Brien to occupy Bunratty castle.

During the fighting at Limerick in May 1642, a force of confederate Catholics entered St Mary's cathedral; they stationed gunners in the cathedral tower to direct fire more effectively at the royalist forces in King John's castle.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it was at this time that the monument of the fourth earl was attacked and destroyed.<sup>25</sup> Even twenty years after his death the ruin he had brought to many families in Thomond still rankled. Sir George Carew had described him as 'the most hated of all his nation' and in 1608 a troop of

<sup>21</sup> George Baker, *The History and Antiquities of the county of Northampton* (London, 1822) p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Breen, 'The 1626 Rental of the Thomond Property', in *N.M.A.J.*, 54 (2014) pp 1-25; James Frost, *History and Topography of the County of Clare* (Dublin, 1893) p. 339.

<sup>23</sup> Frost, *History of Clare*, p. 342.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Wiggins, *Anatomy of a Siege: King John's Castle, Limerick, 1642* (Dublin, 2000) pp 77, 85-6.

<sup>25</sup> The tall metallic notice that today (2015) stands in front of the Thomond tomb in St Mary's Cathedral, informing visitors that the original monument was destroyed by the soldiers of Cromwell is wrong. The inscription on the restored monument (1678) clearly states that the monument 'being defaced in the time of the late rebellion' was by Henry, earl of Thomond, re-edified. Similarly Thomas Dineley on his visit to St Mary's in 1681 relates that the statues of Earl Donough and his wife could still be seen 'in the condition they were left by the Irish Rebels' (*Account of the Progress of Henry, Duke of Beaufort, through Wales, 1684*, ed. Charles Baker (London, 1864) p. 107). And in any event it is simply not credible that Cromwellian soldiers would destroy the tomb of Donough O'Brien, who after all was a staunch supporter of the English establishment and leave the effigy of Conchubhar Ó Deadhaidh, a Catholic bishop, untouched on the opposite side of the chancel.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard

<sup>27</sup> Lodge,

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p

<sup>29</sup> Ainswo

English horsemen had to be assigned for the man's personal protection.<sup>26</sup> The lower portion of the earl's effigy appears to have been smashed with a hammer while the upper portions were cut through with a masonry saw. Similarly the effigy of his wife was sawn into several pieces. There could hardly be an action more calculated to anger Barnabas, the sixth earl, then residing at Bunratty, than the destruction of his father's monument. When he came to make his last will and testament in July 1657, Barnabas expressed no preference for his country of burial: he desired to be buried in the church of Great Billing, if he died in England but in the church at Limerick with his father and brother, if he died in Ireland.<sup>27</sup> In the event he died in England and was buried in the church of St Andrew, Great Billing, the first earl of Thomond to be buried outside of Ireland. No monument was raised to his memory. His wife Mary, making her will in 1672, directed that she be buried 'in the church of Great Billing under her own pew, over against her deceased husband'.<sup>28</sup>

Henry O'Brien, seventh earl of Thomond (1657-91), succeeded his father Barnabas. He graduated from Exeter College, Oxford, in August 1636. His first wife, Lady Anne O'Brien, was a first cousin, a daughter of his uncle Henry, the fifth earl, whom he married in 1641. She died in 1644. By her he had an only son Henry, Lord Ibrackan, who represented county Clare in the parliament of 1661. He continued the family policy of evicting native landholders and replacing them with English colonisers. As the young Lord Ibrackan prepared to travel to Ireland in 1672, he completed his last will and testament. In it he instructed his own son, Donough, to be loyal to the king in all matters that were not contrary to the Protestant religion 'to cherish the English upon his estate and to drive out the Irish, and especially those of them who are under the name of gentlemen'.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly the Thomond lineage had by then become completely alienated from their former followers and supporters, who regarded them as more English than Irish. By 1700 the vast bulk of the Catholic population of county Clare had been reduced to the status of tenants at will paying rents to Protestant landlords.

Henry, Lord Ibrackan, died in 1678 of 'a distemper he brought from Flanders' and was buried in Westminster Abbey. His only son Donough died without issue in 1682, when he drowned in a ship wreck while travelling to Scotland. Fortunately, his grandfather, the seventh earl, had married secondly Lady Sarah Russell, a wealthy widow of Chippenham, Cambridgeshire in 1660. Henry resided with his new bride at the manor of Great Billing. There is no record of him ever having come to Ireland or of having made any contribution to Irish public affairs. In England he was known for being a colourful and eccentric character at the court of Charles II. He did, however, in 1678 finance the restoration of the O'Brien monument in St Mary's cathedral, Limerick. The old memorial was removed from its vulnerable position on the floor and fixed freshly in the wall of the church. The new monument, rising in four tiers, filled the arch on the north side of the chancel. On the lowest level was the tomb chest, on which the damaged effigy of Earl Donough O'Brien was placed. Above him on the next level lay the mutilated statue of his wife. In a semi-circular niche on the third tier an inscription proclaimed the achievements of the fourth earl and at the apex was displayed an elaborate carving of the O'Brien coat of arms (see Fig. 5). It is a monument of modest pretensions more notable for its size than its beauty. Thomas Dineley was present in the church at the time of its completion in 1681. He reported:

<sup>26</sup> Bernadette Cunningham, 'Donough O'Brien (d.1624)', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009) vii, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Lodge, *Peerage of Ireland*, ii, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Ainsworth (ed.), *Inchiquin manuscripts*, no. 1489.



**Fig. 5** Thomond Tomb in St. Mary's Cathedral Limerick  
(Photo: courtesy of National Monuments Service).

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In St Mary's Church is a stately Monument of black and red marble. Its inscription is in the proper place in Letters of Gold, on a black well-polished pane ... In the lower part of the Monument are seen the remains of the figures of Donagh O'Brien, Earl of Thomond, and his Countess, in the condition they were left by the Irish Rebels. The Earle appears layn down with his Robes and Coronet. The Lady Thomond also richly gilded with gold. These are at present concealed with a wainscoate, which the noble Earle, now living, honoured me with an opportunity of seeing.<sup>30</sup>

The decoration and rich gilding, although now much faded, may still be discerned on close examination of the broken figures.

Henry, seventh earl, fathered two sons and three daughters by Sarah his second wife. Their first son Henry died in infancy, while the second son, Henry Horatio, survived into adulthood. At seventeen he married Lady Henrietta Somerset, a daughter of the duke of Beaufort, by whom he had a son, another Henry, and two daughters. Henry Horatio, however, died of the smallpox at Chelsea in July 1690, while still in his early twenties, and his father, the seventh earl, died in May of the following year, aged 73. Both were buried in St. Andrew's church at Great Billing. Following the unexpected sequence of bereavements, it proved extremely fortuitous that Henry Horatio had married in his teens and by fathering a son had prevented the extinction of the lineage. Thus by 1691 only Henry, an infant of two years, was left to succeed as eighth earl of Thomond.

In the years following, Sarah, Countess of Thomond, commissioned John Bushnell, one of the foremost English sculptors of the period, to erect a monument to her late husband. Bushnell of Holborn London had trained in Italy and had completed many public commissions. The Thomond memorial was perhaps his last significant piece of work. The monument of black and white marble is situated in the northern chapel of Great Billing church. It is unusual in that, unlike previous Thomond memorials, it celebrates two generations of the family and their children. On an elaborate altar tomb are the kneeling effigies of Earl Henry and his wife, Countess Sarah. Between them on a ledge lies a baby in swaddling clothes, representing Henry the new infant earl of Thomond. To the left of the countess a standing male figure in prayer represents Henry Horatio O'Brien. To the right of Earl Henry a standing female figure represents Henrietta, wife of the deceased Henry Horatio. On a panel in front are five linked female figures in relief each carrying a book; these are likely to represent the three daughters of Henry, seventh earl of Thomond and the two daughters of his son, Henry Horatio (see Fig. 6). The altar frontal carries a long inscription complimenting the seventh earl for having the foresight to marry off his son and heir so early in life. Bushnell's composition received a mixed reaction: the style was described as anachronistic and the figures as being 'memorable only for their crude faces and stocky builds'.<sup>31</sup> The memorial is nonetheless the most visually pleasing of the surviving Thomond monuments.

During the childhood of Henry, eighth and last earl of Thomond (1691-1741), his mother Henrietta Somerset administered the estate. The finances of the family deteriorated steadily and in 1702 application was made to parliament to enable the earl's mother to issue leases of the lands in Ireland. Subsequently 30,000 acres of the estate in Ireland was put up for auction at Dick's Coffee House, Dublin on 99 year leases.<sup>32</sup> In 1705 Hen-

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Dineley, *Account of the Progress of Henry, Duke of Beaufort, through Wales, 1684*, (ed.), Charles Baker (London, 1864) pp 107-8.

<sup>31</sup> Ingrid Roscoe, *Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain, 1660-1851* (London, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Ivar O'Brien, *O'Brien of Thomond* (Chichester, 1986) p. 239.





**Fig. 6** Tomb of seventh earl of Thomond in St Andrew's Church, Great Billing, Northamptonshire (Photo: courtesy of Courtauld Institute of Art).

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rietta married secondly, Henry Howard, earl of Suffolk, who had previously been married to Lady Auberie O'Brien, a daughter of the seventh earl of Thomond. The young earl and his stepfather came to Ireland in 1707 to assist with the issuing of leases to their Irish tenants. While visiting county Clare, Ennis Corporation presented them with the freedom of the town in two ornate silver boxes.<sup>33</sup> In the same year Earl Henry, aged 19, married Lady Elizabeth Seymour, daughter of the Duke of Somerset. The couple resided in London but the union proved childless. The selling off of large portions of the estate became a feature of Henry's stewardship of the earldom. He made application to parliament in 1711 and again in 1713 to allow him to grant freehold leases of his lands in Ireland. His first major sell-off took place in 1720 when he sold the manor and castle of Carlow to his agent James Hamilton for the sum of £20,900. The following year the Holmpatrick estate in county Dublin was also sold to Hamilton. Both were major losses to the Thomond portfolio. When it was pointed out to O'Brien that the Carlow property had been sold for some £15,000 less than it was worth, he took an action against his former agent. However, after several years before the courts, the Hamilton family were eventually confirmed as legal owners.<sup>34</sup>

The Irish playwright, William Philips, dedicated his new drama *Hibernia Freed* to 'Henry O'Brien, Earl of Thomonde' in 1722. The play was staged at the Theatre Royal, London and dramatized the liberation of Ireland from the Vikings by King O'Brien of Munster.<sup>35</sup> The work aroused much patriotic passion and the 'wild Irish' flocked in numbers to the performances. Regrettably the reaction of Earl Henry, a stalwart of the Hanoverian succession, is not recorded. Following the death of his wife in 1734 Thomond came to Ireland and established a place of residence at Jervis Street, Dublin. He clearly intended to remain in Ireland because in 1739 he contracted with the property developer Nathaniel Clements to build a large red brick house at Henrietta Street.<sup>36</sup> However, it is unlikely that O'Brien ever occupied the new mansion, because he died unexpectedly in his house at Jervis Street in April 1741, aged fifty-two.<sup>37</sup> By his will, dated 14 October 1738, the earl, having no male heir, left his large estates to Murrough, Lord O'Brien, fourth and last surviving son of William O'Brien, earl of Inchiquin. This made sense in dynastic terms since the Inchiquin O'Briens were his distant relatives with whom he shared a common ancestry. However, he further stipulated that if Lord O'Brien, a boy of ten, should die without male issue, the Thomond inheritance should then go to Percy Windham a nephew of his deceased wife. Lord O'Brien, unfortunately, only survived six months, dying of the smallpox in September 1741, and therefore the whole inheritance fell to Percy Wyndham. The earl of Inchiquin instigated legal proceedings, but the courts upheld the validity of the original will.<sup>38</sup> The Wyndham family had no connection whatsoever with Ireland yet it would be they, rather than any O'Brien, who in future would enjoy the fruits of the Thomond estates.

There was a delay in the burial of the eighth earl. Although he died 20 April 1741, he was not buried until the first of June, seven weeks later. The decision was taken to bury him at Limerick cathedral in the tomb of the fourth and fifth earls of Thomond. The Rev.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Ó Dálaigh (ed.), *Corporation Book of Ennis* (Dublin, 1990) p. 87.

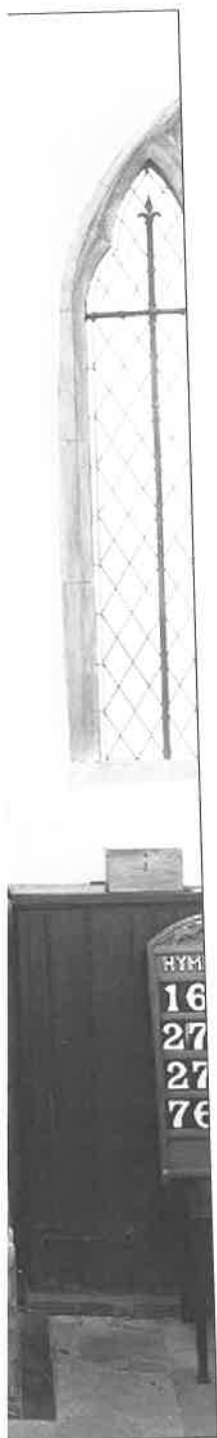
<sup>34</sup> A.P.W. Malcomson, *The Pursuit of the Heiress: Aristocratic Marriage in Ireland 1740-1840* (Belfast, 2006) p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> William Philips, *Hibernia Freed* (London, 1722) pp 1-4.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Malcomson, *Nathaniel Clements 1705-77, politics, fashion and architecture* (Dublin, 2015) pp 34, 46.

<sup>37</sup> West Sussex Record Office: Names of Lord Thomond's servants at his house in Gervas St. Dublin, Petworth House Archives /11,159; *Pues Occurrences*, 18-21 April 1741.

<sup>38</sup> O'Brien, *O'Brien of Thomond*, p. 239; Malcomson, *Pursuit of the Heiress*, p. 87.



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Dr Charles Massy, Dean of Limerick, was directed to have the tomb prepared. The corpse was sent by way of Silvermines and O'Brien's Bridge. Edmund Hogan, Thomond's law agent in Dublin, instructed John Dwyer, a Limerick apothecary, to prepare a great feast in the army barracks at O'Brien's Bridge for the gentry and country people who would attend the funeral. Twelve tables were laid out with beef, mutton, fowl, ham, neat tongue and jelly whips. Six hundred bottles of choice claret were brought from Limerick along with five hundred bottles of Lisbon, Madeira and French wines, four gallons of brandy and four gallons of rum. The landed gentry were admitted first and when they had taken their fill the gates were opened to the country people. Four hogsheads of cider and seventeen barrels of ale were set aside for them. However, 1741 was a year of great hunger and far more people attended at O'Brien's Bridge than could be accommodated. A serious riot ensued: tables were overturned, furniture broken and much damage done to the interior of the barracks. The Thomond estate was presented with the enormous bill of £295 for food, drink and building repairs and Mr Dwyer had to threaten legal action before the money was paid.<sup>39</sup> In the evening Earl Henry was finally laid to rest in the O'Brien vault of St Mary's cathedral. No inscription or memorial was raised to his memory. With his demise the Earls of Thomond, a lineage that had endured for two centuries, became extinct.

Unlike the lineages of the Fitzgeralds of Kildare, the O'Neils of Tyrone or the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell, the O'Briens of Thomond survived the Tudor conquest. This, however, was achieved at a heavy price. The O'Briens, Anglicised, converted to Protestantism and became agents of the English crown. In the process they oversaw the dispossession and impoverishment of their own people and choose to live abroad rather than in Ireland. Perhaps in the short term they did better than the houses of Tyrone and Tyrconnell. But at least the O'Neils and the O'Donnells continue to be held in high esteem as was evidenced by the commemorations of the four hundredth anniversary of the 'Flight of the Earls' in 2007 or by the number of Irish people who continue to visit the tomb of the Great O'Neil in Rome. The lineage of the Earls of Thomond, on the other hand, is uncelebrated. Nevertheless, the most tangible and enduring evidence of their former glory remain their tombs at Ennis, Limerick and Great Billing.

#### Acknowledgment

Thanks to Hilary Gilmore for permission to use her drawing of the wall tomb in Ennis friary (Fig. 2).

<sup>39</sup> West Sussex Record Office: Earl of Thomond's funeral expenses at O'Brien's Bridge, PHA/11,158.

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