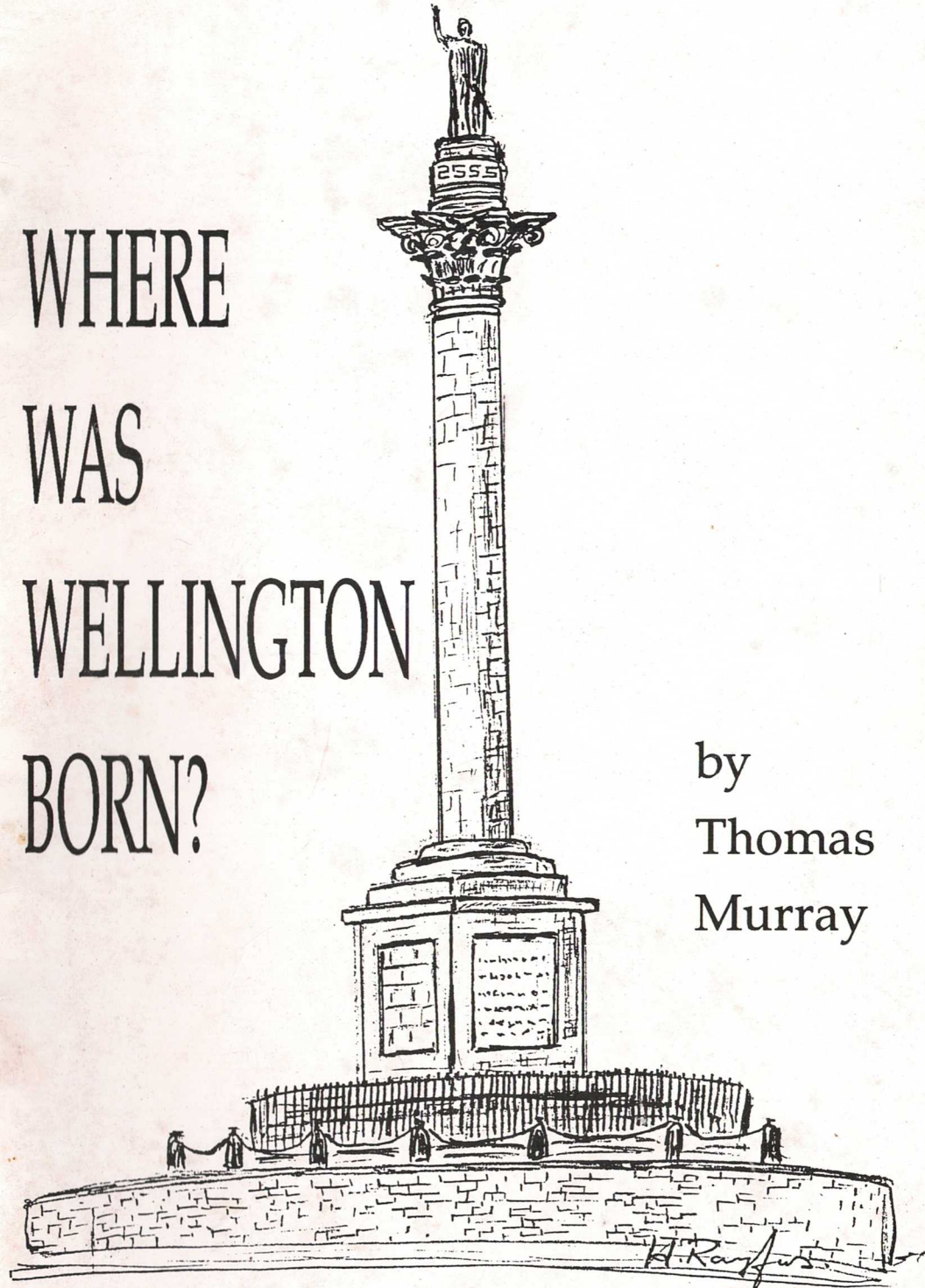


*"Trim indeed was never to become famous for industry
but it has had a hand in shaping the lives of more
than it's share of world famous people".*

Cyril Ellison
WATERS OF THE BOYNE AND BLACKWATER

WHERE
WAS
WELLINGTON
BORN?



by
Thomas
Murray

Introduction

When in the summer of 1992 I was asked by Noel French, the director of the Meath Heritage Centre to consider giving a talk on Wellington I had little or no idea of the amount of research that was involved. I had little interest in the history or in the exploits of the Iron duke and the fact that he was a great military figure or that he had been Prime Minister of England would hardly have inspired me to spend months of research into his life. That such an important figure might have been born in the area, however, possibly in the town itself, was not something that I could resist, given my interest in local history.

Growing up in Trim one could hardly fail to notice the numerous places named after the illustrious duke and indeed his mother, Lady Mornington. There must be something in it I figured, more than just boyhood connections. After all Dean Swift, Esther Johnson, Rowan Hamilton, Dean Butler and many others had spent time around Trim and with the possible exception of a derelict cottage out at Laracor their names were not written in stone. Anyway I didn't have to know about the boyhood adventures, the great battles or Kitty Pakenham. I would concern myself with events surrounding the birth of Wellington. What happened when he was four years old or even two months after the birth would be of no consequence. The history of the Colleys and the Wellesleys would remain as obscure as the man himself. I would give the talk, I told Noel a few days later and the title would be "Where Was Wellington Born." At that time the title seemed perfect, however, now that my research has long since been completed and the talk delivered I feel that the title, "Where Wellington Was Born," would have been more appropriate.

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The Wellington Monument Trim
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Sources:

Riocht na Midha
Local Tradition

Also by Thomas Murray

Memorable Meath views
Something Beginning with Spring
Stella's Cottage

For Josie

Where Was Wellington Born?

It is generally accepted by most scholars that Arthur Wellesley the 1st Duke of Wellington was born in Dublin on 1st May, 1769. This view however, is not held by the people of neighbouring County Meath, particularly in the town of Trim and the surrounding area. Generations of Trim folk have always believed that the Duke was born in the town, the only question was where?

The following birthplaces, nine in all have been suggested by Trim people ever since the controversy first started shortly after the Duke was born. Six of these are in the town and three are within a short distance of it.

- 1 Mossy Keefe's house at Laracor crossroads, exactly half way between Trim and Dangan castle, the home of the Wellesleys.
- 2 The gate-lodge of the Percival family at Knightsbrook in the parish of Laracor 1 mile from Trim.
- 3 The Lough O'Biody, a watering place for horses and less than half a mile from the town.
- 4 Darcy's yard in Emmet Street now the site of the Property Exchange.
- 5 O'Reilly's house, also in Emmet Street.
- 6 Kiely's yard in Emmet Street.
- 7 St. Joseph's Hospital Trim.
- 8 An Inn beside Trim Courthouse.
- 9 Duignan's house in High Street.

Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9 can be disregarded and attributed to wild rumours. For example, the explanation given for the birth taking place in Duignan's house in High Street was that Lady Mornington was rushing to catch the train. Duignan's house however, was not on the direct route to Dublin. Furthermore, followers of this school of thought would hardly be aware that the first train did not steam out of Trim until 1864, when the Duke of Wellington was twelve years dead. The same goes for suggestion number 7, St. Joseph's Hospital, formerly known as the County Home did not open until well into the nineteenth century.

Of the other locations suggested in and around the town of Trim as being possible birthplaces for the Duke of Wellington the only ones worth considering are Nos 1, 2, 3, and 8. They are all part of local tradition and each one of them has it's own particular claim to being the actual birthplace.

In a fascinating manuscript entitled, "*Notes on the Rise and Fall of a Great Meath estate*," by the Rev. C.. C. Ellison, M.A., which was published in Riocht na Midhe in the Nineteen Sixties there is no less than eleven

possible birthplaces mentioned for the Duke of Wellington. Four of these are in Dublin, four are in Meath, one is in Kildare, another suggests that the birth may have taken place at sea, while the possibility of the Duke being born somewhere between Dublin and Dangan is also mentioned. Of the four Meath locations mentioned, the Gate Lodge at Knightsbrook and the Inn beside Trim Courthouse are disregarded owing to reliable evidence. Mossy Keefe's house and the Lough O Biody are not mentioned. The possibility of the birth taking place somewhere between Dublin and Dangan is based on a letter to the London Times in 1926 and is a Colley family tradition. It would actually strengthen the case for Trim as the town could be seen as being on the route from Dangan to Dublin. The fact that nothing in the eighteenth century travelled as the crow flies must be taken into account. While the town may not have been on the direct route between Dublin and Dangan Castle the nearest point would bring the traveller within a few hundred yards of the town. The suggestion that the Duke was born between Dangan and Trim must be considered. Down the years it has featured strongly in local tradition.

Of the three points on the route the most popular was the Gate-Lodge at Knightsbrook. In 1965 a Mrs Rose Daly, a centenarian stated that her grandmother was present at the birth. Mrs Daly lived directly opposite the Gate-Lodge at Knightsbrook. There are still people in Laracor today who remember Mrs Daly telling of her grandmother's presence at the birth. It is well known in the Trim area that the Daly family had a tradition of being handymen, that is to say that not only Rose Daly but her mother and grandmother were known to assist at births. The Wellesley family in nearby Dangan would have been aware of this too.

DUBLIN

Of the four Dublin locations put forward as being possible birthplaces, Mornington House, 6 Merrion Street has the backing of most scholars, including Phillip Guedalla, author of 'The Duke'. Writing in 1931 Guedalla describes the scene in the house in Merrion Square to which the Morningtons had just moved from No. 114 Grafton Street.

After extolling the beauty of the plasterwork, the flower baskets and the ceilings, Guedalla writes, 'But these new glories failed to engage Lady Mornington, since she lay upstairs in the big bedroom at the back. It looked across a little garden to the open space of Merrion Square. A harassed doctor called, the apothecary from Dawson Street brought round a soothing draught, - and then a child, her sixth, was born on May Day 1769. They called him Arthur and the Dublin round was undisturbed.' Chapter Two of Guedalla's book is devoted to a history of the Wellesley family. Guedalla opens Chapter Three by describing the infant Duke's first outing in Dublin.

'Life opened for the child in Dublin, and they brought him down the big staircase lit by it's one tall, pillared window for his first outing in Merrion Street.'

The proximity of these two paragraphs would lead one to believe that the two incidents happened within hours of each other. Nothing however, could be further from the truth. There is proof that Lady Mornington did occupy the big bedroom in Mornington House around that time. The fact that a doctor called and that a chemist from Dawson Street did bring a soothing draught has been recorded. There is little doubt too that they carried the child down the big staircase in early May 1769. It has never been proven however, that the child was born in that house. It is more likely that the child that they carried down the staircase on May Day 1769 was a four week old child, born elsewhere.

Of the other Dublin addresses mentioned as being a possible birthplace for Wellington the likelihood of him being born in any of them is even more remote. In all probability they would have been based on rumours by servants. A date such as 1st May would rule out the possibility of the birth taking place in Grafton Street as the Morningtons had left the Grafton Street address before that date. The other two addresses mentioned, Molesworth Street and a house on the opposite side of the street to Mornington House have been the subject of some debate. The Molesworth Street suggestion is almost certainly based on rumours by servants who would not be aware of Lady Mornington's whereabouts after she had left Grafton Street.

COUNTY KILDARE

The idea that the Duke was born in the town of Athy in County Kildare is based on a letter to the London Times in 1926. In 1851 the Duke, then in the closing stages of his life is said to have written on his census paper that he was born in Athy in Ireland. In Athy however, one does not find the same passionate claims as one finds in the south Meath town of Trim.

AT SEA

The suggestion that the Duke of Wellington was born at sea off Dublin is refuted not only by scholars and traditionalists but by the Duke himself. If there is any truth in the saying so often attributed to him, 'that just because one is born in a stable that does not make one a horse,' then this statement seems to imply that he was not denying his Irish birth. Obviously a response to some taunt that he was born in Ireland, the Duke did not choose to say that he was born at sea. Instead he went on to make this statement which is unique to him and has never been attributed to anyone else in history. Therein lies the authenticity of the statement.

MORNINGTON, CO. MEATH.

This suggestion is almost certainly based on rumours by servants who would have been present in Mornington House Dublin on the night that the mother and child arrived there. These servants would not have been aware of the direction from which the coach came.

TRIM, COUNTY MEATH

No figure in human history has had as many streets, squares and monuments named after them as the Duke of Wellington. In the town of Trim the number of places named either after him or his family is proportionally higher than any other part of the world. An impressive monument to the Duke dominates the Southern part of the town. The hotel is named after him. People living in the Southern area of the town regularly receive letters addressed to Wellington Street and Wellington Place.

Four houses in the town bear the name Mornington House and one of the biggest housing estates in the town is named Mornington Heights. Prints of the Duke adorn several establishments in the town and a lock of the Duke's hair is permanently on display in one licensed premises. From all this it would appear that there is almost total commitment in the town to the idea of the Duke being born there. The wealth of stories concerning the Iron Duke in the Trim area ensures that what is European history in the surrounding villages is local history in Trim. While it is true that Wellington spent some time in the town and has strong associations with the area it is also true that Jonathan Swift did spend even more time in Trim. Yet there is not one single place in Trim that bears the name of Swift. Of the four suggested birthplaces in the town the Inn beside Trim Courthouse seems to be the most likely location for the birth. It has the support of the other three in as much as they would be on the direct route to it. Known as Mornington House, it is today a huge stone building in the centre of the town square. In 1769 it was the residence of the Wellesley law agent. According to the dictionary the word Inn means among other things, A - a house or place of residence for students and B - a legal society occupying such a house. the Inn beside Trim Courthouse may not have been an Inn in the more popular sense of the word.

The suggestion that the Duke of Wellington was born in Dangan Castle is based on letters to the London Times again in 1926. It has a certain amount of scholarly and traditional backing.

It may also have its origins in the belief among people in Dublin in 1869 that if Lady Mornington was not in Dublin then she must have been in Dangan. It would have been common knowledge in certain circles that the

expectant mother had left Dublin and had not returned. This location however, does not accommodate any of the places or the events reputed to have taken place on the road from Dangan to Trim or in the town of Trim itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the most likely items of scholarly and traditional information, it seems certain that the Spring of 1769 was a tumultuous time for Lord and Lady Mornington. They were in the process of moving house from 114 Grafton Street to 6 Merrion Street, Dublin. With the turmoil of moving proving too much for Lady Mornington who was then in an advanced state of pregnancy it was decided that she should be moved to Dangan Castle in County Meath and there in the more tranquil atmosphere of the countryside she could relax among the canals and leafy walks of the Wellesley county home. The eight hour journey from Dublin however, would have been on very bad roads and would have shortened her time somewhat. Sometime in early April it was decided that she should be taken back to Dublin, (not necessarily to the house in Grafton Street), so that she would have access to the better facilities which one would expect to find in a city like Dublin. As we have seen, Dublin was a good days drive from Dangan and there would be two changes of horses. they would have travelled by some kind of converted barouch. All references to Lady Mornington's method of travelling in local tradition have used the term horses as opposed to horse. This would rule out a whole range of vehicles such as cabs, gigs and whiskeys. A stage coach would have been too cumbersome. The Barouch would have accommodated up to five travellers and a sizeable amount of luggage. It would also have been fast and fairly comfortable.

They would have travelled to Dublin by a superior road than on the journey down to Dangan. A route which would have taken them within two miles of Trim. At Mossy Keefe's house they would have turned right and headed down what is now known as the Rock Road. A mile down that road they would have crossed the Rock river at a place locally known as Kingsbridge, headed across the Percival estate and joined the Trim Dublin road at a place known as Everknock.

However, somewhere between Dangan and Mossy Keefe's house which stood on the crossroads at Laracor the drive precipitated matters and hastened the arrival of the Mornington's sixth child.

At Laracor crossroads a decision would have to be made on whether to continue on to Dublin or make a dash for Trim. Discussions would have taken place. Mossy Keefe's house being directly on the crossroads would have been the focus of attention for the passing traffic. Approaching midday the Wellesley coach would have been conspicuous. This was a time when the

roads of Ireland were crowded with slow moving traffic. It was also a time when the population of the country was much greater than it is today. When the news of the birth eventually broke many people would have seen the party stopped at Mossy Keefe's house and assumed that the Duke was born there.

It was probably the fact that Rose Daly's grandmother, who as we have already seen was a well known Midwife lived less than a half a mile away in the direction of Trim that swayed the decision in favour of heading for the town. At Rose Daly's cottage they would have stopped to collect Mrs Daly, giving rise to rumours that the birth took place at Knightsbrook Gate Lodge which is directly opposite. The party then headed for Trim. A brief pause at the Lough O Biody to avail of the facility of cooling the horses feet may account for that landmark being included in local tradition.

Having cleared the Louth O Biody they would then only be a few minutes from the town. They would have travelled down Emmet Street, past several places connected with the Duke in later life. After turning into Market Street they would have stopped at the Inn beside Trim Courthouse and there in that building the Duke of Wellington was born, in early April, 1769.

A few days later when both mother and child were fit to travel they would have been taken to Dublin and installed in the big bedroom in Mornington House, Merrion Square. They would have spent the rest of April there. At some stage during the month the doctor would have called, the apothecary would have brought round a soothing draught. The child would have been christened on the 30th of April. Then on the next day, just as Guedalla tells us they would have carried the future Iron Duke down the big staircase lit by it's one tall pillared window and announced him to the world on the 1st May 1769.

EXTRACTS FROM THE ORIGINAL TALK

HISTORY

My hobby is social history. I would define a social historian as one who would talk for an hour about the Duke of Wellington and not mention Waterloo.

MYSTERY

I know where I was born, everyone here knows where they were born, yet despite all his achievements no one seems to know where the Duke of

Wellington was born. So I think that we owe it to the Duke to find him a birthplace. I have the suggested dates put forward by the scholars. The 6th March, 3rd April, 29th April, 1st May, impossible this was the day after he was baptised. The most likely date I would think would be 3rd April.

TRADITION

One cannot over emphasise the importance of tradition when dealing with matters of Irish history, a country once known as the island of saints and scholars. To the best of my knowledge however, there are only two officially canonized Irish saints, St. Laurence O Toole and St. Oliver Plunket. The rest it seems were saints by tradition only. So every 17th of March we dye the Hudson green, drink green pints and parade up and down the streets of the world in the name of tradition. At other times we climb mountains barefooted, and perform a thousand acts of worship all in the name of tradition. It was G. K. Chesterton who said that tradition was the democracy of the dead, it was like giving votes to the dead, and what does tradition have to say about the Duke of Wellington. The answer according to generations of Trim people is clear. Wellington was born in the area.

MEMENTO

There is a public house in Trim where you will actually see a lock of the Duke's hair on display together with some framed letters proving the authenticity of this memento.

TRAVEL

Now Dublin was eight hours away, with two changes of horses. The great road builders such as John McAdam and Thomas Telford were still in kindergarten when Wellington was born.

SERVANTS

Before the advent of television or radio the servants were a powerful source of communication in Ireland. A network of servants in the big houses throughout the length and breadth of the country followed the comings and goings of the folks upstairs with much the same interest as people today follow Dallas or Coronation Street. So it is not hard to understand the power of these servants when it came to news, gossip and well founded rumour.

BORN IN A STABLE

I believe that he did make that particular statement. You can not make up something like that. Unlike so many other utterances this statement is unique to the Duke of Wellington. I have never heard it attributed to anyone else. Writers who tell us that he never did say these words surely couldn't have known every word that the Duke said unless they were with him twenty four hours every day. Then again how do we know that he didn't say it, it has to be proved that he didn't say it.

I would hold that at some function or other, probably in England the Duke was challenged by someone who may have decided to take him down a peg, 'you were born in Ireland' they would have said, 'over there in the mists and the bogs.' Provoked the duke would have retorted, 'Just because one is born in a stable that does not make one a horse or words to that effect. The important point is that there is no record of him saying, "I was born on the high seas, off the coast near Dublin, at sea".'

WRITTEN IN STONE

There is today in the town of Trim no less than four houses named after Lady Mornington, Number One Summerhill Road, Number Fourteen on the same road, the building presently occupied by Atlantic 252 and the large stone building to the left of the town square.

MOVING HOUSE

Moving from 114 Grafton Street to 24 Merrion Square would have taken quite a fair amount of time. There would have been a lot of heavy furniture to be moved perhaps a harpsichord, massive pictures to be removed, plasterers and other tradesmen coming and going, certainly no place for a women in Lady Mornington's condition.

CONTROVERSY

The arguments will go on, so let us forget about Dangan, the county home and the Lough O Biody, Molseworth Street and Grafton Street. It all boils down to two places, Mornington House in Dublin and Mornington House in Trim. Everything however especially from a traditional point of view points to Trim. If he was born in Dublin how does one account for all the rumours concerning Trim. On the other hand if he was born in Trim it would accommodate Mornington House in Dublin.

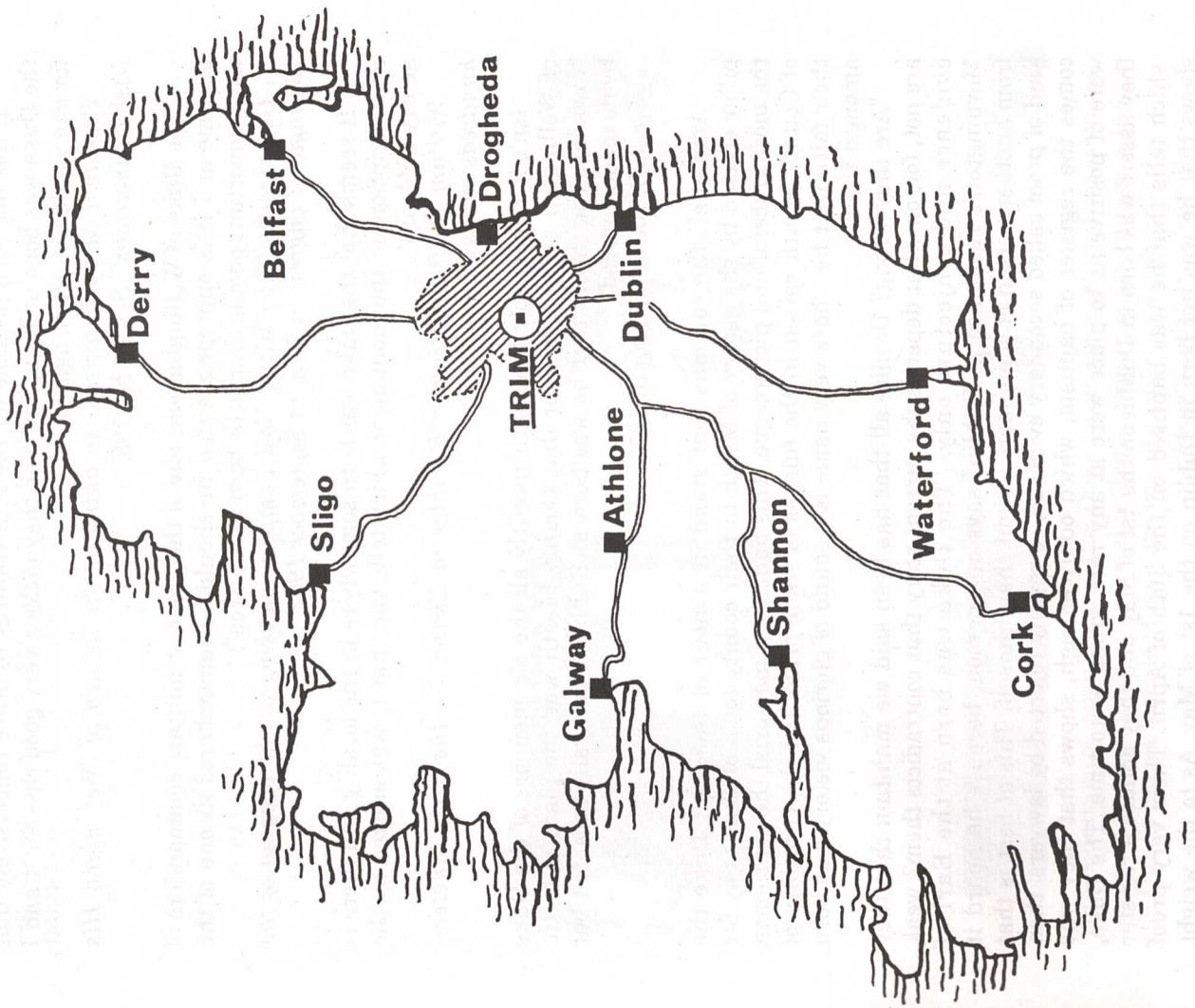
VALUATION OF TENEMENTS.

PARISH OF LARACOR.

Townlands and Occupiers.	Names.	Immediate Lessors.	Description of Tenement.	Area.		Rateable Annual Valuation.		Total Value of Property
				A.	R. P.	Land.	Buildings.	
IFFERNOCK— <i>continued.</i>								
Hugh Hanbury,	Hon. R. T. Rowley,	{	Ho., old offices, & land,	213	2 20	200	5 0	214
Hugh Hanbury,	Same,	}	New farm offices (built 1853),	5	0 0	3 15	0	
KNIGHTSBROOK.								
(Orl. S. 36.)								
Michael Keegan,	Westley Percival,		House, offices, and land,	18	0 28	12	5 0	13
Luko Fry,	Town Commrs. of Trim,		House, offices, and land,	1	3 10	1	7 0	2
Luko Fry,	Michael Sweetman,		Land,	4	0 10	3	5 0	3
Patrick M'Connuck,	Same,		House, offices, and land,	7	3 13	6	0 0	6
James M'Comiskey,	Same,		House, offices, and land,	302	1 31	285	0 0	289
Patrick M'Nance,	Same,		Ho., forge, off., & garden,	0	3 0	0	15 0	1
John Smith,	Same,		House, office, & garden,	1	0 0	1	0 0	1
James Reynolds,	Same,		Garden,	1	0 0	1	0 0	1
Martin Keefe,	Same,		Land,	9	2 25	7	0 0	7
Martin Keefe,	Same,		Land,	11	1 0	5	15 0	5
Catherine Daly,	Same,		House, offices, and land,	5	3 13	4	10 0	5
Patrick Lamb,	Same,		House, offices, and land,	22	0 0	16	10 0	17
Catherine Tyrrell,	Martin Keefe,		House, offices, & garden,	0	1 0	0	5 0	1
Catherine Neill,	Michael Sweetman,		House, offices, and land,	9	3 0	6	15 0	7
Patrick Thomas,	Same,		House, office, and land,	0	3 21	0	2 0	0

Extract from Griffith's Valuations which was taken up between 1847 and 1865 showing Rose Daly's mother, Catherine as being the occupier of a cottage at Knightsbrook on five acres, three roads and thirteen perches of land.

MAP OF TRIM, CO. MEATH



The large stone building on the left of the town square and known as Mornington House, birthplace of the Duke of Wellington as it appeared about 1907
Photo courtesy National Library of Ireland.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

"It has not been possible for the FAS trainees to prove conclusively that the Duke was born in Trim, however, they make a very good case for it and I for one would not argue against it".

President Mary Robinson, speaking at the launch of "Wellington His Irish Connections" September 1992

"The Duke of Wellington was one of the greatest military commanders of all time and it is appropriate that he should be remembered as one of the most important people ever to be born in the area".

Government Chief Whip, Noel Dempsey speaking at the opening of the Wellington Congress in Trim in September 1992.

"It seems that the Duke was born somewhere in the locality and there is an inscription on the monument which tells you that it was erected by the gentry of Meath".

William Bulfin writing in "Rambles in Eirinn" in the early nineteen hundreds on his visit to Trim.

"Isn't it remarkable that until recently all the old memoirs of the Duke of Wellington seemed to infer that County Meath was the place of birth. Nowadays the theory that he was born in Dublin is generally accepted but by no means proved".

Sir J. D. Burke writing in 1873.

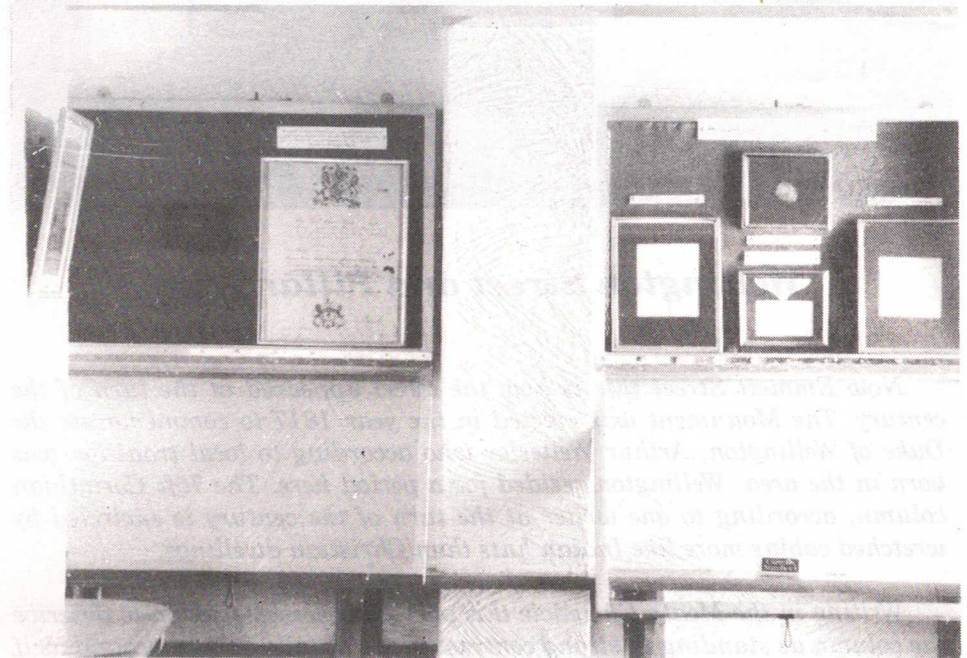
"Among all the columns that stand in honour of the great Duke the pillar erected by the gentry of Meath in their county town of Trim is by far the most graceful and picturesque. This handsome memorial the gentlemen of County Meath raised in the fulness of their pride and the certainty of their faith that he whose very name is a sound of glorious victory was born amongst them".

"Are they wrong? Despite all that has been said we maintain that they are not; for, on what depends the current story that contradicts them? weak evidence and conjecture only. "The Duke was born at the Earl of Mornington's residence in Dublin" says one person, because he heard it from another person of some more weight than himself. This at best is that kind of proof called secondary evidence, so readily rejected by lawyers. then comes the register of baptism, which oddly enough, shows that they who were of positive as to place were at any rate wrong as to time. The Duke, they assert was born in Dublin on the 1st of May and they adduce a register which tells that he was baptised on the 30th of April. Their very proof shows that he was not born in Dublin on the 1st of May. As to the weight

too be given to the register, Mr. Phillips in his able work upon the law of evidence says, "the register of itself does not prove the fact of birth in the parish," for one obvious reason, among others, viz, that it records the baptism not the birth. The birth must have taken place before - where, the baptismal record does not say.

From the top of Trim Castle the view extends over several counties; at a short distance the eye marks Tara once the seat of royalty and celebrated in song. At the castle's foot is a small house where the Duke of Wellington's early education commenced and at a little distance, on the fair green of the town rises the column of Corinthian order.

From "*The Real Birthplace of the Duke*" Meath Chronicle, circa 1900



This collection of mementos of the Duke is on permanent display in one licensed premises in the town and includes among other things, a lock of the Duke's hair, a sample of his handwriting and his passport.

Photo by courtesy - Peter Masterson



Wellington Street and Pillar Trim

Now Emmett Street this is how the street appeared at the turn of the century. The Monument was erected in the year 1817 to commemorate the Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley who according to local tradition was born in the area. Wellington resided for a period here. The 75ft Corinthian column, according to one writer at the turn of the century is encircled by wretched cabins more like Indian huts than Christian dwellings.

Writing in the Meath Chronicle this particular writer goes on to describe the column as standing in strong contrast to the squalid misery around as if to illustrate two striking characteristics connected with Ireland. - The surpassing wretchedness of her people and the surpassing genius that may be and has been discovered amongst them.