‘VIRAGOS AND MATRONS’:

the lived experiences of women in seventeenth-century Dublin

by **Jane Ohlmeyer, Trinity College, Dublin**

THE 27TH ANNUAL SIR JOHN T. GILBERT COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE, 29 MAY 2024
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The 27th Annual Sir John T. Gilbert Commemorative Lecture delivered on 29 May 2024

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by **Jane Ohlmeyer, Trinity College, Dublin**[1&2]

A DETAILED ACCOUNT OF a riot led by women that occurred on St. Stephen's Day (26 December) 1629 paints a vivid picture of Dublin city officials, Protestant clergy and soldiers raiding and ransacking a Franciscan mass house on Cook Street in the heart of the walled city, close to Christ Church Cathedral and Dublin Castle. According to the report, 'a certain matron' called Elinor Nugent, fired with the 'spirit of zeal and indignation', led resistance to this sectarian attack by launching herself against the marauders. Following her lead, 'the rest of the viragos and matrons' in the congregation joined her: 'they strike, they shoulder, they catch, they scratch, thump and tread underfoot whomsoever they lay hands upon; so that the mayor, bishop and soldiers were glad to hasten out of doors; where they met, as they fled through the streets, with a shower of stones'.[3] Others joined the fray 'casting stones and the dirt of the kennel [i.e. dung]'.[4] The following day, Elinor Nugent – a widow probably in her fifties - and others were arrested and briefly imprisoned.

Who was Widow Nugent? The daughter of an established family of aldermen, Elinor Handcock was probably born in Dublin in the 1570s. She married Richard Nugent, a prosperous merchant and freeman of the city, and the couple made their home on Winetavern Street, close to the River Liffey and near Wood Quay, in the bustling and overcrowded parish of St. John (Figure 1). Aside from a few court records relating to Richard's recusancy (he was regularly fined for the family's devotion to Catholicism) and another recording his borrowing, the details of their lives are largely lost.[5] What is clear is that the couple formed part of a closeknit and prosperous Catholic mercantile community coming to terms with a period of profound political transition and religious turmoil. They worshipped openly at the Franciscan mass house on Cook Street. No doubt Elinor shopped, gossiped, and transacted business in the Cornmarket and along the quays and may even have frequented one of the many local inns.

The couple had at least one daughter, Mary, and two sons, John and George. Mary, admitted in 1611 as a freewoman of Dublin, married a Dublin merchant and appears to have worked for the family business but pre-deceased her mother. John studied in the Irish College in Lisbon. In 1619 Elinor incurred the wrath of the local authorities by corresponding with John and sending him 'eleven shillings in gold', a considerable sum.[6] John's very presence in Portugal connected Elinor to an international mercantile, and possibly clerical, network. Another son, George, lived with and presumably worked alongside his mother. Widowed in 1621, it is likely that Elinor took over Richard's business. As head of her household, she paid a 'cess' (or tax) of ten shillings, more than her neighbours, on at least nine occasions throughout the 1620s and 1630s.[7] Elinor died on 9 June 1638 and three days later was buried in the graveyard of the local Protestant church of the parish of St. John. A burial fee of 6s 8d, recorded in the parish vestry book, provides a final glimpse of the 'certain matron' who in 1629

led resistance to a state-sponsored onslaught against beleaguered Franciscan priests. This represented a moment of personal crisis for Elinor, for in doing what she did she risked her life, livelihood, and reputation.

To what extent did Elinor demonstrate agency within a patriarchal society? Her leadership during the riot, her public commitment to Catholicism, and her willingness to support her son's education as a priest, suggests considerable agency. Less clear is the extent to which she enjoyed economic agency as the wife and later widow of a merchant and as a freewoman of the city. More generally, the incomplete nature of the historical record and a focus on 'occupations', makes it difficult to determine with any precision how women deployed their labour within and outside of the home. Recent emphasis on intersectionality and the importance of considering social status, marital status, religion, ethnicity, and geographical background have allowed for more nuanced understandings of how women contributed to the workforce.[8] Thanks to a range of innovative studies, it is becoming clear that women across early modern Europe were often the decision makers in running their household and in spending disposable wealth. Similarly in Ireland they were providers and protectors, who worked co-operatively with their menfolk.[9]

Yet this should not disguise the reality of life and the fact that these women lived in patriarchal societies, where they were regarded as being inferior and subordinate to men in the domestic and public spheres. Moreover, patriarchy and misogyny are baked into most of the extant records. This helps to explain the invisibility of these women, along with the more general scarcity of historical sources recording their lives. Despite these very real challenges, the VOICES project (2023-2028) hopes to recover the agency and experiences of women like Elinor Nugent, as we explore the everyday lives of non-elite women who lived in early modern Ireland (c.1550-c.1700) but who have largely been ignored by scholars more interested in privileging the stories of men of power and influence.[10]

Very much 'work in progress' this pamphlet, based on the 2024 Gilbert Lecture, offers an overview of some of the extant quantitative and qualitative sources - demographic, parochial, municipal, literary, and legal - that make ordinary women more visible. Of course, these records are one dimensional and collected for specific purposes, which makes it difficult to hear the voices of the 'viragos and matrons' but, to quote Raymond Gillespie, 'not impossible if we listen carefully'.[11] Given the fragmentary and dispersed nature of the archive, women appear fleetingly as tax payers, traders, and servants. Specific moments, often associated with a crisis or rupture, offer glimpses of others. These included major events like riots and warfare during the 1590s, 1640s or 1690s or during bouts of bubonic plague (1575, 1604, 1639, and especially 1650-

1) or the subsistence crises in the 1590s, 1604, the late 1620s and 1630s, 1672-74, and 1683-84 (the 'great frost').[12] Court records reveal moments of personal crisis as women emerged from the shadows to claim an inheritance or to secure the wardship of their children. We encounter other women only in death, thanks to the random survival of a will or as a name in a funeral entry.

As we interrogate these transitory sightings in search of early modern women we owe an enormous debt to John T. Gilbert and Rosa, his wife, and their remarkable *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin* and to other collections housed in Dublin City Library and Archive.[13] Various aspects of the city's history have been brought to life thanks to the scholarship of Louis Cullen, David Dickson, Raymond Gillespie, Colm Lennon, and Maighréad Ní Mhurchadha.[14] The unpublished doctoral theses by Brendan Fitzpatrick, Patricia Stapleton, and Edward Whelan are also invaluable in providing context for those working on early modern Dublin women.[15]

I: DEMOGRAPHIC: HOW MANY WOMEN LIVED IN EARLY MODERN DUBLIN?

GIVEN THE ABSENCE OF demographic data for the early modern period it is almost impossible to identify how many people, never mind women, actually lived in Dublin. At the turn of the seventeenth century, it had a population of between 8,000 and 10,000 people, similar to an English provincial town like York or Bristol. Thanks in part to intense immigration and ongoing colonisation the population of the island grew during the early decades of the century, reaching close to two million by 1641, with Dublin's estimated at c.40,000.[16] Despite the fact that the war of the 1640s claimed up to c.30 per cent of Ireland's people, Dublin's population had grown to c.70,000 by 1700, making it the second city of the English empire after London. Large scale immigration characterised the century with between 800 and 850 people, including a significant number of women, moving into the city each year.[17] Raymond Gillespie has shown that Dublin's population increased by 1.5 per cent annually, which outshone even London's demographic growth of one per cent per annum.[18] Moreover this growth occurred at a time when populations elsewhere in Europe had shrunk by up to one third.[19]

Estimating the population of Dublin has long vexed scholars.[20] As will become clear, extant seventeenth-century demographic sources were assembled for a variety of purposes that usually related to the collection of taxation. The data is invariably incomplete and difficult to interrogate and, therefore, has to be treated with caution. That said, when combined, the sources, however flawed, do offer intriguing insights into population levels, gender, ethnicity, confession, and the city's social geography.

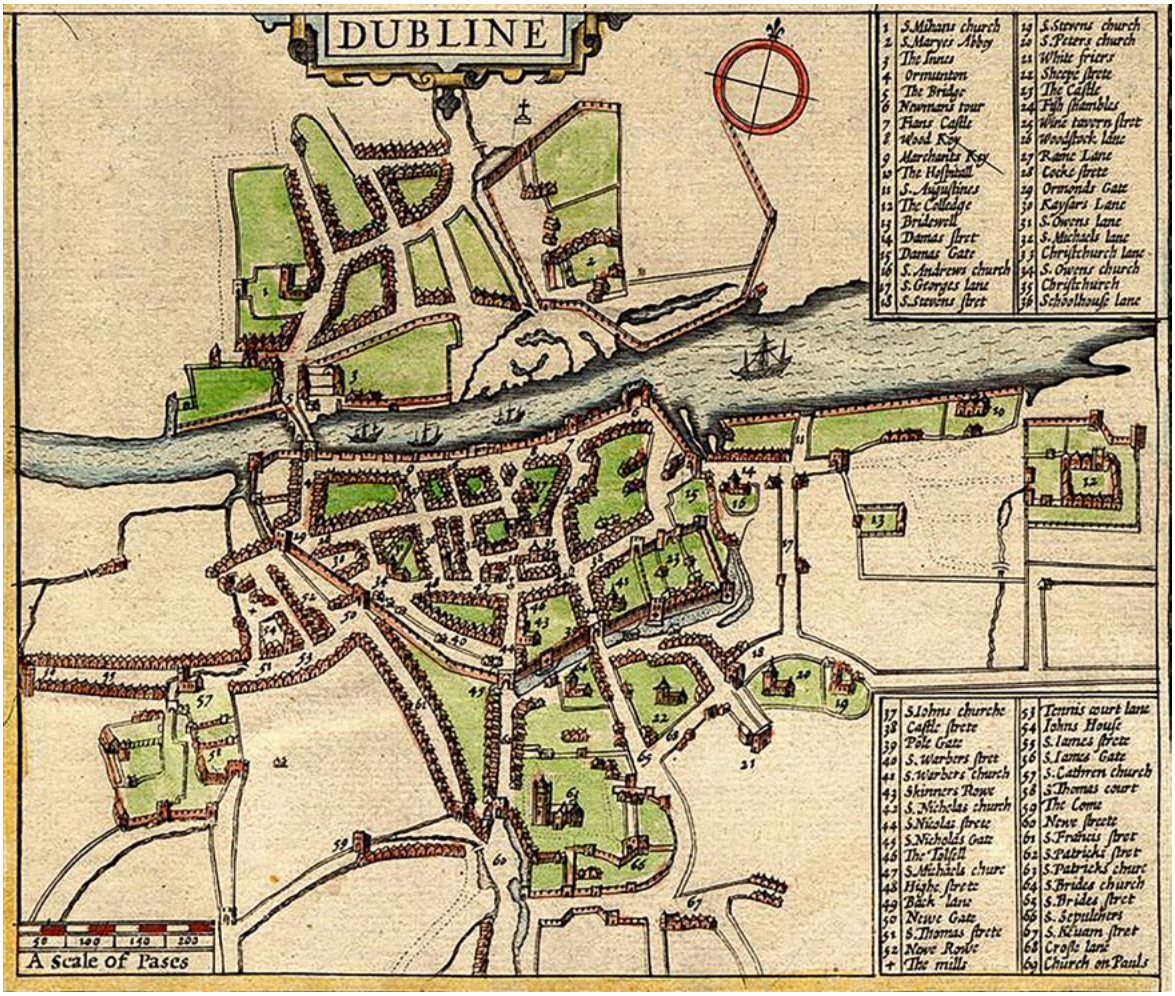

Figure 1: John Speed's Map of 1610. Courtesy of Dublin City Library and Archive

The regular use in the records of the prefix 'Mrs', which stood for mistress (and not necessarily wife), suggests that some women – including heads of household like Elinor – were people of means, responsible for servants and even apprentices.[21]

A poll tax return from 1660 suggested that 8,780 people lived in the city, which is likely a considerable underestimate that excluded those unable to pay taxes.[22] Despite this the poll tax provides a rough snapshot of the ethnic and religious composition of the city after a decade of war and Cromwellian occupation. Consider the parish of

St. John (Figure 1) where it recorded 904 tax payers, the majority (87 per cent) of whom were described as 'English' (and Protestant) and the remaining 120 as 'Irish' (and Catholic).[23] The proportion of English to Irish was particularly high in St. John's. More generally, for every Irish (or Catholic) person living in the city, there were three English (or Protestant) people. Given the hostility towards them during the 1640s and 1650s, many Catholics relocated to parishes outside the city walls or to County Dublin, where the Irish predominated. The poll tax also named 'titualdoes' or important people living in the city. Of these only were two women: Lady Phillipps of Sheep Street and Lady Crosby of Fishamble Street.[24]

More useful from the perspective of gender are the hearth money tax rolls, which date from the final four decades of the seventeenth century. Brian Gurrin published the 1663 hearth tax roll for Dublin city, which listed 2,395 households, each paying two shillings per hearth.[25] Up to ten per cent of the city's population would have been classified as paupers and paid no tax but if each household comprised roughly seven people, then the population of the city in 1663 would have been 27,937, which represented a considerable increase from earlier estimates.[26] The wealthier parishes, with the greatest number of large homes, were St. Nicholas (within the walls), St. Werburgh, and St. Michael. Of course, even at the best of times this data is 'dirty and noisy' and must be regarded as indicative rather than definitive.[27]

TABLE 1: HEARTH MONEY TAX ROLL FOR DUBLIN CITY, 1663

Number of hearths	Women	Widows
1	76	43
2	32	24
3	42	32
4	32	19
5	9	5
6	13	9
7	9	8
8	7	4
9	1	1
10	1	1
11	1	0
Total	223	146

Bearing these health warnings in mind, analysis of the 1663 hearth money tax roll suggests two things about the women living in the city (see Table 1). First, of the properties listed, females were recorded as head of household in 223 instances or c.9 per cent of the total, which is lower than the figure of 16 per cent Laura Gowing provides for London 30 years later in 1693.[28] Of these 223 women, widows comprised two-thirds, single women one-fifth, and married women – whose husbands were presumably absent - 14 per cent (or 31). Even though men headed c.90 per cent of all households many were married and so their wives, daughters or other female relatives and servants would have formed part of their family units. We simply have no visibility of these women but in terms of total numbers they would have been significant and their contributions considerable, both within and outside of the home. Second, the 1663 hearth money tax roll shows how women – widows, single, married – operated as heads of household in large, as well as more modest properties (see Table 1). Roughly one third (73 women) lived reasonably well in homes with more than three hearths, which R. A. Butlin regarded as the threshold of 'comfortable' living. Some of the larger households of six hearths or more (32) were held to be 'wealthy'. Many households would have been intergenerational and included extended family members, apprentices, journeymen, and lodgers, along with servants.[29] For the remaining two-thirds (150) of households headed by women, the majority of whom were widows, life may have been more challenging, especially for those who lived in homes with a single hearth (76).[30] That said, they still had sufficient resources to pay their taxes unlike those marginal women who were unable to pay and eked out an existence.

As the century passed the population of Dublin rapidly increased, despite a further round of disruption caused by the Jacobite war of 1688-1691. The 1696 enumeration prepared by John South, commissioner of the revenue, estimated a total population of 40,508 but informed estimates suggest a higher figure of c.70,000.[31] According to South, women accounted for 54 per cent (21,746) of the population. The enumeration recorded male and female births and reported that more boys were born than girls and that children made up nearly one third of the population. South also counted female servants, who comprised 25 per cent of the adult female population.[32] The demographic impact of this for the city needs to be fully explored since servants often married later in life. David Dickson's study of County Dublin during the 1650s suggests that women would have married around the age of 23, which was within the 'norm' for north-west Europe but at the lower end.[33] Also worthy of further investigation is the suggestion by Raymond Gillespie that by the end of the century women were pushed into more marginal areas of the city and that they predominated in the poorer parishes of St. Audoen, St. Michan, and St. Andrew, which had the highest female/male ratios.[34]

There was particular interest in how the city's inhabitants died. A bill of mortality for 1683-1684, the year of the great frost, provided incredible detail on causes of death at a moment when hunger made people very vulnerable to disease: 159 people died of old age (and those

who reached old age tended to be female), along with 178 infants. Measles claimed 122 lives; consumption 322; and 'fever' 527. Small pox, which ravaged the city every three or four years, resulted in 143 deaths. Less common killers were 'spotted fever', canker, worms, rickets, and 'French pox' (syphilis). More gendered were the four women who committed suicide: one 'choked herself', one 'hanged herself', one 'drowned herself', and one poisoned herself. Another was 'hurt and ill used by her master and mistress'. There were 36 deaths in 'child bed', something that parish registers underscore with newborns being buried within days of their mother's death and vice versa.[35]

II: PAROCHIAL: WHAT DO PARISH RECORDS REVEAL?

WHERE THEY EXIST, PARISH registers and church wardens account books also deserve close scrutiny and will allow for micro-histories of a select number of communities as part of the VOICES project.[36] The most complete records for seventeenth-century Dublin are for the parish of St. John, home to the Nugents, where the newest commercial streets of the city were located. It included Fishamble Street, parts of Copper Alley, Smock Alley, Winetavern and Cook Streets, Wood Quay, and part of Merchant's Quay.[37] Within the walls, facing the river, at the heart of the medieval city and close to Christ Church cathedral, St. John's parish appears to have been densely populated. That said, 126 people died and 40 houses were destroyed as a result of a major gunpowder explosion in 1597 on Winetavern Street near the quay.

The vestry book for the parish of St. John recorded the men and women, Catholic and Protestant, who made 'cess' payments from the 1620s to the 1650s. In 1622 164 houses were listed; by 1636 there were 197 houses; by 1643 there were 248 houses, which then contracted to 192 in 1659.[38] If there were 7 people in each household the parish population could have equated to 1,148 in 1621; to 1,736 in 1643; and shrinking to 1,344 in 1659. In 1636 and 1643 the number of women paying cess comprised c.13 per cent of all taxpayers, which incidentally is in line with what has been calculated for New Ross in 1635 and slightly higher than for Clonmel and elsewhere where the figure was c.10 per cent.[39] Though some female bakers are noted, the cess records list the occupations of husbands and fathers. A few gentlemen aside, these men were mostly from the 'middling sorts': builders, boatmen, bricklayers, clerks, cooks, glaziers, joiners, merchants, painters, plumbers, porters, surgeons, and upholsterers. While more modest in size, when compared with some of the neighbouring parishes, 81 per cent of the houses were described as in 'good' repair despite the war of the 1640s.[40] In short, the parish was home to those involved in commerce, construction and the reasonably well to do.

The inhabitants of the parish drank and socialised in the many inns and taverns - the Crane, the Black Boy, the Golden Lyon, the Red Stagg, the Red Lion, the Star Cellar - or played tennis on the courts built in 1626.[41] Churches provided succour for the souls. During the early decades of the seventeenth century several religious orders established themselves on Cook Street: the Franciscans in 1615, the Dominicans in 1622, and the Discalced Dominicans in 1625.[42] Eventually the authorities cracked down, raiding the Franciscan mass house on 26 December 1629 and triggering the riot led by Elinor Nugent (discussed above). Mass attendance did not prevent, at least in the pre-war years, Catholics from serving as church wardens in St. John the Evangelist, the Church of Ireland parish church, and burials included Catholics, like Elinor in 1638 or Mathew Roch, a 'priest', who was interred in January 1648.[43] By 1686 the population of the parish had more than doubled to 2,739 people (54 per cent were female). Of the female population, 30 per cent were girls and of adult females 36 per cent were female servants, which was higher than the city average of 25 per cent.

Details of births, deaths, and some marriages for the parish of St. John are extant between 1619 and 1699 and deserve sustained scrutiny even if the data is flawed (Figure 2).[45] There was incomplete or no data for a number of years (1659-61, 1671-73, and 1678) and female burials during the late 1630s appear to have been underreported. The marriage data is particularly patchy but it would appear that the number of marriages contracted significantly as a result of the disruption caused by the war of the 1640s only to increase again during the 1650s, as peace returned. As Figure 2 shows, the birth levels, as measured by baptisms, remained remarkably constant over the course of the century, with a slight rise in births during the 1650s as the number of marriages increased. More boys were born than girls.[46] There were regular references to the birth of twins and to women giving birth every other year, which suggests that these women used wet nurses to breast feed their children. In terms of deaths, more men were buried than women. For the first half of the seventeenth century baptisms appear to have exceeded burials. This is, however, slightly misleading since deaths of children were not always recorded and vestry records suggest that children accounted for between one third and a half of burials. Since burials exceeded baptisms the growth in the parish's population after 1660, recorded in the poll tax return and the hearth money roll tax, can be attributed to migration from Britain, especially Chester and the north west of England, or from other parts of Ireland.[47]

With the outbreak of war in 1641 the level of deaths in the parish of St. John increased significantly (Figure 3). Mortality spiked in 1642 with 181 female burials. Of these women, nearly 40 per cent (68), were described as refugees which was a small fraction of those who flooded into the city, where they allegedly died at the rate of 30 a day.[48]

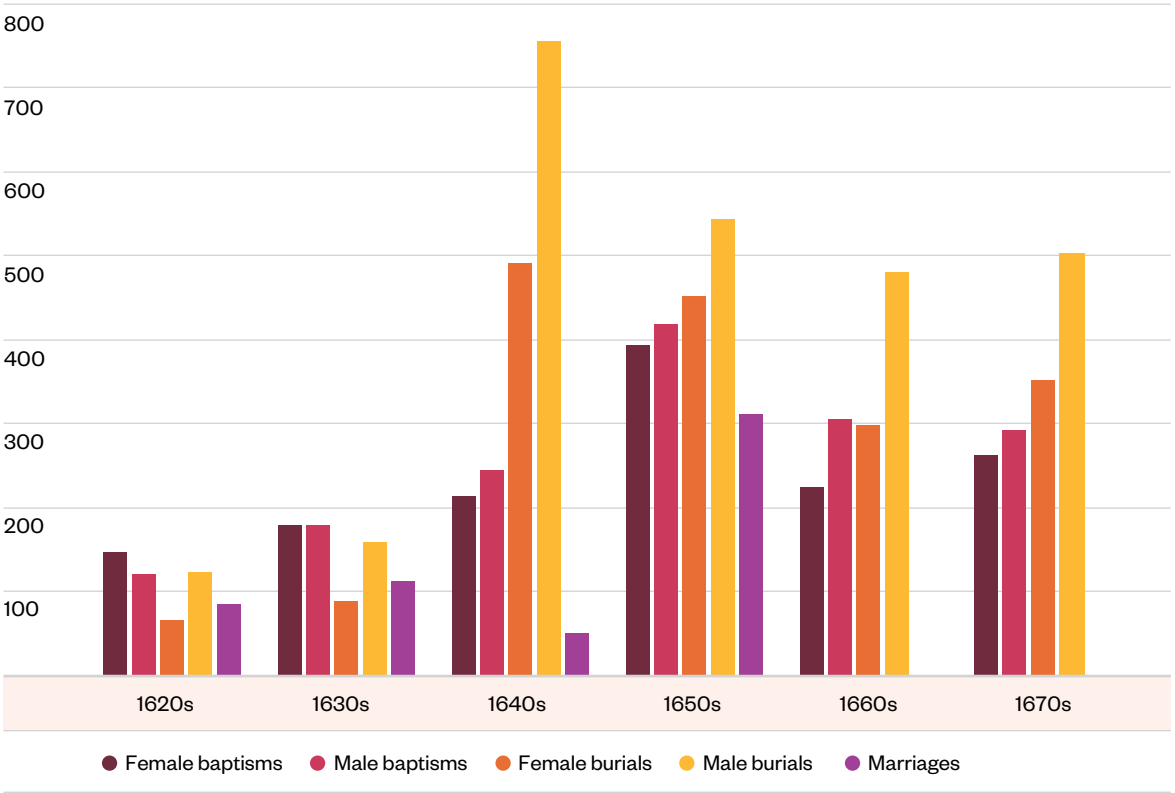

Figure 2: Baptisms, burials, and marriages in the parish of St. John, 1620s-1670s[44]

The authorities reckoned that in the spring of 1642 there were c.4,000 refugees in Dublin, mostly women and children, half of whom were considered destitute. By the summer this figure had increased to c.7,500 people, dubbed by one writer as 'lamentable spectacles of sorrow' or 'living ghosts'.[49] The church warden accounts for the parish of St. John recorded sums allocated 'for burying the poor who were found dead in the streets' or for caring for children 'left on the parish'.[50]

The number of burials in the parish of St. John soared in 1650, especially over the hot summer months. 'In this time of mortalitie' women were harder hit, with more dying. In June and July alone 150 women and girls died, which represented 80 per cent of all female deaths recorded for 1650. That said, church wardens recorded

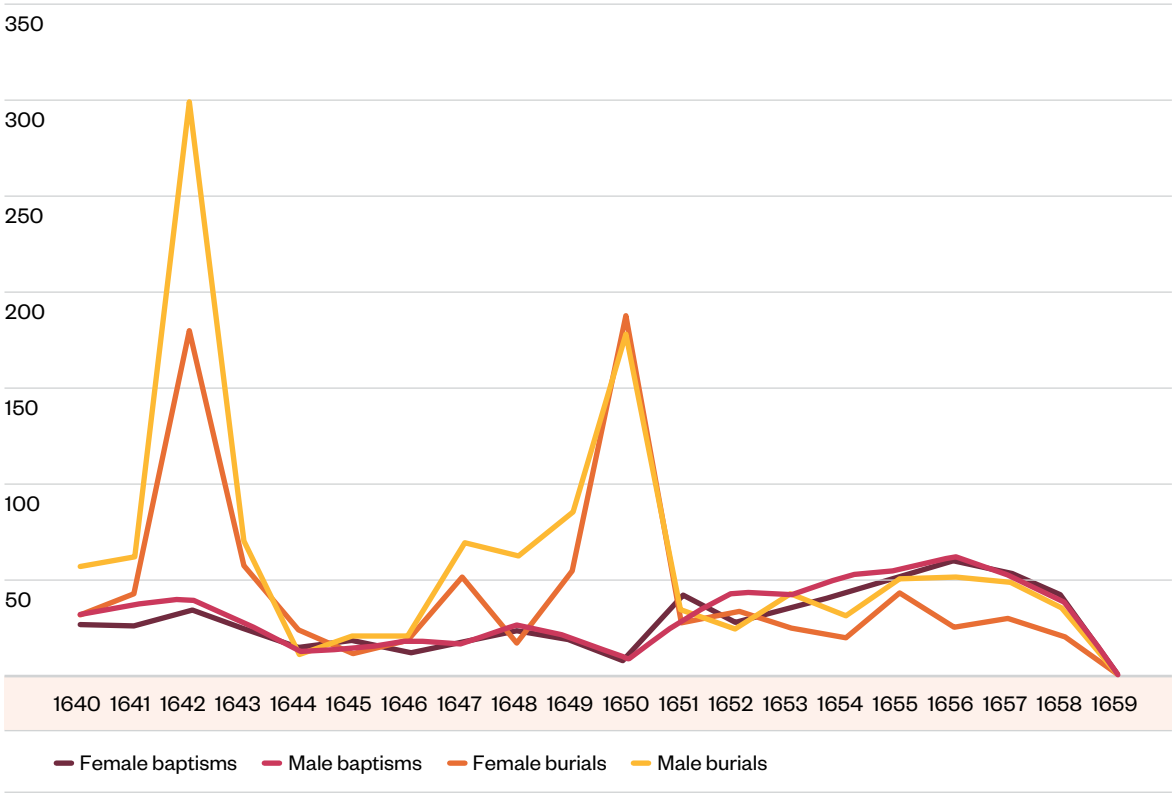

Figure 3: St. John's Parish: births and deaths, 1640-1659

burials of entire families, with each entry naming multiple interments. For example, in July 1650 plague claimed the lives of three members of the Robinson family and the following month four of the Weldons.[51] It has been suggested that ten per cent of the city's residents succumbed to plague and fever during the first and most lethal wave in 1650 (there were two more over the next few years) and that 1,300 people per week allegedly died during these summer months.[52] Horrendous though this was, it was proportionately less devastating than the plague of 1574-75, which had claimed c.3,000 people or one third of the city's population. Officials responded much as they had to the outbreak of plague in 1604-6 by cancelling festivities, controlling access to the city, and monitoring the disposal of bodies. The city mortgaged land to pay 'for reliefe of the poore and defraying other chardges about the buryall of the dead'.[53] It fell to women to care for the sick and dying and to search out the dead.[54]

III: MUNICIPAL: FEMALE CITIZENS OF DUBLIN

THE ADMISSION LISTS TO the freedom of Dublin, housed in Dublin City Library and Archive, offer extraordinary insights into the city's female citizens from the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century. Though the precise benefits are opaque, being a freewoman of Dublin presumably strengthened a woman's social and economic position and provided her with some independence. This also afforded her privileges – the right to reside, to trade within the city, to join a guild, to lease property owned by the city, and to receive charity. In return the freewoman was obliged to defend the city, to pay taxes and, more generally, to adhere to any rules (or bye-laws) laid down by the city assembly for the regulation of communal life.[55] The mayor and the sheriffs 'swore' in all new freewomen in a public ceremony that took place in the Tholsel hall (Figure 4).

Married women, like Elinor Nugent, shared in their husband's freedom and their daughters could secure it by patrimony, as in the case of Mary Nugent. A few were admitted 'by special grace' and 'on fine of gloves', a route normally reserved for men. Given the nature of the evidence, it is hard to determine how many freewomen lived in Dublin at any point. However, at the height of war during the 1640s, the authorities estimated that 1,406 Catholic freewomen resided in the city alongside 2,986 Protestants (Table 2). Thus in 1644 freewomen comprised 54 per cent of all citizens, a figure no doubt inflated by male deaths during the early years of the conflict or their soldiering outside of the city. The majority of the women accounted for in 1644 would have been citizens as a result of marriage. A significant minority were also admitted by patrimony. It has been suggested that advancing a daughter as a freewoman would have been the equivalent of providing a dowry and improved her marital prospects.[56] Since citizenship afforded trading and other privileges, it comes as no surprise that admissions were jealously guarded. A bye law of 1676 mandated that those who married 'papists' forfeited their freedom unless they paid a fine of £20.[57]

TABLE 2: CITIZENS OF DUBLIN, AUGUST 1644[58]

Number of hearths	Protestant	Catholic	Total
Men	2,565*	1,202	3,767 (46%)
Women	2,986	1,406	4,392 (54%)
Total	5,551 (68%)	2,608 (32%)	8,159

*not including soldiers

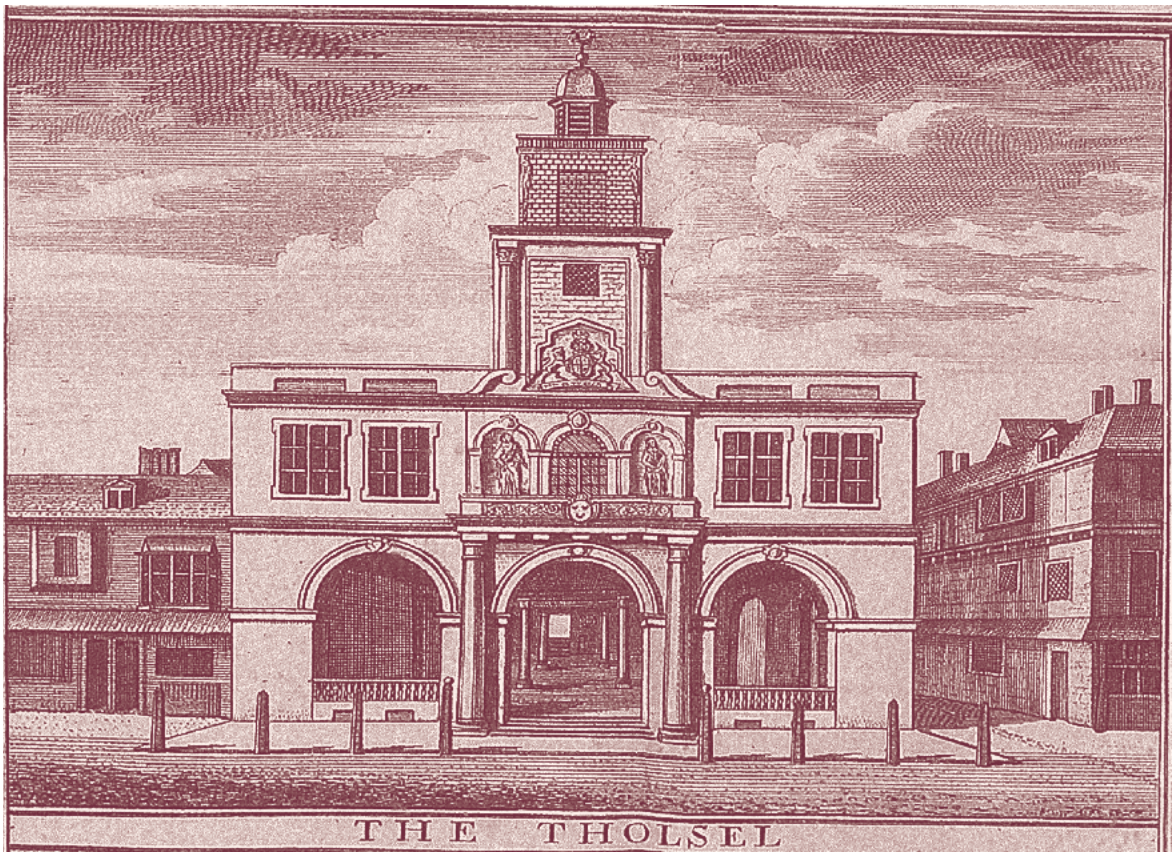

Figure 4: The Tholsel, near Cornmarket in 1728, from *Charles Brooking's Map of Dublin*.
Courtesy of Dublin City Library and Archive

In all, between 1570 and 1730, 1,098 women were admitted by patrimony to the freedom of Dublin (see Table 3), accounting for nearly six per cent of all admissions over a period of 160 years.[59] Analysis of surnames of female citizens suggests that the bulk at the turn of the century were of Old English provenance – Allen, Browne, Byrne, Doyne, Kelly, Long, Malone, Quin, Usher, and Walsh – with some Gaelic Irish ones. Distinctively Irish first names for women were rare. Instead, anglicised names predominated, with the names of English newcomers becoming increasingly common as the century passed.[60] During the early decades of the seventeenth century the proportion of women admitted reached 14 per cent (Figure 5), only to drop during the 1640s and 1650s to around five per cent. With the Stuart restoration after 1660 female admissions fluctuated between nine and one per cent. The equivalent number for sixteenth century York was one

per cent. Of seventeenth-century London, Laura Gowing noted that women always represented a small proportion of the citizens. Widows and daughters of freemen could claim the freedom of Waterford but none appear to have done so in the years between 1542 and 1650, while between 1549 and 1609 only two women (out of 128) opted to claim the freedom of the Irishtown, Kilkenny.[61]

TABLE 3: ADMISSION TO THE FREEDOM OF DUBLIN, 1570-1730[62]

By decade	Female	Male	% of women
1570	21	211	9.1%
1580	47	464	9.2%
1590	29	502	5.5%
1600	49	508	8.8%
1610	64	570	10.1%
1620	81	606	11.8%
1630	145	883	14.1%
1640	35	575	5.7%
1650	60	938	6.0%
1660	150	1,453	9.4%
1670	108	1,287	7.7%
1680	134	1,883	6.6%
1690	45	1,912	2.3%
1700	69	1,600	4.1%
1710	32	1,543	2.0%
1720	15	1,496	1.0%
1730	14	1,354	1.0%
	1,098	17,785	5.8%

The high level of female admissions is interesting and offers a point of difference between Dublin and other towns across Ireland and the Stuart kingdoms. In particular the increase in female admissions to 14 per cent during the 1630s begs the question of why? In an earlier period, as Bruce Campbell has shown, increased admissions of women was triggered by a relative absence of men associated with repeated outbreaks of plague. It is not clear whether the harvest and epidemic crises of the 1630s had a disproportionate impact on men, thereby creating opportunities for women. Brendan Fitzpatrick has suggested that this increase might relate to female involvement in brewing but this seems unlikely since the number of female brewers remained constant across the century.[63]

Another hypothesis is that women were becoming embroiled in sectarian power struggles, as the community of Catholic freemen sought to boost their numbers and secure their predominance. During the first decade of the seventeenth century a wealthy Catholic elite held sway and of the 77 elected aldermen, 36 were known Catholics and 12 known Protestants.[64] From the 1620s this ascendancy was being challenged by conforming civic officials, perhaps prompting Catholics to admit daughters in ever increasing numbers. This is precisely what happened later in the century when female admission numbers peaked during the brief reign of the Catholic king, James II (1685-1688). In a single sitting in 1688 83 women, predominately Catholic, were admitted. Rather than the daughters of merchants and tradesmen, they were the daughters, grand-daughters, and step-daughters of the mayor, the recorder, 16 burgesses, 12 aldermen, and 3 sheriffs. Two years later, with the defeat of James II, they were stripped of their status as freewomen and, as a result, are not included in Table 3 or Figure 5. Earlier in the century, Protestants adopted similar tactics to increase the number of Protestant citizens.[65] Among those admitted upon the payment of a token fine during the 1650s (46 people) were a group of 24 women, who were single and immigrants, probably from England.[66]

Of the 1,098 women admitted between 1570 and 1730, no marital status is recorded for 176 (or 16 per cent), which may mean that at least some were married. Nine were widows. The majority – 83 per cent (913) - were single women, described in the records as ‘spinster’, ‘maiden’, ‘virgo’ or ‘daughter’. It is difficult to determine whether a daughter was admitted during the lifetime of her father. Given that the death of a father is only noted in 102 instances (not even 10 per cent), it appears that the bulk of women became freewomen while their father lived, which suggests that at least some worked as part of the family business, as in the case of Mary Nugent (discussed above). Ages were not stated but a women had to be at least 21 before

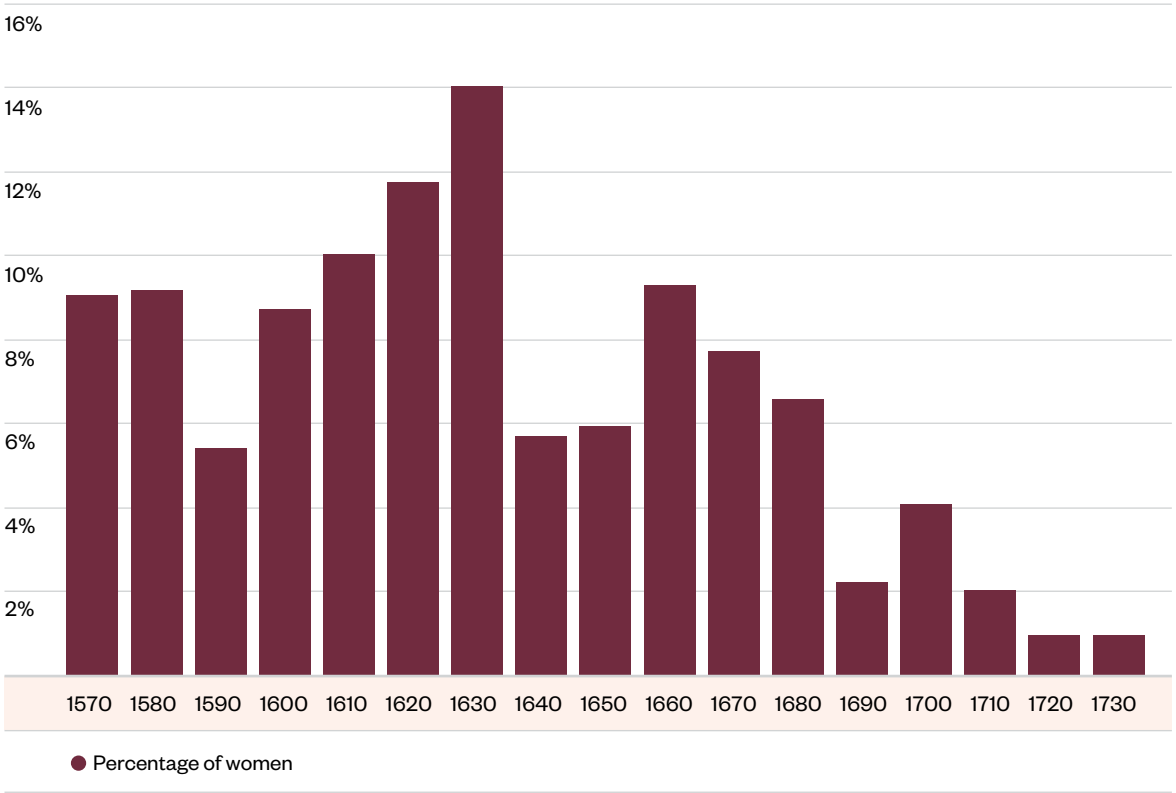

Figure 5: Female proportion of those admitted to the freedom of Dublin, 1570-1730

she could be admitted so presumably most of these women were in their 20s. For some their admission improved their marriage prospects because an unfree spouse could then claim status as a Dublin freeman.

Interestingly, between 1578 and 1707, 121 men were admitted in right of marrying a freewoman (from the 1580s this only applied to a first marriage). Many of the surnames of these men were familiar Old English ones but there were also newcomers, eager to secure considerable financial and social advantage. No fine was paid and free entry to a guild became possible. Marriage also afforded the husband access to his spouse's family social and commercial networks. For example, in 1606 John Franckton, the royal printer and bookseller, was admitted as a freeman thanks to his marriage to Eleanor Laghlin, the daughter of a well-connected freeman. In 1639 Jana,

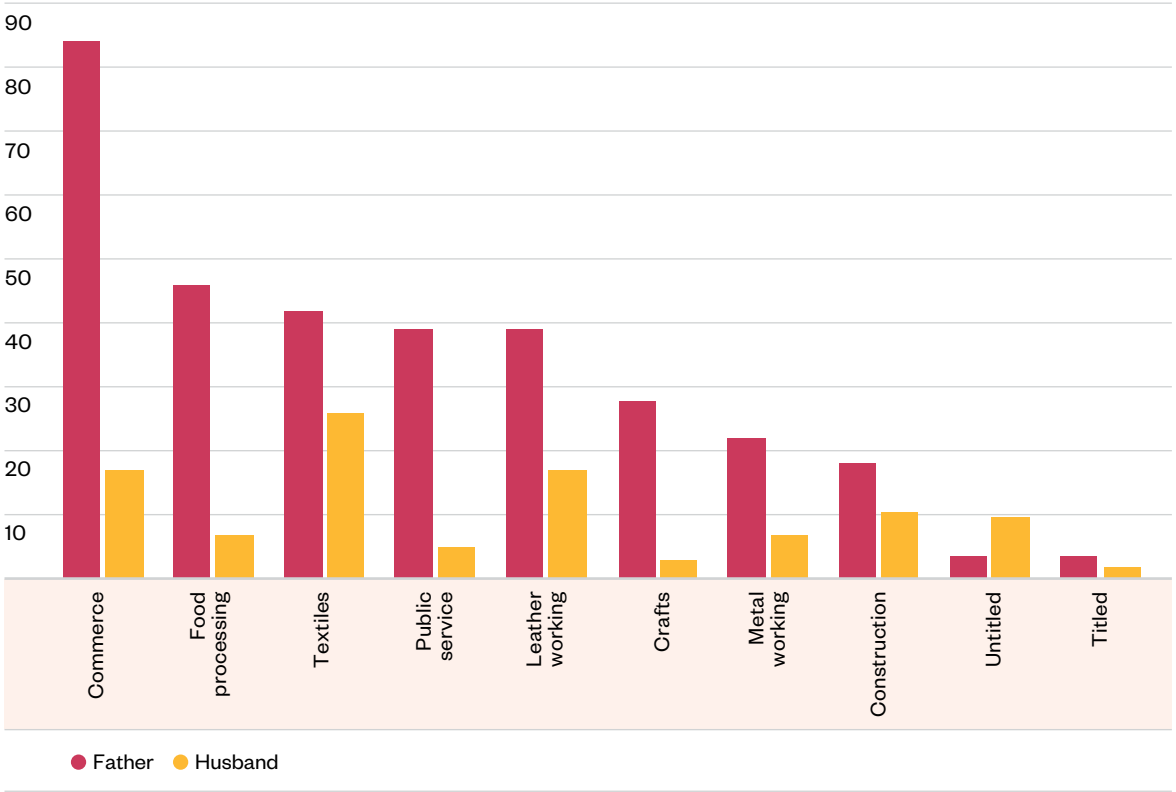

Figure 6: Number of women by the occupation group of their father (red: n326) and husband (yellow: n106)[68]

their youngest child who could well have been in her thirties but is listed as 'virgo', was admitted as the daughter of a freeman, long after her father's death in 1620.[67] In 1640 Jana married William Palmer, a merchant, who was then admitted. It is likely that Jana claimed her citizenship so William might benefit from it.

As in the case of Jana, nearly one third (326) of female admissions recorded the occupations of their father and in 106 instances we also know the occupation of their husbands (Figure 6). Over 50 occupations were listed, which have been broken down under a number of headings: commerce, food processing, textiles, leather and metal working, crafts, and public service. As Figure 6 shows, the daughters of merchants and others involved in commerce comprised the largest group (84). Those who worked in food processing, especially bakers, butchers, and cooks, formed a significant group

(46). A roughly equal number (42) worked in textiles - cloth making and clothing - as weavers, tailors, button makers, and felt makers. Some form of leather working – skinners, tanners, shoemakers, glovers and saddlers – occupied 39 fathers, while 22 more worked with metal, with an equal number of goldsmiths and blacksmiths (seven of each). A variety of crafts – box makers, chandlers, coopers, joiners, and printers – accounted for the occupations of 28 and a further 18 were involved in construction as architects, carpenters, painters, and plumbers. The final category of public service (39) included the mayor, alderman, clerks, surgeons, and the jailer of Newgate prison. Where we know the occupations of a woman's father and her husband (in 29 instances) it becomes clear that a woman wed a man whose occupation was the same as, or closely related to, that of her father. This was particularly the case for those employed in textiles, construction, and leather and metal working. Thus Elizabeth Cheshier, daughter of Henry, goldsmith, married Gilbert Tonques, another goldsmith while Jane Peppard, the daughter of George, a plasterer, wed a brick layer called William Stone. And so on. Whether as a daughter, wife, or mother, Elizabeth and Jane probably worked alongside their father and later spouse, as they raised their children and ran their households.

IV: LITERARY AND LEGAL RECORDS

Of particular interest - because they focus on Dublin and women - are the works of the popular novelist, playwright, and bookseller, Richard Head (c.1639-c.1686). Born in Carrickfergus, Head later fled to England only to return to live in Dublin during the 1650s, when he wrote a bawdy play, *Hic et ubique, or, The humours of Dublin* (London, 1663) where some of the most interesting characters were female. Mrs Anne Hopewell was a married woman who passed herself as a widow and tricked an admirer into handing over his estate. Mrs Thrivewell, the wife of a Dublin alderman, was an entrepreneur who made the family's fortune when she opened a boarding house. Her chaste daughter, Cassandra, nearly married a bigamous English charlatan but was saved by the arrival of his wife, Mrs Contriver. Formidable, wily, and well-educated landladies featured in *Hic et ubique, The English Rogue: Described in the life of Meriton Latroon* (London, 1665) and in *The miss display'd* (London, 1675). In *The miss display'd* Cornelia, a 'notorious *Irish-English Whore'*, was born in Ulster of an Irish Catholic mother, who converted, and an English Protestant father. Head offered a detailed and titillating account of Cornelia's life as a lady's maid, as her master's concubine, and then as a sex worker. Head's characterisation, in his prose and play, of women - single, married, and widowed - from a variety of social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds may well have been imagined but it was also informed by his experiences of living in Dublin. Certainly, Head offers insights – especially into the lives of more marginal women – unavailable in other historical records.

Equally illuminating, though for very different reasons, is legal evidence by or about women. Amongst the most controversial are the 1641 Depositions, predominately by Protestant women, who had settled in Dublin during the pre-war years. Of the 46 female deponents who lived in the city, 20 were married, 16 were widowed, and 5 single (and described rather unflatteringly as 'spinsters'). Three quarters deposed during the 1640s, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, and a quarter during the early 1650s, when they recalled events that had occurred over a decade previously. These suggest that women worked closely with their husbands and had little difficulty stepping into their shoes when they died or travelled. For example, Jane Cox, whose late husband John was a coach maker, listed in her deposition those who owed him money, including the earl of Fingal, Lords Dunsany and Gormanston, and other clients who had joined the insurrection.[69] Jane was one of 31 Dublin women who marked her deposition (Table 4). The 14 women who signed tended to be married to aldermen, clerks, and clergy, while those who left a mark had husbands who worked as brewers, blacksmiths, carpenters, clothworkers, coachmakers, fishmongers, merchants, soldiers, surveyors, tailors, and vintners.[70] Whether they could sign or not, it is likely that in addition to running their homes and caring for their families, these women had some knowledge and understanding of what their husbands did and could well have worked alongside them.

Catholic and Protestant women from Dublin feature in court records, where they appear as plaintiffs and defendants. Ongoing research on the Court of Chancery pleadings, held in the National Archives, represents an unparalleled opportunity for the study of women from diverse ethnic backgrounds. They contain hundreds of examples of disputes involving jointures, marriage settlements, dowries, and wills, all of which formed the ever-changing social, legal, and economic backdrop to early modern Irish women's lives.[71] Very much 'work in progress', the full findings from these investigations will be made available soon, as will ongoing work on extant early modern wills, another rich source for women from a wide variety of religious, social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds.[72] The majority of wills were lost during the destruction of the National Archives in 1922. Those that survive are dispersed across multiple locations or are reproduced in local historical journals and books that pre-date 1922. Alongside any extant wills VOICES is interrogating funeral entries, housed in the Genealogical Office in the National Library of Ireland, which greatly enrich our understanding of women's familial relationships, social status, material wealth, and even the cause of death.[73]

Figure 7: Richard Head, The Miss Display'd. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

TABLE 4: WOMEN WHO SIGNED OR LEFT A MARK (AS RECORDED IN THE 1641 DEPOSITIONS)

Marital status	Mark	Signature
Unmarried	4	1
Married	12	8
Widow	12	3
Not stated	3	2
Total	31 (69%)	14 (31%)

Yet these sources also have their limitations. One of the thousands of funeral entries being analysed as part of VOICES is that of Elinor Nugent (Figure 8). Dating from 1638, it simply tells us that she was the daughter of a Dublin gentleman called Handcock and married a Dublin merchant called Richard Nugent. She mothered George, Mary, who had married another Dublin merchant called James Queytrot, and 'other children', who died young. She was buried, three days after she died, on the 12th June in St. John's church. The silences are noteworthy. Her son John is not mentioned, perhaps because he was a priest, or Elinor's commitment to Catholicism. Nor was the 1629 riot or how Elinor made her living. Instead, the funeral entry speaks to the patriarchal, misogynistic, and Protestant world in which she lived and which focussed on her role as a daughter, wife, and mother to a respected mercantile family. How best to address the silences and the biases inherent in the archive remains a huge challenge to any attempt to recover the lived experiences of early modern women.

With this health warning in mind, a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn from this brief overview of some of the evidence that relates to the 'viragos and matrons' in early modern Dublin. First, despite being fragmentary and fleeting, a wide variety of sources are extant and, thanks to various technologies, are ever more accessible. In fact, of all the towns in early modern Ireland, women in Dublin are the most fully documented. The large number of free women suggests that the lived experiences of female citizens might have been different when compared with other towns, something that further research will hopefully reveal more fully. Second, women in Dublin appear to have made significant contributions to the workforce. They were decision makers in running their households and worked co-operatively with their menfolk. The extent to which this was 'typical' of other places in early modern Ireland remains to be determined but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is. Finally, for many ordinary women, it was only in death or at moments of crisis that they became visible. As work on VOICES continues this hypothesis will be tested

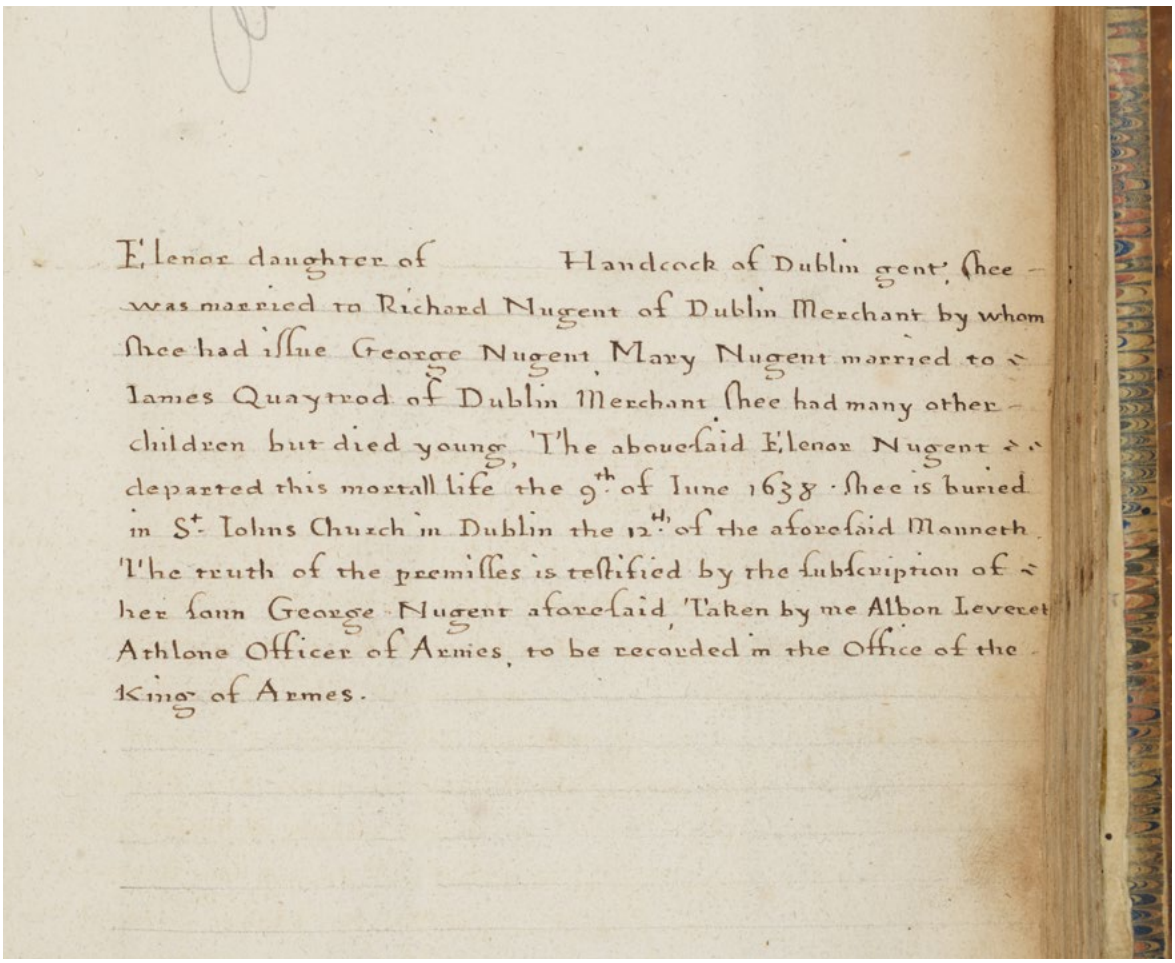
Elenor daughter of Handcock of Dublin gent' shee
was married to Richard Nugent of Dublin Merchant by whom
shee had issue George Nugent, Mary Nugent married to
James Quaytrod of Dublin Merchant shee had many other
children but died young. The aboveſaid Elenor Nugent
departed this mortall life the 9th of June 1638. Shee is buried
in St. Johns Church in Dublin the 12th of the aforeſaid Manneth.
The truth of the premiſſes is teſtified by the ſubſcription of
her ſonn George Nugent aforeſaid. Taken by me Albon Leveret
Athlone Officer of Armes, to be recorded in the Office of the
King of Armes.

Figure 8: Funeral Entry for Elinor Nugent, 1638. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

systematically. What is already clear is that the extreme circumstances triggered by a decade of warfare during the 1640s meant that women exercised a greater level of agency simply because the crisis turned their world upside down forcing them to take on roles previously held by men. This was as true of Dublin, as it was for the rest of the country.

While this brief overview has raised more questions than provided answers, one thing stands out. Women - those 'viragos and matrons' - were at the heart of the history of early modern Dublin and have been hiding in plain sight for far too long.

ENDNOTES

1 This publication is dedicated to the memory of Raymond Gillespie (1955-2024), the most generous of scholars and friends.

2 Much of the research for this publication has received support from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon Europe Research & Innovation programme under grant agreement No 101097003. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the ERC. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. Jane Ohlmeyer is the Principal Investigator for VOICES, https://voicesproject.ie/, accessed 17 October 2024. I am very grateful for their insights to the VOICES team members - Anne English, Lucy McKenna, Bronagh Ann McShane, Declan O'Sullivan, and Diego Rincon-Yanez - and especially to Ella Mae Cromie, Madina Kurmangaliyeva, and Daniel Patterson who helped to check the names of Dublin freewomen. Colleagues at Dublin City Library and Archive could not have been more helpful especially Tara Doyle and Mairead Walsh. I am also indebted to Professor David Dickson, Dr Phil Kilroy and Professor Phil Withington for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this pamphlet.

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4 Ní Mhurchadha, *Early Modern Dubliners*, p. 98.

5 Ní Mhurchadha, *Early Modern Dubliners*, p. 91.

6 Ní Mhurchadha, *Early Modern Dubliners*, p. 88.

7 Raymond Gillespie (ed.), *The vestry records of the parish of St. John the Evangelist, Dublin, 1595-1658* (Dublin, 2002).

8 Ariadne Schmidt, 'Women and Work in the Dutch Republic', *Early Modern Low Countries* 9 (2025), pp. 14-33.

9 Alexandra Shepard, 'Provision, household management and the moral authority of wives and mothers in early modern England' in Michael Braddick and Phil Withington (eds.), *Popular Culture and Political Agency in early modern England and Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2017), pp. 73-90 and Laura Gowing, *Ingenious Trade. Women and Work in Seventeenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 2022).

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20 Butlin, 'The population of Dublin', p. 55.

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22 Butlin, 'The population of Dublin', p. 55. Also see *CARD*, V, pp. 579, 590.

23 Pender (ed.), *A 'Census' of Ireland,* p. 373.

24 Pender (ed.), *A 'Census' of Ireland,* pp. 364, 365.

25 Brian Gurrin, 'The Hearth Tax Roll for Dublin City, 1663', *Analecta Hibernica*, 38 (2004), pp. 67-133 pp. 49, 51-133.

26 Butlin, 'The population of Dublin', p. 55. Also see *CARD*, V, pp. 579, 590.

27 See D. Dickson, C. O Grada, and S. Daultry, 'Hearth Tax, Household Size and Irish Population Change 1672-1821', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 82, C (1982), pp. 125-160, 162-181

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30 Butlin, 'The population of Dublin', pp. 58-60.

31 Butlin, 'The population of Dublin', p. 57.

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33 David Dickson, 'No Scythians here: women and marriage in seventeenth-century Ireland' in Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (eds.), *Women in early modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 223-35.

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44 Mills, *Registers of the parish of St John*.

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47 Whelan, 'The Dublin patriciate', pp. 17-18.

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50 Gillespie (ed.), *The vestry records,* pp. 161, 167, 170, 182 and Mills, *Registers of the parish of St John*, p. 51.

51 Mills, *Registers of the parish of St John*, pp. 106, 112 and Gillespie (ed.), *The vestry records*, p. 192.

52 Dickson, *Dublin*, p. 71.

53 *CARD*, III, p. 501

54 Ní Mhurchadha, *Early Modern Dubliners*, pp. 44-56.

55 McGrath, 'A fragment of the minute book', p. 104.

56 Campbell, 'The occupational profile of pre-modern towns'.

57 *CARD*, V, p. 103.

58 *CARD*, III, p. xxxi.

59 For the earlier period see Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The occupational profile of pre-modern towns: the case of Dublin, c.1190-1640' in S. Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin XX* (Dublin, 2025) and Lennon and Murray (eds.), *The Dublin City franchise roll.* I am grateful to Bruce Campbell for sharing his paper with me prior to publication.

60 Ní Mhurchadha, *Early Modern Dubliners*, p. 13.

61 T. Greg Fewer, 'The brewster in medieval and early modern Kilkenny and Waterford', *Ossory, Laois and Leinster*, 6 (2015), pp. 57, 59-60.

62 Lists of freemen in the 'Dublin Directory'. As a starting point we used the lists prepared by DCLA. There were however inconsistencies with dates that occurred either around the change of year (25 March) or with the regnal years post 1649 (and the death of Charles I), which we corrected and which are tabulated here. I am very grateful to Dr Daniel Patterson and Ella-Mae Cromie for undertaking this painstaking task.

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64 Fitzpatrick, 'The Municipal Corporation of Dublin', p. 225.

65 Lists of freemen in the 'Dublin Directory'.

66 Whelan, 'The Dublin patriciate', pp. 91-2.

67 DIB, https://www.dib.ie/biography/franckton-francke-john-a3353, accessed 17 May 2025.

68 Lists of freemen in the 'Dublin Directory'.

69 Deposition of Jane Cox, 25/1/1643, TCD, Ms 810, ff. 132r-132v.

70 Raymond Gillespie, *Reading Ireland: Print, Reading and Social Change in early modern Ireland* (Manchester, 2005); Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015), p. 24, David Cressy, *Literacy and the social order: reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980).

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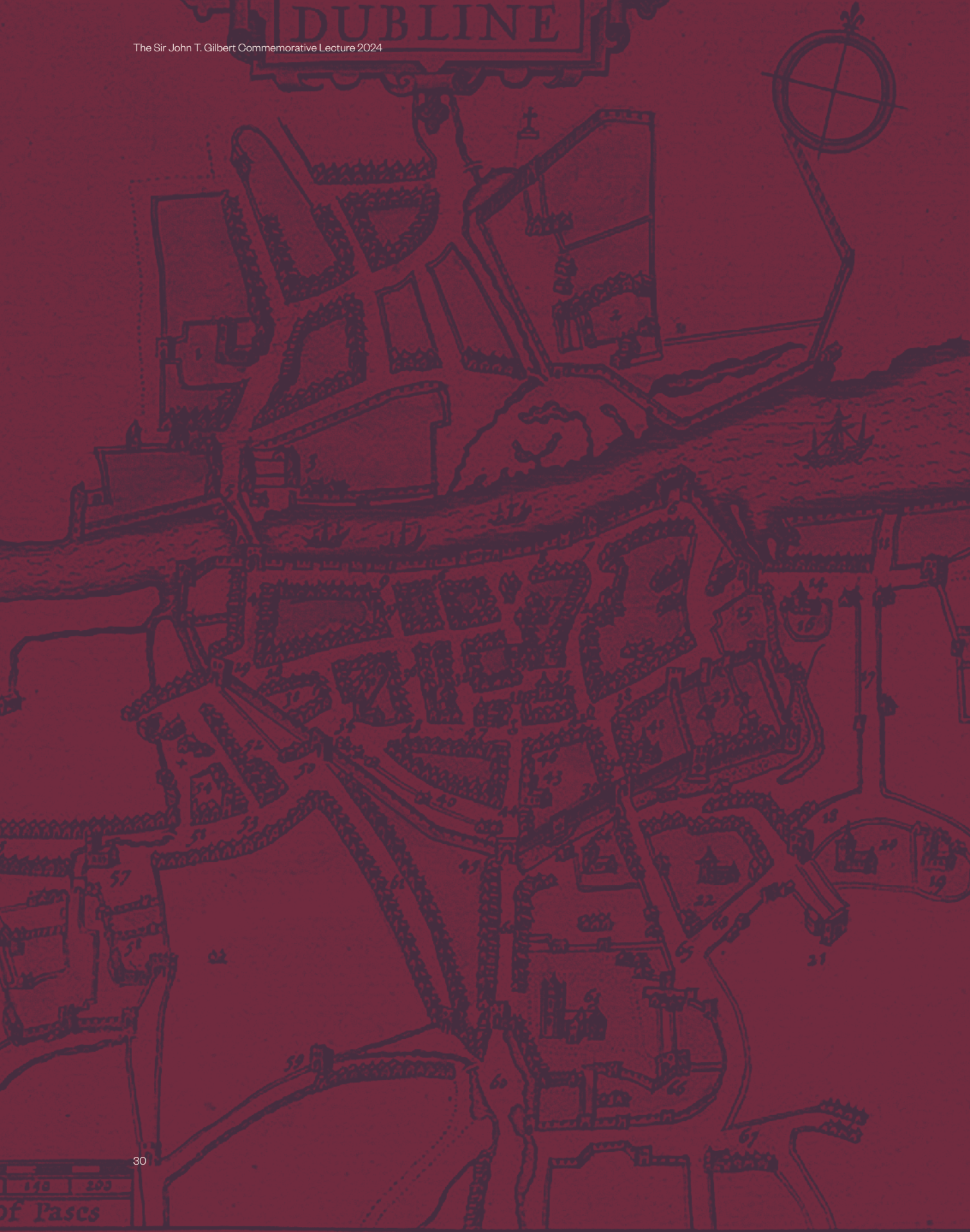
DUBLINE

Jane Ohlmeyer, Professor of Modern History at Trinity College, goes in search of the women of early modern Dublin. She skilfully navigates fragmentary archival evidence to assemble glimpses of them as taxpayers, traders, servants, in moments of crisis or during major events like riots, warfare, periods of scarcity, the bubonic plague and especially in death. She listens carefully for the voices of Dublin's 'viragos and matrons' in demographic, parochial, municipal, literary, and legal documents, including those drawn together by John T. Gilbert and his wife Rosa in their *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin* and in the wider collections of Dublin City Library and Archive.

Working in co-operation with their male counterparts, many of Dublin's women were decision makers in their own households. They were able to exercise a greater level of agency during the 1640s especially, when crisis turned their world upside down. This fascinating account makes visible the lived experiences of women, who were at the heart of early modern Dublin.

JOHN THOMAS GILBERT was born in Dublin on 23 January 1829 and died there on 23 May 1898. Author of the influential three volume *A history of the city of Dublin*, published in 1854-59, he was a firm advocate of documenting the history of his native city using primary sources. His work on manuscripts relating to the city alerted him to the need for the preservation of Irish public records, many of which were in a neglected and vulnerable condition. He commenced a campaign which eventually led to the setting up of the Public Record Office in the Four Courts in Dublin.

He calendared the records of Dublin Corporation, which date from the twelfth century, and began the series of printed volumes *Calendar of the ancient records of Dublin*. As an inspector for the Historical Manuscripts Commission, he examined the holdings in many of Ireland's great houses and municipal councils. He prepared for the press and supervised the printing of *Facsimiles of the national manuscripts of Ireland* and *Historic and Municipal documents of Ireland A.D. 1172-1320*. The latter was published as a volume in the Master of the Rolls series.

To mark the centenary of John T. Gilbert's death in 1998, Dublin City Council established an annual commemorative lecture series. The aim of the series is to celebrate the life and work of Gilbert, and the history of Dublin, the city whose past he wished to uncover and promote.

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