

Witt's Wanderings

by John W. Witt

Mussenden Temple and the House at Downhill are the eccentric relics left in Northern Ireland by an equally eccentric Anglican Bishop, Frederick Augustus Hervey. Born in 1730, he was fortunate among his contemporaries. Being the blessed scion of a wealthy, titled English family, his education and social status were assured, even though favorable application of the inheritance pecking order seemed obscure for him at his birth.

Frederick Hervey was the grandson of the first Earl of Bristol in the Hervey line. It was a family which had some difficulty producing legitimate heirs. His father died before his grandfather did, so the title fell to Frederick's brother, George, an Army officer/diplomat.

George was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1766. The Lord Lieutenant functioned as a Viceroy, the Crown's representative in Ireland. Effectively, he was the top government official when the Monarch was not in Ireland, which was most of the time. While in office, however, George never set foot in Ireland at all. Nevertheless, since he had the power to do so, he took the opportunity to appoint his kid brother, Frederick, to be Bishop of Cloyne in the Anglican Church of Ireland.

As was often the case, younger sons, like Frederick, well educated aristocrats with no apparent hope of inheriting the family title and property, often looked to the church for a career. Finding no suitable job as a priest, he traveled to Italy frequently after his ordination, spending roughly 12 years there, off and on. As Bishop of Cloyne, however, he "improved the property" of the Diocese and was rewarded with appointment to be Bishop of Derry.

His new diocese was large and wealthy. Bishop Hervey spent lavishly on roads and assistance to agriculture, much of which directly benefited the government and the people of the Diocese. He also built three magnificent houses, one of them at Downhill, and furnished them with rare works of art.

His brother and benefactor, George, died childless in 1775, or at least without leaving legitimate progeny, and the middle brother, Augustus, inherited the title as 3rd Earl of Bristol. Augustus was a retired Vice Admiral in the Royal Navy and, despite some extraordinary affairs, not all of them naval in character, also was childless. In 1779, he died, unwillingly leaving property and title to Bishop Frederick. Thus, the latter became the first Earl-Bishop in the previous 700 years of British history.

The newly ennobled bishop enjoyed the good life. His luxurious tastes were well known and his political views drifted toward sympathy for Irish Nationalism, not something making him particularly popular in London. Though married to the mother of his five

children, he had an affair with Countess Lichtenau, mistress of King Frederick William II of Prussia. His life style, personal behavior and "ostentatious style of dress," gave supporting evidence to the contemporaneous saying, "God created men, women and Herveys."

Moreover, Frederick, though a priest and bishop, was an admitted agnostic. According to my *Webster's New World Dictionary*, an agnostic "questions the existence of God, heaven, etc. in the absence of material proof and in unwillingness to accept supernatural revelation." An atheist, on the other hand, "rejects all religious belief and denies the existence of God." His unorthodox views on the subjects of personal conduct, politics and religion, were apparently noticed by King George III, who referred to him as "that wicked prelate."

Despite its name, Downhill House is reached by climbing *up* a hill to the top of a grassy knoll overlooking the northern coast of Ireland, northeast of Derry and west of Portrush, the Giant's Causeway and Bushmills. It was a magnificent building in its day. There were frescoes on the walls and a collection of fine paintings hung in the corridors, including works by Vandyke, Raphael and Tintoretto. It boasted a huge library and, in one corridor, a great organ. The house was abandoned after World War II and rapidly deteriorated into a complete ruin.

At the top of the path leading up the hill stands Mussenden Temple, a small round building modeled after the Temple of Vesta in Italy. Frederick built it in 1785, naming it in honor of a married lady, Mrs. Frideswide Mussenden. Although rumor persists, there's apparently no evidence of a romantic liaison between the two. He established a library in the building and dedicated a downstairs room for celebration of Mass by Roman Catholic clergy, a daring action in an era when the Roman Church and its practices were forbidden by British law.

Frederick's fondness for Italy never faltered. He died in Albano in 1803, leaving as his legacy the beautiful Downhill property. It's now owned and maintained by the British National Trust.