

and Heard notes. I would sincerely like to thank all our guest speakers who, by their contribution in 2005 enriched our lives. Finally, I hope that you the readers derive both knowledge and pleasure from reading this journal.

Brendan McCarthy,

Hon. secretary.

WRECKS AND RECKONINGS IN WEST CORK IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By Dr Toby Barnard

Skibbereen is rarely mentioned in the records that survive from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was not a parliamentary borough like Baltimore, Bandon, Clonakilty and Kinsale. Even the parish which encompassed the later town was concealed under the name of Abbey Strewery. The needs of the Protestant church led to a visitation in 1699 by a new bishop of Cork and Ross, Dives Downes. The bishop's comments on the arrangements for Church of Ireland worship reveal incidentally that Skibbereen had an ale-house, where Protestants worshipped in the absence of a usable church, and a school-teacher, a convert from Catholicism.¹ But the place lacked any powerful proprietor keen to develop it, such as Dunmanway had early in the eighteenth century with Sir Richard Cox, or Bantry, slightly later in the century, with the families of Hutchins and White.

In 1677, a grant authorised Colonel Richard Townsend to hold a market every Friday and a twice yearly fair at Bridgetown, *alias* Coronea.² There are indications by 1709 that the settlement had grown, perhaps because the market made it a centre for the district. Early in 1709, the Munster vice-admiralty court convened in Skibbereen. It sat for six days. The Revd Rowland Davies, an accomplished pluralist who served successively as Dean of Ross and of Cork, presided over it.³ At the same time, another functionary of the admiralty court spent twenty-three days collecting statements in the area. The court again sat in Skibbereen in the summer of the same year. These proceedings suggest that there was enough – and suitable – accommodation for the officials. However, other than Skibbereen serving as the location for the court session, no other light is shed on the physical characteristics of the town. Instead, what the patchy documentation of the episodes reveals is the prevalence of smuggling, piracy and other maritime misdemeanours within this part of the south-west, and the continuing ambivalence of those in authority towards such activities.

The rocky and indented coast, remote from centres of power, was ide-

ally suited to clandestine operations. Privateering and smuggling were valued as supplements in an otherwise precarious local economy. The activities, viewed by many as essential to subsistence and, sometimes, as a justified defiance of unjust English laws, elicited ambivalent responses from the notables of west Cork. The involvement in smuggling in the early seventeenth century of one – William Hull of Leamcon – has been thoroughly investigated.⁴ The likelihood that landowners such as the Hulls abetted if not actively encouraged the breaking of the law is increased by the evidence collected by those keen to uphold the authority of the high court of admiralty. It is in line with other studies that focus on the eighteenth century. Elsewhere, in County Clare, the O'Briens of Dromoland and (later) the O'Connells of Derrynane engaged in smuggling. In the Shannon estuary, the Fitzgeralds, Knights of Glin, were similarly involved.⁵

The jurisdictions delegated to vice-admirals in Ireland had vexed histories. They conflicted, especially in relation to rights over wrecks and salvage, with the powers claimed under their patents by lords of the manor and by incorporated boroughs, and with the authority of the revenue officers. One landowner in County Mayo, for example, was warned in 1701 about the dangers of impounding goods salvaged from a wreck.⁶ There were further skirmishes between agents of the vice-admirals in Ireland and officials claiming to act directly on the orders of the Court of Admiralty in Dublin and London or of other courts of law in Ireland. An additional irritant arose from the fact that the vice-admirals in the Irish provinces derived their powers from the lord high admiral in England: another instance, it might seem, of English interference in Irish affairs. Yet, although there might be unedifying clashes with competitors, the post of vice-admiral, whether in Leinster, Connacht or Munster, was sought eagerly, both for the prestige and for the profits. In Connacht, for example, the prosperity of the St Georges in County Galway was traced back to their holding the vice-admiralty of that province.

The office of vice-admiral of Munster had been secured by the Southwells, the family which dominated the port of Kinsale throughout the later seventeenth century. Appointment as vice-admiral rewarded Robert Southwell for his services to Charles I during the later 1640s: services that included the provisioning of a fleet commanded by the king's nephew, Prince Rupert. In successive generations, the Southwells interested themselves in naval matters, which were inseparable from

the prosperity of Kinsale and so from the length of the family's rentals of property there.⁷ On the death of Sir Robert Southwell in 1702, his heir, Edward Southwell, succeeded as vice-admiral. In turn the latter's son, the younger Edward Southwell, would be appointed in 1733.⁸ The elder Edward Southwell, like his father, spent little time in south Munster, but was careful to maintain his interests there. Agents handled the regular business, including that relating to the admiralty jurisdiction. In 1709, one predicted that a more vigorous assertion of rights over shipwrecks could bring Southwell an extra £300 annually.⁹ Part of the problem was the remoteness from the west of the county of even the Southwells' regular agents, who were based usually in and around Kinsale. To improve matters, it was suggested that some of the admiralty powers should be delegated to local commissioners. Accordingly, deputies were appointed. One was Michael Beecher, who had recently inherited from his father, Thomas, estates concentrated around Aughadow and Sherkin Island. Father and son served successively as a member of parliament for Baltimore between 1692 and 1726.¹⁰ The Beechers had already assisted Southwell in the prosecution of admiralty matters in the area, and welcomed this further, more formal involvement. The family was felt to be well-situated to oversee the stretch of coast from Baltimore to Crookhaven and then around the Mizen Head to Bantry and even to Castletownbere. In the eyes of Southwell's advisers it was the existing position of the Beechers in the locality that made them so useful to their employer's concerns.¹¹

A succession of disputed wrecks and salvage led Southwell to agree with his agents' view that the operations of the vice-admiralty in south-west Munster needed to be improved. Reports of these episodes throw fitful rays on the area. In the earliest recorded incident, during the winter of 1701–1702, the wrecking of a 'Guinea ship' in Dunworley or Clonakilty Bay had been followed by a fruitless attempt to recover the cargo, which included wine. Some of the barrels had been claimed by Lord Barrymore, as owner of the shore where they had been washed ashore, and were removed to his house at Castlelyons in the north of the county. Twelve hogsheads of claret were taken to the house of a son of Sir Richard Cox at Timoleague, purportedly for safety. Sir Richard Cox was a judge and soon to become lord chancellor, as well as the proprietor of an extensive estate around Dunmanway. It was suspected that the wine would be adulterated while in the younger Cox's care, with some

being siphoned off and replaced by water.¹²

In the same storm, a second vessel of forty tons had foundered beyond Baltimore, and was being taken into Crookhaven. Its cargo included whale oil, prunes, chestnuts, cork, pitch and a small quantity of brandy. The last commodity was said to belong to merchants in Bristol. Thomas Beecher, father of Michael, supervised the salvage operation, secured the hulk in a creek and removed the goods to a cellar. The cargo was eventually returned to the Bristol traders; the value of the vessel itself, estimated at £33, was divided between the salvage team and the admiralty.¹³ Difficulties over this affair confirmed Beecher's misgivings about the imprecision of his authority. He was hampered in acting anywhere east of Rosscarbery because of Lord Barrymore's claims over the area. Similarly, when Beecher seized a French boat from Nantes bound for Galway, he was at a loss how best to proceed. He begged Southwell for clearer instructions, 'that I may not let anything slip or meddle where I ought not'. The sensitivity on this occasion was worsened because five of the seven passengers were suspected to be Catholic priests. Beecher reported that 'they have several rich vestments and abundance of other mass trinkets and a great many books'. Unlicensed priests had recently been banished by the government and their entry into the country prohibited.¹⁴ Beecher feared that if he acted wrongly, he would give ammunition to his local competitors and fall from favour in high places in Dublin and London.

Fresh storms late in 1708 caused further problems. The *Elizabeth*, a pink built at Wexford, was sailing from San Sebastian in Spain to Wexford with a cargo of wine and vinegar when it was wrecked. The Admiralty ordered the Beechers and Southwell's agent, James Dennis, to impound the wreck and its cargo as a prize. Before any of them could intervene, another local had acted. Bryan Townsend, proprietor of Castletownsend, had encouraged the rescue of the casks by offering 40 shillings for each one that was recovered. Two would-be rescuers were drowned and others were injured. However, on the next day, six 'bold fellows' took out a boat and managed to retrieve some barrels, which were then taken to Ballyisland, owned by the Freke family. In all, twenty-one hogshead barrels were saved, but, as Townsend commented sardonically, they would make only thirteen full ones: 'I cannot say it all leaked, for the country people from remote parts came in the night and tried a good quantity of the wine'.¹⁵ Townsend took eight hogsheads of wine and ten

casks of vinegar into his safekeeping, and these were subsequently restored to the owner, Henry Archer, a Wexford merchant, as a result of a writ from the high sheriff's court.¹⁶ Townsend, a former member of parliament, denied any wish to involve himself in costly legal wrangles over the ownership of the rescued goods.

Southwell's deputies confirmed that Townsend was cooperative.¹⁷ Others among the local gentry were less so. One of the local customs officers alleged that Ralph Freke (owner of Ballyisland and an MP for Baltimore) and his men had prevented the restoration of six hogsheads of claret, Freke regarding them 'as his royalty', i.e. his property since it had come ashore in his manor. It would seem that Freke had forced his tenants into the sea 'as high as their necks, and were obliged to hold hand in hand when they went into the sea for the wine'.¹⁸ Freke, as a local member of parliament, was earlier accounted 'a sober man' by one of the Southwells' allies. The Frekes possessed estates in the locality of greater value than those of either the Beechers or Townsends.²⁰ It was this dispute that brought the functionaries of the vice-admiralty to Skibbereen early in 1709. James Dennis, the chief agent of Southwell, was paid for examining witnesses on twenty-three days and four journeys to Castlehaven. Dean Davies stayed for six days when the court was convened.²¹

On the dangerous coast, boats regularly came to grief. In 1708, two traders – one of them Micah Perry – petitioned Southwell in his capacity as vice-admiral about the contents of their ship, *The Greyhound*. Sailing from South Carolina with 40,000 dressed Indian deerskins and log-wood, it sank near Crookhaven. It was reported that 'the country people came down in great numbers', forced away the crew and took the goods. Thomas Beecher, consulted about the events, contradicted the owners' account. Instead, he contended that 'the people of the country were not suffered to meddle with anything until it was thrown overboard and then they hooked out the skins with gaffs and long pulls out of the water'.²²

In the summer of 1709, the vice-admiralty court again convened in Skibbereen. This time it was to adjudicate on a wreck near Bantry.²³ Late in the same year, Michael Beecher was obliged to enquire into the fate of a privateer wrecked near Berehaven. Once more, there were stories of the locals carrying away the best part of its cargo. Trouble also occurred, especially in time of war, through the depredations of the ene-

mies of England. Early in 1710, William Hull wrote from Leamcon to a captain of an East-India man with a report of the descent from a gun-boat of 100 French on Crookhaven. The invaders were said to have stripped and plundered the inhabitants.²⁴

These sporadic references to events in the environs of Skibbereen early in the eighteenth century tantalise rather than satisfy. Nevertheless, three features are worth isolating. The first is the prominence of a small number of Protestant settler families, beneficiaries of the dramatic confiscations and re-granting of lands in the preceding century, most notably the Beechers, Frekes and Townsends. Their pre-eminence in the district was registered publicly by their regular election to sit in the Dublin Parliament, by 1692 an entirely Protestant assembly. The Beechers and Townsends in particular professed obedience to the agencies of law enforcement, and were happy to assist in local operations. Their cooperation was not altogether disinterested. Powers delegated from the vice-admiralty of Munster supplemented their authority from other sources, such as the commission of peace, militia commissions, patents as lords of manors or simply as the owners of large estates. Behind the professions of service to the English state in Ireland can be detected more ambiguous attitudes and behaviour. There must be suspicions of opportunism, not only in offering to help the absent Southwells uphold their maritime jurisdiction, but in dealing with cargoes washed ashore within their bailiwicks. The suspicions persisted throughout the eighteenth century: so much so, that in 1760, when a bill to curb smuggling was to come before the Dublin parliament, it was predicted that all members from the provinces of Connacht and Munster would oppose it, being friends to the running of goods.²⁵

Grandeers showed themselves to be opportunists in taking advantage of wrecks. Their tenants seized the chances to pluck essentials and novelties from the ocean. The second theme in the accounts is the light thrown on humbler inhabitants. The bravado or foolhardiness evident in some rescues suggests a desperation arising from the severely straitened circumstances in which most tenants and labourers lived. The correspondence on occasion suggests that some were forced into the sea at the behest of their landlords. The daring may have derived no benefit from their exploits, having immediately to hand the booty to their 'betters'. Whatever impulses drove the salvage crews, the flotsam and jetsam were to be recovered. This leads naturally into the third, obvious

conclusion. Proximity to the coast brought constant danger from seaborne marauders (as apparently at Crookhaven in 1710), but also regular chances to vary otherwise meagre diets and to supplement ways of life pared down to, or below, subsistence. Finally, these few reports remind that a place like Skibbereen benefited indirectly as well as directly from the nearby seas. When court officials and witnesses descended on the place, the business and bustle of Friday markets and twice-yearly fairs were reproduced and amplified.

Notes:

The following abbreviations are used BL, British Library; NLI, National Library, Dublin; NMM, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; PRONI, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast; TNA, The National Archives, Kew.

1. T.A. Lunham (ed.), 'Bishop Dive Downes' visitation of his diocese, 1699–1702', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, xv (1909), pp. 85–86.
2. R. and D. Townsend (eds.), *An Officer of the Long Parliament and His Descendants* (London, 1892), pp. 139–140.
3. R. Davies to E. Southwell, 25 Oct. 1709, BL, Add. Ms. 38,152, f. 12v. For Davies and his tribe, see T. Barnard, *A New Anatomy of Ireland* (London and New Haven, 2003), pp. 89–91.
4. J.C. Appleby, 'A nursery of pirates: the English pirate community in Ireland in the early seventeenth century', *International Journal of Maritime History*, ii (1990), pp. 1–27; J.C. Appleby, 'Settlers and pirates early seventeenth-century Ireland a profile of Sir William Hull', *Studia Hibernica*, xxv (1988–1990), pp. 76–104; M. MacCarthy-Morrogh, *The Munster Plantation. English Migration to Southern Ireland, 1583–1641* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 215–222.
5. L.M. Cullen, 'The smuggling trade in Ireland in the eighteenth century', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 67, sect. C (1968), pp. 149–175; L.M. Cullen, 'The Galway smuggling trade in the seven-teen-thirties', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, xxvii (1956–1957), pp. 10–25; xxx (1962), pp. 7–40; F.G. James, 'Irish smuggling in the eighteenth century', *Irish Historical Studies*, xii (1960–1961), pp. 299–317.

6. L. Hussey to J. Lyon, 19 Dec. 1701, NLI, Ms. 40,903/5, item 10.
7. R. Southwell to Sir R. Southwell, 6 Feb. 1674[5]; BL, Add. Ms. 9714, f. 67; T. Meade to same, 18 Oct. 1681, *ibid.*, f. 83.
8. Warrant, 10 July 1701, BL, Add. Ms. 38,151, f. 52; warrant, 22 May 1731, *ibid.*, Add. Ms. 38,152, f. 59. In the case of the first warrant, the son took over before his father's death.
9. J. Dennis to E. Southwell, 25 Feb. 1708[9], *ibid.*, Add. Ms. 38,151, f. 114.
10. E.M. Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament, 1692–1800*, 6 vols (Belfast, 2002), iii, pp. 149–150; R. Refaüssé and M. Clark (eds.), *Maps of the Estates of the Archbishops of Dublin* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 52, 54; figs. 29–31.
11. M. Beecher to same, 30 May 1709, *ibid.*, Add. Ms. 38,151, f. 116; same to same, *ibid.*, Add. Ms. 38,152, f. 19; H. Hutchinson to same, 5 Jan. 1709[10], *ibid.*, Add. Ms. 38,152, f. 16.
12. J. Waller to E. Southwell, 20 Jan. 1701[2], 1 March 1701[2], NMM, Southwell Mss 19; T. Beecher to E. Southwell, 13 Jan. 1701[2], *ibid.*, 19.
13. T. Beecher to E. Southwell, 5 Oct. 1702, NMM, Southwell Ms 19.
14. T. Beecher to E. Southwell, 22 Oct. 1701, 17 June 1702, NMM, Southwell Mss 19.
15. B. Townsend to H. Beecher and James Dennis, 8 Feb. 1708[9], NMM, Southwell Mss 19; same to E. Southwell, 23 Feb. 1708[9], *ibid.*, 19.
16. E. Southwell to Lord Pembroke, after Dec. 1708, NMM, Southwell Mss 19.
17. For accounts of Bryan Townsend: see Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament*, vi, pp. 428–429; Townsend (eds), *An Officer of the Long Parliament*, pp. 143–148.
18. Memo of Thomas Dyer, tidewaiter [?Baltimore], 29 Dec. 1708, NMM, Southwell Ms 19; J. Dennis to E. Southwell, 3 Feb. 1708[9], *ibid.*, 19.
19. J. Waller to E. Southwell, 9 Jan. 1699[1700], BL, Add. Ms. 38,151, f. 45v; R.A. Anselment (ed.), *The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke, 1671–1714*, Camden Society, 5th series, 18 (2001), pp. 13, 15–19, 26–29.
20. Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament*, iv, pp. 242–243.
21. Account of J. Dennis with E. Southwell, from 22 Dec. 1708, NMM,

- Southwell Ms 19.
22. M. Perry and T. Byfield to E. Southwell, 3 April 1708, Southwell Ms 19; Col. Beecher to Admiralty, 11 May 1708, TNA, formerly PRO, ADM 1/3989. For the collaboration of Byfield and Perry, see J.M. Price, *Perry of London: A Family and Firm on the Seaborne Frontier, 1615–1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 160, n. 83.
23. J. Dennis to E. Southwell, 17 July 1709, BL, Add. Ms. 38,152, f. 7.
24. W. Hull to the captain of an East Indiaman, 14 Feb. 1709[10], TNA, ADM 1/3989.
25. R. Rigby to Sir R. Wilmot, 7 Feb. 1760, PRONI, T 3019/3695. I owe this reference to David Fleming.