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In Five Volumes

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Inquiry into the Person and Age of the long-lived Countess of Desmond

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A N
I N Q U I R Y
 INTO THE
 P E R S O N A N D A G E
 OF THE LONG-LIVED
C O U N T E S S O F D E S M O N D .

HAVING a few years ago had a curiosity to inform myself of the particulars of the life of the very aged countess of Desmond, I was much surpris'd to find no certain account of so extraordinary a person; neither exactly how long she lived, nor even who she was; the few circumstances related of her depending on mere tradition. At last I was inform'd that she was buried at Sligo in Ireland, and a gentleman of that place was so kind as to procure for me the following inscriptions on the monument there; which however soon convinc'd me of that supposition being a mistake, as will appear by the observations in my letter, in consequence of this which contain'd the epitaph.

To C. O. Esq.

Nymphsfield, August 23, 1757.

DEAR SIR,
IHAVE made I think as accurate an extract of all the inscriptions on O'Connor's monument as can be, even to copy the faults of the carver: I was many hours on a high ladder, and it cost much time to clear the letters.

2

The

The lowest inscription is this ; but you are to observe, all the letters in the original are capitals, and could not come in compass to give it to you in that manner, as you will perceive.

“Hic jacet famosissimus miles Donatus * Cornelianus comitatus Sligiæ dominus cum suâ uxore illustrissimâ dnâ Elinora Butler comitissa Desmonia que me fieri fecit A^o 1624 post mortè sui mariti qui obiit 11 Aug. A^o 1609. Itm ejus filia & primi mariti vizt comitis Desmonia † noie Elizabetha valdè virtuosissima dnâ sepulta fuit hoc in tumulo 31^o Novem. anno Domini 1623.”

Just above this is O'Connor in armour kneeling, and his hands raised up and joined as at prayer, his helmet on the ground behind him : a tree in an escutcheon, which is the arms of O'Connor, and a trophy on one side, and over his head this inscription :

“Sic præter cælum quia nil durabile fitit,
‡ Luceat ambobus lux diuturna Dei.
Donato Connor Desmond Elinora marito——”

On the west side is the countess with a coronet and her beads, kneeling, and over her head this continuation of the preceding lines :

“Hunc fieri tumulum fecit amena suo.
Cum domino saxis Elinoræ filia cumbit,
Et comitis Desmond Elizabetha virens.”

Between the two tablets, which contain the inscriptions, is a boar, and a coronet over it of five balls, which I suppose belonged to Desmond.

On the side of the countess is an escutcheon with the arms of Butler, and under them a book open and a rose on it, crossed by a spade and flambeau, and an urn at bottom.

* Cornelianus is the descendant of Cornelius, † Abbreviated for nomine.
which in Irish is *Conagher*, or, in the short way, ‡ Luceat.
Connor.

E c 2

Above

Above there is a table with this inscription that runs from each end and over both the former, and ornamented with an angel's head at each end. It does not pay any respect to the poet's arrangement, as you will perceive.

“ Siccine Conatiæ per quod florebat eburna
 Urna tegit vivax corpora bina decus !
 Siccine Donati tumulo conduntur in alto
 Offa, que Momoniæ siccine cura jacet !
 Martia quæ bello, mitis quæ pace micabat,
 Versa est in cineres siccine vestra manus !
 Siccine Penelope faxis Elinora sepulta est,
 Siccine marmoreis altera casta Judith !
 Mater Ierna genis humidis quæ brachia tenda*,
 Mortis ero vestris, lucibus aucta, memor.”

Over this is O'Connor's arms, viz. a tree; and crest, a lion crowned. The motto is, *QUO VINCI, VINCOR*. On one side of these is a figure with a key lying on the breast, and a sword in the left. On the other is a figure with a sword in the right, and a book in the left lying on the breast; and the whole is surmounted by a crucifix.

I am, sir,

Yours, &c.

This letter having been communicated to me by the gentleman who was so obliging as to make the enquiry, occasioned my sending him the following:

To C. O. Esq.

Strawberry-hill, Sept. 17, 1757.

S I R,

I Should have thanked you the instant I received the honour of your obliging letter, if you had not told me that you was setting out for Ireland: I am now in pain lest this should not come to your hands, as you gave me no direction, and I should be extremely sorry that you should think me capable,

* tendo.

Yours,

fir, of neglecting to show my gratitude for the trouble you have given yourself. I cannot think of taking the liberty to give you any more, though I own the inscriptions you have sent me have not cleared away the difficulties relating to the countess of Desmond.—On the contrary, they make me doubt whether the lady interred at Sligo was the person reported to have lived to such an immense age. If you will excuse me, I will state my objections.

I have often heard that the aged lady Desmond lived to one hundred and sixty-two or sixty-three years. In the * account of her picture at Windsor, they give her but one hundred and fifty years. Sir William Temple †, from the relation of lord Leicester, reduces it to one hundred and forty; adding, “That she had been married out of England in the reign of Edward the fourth, and, being reduced to great poverty by the ruin of the Irish family into which she had married, came from Bristol to London towards the end of the reign of James the first to beg relief from court.”

This account by no means corresponds either with the monument at Sligo, or the new Irish Peerage by Lodge. The great particular (besides that of her wonderful age) which interested me in this enquiry, was the tradition which says, that the long-lived lady Desmond had danced with Richard the third, and always affirmed that he was a very well-made man. It is supposed that this was the same lady with whom the old lady Dacre had conversed, and from whose testimony she gave the same account.

In the catalogue of the ancient earls of Desmond, inserted in the pedigree of Kildare, I can find no one who married an Englishwoman near the period in question: but that we will wave; it might have been a mistake of sir William, or his authority, the earl of Leicester. Her poverty might be as erroneous, if Lodge's account be true ‡, that she left three hundred pounds to the chapel at Sligo, the tomb in which, as the inscription says, she erected in 1624. But here is the greatest difficulty: if she was one hundred and forty in 1636, according to Lodge the æra of her death (which by the way was in king Charles's and not in king James's reign), she was born in 1496.

* See Pote's Account of Windsor-castle, p. 418. † Vol. i. page 19.

‡ See his Essay on Health and long Life.

Gerald earl of Desmond, her first husband, died according to the Peerage in 1583. She was therefore eighty-seven when she married O'Connor of Sligo—That is possible—If she lived to one hundred and forty, she might be in the vigour of her age (at least not dislike the vigour of his) at eighty-seven. The earl of Desmond's first wife, says Lodge (for our lady Eleanor was his second), died in 1564: if he re-married the next day, his bride must have been sixty-eight, and yet she had a son and five daughters by him. I fear, with all her juvenile powers, she must have been past breeding at sixty-eight.

These accounts tally as little with her dancing with Richard the third: he died in 1485, and by my computation she was not born till 1496. If we suppose that she died twelve years sooner, viz. in 1624, at which time the tomb was erected, and which would coincide with sir William Temple's date of her death in the reign of James; and if we give her one hundred and fifty years, according to the Windsor account, she would then have been born in 1474, and consequently was eleven years old at the death of king Richard: but this supposition labours with as many difficulties. She could not have been married in the reign of Edward the fourth, scarcely have danced with his brother; and it is as little probable that she had much remembrance of his person—the point, I own, in which I am most interested—not at all crediting the accounts of his deformity, from which Buck has so well defended him, both by the silence of Comines, who mentions the beauty of king Edward, and was too sincere to have passed over such remarkable ugliness in a foreigner, and from doctor Shaw's appeal to the people before the Protector's face, whether his highness was not a comely prince and the exact image of his father. The power that could enslave them, could not have kept them from laughing at such an apostrophe, had the Protector been as ill-shapen as the Lancastrian historians represent him. Lady Desmond's testimony adds great weight to this defence.

But the more we accommodate her age to that of Richard the third, the less it will suit with that of her first husband. If she was born in 1474, her having children by him (Gerald earl of Desmond) becomes vastly more improbable.

It

It is very remarkable, sir, that neither her tomb, nor Lodge, should take notice of this extraordinary person's age; and I own, if I knew how to consult him without trespassing on your goodnature and civility, I should be very glad to state the foregoing difficulties to him. But I fear I have already taken too great freedom with your indulgence, and am, &c.

H. W.

P. S. Since I finished my letter, a new idea has started, for discovering who this very old lady Desmond was, at least whose wife she was, supposing the person buried at Sligo not to be her. Thomas the sixth earl of Desmond was forced to give up the earldom: but it is not improbable that his descendants might use the title, as he certainly left issue. His son died, says Lodge*, in 1452, leaving two sons, John and Maurice. John, being born at least in 1451, would be above thirty at the end of Edward the fourth. If his wife was seventeen in the last year of that king, she would have been born in 1466. If therefore she died about 1625, she would be one hundred and fifty-nine. This approaches to the common notion of her age, as the ruin of the branch of the family into which she married does to sir William Temple's. A few years more or less in certain parts of this hypothesis, would but adjust it still better to the accounts of her. Her husband being only a titular earl solves the difficulty of the silence of genealogists on so extraordinary a person.

Still we should be to learn of what family she herself was: and I find a new evidence, which agreeing with sir William Temple's account, seems to clash a little with my last supposition. This authority is no less than sir Walter Raleigh's, who in the fifth chapter of the first book of his History of the World, says expressly, that he himself "knew the old countess of Desmond of Inchiquin, who lived in the year 1589, and many years since, who was married in Edward the fourth's time, and held her jointure from all the earls of Desmond since then; and that this is true, all the noblemen and gentlemen of Munster can witness." Her holding a jointure from all the earls of Desmond would imply that her husband was not of the titular line, but of that in possession: yet that difficulty is not so great, as no such lady

* Vol. ii. page 14.

being

being mentioned in the pedigree. By sir Walter's words it is probable that she was dead when he wrote that account of her. His History was printed in 1614; this makes the æra of her death much earlier than I had supposed; but having allowed her near one hundred and sixty years, taking away ten or twelve will make my hypothesis agree better with sir William Temple's account, and does not at all destroy the assumption of her being the wife of only a titular earl. However, all these are conjectures, which I should be glad to have ascertained or confuted by any curious person who could produce authentic testimonies of the birth, death and family of this very remarkable lady; and to excite or assist which was the only purpose of this disquisition.

Having communicated these observations to the reverend doctor Charles Lyttelton, bishop of Carlisle, he soon afterwards found and gave me the following extract from p. 36 of Smith's Natural and Civil History of the County of Corke, printed at Dublin 1750, 8vo.

“* Thomas the thirteenth earl of Desmond, brother to Maurice the eleventh earl, died this year (1534) at Rathkeile, being of a very great age, and was buried at Youghall. He married, first, † Ellen, daughter of McCarty of Muskerry, by whom he had a son, Maurice, who died *vita patris*.—The earl's second wife was Catherine Fitzgerald, daughter of the Fitzgeralds of the house of Drumana in the county of Waterford. This Catherine was the countess that lived so long, of whom sir Walter Raleigh makes mention in his History of the World, and was reputed to live to one hundred and forty years of age.”

This is the most positive evidence we have; the author quotes Ruffel's MS. If she was of the Fitzgeralds of Waterford, it will not in strictness agree with sir William Temple's relation of her being married out of England; by which we should naturally suppose that she was born of English blood.—Yet his account is so vague, that it ought not to be set against absolute assertion, supposing the Ruffel MS. to be of good authority enough to support what it is quoted to support in 1750.

* His name was James, and he was the twelfth earl. † See Lodge's Peerage, vol. i. p. 16.

Upon

Upon the whole, and to reduce this lady's age as low as possible, making it at the same time coincide with the most probable accounts, we will suppose that she was married at fifteen in 1483, the last year of Edward the fourth, and that she died in 1612, two years before the publication of sir Walter Raleigh's History, she will then have been no less than * one hundred and forty-five years of age, a particularity singular enough to excite, and, I hope, to excuse this enquiry †.

N O T E.

HAVING, by permission of his grace the lord chamberlain, obtained a copy of the picture at Windsor, called The countess of Desmond, I discovered that it is *not* her portrait. On the back is written in an old hand, *The Mother of Rembrandt, given by Sir Robert Carr.* In the Catalogue of King Charles's Collection of Pictures, p. 150, N^o 101, is described the portrait of an old woman with a great scarf upon her head, by Rembrandt, in a black frame; given to the king by my lord Ankrom. This was the very sir Robert Kerr, earl of Ancram, mentioned above, and the measures answer exactly.

* Lord Bacon, says Fuller, computed her age to be one hundred and forty at least; and added, that she three times had a new set of teeth; for so I understand *ter vices dentiffe*, not that she recovered them three times after casting them, as Fuller translates it, which is giving her four sets of teeth. *Worthies in Northumb.* p. 310.

† I cannot omit an anecdote, though too extraordinary to be given as authentic, relating to this lady. In an original MS. written by Robert the second earl of Leicester, (from whom sir W. Temple says he received the account of lady Des-

mond) and containing memorandums of remarkable facts, it is said that that old countess came to England to solicit a pension at the end of queen Elizabeth's reign, and was so poor that she walked from Bristol to London; her daughter being too decrepit to go on foot, was carried in a cart. "The countess, adds lord Leicester, might have lived much longer had she not met with a kind of violent death; for she would needs climb a nut-tree to gather nuts; so falling down, she hurt her thigh, which brought a fever, and that fever brought death." Lord Leicester fixes her death to the end of that reign.