

Freemasonry and the MacDermots

by Ken MacDermot Roe

The MacDermots - freemasons? How can that be? The MacDermots have a very strong Catholic tradition and the Catholic Church disapproves of freemasonry.

Nonetheless, the MacDermots and the MacDermots Roe were extremely active in freemasonry in Ireland in the 18th century. In fact, the most important freemason of the 18th century was a MacDermot Roe descendant - Laurence Dermott of London.

First, here's a little background on freemasonry. Modern freemasonry traces its origins to associations of stone masons established in the middle ages. These associations, known as lodges, were an important way for builders who often traveled from town to town for their projects to maintain close social and professional contact.

Secrecy was an important element of the early Masonic lodges in order that important technical knowledge was kept within the membership. It was only after a period of training and advancement that a person could acquire or be initiated in all the important techniques of building.

As a social organization, the Masonic lodges became attractive to non-builders. They evidently found its tight brotherhood to be a good environment for establishing friendship with others who shared similar values. Masons who were professional builders were known as operative masons while those who were not were called speculative masons. Over time a majority of masons were speculative.

Irish freemasons claim that their fraternity existed in Ireland from time immemorial. There was a strong stone building tradition in Ireland in the middle ages and it is likely that operative masons formed lodges during this period. However, the earliest documented reference to Irish freemasons is in the 17th century and lodge records are not available before the early 18th century.

Freemasonry was an especially important institution during the 18th century enlightenment. Lodges provided a secure place where educated, public minded men could freely discuss controversial subjects disturbing to the ruling elite such as the need for constitutional reform or even republicanism. It has been said the French Revolution was born in

freemasonry lodges and Masonic lodges may have played a similar role with respect to the Irish rebellion of 1798.

Until the early 19th century, Catholics were strongly represented in Irish freemason lodges. Indeed, the 18th century enlightenment ideals embraced by freemasons were very conducive to membership by both Catholics and Protestants. Once inside the fraternity, sectarian differences were set aside in deference to principles of freedom and universal brotherhood. It was not until 1826 when the Irish bishops started to enforce the papal ban on freemasonry that Catholics left the organization.

Laurence Dermott (1720-June, 1791) was the son of Thomas Dermott, a successful merchant of Francis Street, Dublin.(1) Thomas had a family home in Strokestown, County Roscommon.(2) Thomas' brother Anthony (1700-1784) ran a successful trading operation from Usher's Quay, Dublin. The family traded internationally in a wide range of goods including wine and owned and operated ships.

As discussed in "The MacDermots Roe and the French Revolution", recent research indicates that this branch of the MacDermots descends from the MacDermots Roe. This author believes that the probable ancestor of this branch of MacDermots Roe was Edmond Dermott who was Master of the Merchant Taylors Guild in Dublin in 1575-6.(3) The branch was established in County Louth, as well as, an area of County Roscommon between Tulsk and Roscommon - far south of the family seat in Kilronan Parish.

Laurence was probably born in the vicinity of Strokestown which is located a short distance east of Tulsk. At the time he was born, the MacDermots Roe had considerable holdings in the area including Michael, d. 1732 of Castlemehen (just north of Roscommon Town), Brian, d. 1728 of Castletehen (just southwest of Tulsk) and Thomas (c.1690-November 1765) of Cloonyquin in 1721 just north of Tulsk and after Michael's death of Castlemehen.

It is not clear when the MacDermots Roe became established in this area - so far south of Kilronan. Skeffington Gibbon states:

"Dundermott, previous to the Last Revolution was the residence of MacDermot Roe. The MacDermot Roes possessed large estates in the vicinity of Oran Abbey and Ballymoe on the banks of the Rivers Suck."(4)

Dundermott is a townland in Drumatemple Civil Parish, County Roscommon. It is strategically located on the Roscommon side of the River Suck at a horseshoe bend near the crossing to Ballymoe, Galway. Evidently,

the townland was named after the MacDermot Roe family. It is about 10 miles west of Roscommon Town and only 2 miles south of Ballintober Castle, the ancient headquarters of the O'Conors.

As there were no MacDermots Roe left in Dundermott by the Elphin Census of 1749, it would appear that Gibbon is referring to the 1688 English Revolution. It may be that the MacDermots Roe of Dundermott, like their close cousins, the MacDermots Roe of Kilcurley, County Louth were dispossessed under Cromwell and later acquired other estates in the same area.

It should, also, be noted that the MacDermots Roe as Biatachs General for the Kingdom of Connaught from at least the mid-14th century would have worked closely with the O'Connor kings of Connaught. Dundermott was conveniently near the headquarters of the O'Conors at Ballintober Castle.

Dundermott would have been very useful location with respect to the distribution of food as part of their biatach duties and for the distribution of all kinds of goods for commercial activities. The current bridge across the River Suck from Dundermott to Ballymoe indicates that this was an important route to and from Galway to the west.

The proximity of Dundermott to the O'Connor properties at Cruachan near Tulsk and to the many abbeys in the area was, also, advantageous for a family deeply involved in trade and the movement of goods whether for public or private purposes. All of the important medieval roads in Roscommon converged at Cruachan. (5)

Additionally, much trade in medieval times was connected in one way or another to abbeys. Abbeys were located at Oran, Roscommon, and Tulsk, as well as, Cloonshanville, near Frenchpark to the north founded by MacDermot Roe in 1385. Thus, the large number of MacDermots Roe serving the Church in monasteries or Episcopal positions would have been supportive of their biatach function, as well as, trade activities.

In addition to the MacDermots Roe who were clergymen in the area Boyle area, such as Thomas MacDermot Roe of Kilronan, who was Bishop of Ardagh 1747-1751, many served in the Tulsk/Roscommon area. Bishop Ambrose MacDermot Roe, Bishop of Elphin 1709-1717 was educated at Tulsk. In the late 1600's Bernard MacDermot Roe was Prior of Cloonshanville until his exile to the Dominican province of Occitania on the Continent 1698. In 1756 Patrick and Ambrose (not the bishop) MacDermot were serving at the Roscommon Town Dominican Friary founded by the O'Conors in 1253 or 1257 and Michael MacDermot was at

Cloonshanville.(6) From their location, all may have been MacDermots Roe.

According to the official history of the Grand Lodge of Ireland, Lawrence Dermott was initiated as a freemason in Ireland on 14 January 1740-41 (sic) and installed as the Master, chief officer, of Lodge 26 in Dublin. Lepper and Crossle, authors of the Grand Lodge History, assume that Lawrence was continuing a family tradition of freemasonry and this seems a reasonable assumption.(7)

In 1748, Lawrence went to London. His initial occupation was journeyman painter. It is unclear whether he was in the painting business or an artist. In any event, his arrival there may have related to family business contacts as he was later a wine merchant.

At the time Lawrence arrived in London, there were many other Irish freemasons living there. Freemasonry in England was then nominally under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of England established in 1717. The purpose of the this Grand Lodge like those in other jurisdictions was to establish rules for the practice of freemasonry and to issue "warrants" for the creation of new local lodges.

The Irish in England chafed under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of England. While some of their resentment may have been due to English religious and national prejudice there were other bases for their dissatisfaction with the Grand Lodge of England.

While freemasonry had traditionally been exclusively Christian and Trinitarian, in 1738, the Grand Lodge of England adopted the Anderson charges which opened up membership to anyone believing in a divine being. The Irish strongly adhered to freemasonry's traditional association with Christianity.(8) This would seem to restrict membership to Catholics, Anglicans and other Protestants who accepted the Trinity.

In addition to the religious disagreement, the Irish who had been initiated to freemasonry in Irish lodges had different Masonic practices. In particular, they supported the practice of initiating members into higher levels, such as the Royal Arch, to mark the progress of masons beyond the Master Mason level. Lawrence was admitted to the Royal Arch in 1746 while a mason in Dublin.(9) The Grand Lodge of England objected to this practice which it viewed as irregular.

There was, also, a social aspect to the split between the Irish and the English. The members of the Grand Lodge of England were drawn from the wealthy and well connected and their lodges were on the way to becoming

gentlemen's clubs. In contrast, the Irish freemasons in England were largely drawn from the artisan class.(10)

Finally, there was an important political dimension. The Irish, especially the Irish Catholics, were generally Jacobites - supporters of the Stuart claim to the throne of England. MacDermots, including Captain Henry MacDermot Roe (probably of the Alderford branch) fought for King James II who was deposed in England by William of Orange in 1688 and defeated thereafter in Ireland. The Grand Lodge of England was clearly a creature of the German based House of Hanover which governed England after William. Its leaders were naturally fearful of Jacobites especially given the near success of Bonnie Prince Charles Stuart in re-taking the English throne in 1745.

As the result, the Irish in England started to organize themselves in private lodges outside the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of England. In July 1751, about 70 or 80 of them met to form a new Grand Lodge which was to become known as the Grand Lodge of England (Antients) as opposed to the 1717 established Grand Lodge of England (Moderns).

On February 5, 1752, Laurence Dermott was elected Grand Secretary of the Antients and played the key role in the steadily rising organization over the next four decades. He served as Grand Secretary from 1752 to 1771 and Deputy Grand Master from 1771-1777 and again from 1783-1787.

Dermott's administrative skills contributed greatly to the expansion of the Antients system of Masonic lodges. Eventually, the Antients network of lodges outstripped that of the Moderns. The Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland recognized the Antients as the legitimate Grand Lodge of England. Additionally, many regiments of the British Army organized Antients lodges.

Dermott was, not only, an effective organizer, but also, an influential writer. In 1756, he published a book entitled *Ahiman Rezon* (understood to mean "Thoughts of a Faithful Brother") in which he set forth the laws and philosophy of the Antients Grand Lodge. In his 1764 edition, he added a famous polemic against the Moderns.

Dermott's book was widely known outside England, including the American colonies. According to Lepper and Crossle, "Few books have had so great influence among English speaking lodges" and they described the work as "a slogan to all Antients masons."

Dermott's book was especially well received among Irish freemasons:

"From the appearance of this book it may be said to have formed the basis of every subsequent official publication by the Grand Lodge of Ireland and not a few unofficial ones. Its ready adoptions by the Grand Lodge of Ireland shows how close the Irish and Antient rites must have lain. Whenever the name crops up, let us not forget that it was written by an Irish mason for the English Craft, and traveled all over the world wherever Antient freemasonry was known."(11)

Laurence Dermott was not the only McDermott to embrace freemasonry. Among the subscribers in 1760 to Ahiman Rezon was Michael McDermott, merchant - probably a member of the Tulske-Roscommon MacDermots Roe. Michael was one of 14 members of the Strokestown Lodge No. 340 subscribing to the book. It seems likely that Laurence remained close to his native area and that Michael and the others may well have been personal friends of Laurence.

We are not sure if Lawrence's uncle, Anthony, was a freemason, but he was certainly close to them. In 1736, Anthony was trustee in the marriage settlement of Thomas Mathew, of a prominent Anglo-Catholic family, who became Grand Master of Antients 1766-1770. Interestingly, Anthony and other close relations of his were devout Catholics and active in the Catholic Rights Association established by historian Charles O'Connor whose sister married Charles MacDermot Roe of Alderford.

Boyle Lodge 338 was the lodge nearest to the ancient MacDermot headquarters at Loch Ce. The list of members of Lodge 338 initiated since June 24, 1769 includes:

Edward McDermott
Michael McDermott (from 1769)
----- Dermott (from 1769)
T. McDermott
Henry McDermott (1818)
Tom McDermott (1821) (12)

Note that all the memberships were before the Catholic bishops began enforcing the Church's ban on freemasonry for Catholics.

MacDermots were especially influential in freemasonry in 18th century Dublin. The list of Masters and Wardens of Irish lodges of the Grand Lodge of Ireland from June 24 to December 27, 1793 shows the following MacDermots:

Roger McDermott, Warden, Lodge 207 82 Bridge Street

John McDermott, Warden, Lodge 324, 9 Eustace Street
Christopher McDermott, Lodge 353, 2 Hoey's Court (13)

Christopher might be a sibling of Laurence as Laurence's grandfather was Christopher Dermott, a merchant of Usher's Quay. He may, also, be the Christopher McDermott who in 1789-1790 was Warden of the Merchant Taylors Guild of Dublin. It was in the Merchant Taylors Guild that the Dublin chapter of the United Irishmen convened. Attorney Owen McDermott, brother of the Colonel Thomas MacDermot Roe of Emla who died in the French Revolution, was the group's secretary.

In Ireland many Masonic lodges practiced the granting of advanced Masonic degrees such as the Royal Arch and the High Knights Templar. The Early Grand Encampment of the High Knights Templar of Ireland was revived on September 26, 1786. Its roster of members shows "Sir Henry M'Dermotroe" as initiated on July 30, 1787. (14)

Henry was probably the second son of Charles MacDermot Roe of Alderford. He was born about 1753 and expelled from Alderford following his father's death in 1759. Charles' brother, John, an attorney, had conformed to the Church of England and ousted his brother's widow Eleanor O'Connor and her children from Alderford apparently under some provision of the Penal Laws.

Charles MacDermot Roe was known to be a friend of the Earl of Kingston.(15) The Earl was a member of the King family, the leading Anglo-Irish family in the Boyle area whose seat was at Rockingham near Loch Ce. Indeed the two families were close friends from the time of the Kings arrival in Ireland in the late 1500's. Their friendship survived the fact that the King's in 1603 were granted the land of Boyle Abbey, an institution founded on a MacDermot donation.

Lepper and Crossle suggest that the McDermott's ancient friendship with the Kings is an indication of a very old Masonic tradition in the MacDermot family since the Kings were famous masons. James, the fourth Lord Kingston was one of the most important leaders in 18th century Irish freemasonry. He served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Ireland 1731, 1735, 1745 and 1746 and was Grand Master of Munster in 1731. The first warrant of the Grand Lodge of Ireland was issued in 1731 to James' private lodge in Mitchelstown, County Cork.

One may speculate that the MacDermots might have an even more ancient relationship with the Knights Templar. Leaders of the freemason movement in the early 18th century, Chevalier Ramsay of the court of

James II in particular, saw freemasonry as a continuation of the Templar tradition.

Boyle Abbey was founded in 1161 by the Cistercians on land donated by the MacDermots. The Cistercians were closely connected with the Knights Templar. St. Bernard, the order's leader in the late 12th century was the nephew of an original Knights Templar and a Knights Templar was a principal patron of the Cistercian order. It was at a church council led by St. Bernard that the Knights Templar were constituted an order of the church.

The rapid expansion of Cistercian Abbeys from Ireland to the Holy Land in the 12th century was accompanied by parallel expansion of the Knights Templar. In the early 1300's, there were many Knights Templar establishments in Ireland. The Knights Templar maintained a headquarters at Temple House, Sligo Town.

The Cistercians were the first order to train local lay people in important skills. These locals, called *conversi*, could learn advanced farming techniques, as well as, technical skills such as masonry. At the same time, the Knights Templar created an extensive trade, banking and shipping network encompassing Europe and the Holy Land. The Templar House in Sligo probably related to their considerable shipping activities. (16)

Given the fact the MacDermots had a record of church construction dating from the 11th century, it would not be surprising if they learned the modern continental building techniques from the Cistercians of Boyle Abbey. Additionally, it may be from the Cistercians of Boyle or the Knights Templar that Cormac MacDermot acquired the interest in creating a trading community at Port na Cairge circa 1235. About this time, Tomas MacDermot was the Abbot of Boyle Abbey. He was later, Bishop of Elphin and died in 1265.

Also, there may have been a connection between the MacDermots Roe and the Cistercians and Templars in their role as *Biatach General*. This public function would have fit closely with the charitable activities carried out by the Cistercians with Templar assistance. It is interesting to note that Dermot Roe is said to have died at Boyle Abbey "in the Cistercian habit." in 1342. (17)

When the Templars were suppressed in France 1307-1314, there were many Templars in Ireland. Unlike the French Templars, the Irish Templars were dealt with leniently. It appears that they simply blended in with the population after the order's dissolution probably continuing many of their former activities. (18)

There is no evidence that any MacDermots became Knights Templar - certainly none that had descendants since the Templars were celibate. However, the Boyle Abbey/Cistercian/Templar relationship indicates that the MacDermots, at least, had contact with the Templar network. Thus, it may be that the MacDermots through their involvement with the Cistercians/Templars and with medieval operative masonry were connected with the medieval origins of freemasonry.

The prominent role of the MacDermots in Irish freemasonry will come as a surprise to even those with a good understanding of Masonic history. The fact that the most important figure of the 18th century freemasonry was a MacDermot Roe is even more amazing. Here, we have yet another impressive example of how the MacDermots help shape the times in which they live.

- (1) MacDermot of Moylurg, Sir Dermot MacDermot, Drumlin Publications, 1996, pedigree on p. 315
- (2) History of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Ireland, John Heron Lepper and Philip Crossle, Dublin, 1925, p. 238
- (3) MacDermot of Moylurg, supra, at p. 312
- (4) Recollections of Skeffington Gibbon, from 1796 to the present year 1829; being an epitome of the lives and characters of the nobility and gentry of Roscommon, published 1829, at p. 74.
- (5) Medieval Communication Routes Through Longford and Roscommon and Their Associated Settlements, Linda Doran, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Vol. 104C, No 3, pp. 57-80, 2004. Royal Irish Academy.
- (6) History of the Irish Hierarchy: with monasteries of each county, Rev. Thomas Walsh, 1854, New York, p. 622, et seq.
- (7) History of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Ireland, pp. 236-238.
- (8) History of Freemasonry, H.L. Haywood, Chapter XIV, The Great Division,
- (9) "Laurence Dermott 1720-1791", Bro. T. Eric Henry P.M. (I.C.) published on the internet at <http://www.lodgehope337.org.uk/lectures/henry%20L1.PDF> and accessed December 19, 2009 at p. 3.
- (10) Bro. T. Eric Henry, supra., p. 9
- (11) Ibid, p. 236.
- (12) Freemasonry of Boyle, F.E. Clark, pp.10,27
- (13) Minutes of the Grand Lodge of Ireland 1780-1803, compiled by Brother Keith Cochrane, published by Irish Masonic Records, 3rd Edition (CD), 2009
- (14) History of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Ireland, p. 162. For a history of the Early Grand Encampments, see The Early Grand Encampments of Ireland and Scotland and in England by R.W. Bro. S Forster, Reprint from Lodge of Research No. C.C. Ireland, Transactions 1982-84, Vol. XVIII, edited by Rt. Wor. Bro. George Power, M.A.
- (15) Carolan, The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper, Donal O'Sullivan, Vol. 1, p. 53, Celtic Music edition, 1991.
- (16) Medieval Religious Houses, Ireland, Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, published by Longman 1970, pp. 327-331.
- (17) History of the Irish Hierarchy, p. 627
- (18) See The Temple and the Lodge, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, 1989 and "The Templars in Ireland", by H. Wood, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C, Archeology, etc, Volume 26, 1906-7, pp. 327 f., Dublin, Hodges & Figgis.