A Third John de Courcy.

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AMONG those who have given no particular attention to the early history of Ireland only one John de Courcy is generally known; and of this follower of "Strongbow" the prevalent impressions are mostly erroneous, from his hat downwards. But a measure of inaccuracy is pardonable since the older works of reference are commonly far from correct in their statements concerning him. In a full account of this first John de Courcy's personal history, Mr. Round has shewn[1] that he was sent into Ireland during December, 1176, and has dated his raid into Ulster during the January following. It may be thought perhaps that John was then still young; but we cannot well suppose him less than about five-and-twenty years of age, in other words born more or less about 1150. It would perhaps be necessary to state an earlier year, if we could accept the earlier date, 1171 or 1172, of the dubious grant of Ulster, or of any part of it "if he could take it." Mr. Goddard Orpen allows[2] that John may have been with the king in Ireland in 1171, but a better reason for the belief that John did have a "grant" of Ulster on such or like terms is founded on the express statement to that effect in the *Song of Dermot* (l. 2734). The existence of any such concession however is by no means established: a reasonable opinion is that

1. *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, and Walford's *Antiq. Mag. and Bibliographer*, vols. III and IV.

2. "Ireland under the Normans," II, 6.

the king's shifty dealings with Strongbow were repeated with John, who was led to suppose himself grantee of a something the king was able to repudiate. John's supposed grant was certainly not in fact an earldom, though as Mr. Orpen has well said he was "de facto princeps Ulidiæ." The definite fact is that in January, 1176-7, John did take the region then called "Ulvester," roughly the modern counties of Antrim and Down. His success at this latter date proves him then no child, nor quite young in arms; there is no ground for misdoubting the graphic description of him as he started upon this raid, riding a "white" horse, and with eagles painted upon his shield:—

"Erat itaque Johannes vir albus et procerus, membris nervosis et ossosis, staturæ grandis, et corpore pervalido; viribus immensis, audaciæ singularis; vir fortis et bellator ab adolescentia; semper in acie primus, semper gravioris periculi pondus arripiens."[1]

In giving this portrait Giraldus continues further to the same effect; but for the moment it is more to the purpose that even Lynch himself could find nothing to withdraw from this description; indeed he accentuates it by citing an amazing example of fortitude and endurance;[2] his chief point apparently in depreciation is made from the fact that some texts of Giraldus read "aviculas" for "aquilas" on the shield, which *inter alia* he took to indicate a mountebank air in dress and equipment. Read in a less carping spirit, the narrative suggests that never a hero before the walls of Troy was more altogether the perfect man of war; if in 1177 John did not as yet precisely fulfil the description, the pertinent fact of his success proves him then possessed of qualities strictly similar in kind; not because he succeeded, but that he was already of

1. Giraldus Cambrensis, "Expugnatio Hiberniæ," lib. II, cap. xviii, Rolls Series 21, vol. V, pp. 339, 344.

2. "Cambrensis Eversus," Celtic Society: ed. Matthew Kelly, cap. vii, p. 386; cap. v, p. 339.

a reputation to secure that quality of following, however small its numbers may have been, which was needful for success. We may be sure his "adolescentia" was then no longer in the quite immediate past; we shall not gravely err in thinking him born about 1150 if not, as quite possibly, before that date. We must suppose him of full age at least, if he was a person of consideration in 1171; it is plain he was well past his majority, in any case, at the time of his Ulster expedition in the beginning of 1177. It is most necessary to be reasonably clear as to his age, although we do not know with certainty who was the father of this last and extremest of his type, blending in his own person the more prominent features of Cœur de Lion and the Conqueror, since his personality it is presently to be shewn has been borrowed for another individual, some three generations later in date.

The second John de Courcy is affiliated in the most precise terms by sundry record evidences, but his relationship to the John foregoing is by no means clear, nor indeed do we know much of him in any way. He first appears as one of certain hostages given for the foresaid John, on the back of the first membrane of the patent roll for 6 John: there he is "John de Curcy son of Roger de Chester"[1] namely son of Roger de Courcy who was constable to the foresaid John de Courcy of Ulster. From the fact that this second John was a hostage at a date not very long before 1205 it might be assumed that he was born not long before 1190, quite as probably after that year. He was of full age in or before May 1218, when the justiciary of Ireland is to take a jury whether Roger de

1. "Calendar of Documents relating to Ireland," I, 259. The entry is editorially dated about April 1205, but the calendar date is not sufficiently correct, as has been shown by Mr. Round (*op. cit.*, IV, 177); "before 15 July 1204" being a preferable expression. At the same passage Mr. Round demonstrates a "John de Curcy junior," father of Milo, another hostage, which John was therefore then a man of thirty or so we may suppose, if not older; born that is towards 1175 or earlier, and presumably a bastard of the first John himself.

Chester father of John de Courcy held certain lands, etc.,[1] and it is thus likely that he was then but lately of age, or in other words born by if not in the year 1197. This second John then we are to regard as born a matter of forty if not fifty years after the first John de Courcy ; and now we are in a position to consider the date of yet another John de Courcy, whose origin, fortunes, and ultimate fate are alike mysterious, if we can at least believe that the statements about him are not devoid of some actual basis in fact.

The mere existence of this third John is perhaps known only from an assertion by Sandford[2] which as it stands is simply impossible. He affirms that King John had a bastard son named John de Courcy, brought up at Stoke Courcy who became Earl of Ulster in Ireland. Inasmuch as only one John de Courcy has ever been called Earl of Ulster, quite apart from the question whether he was or was not an earl, it is manifest that here Sandford confuses the person brought up at Stogursey with the first John. Though that John's parentage is in a measure doubtful, still it is amply clear that he was no son of King John; for between his going to Ireland and his invasion of Ulster, the future King John attained the age of nine years. It becomes then a question what the story given by Sandford can possibly mean ; and first as to how he arrived at his assertion. For authority we find a citation " Robert of Gloucester 247 b." Now in 1724 Hearne gave the same story in his edition of Robert's poem ;[3] whence it is discovered that the text cited by Sandford is the fine MS. belonging to the College of Arms, from which Hearne borrowed so freely for his notes. Both Hearne and Sandford give the passage accurately enough ; in the text it reads :—

" In ye yer of our lord m ^{1} c ^{o} ^{xx} iiij ^{o} v (1185) Hugh de lacye

1. Fin. 2 Hen. III, m. 5 ; Roberts I, p. 11.

2. Francis Sandford, Lancaster Herald, " Genealogical History of the Kings and Queens of England," 1677 ; fo. 86.

3. Vol. II, p. 484.

lord of Mithe Englyssh man of a sike man the viij kl. of August was slayne. Sir John Courcy that me seide was kyng Jones sone bastard. And i norsshed atte the Prioury of Stogurcy in Somersetshire in youthe was made erle of Ulvester in Irelond the ferst of Englysshtong and after him the kynrede of the Burghes *that bere the armes of goules with a white croys.*" . . . .[1]

I am indebted to the courtesy of C. H. Athill, Esq., F.S.A., Richmond Herald, for the opportunity to inspect this fine MS. The passage cited is no part of Robert's poem, but part of a long note inserted in the text by the unknown writer thereof. That this annotator was a herald will hardly be questioned, for the passage I have italicized, on the armorial bearings of de Burgh, has nothing whatever to do with the origin of John de Courcy either by this statement or by any other account of him. It is curious that here, actually a few lines after notice of the slaying of Hugh de Lacy, we find no mention of the more pertinent particulars that the same Hugh's son overthrew and succeeded John in Ulster, and really was grantee of an earldom thereof before the kindred of de Burgh. One does not care to explain this detail by a charge of negligent transcribing and casual omission, whereof later. Hearne remarked that this annotator,—whose personality is as unknown to us as that of "Robert of Gloucester" himself,—lived into the reign of Henry VI; but Hearne advanced no opinion on the sources of the annotations. That would indeed be a large question, the reference to a new authority being sometimes no more than "another chronicle." These additions to the poem run in places for many columns together of closely written folio; but considerable search failed altogether to discover the suggested passage where "me seide" previously that this reputed earl was the king's son.

Fairly read, there is in truth no assertion that the annotator had already made the same statement before. That presumably was true only of the writer whose actual words the annotator

1. Fo. 247 b, col. i.

was there inserting; doubtless a chronicler whose work is not as yet identified. Though unfortunately we do not know anything whatever on the subject of the annotator's person, we are happily able to judge of his accuracy, of which we have at this same point direct evidence. He gives here a long extract from Peter of Blois, namely a quotation from the epistle to the archbishop of Palermo "Ad Walterum arch. Panormitanum.—Benedictus D. D. Israel—" which is given as in the printed texts, with but the most trifling verbal differences, until the annotator breaks off from his reproduction of Peter's assurances that Henry was guiltless of Becket's murder, to introduce an utterly different subject with the statement that (king) Richard was born at Beaumont "where the white Friars now are." This reference to the Carmelites at Oxford is rather suggestive of the Benedictine "Worcester College" close by, over which it is supposed that "Robert of Gloucester" was the first to preside.

We have thus an unknown annotator citing an unknown and possibly lost work; the recognition of the passage cited has certainly escaped divers students, and must probably await fortuitous discovery. But the unknown annotator can quote his authorities with accuracy; therefore the presumption is that he did actually find a work which at least twice declared King John the father of some John de Courcy; a work which, further, confused the alleged son of the king with the so-called earl, though by no possibility could these be the same man. Perhaps it is strange that the error of this declared paternity of the earl was perceived neither by the annotator's original; nor by the annotator himself, though a herald; nor by Sandford also a herald; nor by Stebbing[1] another herald, who here simply copied Sandford without addition, alteration, or comment; nor even by Hearne, a far sounder antiquary than casual reading would lead us to suppose, though he gave no particular

1. Samuel Stebbing, Somerset Herald, Editor of Sandford's "Genealogical History," etc. (1707), fo. (86 mis-numbered) 87.

attention to pedigree matters. Nevertheless for the oversight of all there is an obvious explanation; for if they knew John the invader best at the time of his overthrow, namely in 1204 and 1205, when the chronological difficulty of the declared paternity is no longer patent, still they might be unable to ascertain that John the invader was then over fifty and perhaps nearer sixty years of age. To speak of him as "in youthe" in this juxtaposition with an event of 1185 might suggest a deduction of some twenty years from his age, if it did not further suggest a reference of his Ulster raid to such a date more or less; the affiliation story would presuppose him unborn till towards 1185 at the soonest. It would nevertheless be rash to suppose that he who first advanced the assertion concerning the king's son was displaying ignorance; there are grounds for believing that he had some kind of reason for his words, and was on the contrary recording particular knowledge, if we will regard his assertion in all its constituent portions, and apart from the title of earl, which is denied to the veritable and original John de Courcy himself.

The declaration that King John had a son brought up at Stoke Courcy is not in itself absurd; it has, indeed, the appearance of being true, as seen in the shadows of record evidence. Dugdale[1] quotes the Close Rolls that King John gave the manor of Down Ampney in Gloucestershire to Alice de Courcy "for her better maintenance." A light upon the king in his benevolent moments, perhaps; Alice was then needing such aid, possibly; on the face of it nothing could be less likely, and the phrase was not seldom an empty euphemism, employed only to avoid stating the real consideration for which a grant was made.

In 23 Henry II (1177) the heir of William de Courcy was a minor, and by the pipe roll for that year it is shewn that the farm of his honour, 23¾ knights' fees, for a half-year was

1. "Baronage," I, 451, col. ii (1675).

£25 4s.[1] It is supposed that this William was the father of the first John de Courcy, but the heir was William's daughter Alice. She was born apparently more or less about the year 1165; and as she inherited from le Meschin a further 16½ fees, plainly Alice was no pauper. She was wife of Warin FitzGerold; their daughter married to her second husband Fulk de Breauté, the "Falcasius" whose memory we preserve in "Vauxhall," though he was reviled of the chroniclers; and who under Essex owed £100 for his relief for that daughter's lands;[2] and was also guardian of his said wife's son and heir, the Earl of Devon. These people then were among John's extremest supporters; and though at the time of the Down Ampney grant to Alice her husband Warin was in rebellion, it was only in the closing months of John's reign that Warin forsook the king's cause. Warin had been John's chamberlain, and doubtless knew much of the king's villainy; but he should also have known discretion for one of his duties, since his father had filled the same office under Henry II.

It is on the Close Roll for 18 John (m. 2)[3] that we read the sheriff of Gloucester is to know the king has granted "to Alice de Courcy, wife of Warin FitzGerold," "manerium de Dumhamenell'" with the appurtenances which was John de Pratell's with all the chattels of the aforesaid Warin in the said manor, "ad se sustentand'," and she is to have full seizin without delay of the said manor and chattels. "Teste meipso. Apud Cirincestr' ij die Septembris." (1216).

Certainly there is little time for delay; within seven weeks the king is appointed to die. That of course he cannot know with any precision, but he knows the net is gathering about him. If it would be unreasonable to overvalue the detail that at this time the mandates usually contain such exhortations to instant obedience, still he knows he is surrounded by trouble

1. Pipe Roll Society, 23 Hen. II, p. 24.
2. Fin. 2 Hen. III, m. 5; Roberts, I, p. 11.
3. Hardy, "Close Rolls," 1833, p. 285, col. ii.

on every hand; he knows Louis has been for fifteen weeks in England, and is already in possession of much of the south-eastern part of the kingdom. Most of his subjects are long disaffected; the more dependable of his adherents, Warin for example, are leaving him; the papal support is his one last and failing hope. And this is the time when he gives away the manor to Alice; when he has already seized the chattels of her rebel husband; and at the same time declares a consideration so obviously fictitious, that we know there was a cogent reason undeclared. There may be no ground here for assuming that the true reason was the mere maintenance of a son; at a time so critical it is more probable that such reason will have been the concealment of some quite exceptional enormity; but if incidentally there were a child, very appropriately John, we perceive how that child might presently come to be known as John "de Courcy," though he were not the conqueror of Ulster. He is at this date a mere infant, if as yet actually born, which is possibly doubtful; Alice very reasonably might send him later to the priory founded by her forefathers at Stoke Courcy; a place more apt for concealment than this remote cell it would be difficult to find; the story does not look so entirely absurd as at first. This hypothetical infant was not the son of Alice we may assume; apart from the plain indications that she was one of those women physiologically incapable of bearing male issue, Alice is now a matter of fifty years old at least, and already a grandmother; her daughter's child in this year succeeded to the earldom of Devon, being still a minor.

The story says that this John, whoever he was, was nourished at Stogursey, and there is no place more likely to receive a child left on the hands of Alice; equally there he would be likely to go if still young at her death. It is obviously impossible to dispute that such a John might conceivably be called "de Courcy" from the name of the priory; but it is far more reasonable to suppose him so called after Alice; and

in that case it is plausible to associate him with the gift of Down Ampney to her. Her name is the same with that given to him in the story, howsoever derived; but the king says he gave the manor to her for *her* maintenance. That last word may be here no formal euphemism, but an accidental truth on the royal lips. The king is now on his way from Corfe Castle, presumably to attempt a relief of the long-besieged Windsor; but Louis has castles on his direct route thither, and John must—or at least does—go all round westerly by Sherborne, Bath, Bradford, Chippenham, Cirencester, Taynton, Burford, Oxford and Wallingford, to get from Dorset to Reading, not a third part of the distance actually traversed. He has no time for idle refinements; the gift probably is maintenance; but it is also hush-money, we may conjecture. The husband-chamberlain, now a rebel, may or may not know all about it, but the letters close will not invite undue publicity. This perhaps is more nearly what the king should mean, but of course he would say anything; the facts are so far plain whatever he may say. He gives away the manor, in the record it is Alice who gets it, and the chattels also of her rebel husband; in the record she is expressly called Alice de Courcy. In the story it is some John who gets a surname which was also her surname; he is brought up at "her" priory; Alice in all probability knew exactly why she obtained the gift, and what she was expected to do in return. But granting that these diverse beads may be threaded all on one string just possibly, still this "John de Courcy" himself is not forthcoming; he is gone, vanished away.

Who then was John, and what became of him? He may have died in his nonage; he may have become a monk in the priory; but the story appears to suggest that he became a notable magnate in Ireland, when it manifestly confuses him with the great John de Courcy formerly there. Many a man in such case as his did go to Ireland, past all question. Did then this annotator find some chronicler who affirmed as much

of this John? If we can assume that chronicler merely to have mixed up John from Stoke Courcy with the John de Courcy of Ulster, no great space of time were needed for that blending. Did this John from the priory also go to Ulster then, or by some means or other become absorbed into the Lacy's house, and so associated in memory with the supposed Courcy earldom? But there really was a magnate John of unknown origin, who did marry a Lacy heiress; he is that John "de Verdun" of whom the usual account making him a son of Theobald Butler II is demonstrably impossible. That John was eventually called "heir" of his mother Roesia de Verdun; but he was older than Theobald's heir, who was not Roesia's son. That point one has sufficiently laboured already;[1] here it is enough to observe that if John "de Courcy," born about September 1216 more or less, were the same John de Verdun, son of Roesia, who herself was very doubtfully sixteen by that year, and had apparently been a hostage with the king for her father, then doubtless king John needed the assistance of Alice or some other trusty person to help him conceal a transaction too bad even for his abominable record; of a kind indeed to justify the extraordinary bitterness of the chroniclers' allusions to John's cruel profligacy, so utterly different from their tone in connection with the far more human gallantries of other kings before and after John the debaucher.

1. *Genealogist*, N.S. XXV, 1908.