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Amyas Griffith in 18th century Fethard

By Edward J. Law

Amyas Griffith achieved celebrity status in his own lifetime,¹ and has since been the subject of intermittent interest from different perspectives.² Material published in the early numbers of *Finn's Leinster Journal*, the Kilkenny-based newspaper founded in 1767, allows us to present another perspective of Griffith and some notes also on an early hunting club in Co. Tipperary.

The interested reader is referred elsewhere³ for the detailed life story of Amyas Griffith, who travelled and worked the four points of the compass around Ireland. Although he was born in 1746 in Roscrea,⁴ he does not come to our notice for that reason, for he was soon removed to Tralee where he spent his formative years. He returned to Co. Tipperary in September 1766 when he was appointed a gauger in the excise service in Fethard, a post he was to hold for five-and-a-half years.

An account⁵ published in his lifetime states that he was “contented and happy” at Fethard. The earnings from his office were £60 p.a., but he earned another £40 p.a. from writing, an activity he had embarked on at the age of 15, another £40 p.a. practising as an attorney in the petty courts (he had some brief period of training for the law at the Temple in London) and a further £40 p.a. received from his family.⁶

Although he suffered some setbacks in his occupation it is generally agreed that he was efficient, thorough, fearless and honest. Some of this comes through to us in contemporary newspaper reports⁷ of 1769:

Whereas I have the strongest suspicion to believe that RICHARD FIELD, alias MEAGHER, late a nailer at Killenaul in the county of Tipperary, has been murdered by some villain or villains, who thought proper to imagine had informed against sundry persons in Killenaul who were convicted for retailing liquors contrary to act of Parliament, and keeping disorderly houses, and who have since (most of them) secreted their goods and absconded. And whereas the said Richard Field, alias Meagher, on his returning to Killenaul, the day after the convictions happened in Feathard, was abused and ill-treated by a riotous mob, and obliged to make off with his life, and has since never been seen or heard of.

Now I, AMYAS GRIFFITH, Excise Officer of Feathard Walk, in Clonmell District (being struck with the utmost horror, at such illegal, barbarous and alarming proceedings, and willing to risque the small pittance fate has thought proper to give me, or my life, in bringing so monstrous a villainy to light), do hereby offer my mite, being a reward of five pounds sterling for the taking, apprehending and convicting of each and every assassin, who might have been accessory to the taking away the life of the said unfortunate Richard Field, otherwise Meagher; and I also promise to use my endeavours to procure his Majesty's pardon for anyone concerned who will discover and prosecute to conviction any one or more of his or her accomplice or accomplices, within the space of three calender months; and that any and every person so discovering and prosecuting, shall also be entitled to the reward of five pounds sterling.

And I also request, that if I am so happy as to be in an error, and that the above mentioned Richard Field be on the land of the living, that he will be kind enough to make it manifest to me, that I may stop all further proceedings, as I mean by next post to apply to the Right Honourable the Commissioners of his Majesty's revenues for their proclamation and protection, and also to the Grand Jury of this county at the ensuing assizes, who will take every measure (I am satisfied) of



bringing the perpetrator or perpetrators of such an atrocious horrid crime to condign punishments. Given under my hand at Feathard this 12th day of July, 1769.

AMYAS GRIFFITH

It was not only informers who were at risk. It is noted of Griffith that he had been fired at, that an attempt had been made to poison him, that he had been waylaid, challenged and fought.⁸

The following report⁹ hints at the dangers that faced the excise-men in seizing and destroying illicit stills:

Extract of a letter from Tipperary, dated July 22.

"A few days ago Lawford Miles, Esq., Surveyor of excise, assisted by Mess. Griffith, and Bowes, Excise-Officers, and one servant, detected a private Still-house in a bog about ten miles from this town. They found in it only an old flake-stand, a still-rim, and some old vessels, all which they demolished and broke to pieces, although surrounded by some hundreds of the country people. The bog was so deep in many places, that the gentlemen were often up to their saddle skirts in mire and water, notwithstanding which they perfected their business most effectually."

In 1772 when he was moved to Dublin it was said that Griffith was an "active and useful officer".¹⁰

If Amyas worked hard he also played hard, and we find him an active member of the Slevardagh Hunting Club, an organisation first noticed in May 1768. That first notice,¹¹ reproduced here, shows Amyas indulging in another of his great pleasures, the writing and singing of verse:

The following lines were sung extempore by Mr. GRIFFITH at the Slevardagh Hunting Club, at the house of John Bacon, innholder in Killenaul, on Monday the 2nd of May; Lieut. ESSEX EDGEWORTH, in the Chair. And at the request of the members of that club, are published in this paper.

MIRTH, Wit and Good-humour, I summon ye all,
To attend your dear votaries at Killenaul;
Bring Bacchus that ruby-fac'd God in your train,
May all joys with the sons of Slevardagh remain!

Sing tantararara, toast all, toast all,
Sing tantararara, toast all.

I'll give ye the joys and delights of our lives;
Let's drink our sweet partners for life, our dear wives;
These ripen our genius, our wits they refine;
What blessings are greater than women and wine?

Sing tantararara, &c.

My boys fill your glasses, let's merrily sing,
I'll give you our Briton-born gen'rous King,
Who rid us from slav'ry, and gave us free-will,
To elect whom we please by returning our bill.

Sing tantararara, toast all, &c."

Come fill for our Brothers throughout ev'ry zone,
Whether those of St. Patrick, or those of St. John;
Or all honest fellows search o'er the creation,
I care not their sect, their opinions or nation.

Sing tantararara, toast all, &c."

The two references in the last verse are probably to the Order of St Patrick which flourished in the eighteenth century, and the Freemasons whose principal festival was that of St John.

It seems that Amyas could be relied on to entertain the club, although his verses may not have been quite the impromptu compositions which they were given out to be. We find a subsequent offering also published in the Journal:¹²

The following was sung extempore by AMYAS GRIFFITH, Esq., at Mr Minchin's where the Slevardagh Hunt dined some time ago, and would have appeared sooner in this paper but for want of room.

(Air. Happy Dick Dawson's my Name.)

I

Come let's think no more of Elections,
Or any such worn out stuff.
We'll all pelt away to sweet Minchin's,
And there we'll get sporting enough.
We'll quit all debate, strife and noise,
And leave them to tools of the state.
He who's nothing to dread my dear boys ----
Of such are comprised all the great.
Then haste all ye Bloods to Slevardagh,
'Tis there we will hunt, drink and sing,
At the rebels we'll tantararara,
And Chorus long life to our King. Then haste &c.

II

If we smell out a suspect person,
We'll certainly ferret him out,
Near us they shall carry no farce on,
Nor cause a rebellion or rout.
We're true to our trust and our faith,
Each Ferret is steel to back-bone,
'Tis glory to us, or 'tis death,
'Tis mirth, wit and humour all one. Then haste &c.

III

Let's toast all good members elected,
Let each man keep him to the cause,
If not he will soon be rejected.
If he does, he'll deserve our applause,
Eight years will be soon running over,
And then we're once more at free choice,
May the friends of the House of Hanover
Be always in power my boys. Then haste &c."

Our knowledge of the Slevardagh hunt is limited to such references as have been noted in *Finn's Leinster Journal*, most of which are merely notices advising the date and particulars of the next meet. There is one brief report¹³ of a meet, however, which conveys the spirit of the club, and which ends up with a couplet probably from the pen of Griffith:



Killenaul, August 2. Yesterday being the anniversary of the glorious First of August, the gentlemen of the Slevardagh Hunt met here, according to appointment, to commemorate the day; after a fine buck hunt, which lasted at least five hours, they all adjourned to Bacons, where they dined, drunk many loyal and patriotic toasts, and closed the day with much festivity, mirth and friendship.

To State disputes they ne'er give birth,
Their motto — Friendship is — and Mirth.

The Slevardagh was not a unique entity; indeed, hunting clubs seem to have flourished in the area at the period. We know of several through their notices in *Finn's Leinster Journal*. The Gilbo Club met at Caher in 1770.¹⁴ In county Kilkenny there were a Farmer's Club hunting around Gowran at the same time,¹⁵ the Ossory Club meeting in Rathdowney,¹⁶ and another club, the Merry Harriers, at a slightly later date, which has received some attention.¹⁷

The Slevardagh is noted between May 1768 and June 1769, meeting probably monthly, invariably at the inn of John Bacon in Killenaul to chase a sporting buck or doe, and then to dine. This was a pursuit beloved of the eighteenth-century gentry; to sport hard for the first half of the day, then to dine and drink in company through the evening and night. As with the Merry Harriers, the chairman or president of the club changed at each meet, and we find Amyas filling the role of president at the meet of 6 January 1769,¹⁸ an opportunity to air his talents he could not resist:

The following Lines were sung by the President Mr. AMYAS GRIFFITH, at the Slevardagh Hunt, on the 6th of January 1769.

"YE Bloods who chuse good Company, good Hunting and good Wine,
Get into our Slevardagh Club, 'tis there choice Spirits shine,
And a Hunting we will go, will go, &c.
We hunt from break of day 'till Noon, and then we quit our Sport,
For Claret, Mirth, and sweet Content, more than are known at Court.
And a Topping we will go, &c.
We toast our King and Country's Friends, and sit 'till Dawn of Day;
And then reluctantly we part, rous'd by Apollo's Ray,
And a sporting we will go &c.
Who cou'd be dull, when chear'd my Boys, by Ferritts such as we?
The L-n-gl-s, L-n-s, and M-nch-ns, great B-it-es, ay and me.
And a sporting we will go &c.
There's Osb-rne, H-mph-ll, G--dg, with many ferritts more."

Names indicated above include: Henry Langley, George Lean [perhaps Lane], William Minchin, and Simon Osborne, all of whom have been noted as chairing the hunt. The style Ferret, used in both the above songs, is also found in announcements of some of the meets, e.g. "Ambrose Gowen, Esq., Grand Ferret in the Chair." It seems probable that it was a term introduced by Amyas. The prefix Grand is redolent of Masonry, of which fraternity, as we shall see, Amyas was a devoted brother, and he used ferret as one of various pseudonyms in letters to newspapers.¹⁹

It is possible that the hounds were the property of Henry Langley, for the announcement²⁰ of the meet on the "anniversary of the Glorious 1st August," 1768 noted that a sporting buck was to be run by Mr Langley's hounds. We find further references to Langley's pack in 1769:²¹

Wanted, a good huntsman, well recommended for sobriety and honesty. Such a person will hear of a place by applying to Henry Langley Esq., of Springfield near Lismerock, in the county of Tipperary.

and in 1770:²²

To be SOLD,

Ten couple of thorough bred well hunted Buck-Hounds, with a good many Whelps just fit to enter of the same strain, bred from Col. Croker's best hounds. They may be seen and hunted at Springfield near Killenaule. Any person who buys them, shall have six months time for the payment of them, interest free. Apply to HENRY LANGLEY, Esq., at the aforesaid Springfield. May 12, 1770.

However, they may not have been the only pack used by the Slevardagh Hunt, for there was an advertisement²³ in June 1769 for the sale of half-bred foxhounds, in respect of which application was to be made to three individuals in Fethard, including Amyas Griffith. It may be significant that this advertisement coincides with the last noted reference²⁴ to the Slevardagh Hunt:

On Monday the 26th of June instant, a great Stag Match will be fought in the town of Feathard, by John Langley, and Charles Minchin Esqrs. against John Labart, and Samuel Luther, Esqrs. — John Meagher of Durrow, Feeder for Messrs. Langley and Minchin, and John Lane of Clonmell, for Messrs. Labart and Luther. — There will be great sport in Feathard for that week, as the Gentlemen of Slevardagh purpose running a brace of sporting Does for the entertainment of the public. June 21, 1769

Amyas's father was a Surveyor of Excise, of whom it was said²⁵ that he was more elevated by blood than by fortune. Amyas claimed, and it is believed had, connections to several important Co. Kilkenny families: the Agars, the Wemys, the Walshs, the Wandesfordes and the Bushes, as well as to Sir John Lowther of Lowther Hall, Cumberland and Sir Edward Trotter of Skelton Castle, Yorkshire.²⁶

These family connections may have had a bearing on two poems which appeared in *Finn's Leinster Journal* in 1769, the first in February:²⁷

For the LEINSTER JOURNAL

Written on the nuptials of JOHN BUTLER Esq; and Lady ANNE WANDESFORD.

(By AMYAS GRIFFITH Esq.)

"GREAT *Jove* in pleasant mood, with nectar prim'd,
(While thro' Olympus mirth and concord chim'd),
Conven'd all Heav'n by his awful nod,
And all obey'd the thunder-darting God;
Then thus he spoke: Look down and see that pair —
See lovely ANNE! — and see great BUTLER's HEIR!
Cupid and *Hymen* have just join'd their hands;
In happy, lasting, hymeneal bands."

Readers of this Journal may be interested in two footnotes to the second poem, published in August 1769.²⁸

"Gervast Parker Bushe, Esq; late High Sheriff of the county of Kilkenny, Member of Parliament for the borough of Granard, and son to the present High Sheriff of said county, Amyas Bushe, Esq; A.M. Fellow of the Royal Society, and author of that inimitable Dramatick Poem SOCRATES.



“Francis Mathew, Esq; High Sheriff of the county of Tipperary, Knight of the Shire and Custus Rotulorum of said county, son to Thomas Mathew, of Thurles, Esq; and son-in-law to James Smith, Esq; late Collector of Dublin Port.”

Griffith appears first to have been initiated into the masonic movement in 1764 as a member of Lodge 244, attached to the 2nd Regiment of Foot, in which regiment he then held a commission.²⁹ He was subsequently associated with lodges wherever his work took him, on more than one occasion being instrumental in founding lodges. He is still remembered in the masonic movement for renewing and popularising the craft in Belfast.³⁰

When he removed from Tralee to Fethard he transferred from the Tralee Lodge to Lodge 96 held in Clonmel, where his membership is recorded³¹ at 5 September 1770. We shall see, however, that he was almost certainly a member well before this date, and probably joined the lodge on his first arrival in Fethard. It was in Griffith’s nature to seek a leading role in all he undertook, and when a new lodge (No. 484) was founded in Fethard³² on 4 October 1770 his was the first name enrolled.

At the founding of a new lodge there were invariably three names recorded, the Master and two Wardens, and we may be confident that Amyas was the first Master, and probably the prime mover in the foundation of Lodge 484. A John Bacon who was admitted³³ in 1771 may be the Killenaul innkeeper at whose house the Slevardagh Hunting Club met.

There appeared in the *Leinster Journal* in 1768³⁴ a detailed and interesting account of a masonic funeral at Fethard, an item of importance not only for its local interest, but because it is an early account of masonic practice. This was published in this Journal in 1997.

This report is of importance for the revelation that a lodge had existed and declined in Fethard before 1768, and that another Lodge was then in being, something not recorded in the registers at Grand Lodge in Dublin. It is quite possible that lodge was commenced under the auspices of Cornelius Callaghan who served as M.P. for the borough, and who had served Irish Freemasonry as Grand Warden and Deputy Grand Master.³⁵ A tradition is also related³⁶ that Knights Templar Masons were first made at Fethard at some time before 1764. This may again be related to the influence of Callaghan.

In the records of Grand Lodge³⁷ several members are entered in the list of Lodge 96, Clonmel, on 5 September 1770, including Robert Robnett, Amyas Griffith Esq., George Robins and Hill Thompson. The above report indicates that Robnett, Robins and Thompson were officers of the



Modern Fethard, where Amyas Griffith and his circle flourished 200 years ago. (Photo: copyright Frank Burgess).

lodge in 1768, two years before their names appear in the register at Grand Lodge, and we may suppose that Griffith, who took part in the funeral, was already a member of that lodge.

The masonic movement in the eighteenth century was somewhat more open than nowadays. We have seen that funerals were occasions for public display; the movement also publicised itself with sponsorship of theatricals. The following,³⁸ in which Amyas is again noted, is not an isolated instance:

By command of the Master, Wardens, and Bretheren of the Antient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons, belonging to No. 96 of Clonmell, and 484 of Feathard.

On Monday the 15th of Feb. instant, at the Theatre in Cashel, will be presented a Tragedy, called, The REVENGE. With a Farce, called, The VIRGIN UNMASKED. Before the Play, a Prologue in Character of a Master Mason, by Brother HALL. With the Original Mason Songs, Chorusses, &c., &c. Admittance 2s. 2d. Tickets to be had of Amyas Griffith, Esqr. at Feathard, and of Mr. Hall, at Mrs. Shea's in Cashel. Feb. 12.

At a similar event³⁹ in Kilkenny masonic songs were sung between the acts, and the masons sat on the stage "in their proper clothing".

With his post in the excise service Griffith would have been a respected member of the community, and we find him in October 1770 being admitted to a trade guild at Clonmel,⁴⁰ perhaps under the patronage of his masonic brother, George Robbins:

On Monday the first instant being Swearing-Day of the Guild of Merchants of Clonmell, George Robbins, Esq; was sworn Master, and Amyas Griffith Esq; was admitted to his freedom, and sworn a Common Council-man of that Guild.

A man of many parts, we see Griffith in perhaps his best light at Fethard, where he was content, financially comfortable, conscientious and resourceful in his work, happy in his poetry, and delighting and companionable in his sporting and masonic pursuits. We should also remember him with gratitude for his apparent flair for publicity (of both self and organisations) which has given us insights into life in eighteenth-century Co. Tipperary.

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FOOTNOTES

1. *Hibernian Magazine*, January 1773, pp. 726-7.
2. J. F. Fuller: "Amyas Griffith: a chequered career", in *Kerry Archaeological Magazine*, Vol. III. October 1915, pp. 162-75; F. J. Bigger: *Amyas Griffith, Surveyor of Belfast 1780-1785* (Belfast, 1916); and Aiken McClelland: "Amyas Griffith" in *The Lodge of Research Transactions for the years 1969-75*, Vol. XVI, pp. 16-34.
3. Bigger, *op. cit.*; Fuller, *op. cit.*; McClelland, *op. cit.*; *Hibernian Magazine*, January 1773, pp. 726-7; *The Gentleman's & London Magazine*, December 1785, pp. 617-21, January 1786, pp. 21-3, and February 1786, pp. 61-4.
4. McClelland, *op. cit.*, p. 16.



5. *The Gentleman's & London Magazine*, December 1785, p. 619.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Finn's Leinster Journal* (hereafter *FLJ*), 15 July 1769.
8. *The Gentleman's & London Magazine*, January, 1786, p. 22.
9. *FLJ*, 28 July 1769.
10. *The Gentleman's & London Magazine*, December 1785, p. 619.
11. *FLJ*, 18 May, 1768. Portion only of the poem is reproduced here.
12. *FLJ*, 5 October, 1768.
13. *FLJ*, 10 August, 1768.
14. *FLJ*, 12 September, 1770.
15. *FLJ*, 14 June, 1769.
16. *FLJ*, 24 March, 1770.
17. Edward J. Law: "The Merry Harriers Club" in *Old Kilkenny Review* 1995, No. 47, pp. 33-40.
18. *FLJ*, 1 February, 1769. Portion only of the poem is reproduced here.
19. *Hibernian Magazine*, January 1773, p. 727.
20. *FLJ*, 30 July, 1768.
21. *FLJ*, 12 August 1769.
22. *FLJ*, 12 May 1770.
23. *FLJ*, 14 June 1769.
24. *FLJ*, 21 June 1769.
25. *The Gentleman's & London Magazine*, December 1785, p. 617.
26. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
27. *FLJ*, 22 February 1769. Only the first seven lines are reproduced here.
28. *FLJ*, 23 August 1769.
29. McClelland, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
30. McClelland, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
31. Grand Lodge of A. F. & A. Masons of Ireland, Membership Register, Vol. 1, series 1.
32. Grand Lodge, Membership Register, Vol. 2, series 1.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *FLJ*, 16 November 1768. See *THJ* 1997, p. 85.
35. J. H. Lepper and P. Crossle: *History of the Grand Lodge of Free & Accepted Masons of Ireland*, Vol. 1 (Dublin, 1925), p. 161.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Grand Lodge, Membership Register, Vol. 1, series 1.
38. *FLJ*, 20 February, 1771.
39. *FLJ*, 12 March, 1768.
40. *FLJ*, 10 October, 1770.

