

In Search of Lola Montez

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The author of a biography of Lola Montez outlines his attempts to research the life and career of this notorious nineteenth-century Irish woman. In particular he discusses her claim to have been born in Limerick and shows that in fact this was merely one of her many fictions about her life and that she was actually born in County Sligo.

The question of the date and place of birth of Lola Montez, born Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert, was one that gave me extraordinary trouble when I was researching my biography of her.¹ I made two trips to Ireland and the UK attempting to find the truth, and eventually I gave up hope of finding any solid evidence. In the first, clothbound edition of my biography I speculated about her birth, guessing that she was born in Limerick, as she herself claimed and has been widely believed, in late 1819 or early 1820, and prior to the marriage of her parents in Cork on 29 April 1820. Her father was Edward Gilbert, an ensign with the 25th Foot Regiment while her mother, Elizabeth Oliver, was the illegitimate daughter of Charles Silver Oliver, a wealthy landlord in the Kilfinane area of Co. Limerick. But I was extremely dissatisfied with this approximation because the evidence I had remained so contradictory.

From the records of the 25th Foot Regiment in the PRO at Kew I had the date Lola's father arrived in Ireland and knew that the regiment was initially quartered in and around Cork. From the will of Lola's grandfather, Charles Silver Oliver, which I found in the records of the Irish Land Commission in Dublin, I knew that Lola's mother was one of his four illegitimate children by one Mary Green (about whom I could find no other information, except that she was dead when Oliver made his will in 1815). From the will I also knew that Lola's mother and a sister had been put with a milliner in Cork and that one of the brothers, Thomas, was apprenticed to a grocer in Limerick. I also knew that Lola had in the course of her life, once she abandoned her claim of having been born in Spain, had repeatedly asserted that she was born in Limerick. She said this when she was living in Grass Valley in California, and she repeated it when she returned to Ireland in 1858 on a lecture tour and in her autobiographical lectures.

One of the principal problems in researching Lola's date and place of birth was that she was an incorrigible liar. She lied constantly, even when there seemed to be no good reason to lie, and she always lied when there was a good reason. Not surprisingly, she gave a great variety of birthdates as well as birthplaces. But once she began to acknowledge she had been born in Ireland, she always said she had been born in Limerick.

Irish birth records around 1820 present a problem. With no official records of birth, parish baptismal records constitute the best sources. But with Lola the first problem was to determine whether to look in Catholic registers or Church of Ireland registers.

¹ Bruce Seymour, *Lola Montez: A Life* (New York, 1995): thanks to Rev. John Leonard, former President of the Thomond Archaeological Society who made the initial contact with the author (Hon Editor).

For much of her life, she claimed to be a good Catholic, but that was largely because her masquerade as a Spaniard would not otherwise have been credible. But her parents were married in the Church of Ireland, her mother married her step-father in a Protestant church, and Lola's first and only legitimate marriage was in the Church of Ireland. Because Lola's father was an officer in the British army, I assumed that at this time, prior to the Catholic Emancipation Act, he would have had to be a Protestant. But the historian at Sandhurst informed me that although officers were by act of parliament required to take an oath stating they were members of the established church, every year parliament passed an act delaying the date for the taking of that oath, so that there were, in fact, Catholic officers. Gilbert's origins remain obscure, but there is a possibility that he came from a family of military Gilberts in Derbyshire, and they were strongly Protestant.

But not wanting to miss anything, I went through all the parish registers, both Catholic and Church of Ireland, for that period that I could get my hands on (most of the Church of Ireland registers were destroyed in the Four Courts fire in 1922). I went through all the registers I could find for County Limerick, County Cork, and for the other counties where the 25th Foot Regiment was stationed from 1819. At one point I discovered an article in a Cork newspaper after Lola's death, signed 'A member of the family', disputing the paper's obituary, which had stated that Lola was illegitimate. That letter correctly stated that her parents had been married in Christ Church, Cork, in April of 1820 (although it got the exact date and the name of the officiating cleric wrong, but clearly the author had inside knowledge of the family history) and went on to state that Lola had been born about a year after the wedding 'in the north' where her father was stationed at the time. I had already checked all the parish registers in all the areas where Lola's father had been stationed from the time his regiment left Cork until he transferred out of it, but in desperation, relying on the remark 'in the north' I even went to Northern Ireland and checked registers there where the 25th Foot had been stationed about a year after Gilbert had formally left the regiment. In all cases I found absolutely nothing. I got the same result searching every contemporary newspaper I could find. Still no luck.

One thing that constantly troubled me was that Gilbert's regiment, the 25th Foot, had never been stationed anywhere near Limerick. From the records in the PRO, it is easy to follow the course of the regiment as it was moved about Ireland, and after it left Cork, I don't believe it was ever posted in County Limerick, much less in Limerick City. For this reason, in the first edition of my biography, I speculated that Lola's mother, unmarried and pregnant, had gone to Limerick, where her brother Thomas was apprenticed to a grocer, and sought refuge to give birth there, returning to Cork to marry Gilbert in Christ Church in April 1820. But even the idea that Lola was illegitimate troubled me because Lola's mother was particularly open, even brazen, about her marriage in Cork, which somehow seemed unlikely if she had just given birth to a bastard daughter. I remember that when I was in Cork I conferred with a very old gentleman, C.J.F. McCarthy, who, I was told, was the dean of Cork historians and he marvelled at the fact that the bastard daughter of a man who had been one of the most powerful men in Cork had the effrontery to marry very publicly in Christ Church, where the Lord Major and all the important figures of the city had their pews. Even more shamelessly, she placed announcements of the wedding in the newspapers stating that she was the daughter of 'the late Charles Silver Oliver, MP'. Somehow that seemed very unlikely if she herself had just had a bastard child. But if her pregnancy with Lola was not something she needed to conceal, why would she have gone to Limerick to give birth? None of it made much sense, and I struggled with it as best I could in the first edition of my book.

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Fortunately, the key to the mystery came to me through the publication of the book. I received a letter from a Mr Nicholas Shreeve, now regrettably deceased, of Arundel. He had himself been working on a biography of Lola Montez and found his work superseded by my book. He was very complimentary about my effort, but he went on to note that he knew just when and where Lola Montez had been born. Eventually he sent me a document that he had found at the Public Record Office at Kew, among the pension records. I had gone through the pension records, but I clearly had missed this important item.

The document is a baptismal record for Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert, daughter of Edward and Eliza Gilbert, from 16 February 1823 at the Church of St. Peter, Liverpool.² It would appear that this official transcript of the baptismal record was one that the parents obtained at that time since it states that it was made on the day of the baptism itself. Lola's mother filed this baptismal certificate with her application for a military widow's pension, her husband having died just after his arrival for duty in India. It was included as proof of the fact that the deceased officer had not only a widow but also a child. I must admit that I was surprised to see that the baptism took place in Liverpool. I had never previously seen a document to connect Lola or her parents with Liverpool, but on this date they were en route from Ireland to Gravesend, departing from there less than a month later for India. So it is not, after all, so surprising that they were passing through Liverpool en route to Gravesend.

The key to the mystery is on the reverse side of the baptismal certificate: it states 'Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert born at Grange in the County of Sligo on the 17th day of February 1821'. When I read that, many things began to fall into place. First of all, the location and the date coincide with where Gilbert's regiment was located at that time. His own signature is on a number of the muster records in the PRO, and they show that in the early part of 1821 the 25th Foot was stationed in and around Sligo. Secondly, the date agrees with the assertion by a clearly well informed 'member of the family' in the letter to the Cork newspaper in 1861 that Lola had been born about a year after the wedding, in fact about nine and a half months. And the location also agrees with the letter's statement that Lola was born 'in the north', although not actually Northern Ireland, as I had thought might be intended. The inscription even makes the baptism in Liverpool a little easier to understand. They were en route to India, facing a long voyage to a dangerous country, and it was the eve of their unbaptized daughter's second birthday. They probably thought it would be an appropriate occasion to have her finally baptized.

Unfortunately, I have never seen an example of the handwriting of Lola's mother, but I am convinced that the inscription on the back of the baptismal certificate was written by her. So if the inscription on the back of the baptismal certificate fits extremely well with the known facts, one troubling question remains: why did Lola, in the latter part of her life, repeatedly and publicly declare herself to be a native of Limerick? I have to say that I don't really know. But, as I did about Lola's date and place of birth but I hope with more accuracy, I can speculate. I think the primary motivation was that Lola liked to be associated with well-known places and people. It would not have been like Lola to say that she had been born in Grange because then, as now, almost no one would have any idea where Grange is. And she had no connection to Grange or County Sligo other than the accident of her birth there. But if she wanted to pick a hometown that people would have heard of, why not Cork, where her mother had grown up, where her parents were married, and

² Copy of baptismal certificate Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert, 16 February 1823 with annotation of her date and place of birth on the reverse (PRO, WO42/18/81).

where she actually had relatives? Although Lola's mother eventually settled in London, the other illegitimate daughter of Charles Silver Oliver, Lola's aunt, had remained in Cork and had a family, and she and her children, Lola's cousins, were still living there when Lola returned to Ireland for her lecture tour in 1858. The newspapers at that time noted that some of Lola's relatives travelled from Cork to Dublin to hear her lecture in the Round Room, and I assume that those were the aunt and cousins.

Nevertheless, Lola chose to call Limerick her home town. Why? My best guess is that Lola knew that the legitimate heirs of Charles Silver Oliver, sisters Elizabeth and Isabella Oliver-Gascoigne, were not in Cork but had settled at one of Oliver's ancestral properties in County Limerick, Castle Oliver. She probably had also heard that in the cause of famine relief they had built a new stately home, Castle Oliver, there. Lola loved to associate herself whenever possible with people of wealth, power, and fame, and it would have been just like her to try to link her name with that of, the residents of Castle Oliver, especially as Elizabeth Oliver-Gascoigne had married in 1852 Frederick Trench, 2nd Baron Ashdown.

The very earliest instance I found where Lola claimed she was a native of Limerick was while she was in California at Grass Valley in 1854. By that time Castle Oliver was completed and Lord and Lady Ashdown were in residence there. Lola was an avid newspaper reader, and there is some evidence that she remained in touch with her aunt and cousins in Cork, although she was always on poor terms with her mother. I think it entirely possible that she had heard stories of the magnificent new abode of her second cousin, Lady Ashdown, and chose, once she decided to give up, at least in part, the charade that she was Spanish, to call Limerick her home because that was where her noble relatives had their seat. This idea is supported by the fact that when Lola was in Limerick in 1858, a local newspaper reported that it was likely she would be visiting her relatives, Lord and Lady Ashdown, at Castle Oliver.³ I feel sure that the sole source for that story was Lola herself. There is no evidence such a visit ever took place, indeed, given her illegitimacy and dubious reputation, such an idea would have appalled the Ashdowns.

So there it is. Lola Montez, aka Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert, was not, as she often claimed, born anywhere near Limerick but instead at Grange in County Sligo on 17 February 1821. She died on 17 January 1861, exactly one month short of her fortieth birthday, in New York where she had lived towards the end of her life. She is buried in Green-Wood cemetery in Brooklyn. She lies under a white marble tombstone on which the inscription reads 'Mrs Eliza Gilbert, died January 17, 1861, AE. 42'. Perhaps it is only fitting for a woman who had so much difficulty telling the truth, that her grave is marked with a name she never bore and having spent most of her life falsifying her age to make herself younger, it declares her to be three years older than she was.

³ *Munster News*, 27 November 1858.