

## **Doneraile Park**

### ***The long St. Leger connection***

Seamus Crowley

#### **The arrival of St. Legers in Ireland**

When Henry VIII of England decided to suppress the monasteries and break away from the Church of Rome, he gave the job of implementing the process to his “trustworthy and well beloved servant” Sir Anthony St. Leger of Ulcomb in Kent who was reputed to be “a wise and warie gentleman”. Sir Anthony, in his capacity as a member of the Kent Grand Jury, helped to find a “true bill” against Ann Boleyn, which allowed Henry to have her executed in 1536 – a trustworthy servant indeed!

Having finished the job of suppressing the monasteries in England, Sir Anthony was sent to Ireland to render similar service in 1537. He supervised the dissolution of the monasteries in areas subject to the King’s writ and also succeeded in getting the Irish chieftains to accept Henry as King of Ireland. Before that the English King was described as Lord of Ireland, which gave him much less authority. Later Sir Anthony St. Leger was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and from which time on the St. Legers had a presence in Ireland.

When Sir Anthony St. Leger returned to England, one of his sons, William, who later did not feature in Sir Anthony’s will, was “catered for” in Ireland and took part in both government and army. William’s son, Sir Antony St. Leger’s grandson, Sir Warham St. Leger remained in Ireland until his death in 1600. He died following a single combat engagement with Hugh Maguire of Fermanagh outside the gates of Cork. Hugh Maguire also died in that combat.

Sir Warham’s son, William, having killed a man in his youth, had to flee Ireland and spent eight years in the army in the Netherlands during which time he married Gertrude de Vries, a lady from Lower Saxony. He was then pardoned by James I and returned to Ireland with his wife and two sons. In 1627, he was appointed Lord President of Munster, with the title of Sir William St. Leger. His headquarters was in Mallow.

#### **The Synan Clan**

In the meantime the Synan family, who first came to Ireland as a body of bowmen with Strongbow’s army, had a strong connection with Doneraile and later on with the St. Legers. They first settled in the Shandon area of Cork City but later moved to Kilbolane near Millford in North Cork where their castle can still be seen. Finally they moved to the Doneraile area where they “waxed strong” and built tower houses in

Doneraile and nearby Castlepook and Richardstown. They held their Doneraile lands under the lordship of Lord Roache of Castletownroache.

### **The Desmond Rebellion and O'Neill's march south**

When the Earl of Desmond rebelled in the 1570s, he was joined by the Synans. However their overlord, Lord Roche, remained loyal and did not join in the rebellion. When the dust settled all Desmond lands were forfeited to the crown, but due to the influence of Lord Roche, the Synans did not lose their land and were pardoned. However, the rebellion caused financial ruin for the Synans and in 1593 they partially mortgaged their Doneraile Castle and thirteen and a half ploughlands (a ploughland was a Norman measure based on the area that could be ploughed in a year by eight oxen, believed to be between 120 and 160 acres) to Sir Thomas Norreys of Mallow. The following year, Sir Thomas Norreys and the Synans jointly mortgaged all the property to a Captain Francis Wainman who was from Norreys home country of Rycote in Oxfordshire and was with him in Mallow. Wainman proceeded to establish a large sheep farm in Doneraile. Wool production was a very important commercial enterprise in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1599 Hugh O'Neill came south with a strong army to rustle up the support of southern clans for his campaign against the English. They attacked and captured Doneraile Castle and nearby Kilcolman Castle. Edmund Spencer, who was in Kilcolman, took fright and fled with Wainman to England where Wainman died later the same year. The years of war and the O'Neill defeat at Kinsale in 1601 created much confusion in the region. Doneraile was left untended until 1629 when Sir William St. Leger, Lord President of Munster (based in Mallow) was looking to acquire a property suitable for a gentleman of his status.

### **The St. Leger Purchase**

St. Leger found the property he was looking for in the Doneraile lands of the Synans and purchased the mortgage from Captain Wainman's son, Sir Francis Wainman for £1,800 English pounds in 1630. Thus began 340 years of formal ownership of Doneraile by St. Legers, which ended in 1969 when it was purchased by the Irish State. Three years later he purchased another mortgage on four ploughlands from the Spencer estate at Kilcolman, which bounded his Doneraile lands. In 1636 he sought to retrieve Castlepook and two ploughlands around it from the Synans. This property had been already mortgaged by the Synans in 1594 and was part of the mortgage St. Leger had paid for. The Synans thus appear to have been squatting on this land for 36 years. The matter went to court arbitration and St. Leger was deemed "to have the more ancient right" and was given possession. However, he paid the Synans £300 of "good English money in hand", as was recorded on the receipt.

In 1639, to copperfasten his title to the properties he had purchased, he applied for

a patent under the surrender and regrant scheme. He was granted this patent known as “The Black Letter Patent of Doneraile” with rights for Fairs, Court Leet (a yearly or half yearly court that the lords of certain manors held to enforce local policing) and Court Baron (similar to a Court Leet except it dealt with more serious offences).

Sir William St. Leger had two sons; his elder son, Sir William St. Leger, died at the battle of Newbury in England fighting for the Royalist cause during the civil war in England and Captain John St. Leger, his younger son, stayed in Ireland. The latter never recieved a title, perhaps because of the St. Legers support for King Charles I during the Cromwellian period. However, he married the daughter of the Earl of Donegal, which would have given him some protection. He did receive a commission as Captain of a foot company in the regiment of the Lord President of Munster in 1647, which was renewed in 1662 after the restoration of Charles II in 1660. He recieved the freedom of Cork in 1666 and Youghal in 1675. In 1679 Charles II issued a renewed Patent to John St. Leger, making Doneraile, formerly a manor with Courts Leet and Baron into a Borough, which allowed Doneraile to elect two members to the Irish Parilament. John St. Leger died in 1696 and was succeeded by his son Arthur.

Arthur brought a large estate in Co. Waterford into St. Leger hands through his marriage to Elizabeth Hayes grand-daughter of John Ottrington, a former Lord Mayor of Dublin. Lewis’ Topographical Dictionary (1837) in a reference to Kilmeaden states that a Poer (Power) estate of that area was confiscated by the Cromwellians:

...and divided among the soldiers of the Republican army, who transferred their shares to a gentleman named Ottrington. The tomb of this John Ottrington is in the church yard, having been erected by his grand-daughter, Elizabeth, Viscountess Doneraile, through whom the estates were inherited by the present Viscount.

It appears that John Ottrington did not get on with either his daughter or his son-in-law and left all his property to their daughter (and his grand-daughter) Elizabeth. Unknown to his son-in-law, he arranged a secret marriage between Elizabeth and Arthur St. Leger. The “Doneraile Walk” along the cliffs in Tramore, Co. Waterford, reflects to this day the link with the St. Legers. Elizabeth is also buried in her grandfather’s tomb in Kilmeaden and the name “Hayes” became a St. Leger christian name for subsequent generations of the family. Her husband, Arthur St. Leger, was created Baron Kilmeaden in 1703 and elevated to 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Doneraile (of the 1<sup>st</sup> creation) a year later.

### **The Lady Freemason**

One of the most enduring stories of Doneraile Court is that of the Lady Freemason. In 1712, eighteen-year-old Elizabeth, daughter of Viscount Doneraile, fell asleep in the library one evening while Lord Doneraile, as he occasionally did, opened a Freemason

Lodge meeting in the room next to the library with his sons and local gentry. The wall between the two rooms was incomplete and when Elizabeth woke up she heard noises next door and peeped through a hole in the wall. She soon got alarmed by what she saw and tried to leave the scene. However, as she went to leave she was caught by the butler who was keeping guard on the lodge room and he brought it to the notice of the meeting. After some discussion as to what to do, it was decided to induct her into the Freemasons on her swearing to secrecy, which she accepted.

Elizabeth's membership of the Mason's was not widely known until 37 years after her death in 1774. In 1811 a London publisher published the story and a mock up image of her in a Mason's apron surrounded by Masonic symbols. The story we have today is based on a family pamphlet issued in 1811, 99 years after her induction into the masonic order. A detailed analysis of the Lady Freemason's story can be seen in Hyland (1985).

### **Reconstruction of Doneraile Court**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Arthur, had two sons and one daughter –the Lady Freemason. During his lifetime he commissioned the architect Isaac Rothery to revamp Doneraile Court from a two-story over basement house to a three-story house over basement which is its present facade. The bows at each side and the front porch were later additions (Figure 1). In 1727, Arthur St. Leger died and a map was drawn up by one Hueston, probably in connection with the transfer of the property to his eldest son, another Arthur, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount. This map called *An Upright prospect of Doneraile*, shows the park as it was at that time and is thus an invaluable record for historians (Figure 2).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount was succeeded by his son, Arthur Mohun St. Leger, who became



**Figure 1:** *South-east view of Doneraile Court.*

the 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount in 1734. Arthur Mohun St. Leger died in 1750 and as he had no children, the title of 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount went to his uncle, Hayes St. Leger, the second son of the 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount. While the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscounts did not appear to have lived in Doneraile, the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount appears to have always lived in Doneraile Court. Quoting Dr. Charles Smith's history of Cork (1750) about Doneraile:

...is one of the most pleasant and beautiful villages in this kingdom, it is almost surrounded by groves of lofty firs, which flourishing at all seasons of the year, render it always agreeable: but this place is indebted for the greater part of its beauty to the fine house and extensive improvements of Hayes St. Leger, Esq...

Hayes was to become the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount shortly after this was written. Continuing, Smith mentions the house facade "a fine cascade with resevoirs," and "gardens well laid out and of considerable extent" and in them was "a wilderness and a labyrinth". At the foot of the garden:

...is a canal of 370 yards long by 140 yards wide well stocked with fish. The water is constantly supplied by a large wheel that casts up a part of the river Awbeg into a reservoir, which is conveyed underground to the canal... On the other side of the river are pleasant lawns and an extensive deer park, well planted and enclosed to the east of the house is a fine (duck) decoy.

Arthur Young included Doneraile on his tour of Ireland in 1777. He commented on the lawns, woods and cheerful aspect of Doneraile Park. He elaborates on the water wheel, saying it was:

...an improvement on the Persian, which raises a regular stream 28 feet; the [stream] which turns it is confined by a double wall to the exact dimension of the boxes which takes in the water and it works constantly and regularly without trouble or expence.

In 1752, the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount had an elaborate marble memorial plaque erected in Doneraile church in memory of his father. It was carved by Sir Henry Cheer of London at a cost of £300 and erected on the wall of the church for £14 by the O'Daly stone mason from Shanballymore. It traces the 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount ancestry back to the illustrious Sir Anthony St. Leger "... who was so diligent and faithful to King and Country". It is now a listed item in the Monuments of the Dead in Ireland. The 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount was praised for his happy marriage and was very attached to his wife. When she died he ordered a wall plaque similar to the one for his father, which is attached to the wall of St. Patricks Cathedral in Dublin.

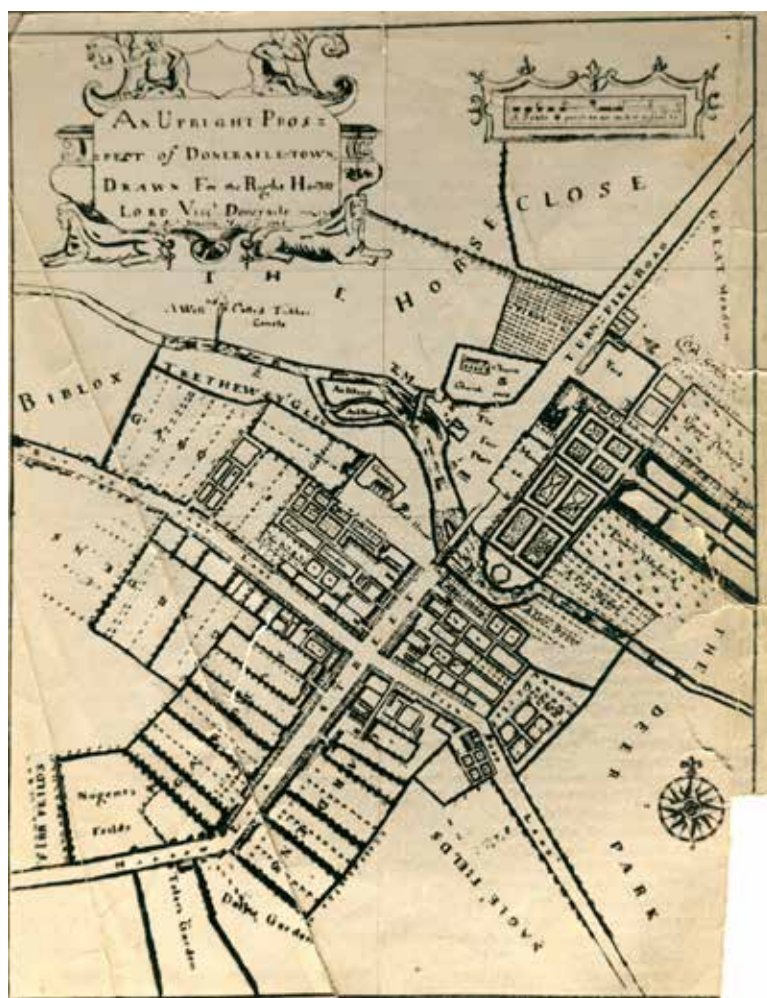
### **The origins of Steeple Chasing**

In 1752, during the life time of the 4<sup>th</sup> Vicount, a horse race took place between the Buttevant church and the Doneraile church. Two local gentlemen – O'Callaghan and

Burke –disputed who had the best horse and to settle the matter they raced from “Steeple to Steeple” over a distance of four and a half miles of “stiff country” giving the name Steeplechase to the English language. Interestingly, nobody is now quite sure which horse won! A nephew of the 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount, Major General Anthony St. Leger, who lived in Doncaster, initiated the Doncaster St. Leger horse race in 1776. It is a race over two miles for three-year-olds. Thus the term “Steeple Chase” and “The St. Leger” entered the house-racing vocabulary.

### **The saga of the priest’s horse whipping**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount died in 1767 and having no son, the title died with him. However, the estate was inherited by his nephew –St. Leger Aldworth, son of the Lady Freemason.



**Figure 2:** Heuston's 1728 map of Doneraile.

In order to regain the title he applied to the sovereign to change his surname to St. Leger, thus becoming St. Leger St. Leger. He became Baron Doneraile in 1776 and the 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Doneraile (of the 2<sup>nd</sup> creation) in 1785.

He became famous however, for his involvement in a notorious incident. It appears he seduced a local girl and had her installed in Doneraile Court. Her brother also seduced a married woman causing much scandal locally. The parish priest Fr. Neill was ordered by his Bishop to excommunicate the man. The sister complained to Lord Doneeraile that her brother had been excommunicated and St. Leger, in a fit of fury, rode to the priest's shack and demanded that he withdraw the sanction of excommunication. The priest tried to explain to his Lordship that it was only the Bishop who could do that and Lord Doneeraile in a rage beat him with his horsewhip. He also whipped his ageing housekeeper who tried to save the priest.

Later the priest had the timereity to sue Lord Doneraile, but could not get a barister to act against a Lord of the realm until John Philpott Curran, a young barister gradually making a name for himself, took the case to court in Cork. It was most unusual for a priest to sue in a Protestant court in the first place, but to sue a Lord of the Realm generated intense interest and the court in Cork was crammed to capacity to watch proceedings. They got their money's worth as Curran's oratory and legal astuteness convinced the Protestant jury that Lord Doneraile's treatment of a fragile old man and his elderly house maid was a dispicable act. The priest got thirty guineas compensation and Lord Doneraile left the court publically humiliated.

### **The early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount (of this new era) was succeeded by his son Hayes in 1787 who served as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount until 1819. During his tenure Fishpond Lane, a public road that ran through the Park towards Castletownroche and Killavullen, was closed down and a new road built around the edge of the demesne to the east and south (two hundred years later it is still called "The New Road"). This work allowed further development within the Park. A new avenue was constructed which meandered for a mile through the Park, over a nice stone bridge allowing his important guests fine views of the Park as they approached the Court. This avenue exited the Park under a Triumphal Arch on the Turnpike road.

In 1820 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount was succeeded by his son, another Hayes St. Leger the 3<sup>rd</sup> Vicount. He extended the St. Leger estates to their largest size by purchasing the Buttevant estate of the bankrupted John Anderson. This brought him Buttevant town, Buttevant Castle and a large area around complete with a large Military Barracks.

He in turn was succeeded by his son another Hayes St. Leger the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount. The 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount was a noted huntsman and was master of the Duhallow Hunt for many years as well as being master or the Burton Hounds in England. He imported fresh

blood from England for the Duhallow pack. Having fallen out with the Duhallow Hunt, he formed his own pack and told them he would hunt his own land in future. His property stretched for 16 miles from near Kildorrery to west of Buttevant.

### **The last case of rabies in Ireland?**

One day Hayes St. Leger came on some local people digging out foxes. They had unearthed a young cub which they were reluctant to kill and His Lordship asked if he could have it. They agreed and he reared the fox as his pet and took it everywhere as his mascot. Unfortunately the fox lead to his eventual downfall. The fox contracted rabies and bit His Lordship as well as his coachman Barrer in early January 1887. They both went to Paris to Louis Pasteur and stayed a month getting Pasteur's new vaccination treatment and came home ostensibly cured. While Barrer never looked back, Lord Doneraile fell ill with what was described as hydrophobia or rabies in August of 1887. Though tended by the best doctors in Cork who kept in touch with doctors in London and Pasteur in Paris, Lord Doneraile was dead within a week. Thus began the legend that Lord Doneraile may have been the last person in Ireland to have died from rabies.

His widow, Lady Doneraile, was Mary Anne Grace Louisa Cunningham, a niece of Robert Emmet. She had married the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount in 1851. She left Doneraile after her husband's death and later lived in France. She was a noted gardener and horticulturist. Curtis's Botanical Magazine Dedications Vol. LXXXIV was dedicated to her memory, noting that:

During her reign at Doneraile she made the garden amongst the most beautiful in Ireland without in any way detracting from the great natural beauty of the demesne.

The magazine also noted:

During the time she lived in Grovenor Street her window flower-boxes drew many visitors, who might have been seen standing in admiration before them. It was for the skillful way in which they were planted and for their beauty that she was awarded the Royal Horticultural Society medal...

After her husband's tragic "death she made her home at Grésy-sur-Aix in the old Chateau de Fontanil where she had every opportunity to indulge her love of gardening..."

### **Lord and Lady Castletown**

Having no son at the time of his death, the Viscount title went to his cousin, Richard Arthur St. Leger 5<sup>th</sup> Viscount. However, he died three years later in 1891 and the title passed to his nephew, Edward St. Leger the 6<sup>th</sup> Viscount. Edward was the organiser of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Championships for many years. While the title went to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Viscounts, Doneraile Park was managed by the 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount's daughter



Ursula Clare Emily St. Leger and her husband, Barney Fitzpatrick 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Castletown of Upper Ossory, commonly referred to as Lord Castletown of Upper Ossory until his death in 1937. Apparently they spent six months each year in Doneraile and six months in Granston Manor in Ossory. They were very popular with the local people. Lord Castletown was a member of the Gaelic League and gave a lot of employment with a local sawmill and in tending the estate. Canon Patrick Sheehan, author and Parish Priest of Doneraile, was an occasional dinner guest in Doneraile Court. Oliver Wendall Holmes, Chief Justice of the United States, having met Lord and Lady Castletown in London, was invited to visit them in Doneraile. It has emerged in recent years that Holmes was smitten with Lady Castletown's beauty and lively intellect and they kept up a lively exchange of love letters for a number of years. Lord Castletown as Chancellor of the Royal University of Ireland was a prominent negotiator for the establishment of the National University of Ireland in 1908.

Lady Castletown died in 1927 and Lord Castletown ten years later. The management of the estate then passed to Edward St. Leger the 6<sup>th</sup> Viscount until he died in 1941. He having no son to succeed him the title and estate went to his brother Hugh St. Leger the 7<sup>th</sup> Viscount who came back from farming in New Zealand and lived a quiet life with his wife in Doneraile until his death in 1967 when the title became extinct.

The estate was then managed by trustees who sold it to the State in 1969. It was the last remnant of the St. Leger estates that were first purchased in 1630 and brought to an end the St. Leger association with Doneraile after 340 years and eleven generations.

### **Gardens and landscape**

From the beginning of their ownership of Doneraile Court, the St. Legers were very conscious of following all the latest gardening fashions from England. The earliest garden of note was the walled and terraced garden attached to the castle. Richard Cox, writing in 1687, noted that:

Doneraile, a sweet seat and a pretty market town belonging to the heir of St. Leger, once Lord [President] of Munster, who kept his Presidency Court here and had a fine house and a curious park adjoining...

The fine house had been destroyed by Lord Castlehaven's army in 1645 and was reerected as a barracks for the army as Doneraile Court was being developed south of the river. The "curious park" was a walled and terraced area near the castle, which was a forerunner of more extensive landscaping as security improved. The conservation of this seventeenth century garden alone was worth the price paid for the Park in 1969.

The map of 1728 (Figure 2) shows much more development with orchards and fir groves as well as gardens around Doneraile Court. The mention of Fish Pond lane indicates it was a well established feature in 1728, though there was no access across

the river. However, Smith's notes of 1750 suggests considerably more development. Later in the Georgian period, Capability Brown's ideas are put into practice with the ponding of the river and the construction of a small cataract facing the Court. Both these features are still present. The open uncluttered vistas radiating out from the Court were also developed as were the carefully planned groves of trees to give an impression of clearings in a primaeva woodland. The building of some fine ha-ha fences enhanced the vistas from the Court, while the Victorian period saw the planting of many exotic trees as they were discovered and brought back to these islands. At the same time, flower and vegetable cultivation developed to the level of an ongoing commercial enterprise.

### **Lavish praise of the Doneraile ladies**

Some St. Leger ladies also got high praise from visitors over the years. Arthur Young mentions a cottage in the park built by Lady Doneraile "...which was a credit to her good taste". Townsend, in 1810, noting the great ornamentation of Doneraile Park, mentions the late Lady Doneraile, describing her as a lady "of most superior understanding" who did much to embellish the the pleasure grounds. Dr. John O'Donovan, later of Ordnance Survey fame, visited in 1817 and noted the Park was "a very happy mixture of the antique English and Flemish style and the picturesque of nature". He also noted the "Forest Garden" planted by Mrs Stawell, a daughter of Lord Doneraile. All this layer-upon-layer of gardening styles and landscaping has survived intact, or almost, to the present day.

### **Conclusion**

With no intrusion of modern development, Doneraile Park is now a very special place. Its legacy to modern Ireland is it's uniqueness, its stunning landscape and fascinating history. It encapsulates an era that has passed without compromising it's relevance to modern Ireland. The 340-year association of the St. Leger family with both Park and town is one of the longest family associations in post medieval Ireland. As such, it is a prized part of our heritage. It is a living relic of a bygone age which must be seen in the context of its time. Doneraile Court and its environs thus deserve a special place in our national conservation endeavours and should be protected for generations to come.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express special thanks to Fergal Mulloy for much advice on presentation and many suggestions on the text.

**References**

- Burke, Sir Bernard. 1881. *Burke's Peerage, Baronetage and Knightage*. Harrison, London.
- Cox, Sir Richard. Regnum Corcagience. J.C.H.A.S., Vol III, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Series, p, 176.
- Crowley, S. 1983. *Doneraile Park, an Historical Note*. Mallow Field Club Journal 1: 109-127.
- Fox, J.B. 1984. Duck decoys in north County Cork. *Mallow Field Club Journal* 2: 111-120.
- White, J.G. 1913-1918. *Historical and Topographical Notes on Buttevant, Castletownroche, Doneraile Mallow and Places in the Vicinity*. Alabama Amite and Knockagree Historical Fund, Birmingham.
- Hyland, C. 1985. The Lady Freemason. *Mallow Field Club Journal* 3: 150-153.
- Jephson, M.D. 1964. *An Anglo-Irish Miscellany: some records of the Jephsons of Mallow*. Allen Figgis, Dublin.
- Lewis, S. 1837. *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Vol 11. S. Lewis and Co., London.
- MacLysaght, Dr. Edward and Ainsley, Sir John. In *Annalecta Hibernica* Vol. 15, pp 335-362, 1944.: and Vol. 20, pp 56-91 1958. [These reports for the National Library are Primary sources for the aquisition by the St. Legers of their Donaraile lands from the Synan family. Many of the documents mentioned are missing from the collection now in the National Library, (Collection List 62 )].
- Sleeman, D.P. and Crowley, S. 1995. Historical rabies in Doneraile. *Mallow Field Club Journal* 13: 79-86.
- Smith, C.M.D. 1750. *The Ancient and Present State of the County and City of Cork*.
- Townsend, H. 1810. "*Statistical Survey of the County of Cork*", written for the Dublin Society.
- Young, A., Wollaston Hutton, A., Parker Anderson, J. 1892. *Young's Tour in Ireland (1776 - 1779)*. G. Bell and Sons, London..