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# COUNT LOFTONZO

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*Henry Loftus, Earl of Ely, was filled with ‘an unbounded passion for improvement’, which he exercised on a series of houses in Ireland, most notably Rathfarnham Castle – built in the 16th century by one of his ancestors. He commissioned Sir William Chambers and James ‘Athenian’ Stuart as his designers, and employed the finest craftsmen of the day. But ‘improvement’ extended to a passion for wealth and honours, which caused him to be mocked in a famous satire, as ‘Count Loftonzo’. This article forms part of a longer work-in-progress, ‘The Invention of Memory’.*

In my hand lies a Gold Medal. One side is boldly embossed with the seated figure of Hibernia and the motto of the Dublin Society, *Nostris Plena Laboris* (‘filled with our labours’). The other is engraved, somewhat unevenly, with a Latin inscription that records its presentation to Henry Loftus, Earl of Ely, in 1773 – for ‘cultivating a mountain’. It weighs exactly an ounce.<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1)

I found this small treasure almost by chance and then I hunted for its history. The minute books of the Dublin Society, of which Henry’s father was a founding member, provided the first clue. On 4th March 1773 it was formally resolved by the Society ‘That a Gold Medal be presented to the Right Hon Henry Earl of Ely, for 30 Acres, 1 Rood and 3 Perches of Mountain, which he caused to be reclaimed in the County of Dublin, since August 1768, and which has now a promising Appearance of rich Pasture, the Grass being from 6 to 9 Inches high.’<sup>2</sup> But where was this mountain?

Some time in the late 1760s Henry Loftus acquired a large house with wonderful sea views in the parish of Dalkey, a few miles south of Dublin. He promptly renamed it Loftus Hill and decided to ‘improve’ the small estate. Barren rock was blasted with explosives and covered with cart-loads of good soil, turning unproductive land into grassy meadows. Trees and shrubs were planted, a new road was cut around the hill and a wall was built to mark the boundary with his neighbour, Sir Oliver Crofton. But Crofton was a wild and feckless man (he had killed an opponent in a duel) and he ordered his servants to throw down Loftus’s new-built wall. Henry appealed to the Irish House of Commons, claiming (as Member for Barrow) that such insults constituted breach of Parliamentary privilege. The House found in his favour and Crofton’s servants were arrested. Finally, when the grass was rich and



Fig. 1. Gold medal awarded by The Dublin Society to Henry Loftus, Earl of Ely, in 1773.

*Private collection, photo © Simon Loftus.*



Fig. 2. Adam Loftus, Archbishop of Dublin and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, who built Rathfarnham Castle in 1583 – artist unknown, oil on canvas, *reproduced by kind permission from The Board of Trinity College Dublin.*

long, he was presented with a Gold Medal, for cultivating his bare mountain.

The story demonstrates all the characteristics for which Henry was often mocked (grandiose self importance, expensive habits, frequent demands for political favour and a love of honours) but it also reveals the one great quality that even his contemporaries acknowledged – ‘an unbounded passion for improvement and a skill equal to that passion’.<sup>3</sup> With the death of his nephew – Nicholas Loftus Hume, the ‘idiot’ Earl of Ely – in 1769 the new Lord Loftus at last had the resources to express this passion to the full. After a lifetime as the younger son (modest prospects, little honour) Henry was

suddenly rich, titled, a man of influence. Along with his vast inheritance (the Hume estates in Fermanagh, the Loftus lands on the Hook, Rathfarnham Castle near Dublin) Henry was heir to the ‘Loftus Legion’ – favoured relatives and friends ‘elected’ as MPs for the family boroughs in County Wexford. His wealth gave him the means, Rathfarnham the opportunity and parliamentary representation the motive to transform an Elizabethan castle into a magnificent setting for hospitality, display and political intrigue.<sup>4</sup> (Figs. 2 & 3)

Rathfarnham had already been modernised by its previous owners (Archbishop Hoadley and his son-in-law, Bellingham Boyle) and was no longer the dark fortress built by Adam Loftus in the sixteenth century. It had acquired tall Georgian windows, a grand staircase and a new kitchen wing (which may have allowed the original vaulted basement to become the servants’ hall) – and it also acquired a ghost, according to family legend.<sup>5</sup> There were fine gardens, a beautiful well-wooded park and ‘a great many fish ponds, where is the largest carp ever I saw in my life’ – as Lady Anne Connolly wrote to her father in 1733.<sup>6</sup> But this was not enough – Henry wanted to refashion everything in the latest taste and was impatient to get started.

Within a few months of his nephew’s death he was pestering Sir George Macartney, the Chief Secretary, for permission to import two or three plates of French looking glass – ‘as they make them of a larger size than is made in London’ – and he decided to employ two of the most fashionable architects of the day to transform the house and embellish the garden.<sup>7</sup>

Sir William Chambers and James ‘Athenian’ Stuart were chalk and cheese. Stuart had never worked in Ireland but was famous for his pioneering book on Greek architecture and through such diverse projects as classical temples at Shugborough Park and magnificent interiors for Spencer House in London.<sup>8</sup> He combined a passion for the primitive vigour of the Doric order with a love of movement, lightness and exquisite colour. Chambers, by contrast, preferred classical Rome to ancient Greece



Fig. 3. Nicholas Loftus Hume (1738–1769), the ‘Idiot Earl’ of Ely in whose name Rathfarnham Castle was purchased for £17,500 in 1767, to restore it to the ownership of the Loftus family. Portrait attributed to Robert Hunter, c.1768. *Private collection, photo © Simon Loftus.*

and was very much the establishment choice – rigorous, sometimes dour, in his formal brilliance. The ‘Casino’ that he designed for Lord Charlemont, just outside Dublin, was a building almost without purpose save its perfect symmetry.<sup>9</sup>

Exactly who did what and when has been the subject of vigorous academic debate, much confused by the misreading of the only surviving drawing that can with certainty be related to Henry’s renovation of Rathfarnham. Long attributed to Chambers, this plan should in fact be connected to William Newton (1735–1790), an architect who competed unsuccessfully to design the Royal Exchange at Dublin in 1769 and was acquainted with James Stuart, for whom he worked as an assistant in the 1780s.<sup>10</sup> A note on the reverse – ‘No. 1. This is part of the Parlor floor Rathfarnham’ – shows that this plan originally formed

part of a series of drawings of the castle. It depicts the south-east ‘Bastion’ and a couple of adjacent rooms that later formed the Long Gallery (which Stuart designed) – together with notes indicating the relationship of those rooms to the rest of the Castle and their proposed use and décor. Some of these notes appear to have been written by Newton – including one that identifies the upper floor of the bastion as ‘Mr Louftus’s Bed Chamber’, which allows us to date the drawing to some time before November 1769, when ‘Mr Louftus’ became a Lord. The lower floor of that bastion is marked as a ‘Drawing Room, which will be covered with Pictures, the walls first being hung with paper and the Furniture Crimson.’ This note is in a different hand, which I believe to be that of Henry Loftus – who gave equally specific instructions for the Parlour: ‘the walls will be covered with Pictures. As this room has a South Aspect the furniture is intended to be Green.’ So it seems likely that the plan formed part of the client’s brief to his architect, James Stuart, and was drawn up by Newton on Stuart’s behalf. Stuart certainly used assistants to execute his designs and may well have engaged Newton to visit Rathfarnham and survey the Castle, while the latter was in Dublin submitting his proposals for the Royal Exchange. The dates fit, and the drawing itself might have survived amongst Newton’s papers because it was hurriedly done and covered in notes, so he made a fair copy for Stuart to work from.<sup>11</sup> (Figs. 4 & 5)

Initially it seems that Stuart was commissioned to design a suite of family rooms on the south side of Rathfarnham while Chambers was allocated a couple of grand reception rooms on the north. Stuart at least ensured that he was properly briefed, but Chambers stayed in London awaiting further instructions. His earliest surviving letter to Loftus (22 April 1770) was a tetchy request for measured plans of the rooms and their situation, and directions on ‘how you wish me to have them fitted up’ – in response to a message from Henry complaining that nothing had happened. It was not until months later that his designs were

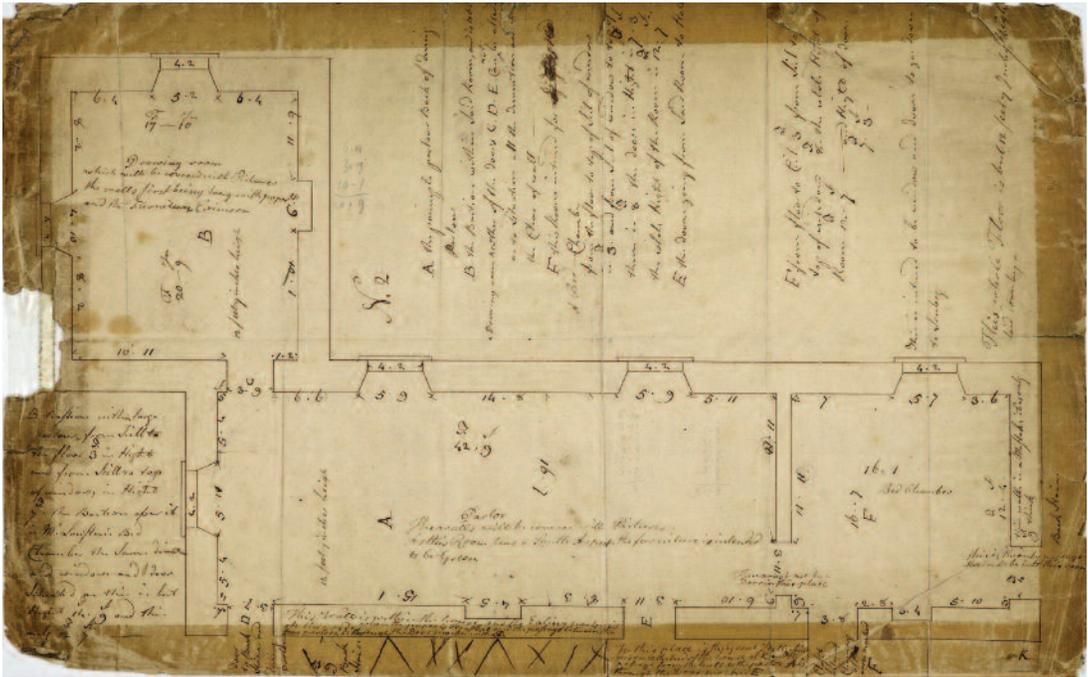


Fig. 4. Floor plan of the south-east ‘Bastion’ at Rathfarnham Castle and two rooms that later became the Gallery, probably drawn in 1769 by the London architect William Newton as a guide for James Stuart.

*Photo © RIBA British Architectural Library.*

dispatched, by which time the first phase of Stuart’s work was already well in hand. We know this because the young Lady Shelburne paid a call with her husband in August 1770.

‘We found Lord Loftus and Miss Munroe his niece at home. She is a celebrated Beauty and very deservedly so, she walked about ye shrubbery with me and showed me a flower garden that is making for Lady Loftus and when we came home sent for a harper to play for us. Lord Loftus walked about with my Lord and showed him his Improvements. The house was an old one of which only the shell is preserved and some of the rooms within he is fitting up after the designs of Mr Stuart’s. There is a great deal of French cabinet work and Lord Loftus showed me several fine pieces of his turned ivory which he bought from Spa and other expensive toys.’<sup>12</sup>

Those ‘expensive toys’ may have allowed Lady

Shelburne a moment of superior disdain, but she was certainly impressed. Having a harper on call to entertain your guests was a sign of princely magnificence – even when used as a stop-gap for conversation.

The sequence of rooms that Stuart designed on the first floor of the Castle gives a tantalising flavour of Rathfarnham’s former glory. The small Drawing Room may have lost most of its original features, including the grisaille wall decorations shown in the background of a family portrait by Angelica Kauffmann, but the ‘Breakfast Room’ next door still has a lovely ceiling in Stuart’s favourite greens, framing roundels of fat cherubs masquerading as the four seasons, while a small, near-perfect cube – the ‘Gilt Room’ – glitters with brilliant combinations of gold, cream and delicate sea green, highlighting the symbols of the gods that circle the ceiling.<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 6)

But that, for the moment, was that. Stuart was overwhelmed with commissions, and Lord Loftus was left to deal with the prickly Chambers, who remained determined to undertake his designs at a distance. His initial commission was for the ground floor Dining Room and the Ballroom above – both of which had been enlarged by constructing a semi circular bay on the east of the Castle, flooding them with light from tall windows in the curvature of the bow.<sup>14</sup> By the time that Chambers got around to his designs, the decoration of the Dining Room may already have been completed – the lovely plasterwork of the earlier ceiling was extended into the bay, and the walls were apparently lined with a Chinese or ‘Indian’ paper – so his main concern was with the large Ballroom, which he proposed to embellish with decorative pillars at the junction between the original rectangular space and the new apse. Lord Loftus, of course, wanted these to be splendid – scagliola or marble – but Chambers pointed out that the floor would not stand the weight and they would have to be made of wood. He complained that the workmen were careless and did not read his instructions, and grumpily enclosed his bill.<sup>15</sup>

That cantankerous attitude must have tried Henry’s patience, but Stuart was impossible to pin down and there was more to be done on the main floor of the house – most notably the long-planned Gallery. Chambers responded with three packets of designs, but most were never executed or were severely modified, for at the last minute Stuart returned to the task and devised a scheme that Loftus liked better.<sup>16</sup>

The result, with atmospheric appropriateness, is a house in halves, each reflecting the character of its designer. Stuart’s south-facing rooms are light, wonderfully elegant, with particularly original plasterwork that reminds me of Japanese fans and the recently-rediscovered ‘orientalism’ of Palmyra.<sup>17</sup> Elegant door-cases – framing doors of Cuban mahogany with intricate fittings – and a subtle brilliance of colour contrast quite markedly with the more severe formalism of the north-facing rooms

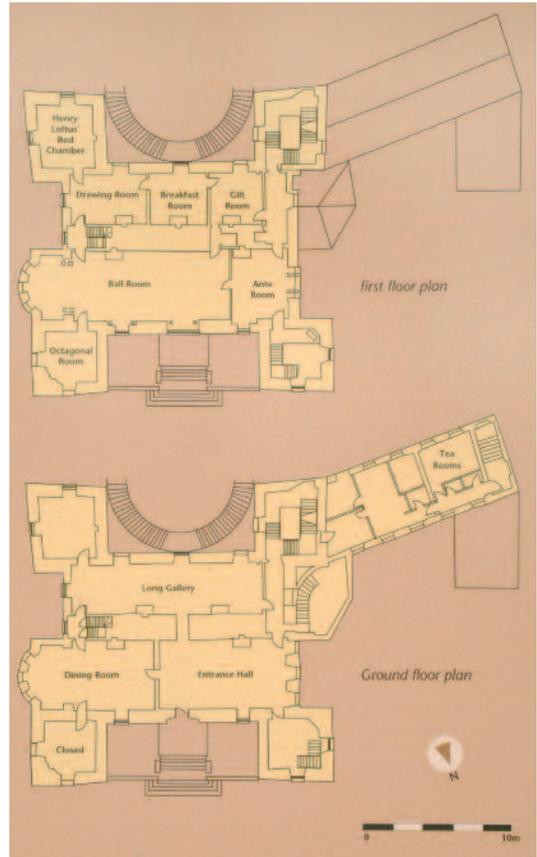


Fig. 5. Plans of the principal floors of Rathfarnham Castle, as now existing. *Courtesy the Office of Public Works, Dublin.*

attributed to Chambers. But I think it must have been Chambers who designed one of the finest features of Rathfarnham – the lovely external staircase, linking Gallery to gardens. On the south side of the Castle, held within the clasp of two massive corner towers, this double flight of stone curves down in a perfect semi-circle, suspended in the air. As you open the glass door from the Gallery and step outside you seem encouraged to pause, to admire the view, before descending with delight to the ground. (Figs. 7 & 8)

‘As far as the eye can reach there is nothing but wide green open or shaded lawns and woods of chestnut, beech, elm and every variety of tree. On the



Fig. 6. Ceilings attributed to James ‘Athenian’ Stuart at Rathfarnham Castle; the Four Seasons in the Breakfast Room and the symbols of the Greek Gods in the Gilt Room.  
*Courtesy of the Office of Public Works, Dublin.*

river facing the house is a picturesque mill-wheel, and a pretty bridge carries one safely across the stream to an old mill house.’ Such was the view until the grounds of Rathfarnham were sold for speculative development, in 1914. Now, alas, that vast and handsome demesne has shrunk to a plain municipal

lawn surrounded by meanly designed dwellings, crowding out the vista that formerly stretched without interruption to the distant blue of the Wicklow Hills. And the Roman triumphal arch that Lord Loftus commissioned as a grandiose gatehouse to the Castle, near a new bridge over the river Dodder,

lingers in melancholy isolation, severed from its park by a housing estate, on the edge of a busy road.<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 9) For a sense of what it was like, centuries ago, we must depend on the eyes of others – on William Jones who painted a large landscape of Rathfarnham in 1769, and Angelica Kauffmann who gives us a glimpse of the gardens in the background of her huge family portrait, to which I shall return.<sup>19</sup>

The letters and diaries of eighteenth century visitors add to our sense of how it once was – with their descriptions of the ‘beautifully stuccoed, gilt and painted’ ceiling of the porch – and the ‘elegant paintings and China Vases,’ magnificent mirrors and furniture that once adorned the Castle. They lavished their praises on the gardens – with their hothouses, ripening exotic fruit, and the ice house, filled in winter when the lake was frozen – and the aviaries, menageries, fish ponds and pavilions that dotted the grounds.<sup>20</sup>

I like to imagine being caught in a sudden shower in that eighteenth century landscape, and dashing back into the house through a small door at ground level that leads to a tiny lobby, giving access to the private staircase that Henry used, when slipping outside from his bedroom. There, if you glance up, you can see what still gives pleasure today – a delicate stucco wreath of mistletoe. That must have been Stuart’s work. Upstairs on the next landing, between the Gallery and the Dining Room, is Chambers’ riposte – a neoclassical miniature on a grand scale. For here is the head of Apollo, and radiating to the corners of the ceiling are the rays of the sun, his symbol.<sup>21</sup>

Whenever this splendour tired him, Lord Loftus could escape to his country retreat on Mount Pelier, up in the hills to the south, near the source of the river Dodder. Henry’s notion of rural simplicity was of course grander than most – the façade of his ‘hunting lodge’, outbuildings included, extended to more than a hundred yards – and the house itself, though relatively modest in size, was more than a rural cottage. Tall, well-proportioned rooms, with

stuccoed ceilings and marble fireplaces, were flooded with light from bay windows that commanded beautiful views as far as Dublin and the sea, with Rathfarnham Castle in the middle distance.

Above the front door were the Loftus arms, carved in stone, and ‘on each side of the house were large arched gateways, surmounted by stone balls weighing about five cwt. On the sides of the gateways were long wings, containing servants quarters and stables. At each end stood a square, three storey tower with castellated walls and Gothic windows.’<sup>22</sup> Henry named the place Dollymount after his favourite niece, Dolly Monroe – of whom more later. (Fig. 10)

South again, on the Hook in county Wexford, was the ancestral home of Loftus Hall. Here, too, his Lordship had been hard at work on ‘improvements’ – following the survey of the estate that he commissioned from Richard and Charles Frizell, in 1771. As well as making the most beautiful maps of every field and farm, the Frizells had added detailed notes on the condition of the soil, exposure to the wind, suitability for crops or pasture, quality of the tenants and opportunities for improvement. They extolled the ‘Dignity and Grandeur of the situation, the richness and fertility of the Land, being all inclosed with Lime & Stone Walls, the great plenty of fish, wild Fowl, Pigeons and Rabbits at all seasons’, and the ‘pleasing prospect’ of the demesne, overlooking ‘the Ships at Anchor in the Harbour, as well as all that sail in and out’. Even now, more than two centuries later, I can sense the pleasure it must have given Henry Loftus to read those words, while relishing his great fortune.<sup>23</sup>

But this life of splendour concealed a hidden terror, for his Lordship’s glory was built on the quicksands of a disputed inheritance, and he lived in constant fear of losing half his wealth – the Hume estates, bequeathed him by his nephew. The nephew’s maternal relatives, the Rochforts and the Humes, had mounted a powerful legal challenge to that inheritance, hoping to prove that the ‘Idiot Earl’ had been incapable of making a valid will, and they



Fig. 7. View of Rathfarnham Castle 1794, by George Holmes.  
*Courtesy of the Office of Public Works, Dublin.*



Fig. 8. Rathfarnham Castle today, showing the external staircase from Gallery to gardens, attributed to William Chambers, and the bay added by Henry Loftus to the East front, to extend the Ballroom and Dining Room. *Courtesy of the Office of Public Works, Dublin.*



Fig. 9. Gate-house in the form of a Roman triumphal arch, Rathfarnham, c.1772.  
Architect unknown. *Courtesy of the Office of Public Works, Dublin.*

had powerful allies. Several times they had come close to success and it looked increasingly likely that the final appeal, to the Irish House of Lords, would be determined by the narrowest of margins, influenced as much by ties of kinship and political allegiance as by the legal arguments on either side.<sup>24</sup> That fear of disinheritance was compounded by vanity and by the expensive ambitions of Henry's wife. She dreamed of a grander title, political influence, social coronation.

Knowing those fears and playing on that greed, the much-loathed Deputy, Lord Townshend, had no hesitation in exploiting the situation for his own ends. Townshend was determined to break the power of the great political 'undertakers' on whom Dublin Castle had long depended for the passage of government business – the grandest of whom was Loftus's cousin John Ponsonby, the Speaker of the House. The Viceroy wanted to replace that established system of favours given and patronage received with a looser network of corruption, under

his direct command. To achieve this aim, every vote was vital – and Loftus controlled his 'legion' (at least eight Members of Parliament elected through his influence), which had hitherto voted as Ponsonby saw fit. But Townshend was unscrupulous. His stick was the threat of ruin (that Henry's cause would be lost when it came to the House of Lords) and his carrot was the promise of preferment – an Earldom at least and maybe more.<sup>25</sup>

Still Loftus hesitated, for Ponsonby had proved a generous patron in the days when Loftus was poor, and to betray his kinsman would earn the scorn of half his friends. It was his wife, a foolish and determined woman, who made him turn. For at this critical moment, in the autumn of 1770, Townshend became a widower, and Lady Loftus took it into her head that all her social ambitions would come to fruition if she could manoeuvre the Viceroy into marrying her niece, the beautiful 'Dolly' Monroe. Driven by this mad dream, against every sense of decency or reality (Townshend was a cynical rake of



Fig. 10. 'Dollymount'. This sketch of the hunting lodge that Henry Loftus built on Mount Pellier, south of Dublin, conveys its essential features but not its astonishing scale – the width of the façade was approximately 120 yards. Illustrated in F.E. Ball, *History of the County of Dublin*, 1905.

46, Dolly was seventeen), she made her desires abundantly plain and Townshend played along with her. He took to visiting Rathfarnham at frequent intervals, and went so far in his apparent courtship of Dolly that she was persuaded to throw over her acknowledged suitor, Hercules Langrishe.

Langrishe (who was also a widower, and only a few years younger than Townshend) always spoke of Dolly with tender respect, but soon had his revenge on Lord Loftus and his ambitious wife. He began by publishing a couple of open letters to his Lordship, as rumours started to circulate that Henry had agreed a secret deal with the Castle.

'The present Viceroy must infallibly, within a few months be removed; and upon the first change you will find your folly; despised by your friends, renounced by relations, cast off by Government, and hooted at by a nation.'<sup>26</sup>

All of which was to some extent hypocritical cant – for there was not much to choose between the corruptions of the Ponsonby's gang of 'Undertakers' and Townshend's cynical intrigues – and Langrishe himself was no political virgin. He held a succession of official sinecures, voted with the government when it benefited him to do so and eventually proved vulnerable to bribery of the most straightforward sort, accepting £15,000 from Lord Castlereagh not to vote against the Union. But he was at least a wit – and so, when plain words had no effect, he turned to satire. His *History of Baratania* originally appeared in the *Freeman's Journal*, in the spring of 1771, and was subsequently enlarged, with contributions from Flood and Grattan, as a scandalously successful book – which mocked the pretensions of 'Count Loftonzo' while exposing the corruptions of Townshend's Viceroyalty.<sup>27</sup> Ireland was transposed

to Barataria – the village over which Sancho Panza was given brief dominion, in a famous episode from *Don Quixote* – Townsend became Sancho and everyone else was assigned a suitably Spanish pseudonym. Here is an extract.

‘As to the Countess, her imagination was on fire! – it already presented to her, her niece, the incomparable Dorothea, crowned Vice-queen of the island of Barataria; her Lord Loftonzo distinguished by all the coronets of his ancestry; and the deputyship of the island conferred on him, at the departure of Sancho. Every thing was accomplished in her ardent mind; and sports and pastimes – tilts and tournaments – dance and festivity, were proclaimed throughout the Castle and the forests of Rafarmo.’<sup>28</sup>

Those glorious expectations were captured in a vast family portrait, painted by Angelica Kauffmann in 1771. (Fig. 11) It is unexpectedly revealing. The setting is lovely (an interior at the Castle, with a view to the garden) and the iconography is evocative of the Holy Family, but the overall impression (glances, gestures, relationships) is curiously uncertain.<sup>29</sup> Henry and his wife pose majestically in the scarlet and ermine robes of the Irish peerage as an Indian page hovers nearby, carrying a tasselled cushion on which rest the coronets of the newly created Earl and Countess of Ely. The servitude of this ‘young black boy from the Malibar coast’ (who is said to have accompanied a gift of ostriches to Lord Loftus) is echoed in the lowered head of Dolly Monroe, standing on the left of the picture, to whom Henry draws our gaze as he glances with somewhat tentative affection towards his unsmiling wife. Dolly is the sacrificial lamb, soon to be anointed, and her sister Frances, seated at a keyboard, plays the role of John the Baptist, as she points to the words of a song. But the traditional text of sacred imagery (*Ecce Agnus Dei*) has been replaced by a warning, for the music lies open at an aria from a popular opera, *La Buona Figliuola* (‘The Good Girl’), which begins: Away, away, Sir, I will allow no-one to touch me.<sup>30</sup>

That sense of unease was prophetic. As soon as

Lord Loftus voted with the government he was rewarded with the promised Earldom, but Townshend ceased his courting.<sup>31</sup> The wretched Dolly became the butt of Dublin gossip as the Viceroy transferred his attentions to her cousin, Anne Montgomery (who was also, as it happened, a niece of Lady Loftus) and the wits of Dublin laid huge wagers as to which of these two young beauties would be the next Lady Townshend.<sup>32</sup> The Viceroy himself was in no hurry to come to an altar, and dallied with Anne as he had with Dolly. Eventually he became so deeply unpopular with the Irish powerbrokers that the ministers in London decided to recall him, and he embarked for England, closely pursued by Miss Montgomery’s brother, a noted duellist. Before they reached London, Townshend was forced at sword-point to issue a formal proposal of marriage to the girl whom he had jilted; and those who had wagered on this outcome are said to have won a total of £20,000. Her unhappy rival, Dolly Monroe, met a happier fate – for she was married in 1775 to William Richardson of Richhill Castle, a thoroughly decent man who seems to have loved her.<sup>33</sup>

If the new Lord Ely was disappointed he made no show of it – but turned instead to his favourite pastime, improvement. By 1770 he had decided that his town house in Cavendish Row was no longer appropriate to his new social status, and leased an undeveloped plot of land close to the fashionable heart of the city, in what was promptly named Ely Place. Within a few months he commenced construction on a thirty-six roomed mansion.<sup>34</sup> As with so many Dublin houses, magnificent interiors are hidden behind a plain brick façade, but the sheer scale of what remains (dominating its setting, as it faces down Hume Street towards Stephen’s Green) is quietly impressive, and the site originally included a coach house, stables and other outbuildings, as well as a spacious garden. Now, when you step inside the hall and gaze at the life-size statue of Hercules who guards the astonishing staircase (embellished with scenes of his Labours), you can still experience



Fig. 11. Loftus family portrait by Angelica Kauffman, 1771. Left to right: Dolly Monroe and her younger sister Frances; Henry Loftus, Earl of Ely (1709–1783) and his first wife Frances (aunt of the Monroe girls); ‘a young black boy from the Malibar coast’. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland.

something of the force of that former glory – despite the institutional furnishings and pious knick knacks, and an ugly office block that covers most of the old garden. Almost every room is decorated with exquisite plasterwork, embellished with a carved marble fireplace and entered through a door of ‘panelled West Indian mahogany, with silver handles and lockplates, pierced and chased’.<sup>35</sup> The grate of one of those fireplaces is framed in silver and the mantel of another is adorned with a carving of Hercules asleep, sprawled on a boar’s hide, with its

bristling head tucked beneath his arm – a reference to the family crest. Everywhere you look there is evidence of the handiwork of Dublin’s finest craftsmen. It was all enormously expensive, somewhat over the top and rather splendid. (Fig. 12)

This marvellous house was completed only a year or two before Henry’s wife fell ill; and she died in 1774, having scarcely had time to display herself in its setting. With his ‘passion for improvement’ it seems inevitable that Lord Ely’s second wife, whom he married the following year, was young, beautiful

and socially well connected. Reynolds painted a full-length portrait of the new-wed couple, walking together in a garden, magnificently dressed. They look like father and daughter, as he introduces her to her new domain and she steps forward into adult life – Anne Bonfoy, exploring her role as Countess of Ely. A few years later, in 1778, they went to a masquerade ball on St Patrick’s Eve and acted a different story, with Lord Ely dressed as a hermit and his wife as a washerwoman; and about the same time she posed as Hebe, goddess of youth, for a likeness in pastels by Hugh Douglas Hamilton.<sup>36</sup> That play-acting streak survived Henry’s death, for his dashing widow transformed a room on the top floor of Ely House into the ‘attic theatre’, where her friends would gather for amateur dramatics.<sup>37</sup> (Fig. 13)

Anne and Henry may have been well matched – for he, too, seems to have spent his entire life posing as someone other – the man he wanted to be and never quite was. As a younger son he had lived on hand-me-downs and leftovers, dependent on men like Ponsonby for a modest sinecure or a government pension for his wife. It was not until his brother died that he finally took centre stage, as the saviour of his maltreated nephew and then his heir. So all his resources were spent on constructing the framework of a grand and civilised life. He built himself a series of magnificent stage sets, acquired the clothes, the

titles, the attributes of a great man, and was renowned for having his books bound with princely splendour. Like the hunting lodge that he built in the hills, Henry seemed all front and little depth, and lacked the force of character to play a major role in the drama of Irish politics. He was sometimes the buffoon, often ignored and left little trace on the history of his times. But for all his pomposity and the weakness that allowed him to be manoeuvred into shameful stratagems by his first wife, he was essentially good-natured. And his ‘unbounded passion for improvement’ was worth a great deal more than the cynical games of those who mocked him.

Even the mockers were dazzled. So many curious members of the gentry applied to visit Rathfarnham that Lord Ely had to organise a weekly opening. Silver tokens were struck, embossed on one side with his lordship’s coronet and the words ‘This ticket to be left at the Porters Lodge’ and on the other ‘This Ticket admits four persons to see Rathfarnham on Tuesdays only’.<sup>38</sup>

The last decade of Henry’s life was one of quiet satisfaction. ‘Count Loftonzo’ was forgotten and the Earl of Ely basked in social approbation, which culminated in his appointment as one of fifteen founding Knights of the Order of St Patrick, intended to be Ireland’s equivalent of the Garter. He received the news in Bath, in a letter from his



Fig. 12. Decorative lock plates at Ely House, Ely Place, Dublin. Photos © Simon Loftus.



Fig. 13. Portrait of the second Lady Ely as Hebe, cupbearer of the gods, by Hugh Douglas Hamilton, c.1778. *Private collection, photo © Simon Loftus.*

younger cousin William, who was an aide to the Lord Lieutenant.<sup>39</sup> Henry replied with unctuous affection, reminders of favours given and self-important claims regarding his own part in the invention of the new order, so long mooted and so often postponed – ‘what is called A Will of the wisp, or an imaginary Phantom, for men to follow’. He wrote with sublime self esteem that ‘my Peerage and my Consequence ought to place me’ in the first rank of the new Knights, and claimed that eight years earlier he had been ‘recommended to his Majesty for the Red Ribbon [Order of the Bath], Which I

declined accepting of, as This Order for Ireland, was then in Agitation, and offered to me, which I prefer’d.’ But then, just as pomposity reached the limits of absurdity, Henry concluded his letter with this delightful postscript:

‘If you do not find an opportunity of very soon of sending me a few Bottles of high toasted Snuff from Mc.Donnald, I must enclose My Nose to you in a letter, for tis now as great an inconvenience to me, as a house would be without Furniture.’

That cheerful joke (which echoes Henry’s passion for furnishing lovely houses) now reads with special

poignancy, for this is one of his last surviving letters. When the Knights of St Patrick paraded in their blue robes before their inaugural dinner at Dublin Castle, on 17 March 1783, Henry was absent. His health had begun to fail and he stayed in Bath, ‘taking the waters’, hoping to recover.

A few weeks later, on 3rd May 1783, an unexpected visitor called at Rathfarnham Castle and was admitted to the house, perhaps having explained that he was a distant cousin of Lord Ely.<sup>40</sup> It was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who may have hoped to impress upon his Lordship the vanity of worldly things – but Henry was in England, and close to death. Wesley’s description, recorded in his Journal, is that of a prophet of doom:

‘It may doubtless vie in elegance, if not in costliness, with any seat in Great Britain, but the miserable master of the whole has little satisfaction therein. God hath said, ‘write this man childless’. For whom then does he heap up these things? He himself is growing old. And must he then leave this paradise? Then leave These happy shades, and mansions fit for gods?’<sup>41</sup>

Five days later Henry Loftus, Viscount Loftus, Earl of Ely and Knight of St Patrick, died at the Circus in Bath.

#### NOTES

- 1 The Dublin Society motto refers to Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Book1, lines 460–461). Aeneas finds pictures of the Trojan war on a building at Carthage and turns weeping to Achates: ‘What region on earth is not full of [the tales of] our labours? Behold Priam. Here too are the rewards of glory.’ The medal is in a private collection.
- 2 Thanks to Frances Egan for a copy of the entry in the *RDS Proceedings* (Volume 9–10) for a ‘General Stated Meeting’ of the Dublin Society, 4 March 1773.
- 3 William Temple, ‘Topographical Description of Dalkey’, *Exshaw’s Magazine* (1770) – quoted in Francis Elrington Ball, *A History of the County Dublin*, I (London 1902) p. 59
- 4 Rathfarnham with its demesne was bought for £17,500 on behalf of Nicholas Loftus Hume, 2nd of Ely, in April 1767, three months after his trial for idiocy. He died at Rathfarnham at the age of 31 in Nov 1769, leaving all he possessed to his uncle. F. Elrington Ball, *History of the County Dublin*, II (1903).
- 5 ‘The superb rococo plasterwork and finely carved overdoors had been carried out for John Hoadly who transformed the seventeenth century castle into a modern house.’ Knight of Glin & James Peill, *Irish Furniture* (London 2007) p. 170. Around 1880 the panelling that had been built across the corners of the first floor Octagon Room was taken down, revealing ‘the skeleton of a woman and on the floor, a pair of earrings, and a pair of lady’s shoes which suggested a period about 1745.’ Stephen Redmond, ‘Behind the Wall; a Rathfarnham Mystery’ in *Ecclesiastical Record* (nd) pp. 15–17. The woman’s bones were said to have been reburied near the front steps to the Castle. An unpublished article by Alastair Lindsay, former Architect of the OPW (*Rathfarnham Castle, A case study in Conservation*, c.1995) cites an old report that ‘a brick vault had collapsed near the Main Entrance, [where] some human remains were discovered’. Several portraits were also found behind the panelling in this room, including the Ely family group by Angelica Kauffmann. John, 5th Marquis of Ely, *A Famous Castle, Reminiscences of the lovely Dolly Munro* (‘Printed for Private Circulation’, c.1890).
- 6 British Library, Add MS 22228 f. 121.
- 7 ‘If Sir George Macartney will be so kind as to grant this liberty to Mr Loftus, he will lay him under much more obligation than by making him a Privy Councillor.’ Loftus to Macartney, 17 June 1769, quoted in: Knight of Glin & James Peill, *Irish Furniture* (London 2007) p. 170.
- 8 Loftus may have been introduced to Stuart by his cousin, William Ponsonby, Earl of Bessborough, a leading member of the Society of Dilettanti (closely connected to Stuart), whose taste clearly had influence on Loftus. See letter from Chambers to Loftus, 29 Jan 1771. British Library, Add Mss 4133.
- 9 For Stuart see Julius Bryant, ‘“The Purest Taste” – James ‘Athenian’ Stuart’s work in Villas and Country Houses’, in Susan Weber Soros (ed) *James ‘Athenian’ Stuart (1713–1788): The Rediscovery of Antiquity* (New Haven and London, 2007), pp. 300–304, and Howard Colvin, *A Biographical*

- Dictionary of British Architects, 1600 – 1840* (New Haven & London, 2008) pp. 998–1003. For Chambers see John Harris & Michael Snodin (ed), *Sir William Chambers, Architect to George III* (New Haven & London 1996).
- 10 Newton's sketches for the pediments of the Royal Exchange at Dublin are in the RIBA British Architectural Library, SE15/4 (9).
  - 11 RIBA British Architectural Library, SC72/8, catalogued as by William Chambers. I am grateful to Charles Hind and Kate Jones, of the Library's curatorial team, for confirming that this plan was originally acquired as part of a collection of drawings by William Newton (1735–1790). Although previously accepted as by Chambers in John Harris, *Sir William Chambers; Knight of the Polar Star* (London 1970) p. 241, on the basis of his work at Rathfarnham, the reattribution to Newton made here by the present author is accepted by the RIBA Library. Confusion is compounded because this architect is often mistaken for another William Newton (1730–1798), who worked in and around Newcastle.
  - 12 Lady Shelburne's Diary, 6 Aug 1770. Copy of this extract supplied by Alastair Lindsay.
  - 13 There are no surviving letters between Loftus and Stuart, so judgements are based on comparison with Stuart's other work and deducing what was *not* done by Chambers, whose correspondence with Loftus appears to be complete (British Library, Add MSS 41133 & 41134). The roundels in the Breakfast Room ceiling are attributed to Stuart, but the execution is clumsy and they may have been painted by Jean Baptist Cuvillie, who was owed £300 for his work at Rathfarnham when Henry Loftus died, in 1783; Edward McParland; 'Rathfarnham Castle', *Country Life* (9<sup>th</sup> Sept 1982) pp. 734–737.
  - 14 The semi-circular bay on the east of the Castle is shown in Thomas Roberts' *View of Rathfarnham Castle* (1769) and may have been commissioned by the previous occupants.
  - 15 Chambers to Loftus, 29 Jan 1771. For the evidence of the Dining Room wallpaper, I am grateful to Alastair Lindsay, former architect of Rathfarnham's restoration.
  - 16 Chambers' correspondence (20 June 1771) indicates that he intended to increase the number of windows in the Gallery and only make one fireplace – 'which I think looks better than two and I believe is equally warm'. Loftus evidently had his doubts. Chamber's work at Rathfarnham was completed in 1772, but he had to wait until the following year until Henry Loftus (by then Lord Ely) authorised payment of his final bill, for £82-17s-6d, on 29 Feb 1773. 'I have now finished all your designs, and should any chance, or pleasurable jaunt bring you to Ireland, I shall be happy to have an opportunity of shewing you their good effect.' British Library, Add MS 41134.
  - 17 The prevalence of fan-shaped motifs in Stuart's designs may reflect his early career as a fan painter. The rediscovery of Palmyra, in Syria, was the achievement of Robert Wood, who published *The ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tedmor, in the desert* in 1753. The ceiling of the Long Gallery originally incorporated a number of panels attributed to Angelica Kauffman, which were replaced with religious paintings when the Castle was owned by the Jesuits.
  - 18 The description of the park in 1914 is from an undated clipping of *The Irish Catholic*. There is no mention of the gatehouse in Chambers' correspondence with Loftus and I believe it to be Stuart's work.
  - 19 Thomas Roberts' *View of Rathfarnham* (1769) was sold by Christies on 21 May 1997 – present whereabouts unknown. Kauffmann's family portrait is in the National Gallery of Ireland. Richard Frizell's *Map of Rathfarnham Park, 1779* shows the park extending to a total of 213 acres 'plantation measure', nearly 350 acres statute: National Library of Ireland, 16 G 40 (20) .
  - 20 Amongst the cabinet-makers that Henry employed were Joseph Ellis, Hely & Grant, and William Moore – to all of whom he owed money when he died. Knight of Glin & James Peill, *Irish Furniture* (London 2007) p. 170. He also had a pair of large oval giltwood mirrors made by John Linnell, for which he was charged £48. Linnell's design survives in the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the mirrors themselves were sold by Christies, New York, in 1991. *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* (1991/1992). Austin Cooper visited Rathfarnham in 1781 and described it in his diaries. *An eighteenth century antiquary; the sketches, notes and diaries of Austin Cooper* (Dublin 1942). *The Post Chaise Companion* (nd., but c.1810) mentions the greenhouses, aviary and collection of pictures.
  - 21 Alastair Lindsay (*Rathfarnham Castle, A case study in Conservation*) notes that 'The Apollo sunburst

- ceiling is similar to one in the Casino at Merino', designed by Chambers.
- 22 'William Handcock, *History and Antiquities of Tallaght* (Dublin 1877/1899, reprinted 1991) p. 90. A sketch corresponding to this description of Dollymount can be found in Francis Elrington Ball, *History of the County of Dublin*, III (1905) p. 41. Dollymount has fallen into ruins but it is still possible to trace the layout of the long facade described by Hancock, and of the walled gardens and yards that lay behind the house.
- 23 *Maps of the Lordships and Manors of Loftus Hall, Fethard, and Temptown in the County of Wexford*, drawn by Richard and Charles Frizell in 1771: National Library of Ireland, Ms. 4153.
- 24 The final decision in the case of Henry Loftus v. Rochfort was in the Irish House of Lords, on 24 March 1784, almost a year after Henry's death. The votes were even until the Lord Chancellor gave his casting vote in favour of Loftus.
- 25 'The members considered under the influence of Mr Ponsonby, Ld Shannon, the Loftus's and Tottenhams, who are all related and connected together amount in the whole to 47': David Large; 'The Irish House of Commons in 1769', *Irish Historical Studies* vol 11, No. 41 (Mar 1958) p. 45. Townshend had threatened to dismiss Henry Loftus from the Revenue Board, strike out his wife's pension and remove various members of the Loftus Tottenham connection from their offices, unless they voted with the Government: Thomas Bartlett, 'Opposition in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* vol 22, No 88 (Sept 1981) p. 326n.
- 26 This extract comes from the second of two letters, dated Feb 23, 1771 (signed 'Pascal' but generally believed to have been written by Langrishe), which were widely circulated before being subsequently re-published in *Baratariana* (Dublin 1773) pp 145–150.
- 27 According to a footnote in *Baratariana*, it 'was originally published in detached portions in the Freeman's Journal in April and May 1771'. A slim edition was published in book form in 1772, followed by 'the second edition, corrected and enlarged', in 1773.
- 28 *Barataria* (Dublin 1773) p 180.
- 29 The garden temple glimpsed through the window of Kauffmann's portrait may have been drawn from an unexecuted design, because a photo of the ruined building – *Georgian Society Records* (Dublin 1913) vol 5, plate LXXXVIII – indicates a more open colonnade than shown in the painting – strikingly similar to a drawing by William Newton: RIBA British Architectural Library, SE12/10 (2). Newton may perhaps have contributed more to the refurbishment of Rathfarnham than plans for others to work from. The temple survived until the early 20th century, when some of its columns are said to have been used in re-building the Castle's porch.
- 30 The portrait by Angelica Kauffmann (National Gallery of Ireland) is dated 1771 and is traditionally said to have been commissioned at the urging of Lord Townshend, and in some sense supervised by him – it may have been his sense of mischief that devised the strange iconography. The only other large family portrait painted by Angelica Kauffmann during her trip to Ireland was of the recently widowed Townshend and his children – a picture that is also unusual in its psychology. Anne Cruikshank & the Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters* (New Haven & London, 2002) p. 163. Melissa Brennan of the Office of Public Works identifies the page in the Ely portrait with the 'young black boy from the Malibar coast' who accompanied a gift of ostriches from India to 'Lord Loftus', as noted in the *Belfast Newsletter* for 27th June 1788. That was five years after Henry's death, but may refer to an earlier story, slightly garbled in the re-telling. There is some debate as to whether the girl sitting at the keyboard is Dolly's sister Frances or the artist herself – but seems too young for the latter. The keyboard itself was probably that supplied to Rathfarnham by the Dublin maker, Ferdinand Weber, who also supplied an organ (said to have belonged to Handel) that was later moved to Lord Ely's Dublin house in Ely Place: E.G Barton, 'A list of interesting Old House Organs in the Dublin district with some pertinent details on each', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol 17, no 2 (Mar 1962) p. 74. For details of the music from Niccolò Piccinni's 1760 opera see Barra Boydell, *The Ely Family and musical life in 1770s Dublin* (Kauffmann symposium at the National Gallery of Ireland, 2005).
- 31 In addition to his Earldom, Henry was appointed Privy Councillor and obtained numerous official appointments or government pensions for relatives and friends – but a bishopric for one of them was refused.

- 32 As an acknowledged beauty in an age of celebrity, Dolly Monroe suffered the fate of many a modern starlet. Her movements, beauty and the prospects of her admirers were the subject of constant comment in the press, so that that she could not walk in the Mall in Dublin without being mobbed, but had to rise at 6 in the morning to take her exercise, when in town.
- 33 Dolly Monroe, born in 1754, died at the age of 39, in 1793.
- 34 Henry Loftus, Earl of Ely, leased the plot of land on which he built his new house in Ely Place from Gustavus Hume, in 1770, and gave his name to what had until then been designated Hume Row. *Georgian Society Records II* (Dublin 1911) pp. 120–123.
- 35 Brian MacGiolla Phadraig, *Ely House, a detailed guide to its Classical and Georgian features* (Dublin 1982). Neither this guide, nor any other that I have come across, identifies the architect. The plaster medallions in the Dining Room are attributed to Michael Stapleton and the design of the staircase to Bartholomew Cramillion. The Knight of Glin & James Peill, *Irish Furniture* (New Haven & London 2007) p. 160.
- 36 The second Countess Ely was the daughter of an English naval officer, Captain Hugh Bonfoy, and his Cornish wife Anne Eliot (a Lady of the Bedchamber to the daughters of George III). Reynolds' portrait hangs at Upton House, Warwickshire (National Trust). The pastel of Lady Ely by Hugh Douglas Hamilton is in a private collection.
- 37 A full-length portrait of Lord Ely 'in fancy dress' by Angelica Kauffmann is now at Rathfarnham. It shows Henry without his wig and dressed in Vandyke style – black silk, white lace. Lady Ely's 'attic theatre' at Ely Place seated about sixty and the *Freeman's Journal* for 19 April 1785 records the performance of a tragedy (*The Distressed Mother*) and a comedy (*All the World's a Stage*) performed there by her friends. Brian MacGiolla Phadraig, *Ely House* (Dublin 1982) p. 18.
- 38 One of these silver tokens (now in a private collection) is illustrated in *Ireland's Painters* (New Haven & London 2002) by Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, who date it between 1780 and 1790. The coronet is that of an Earl, which suggests the last years of Henry's life – since after his death the peerage was dormant until re-created for his nephew and heir in 1794.
- 39 *Onslow letters, compiled by Harriet Loftus*: Surrey History Centre G173/26/10. Henry had secured William's promotion to the rank of Colonel on the staff of Lord Temple, appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland the previous year.
- 40 John Wesley's great-grandmother was a granddaughter of Archbishop Adam Loftus.
- 41 The quotation is an altered version of Milton, *Paradise Lost*, xi 26