

**THE IRISH PARLIAMENT
1775: FROM AN OFFICIAL
AND CONTEMPORARY
MANUSCRIPT**

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The Irish Parliament 1775: From an Official and Contemporary Manuscript by William Hunt

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WILLIAM HUNT

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*FROM AN OFFICIAL AND CONTEMPORARY
MANUSCRIPT*

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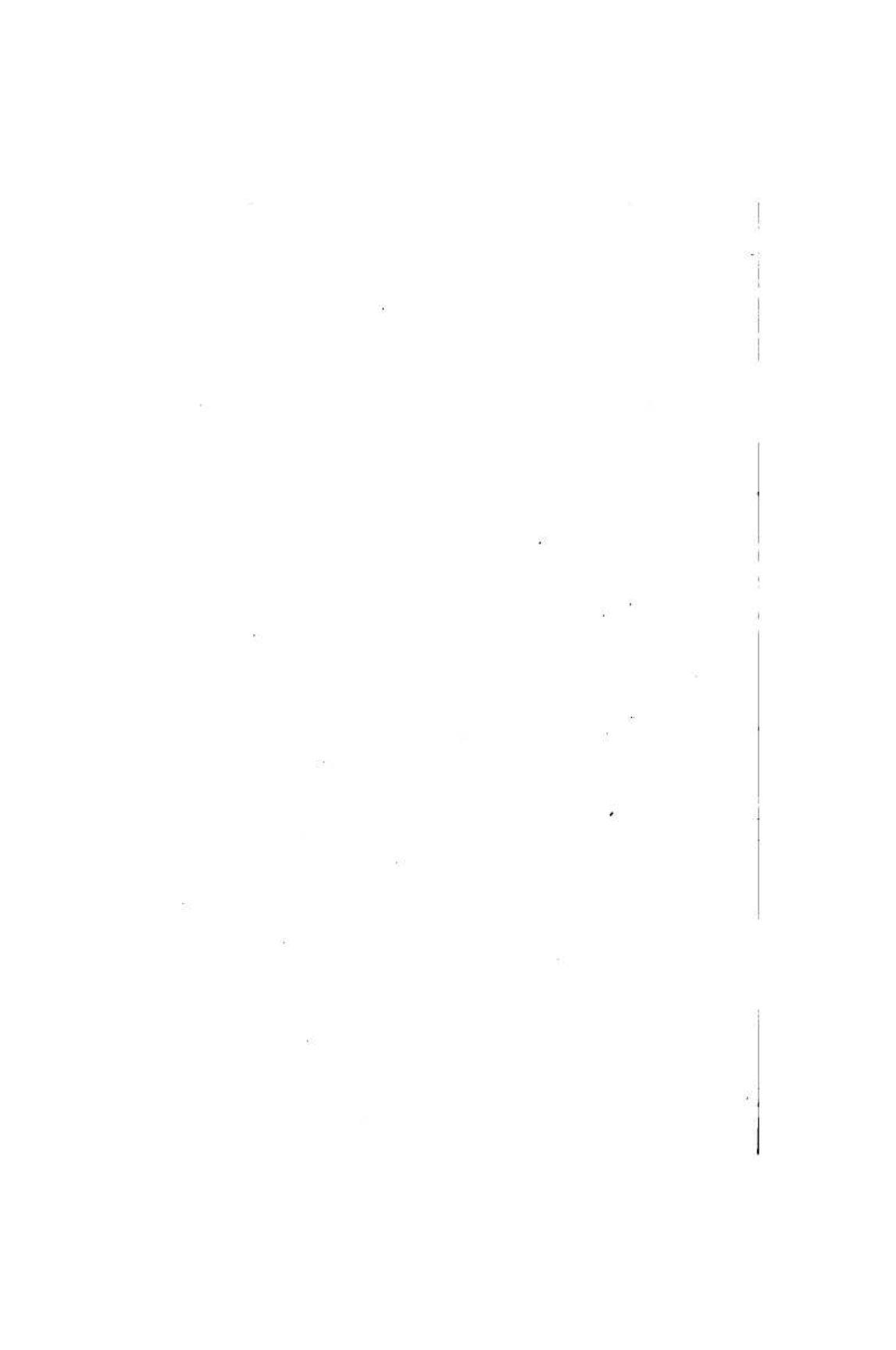
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INTRODUCTION

THIS introduction will set forth only so much of the history of the Irish Parliament as may enable readers without special knowledge of it to understand the significance of the document printed in the text. No attempt will be made to exhibit the policy of the British Government towards Ireland in the eighteenth century, except so far as it concerned the Irish Parliament; nor will ethical questions such as justice and honesty be discussed. Readers will form their own opinions from the facts set before them, and in doing so it will be well to remember that the standard generally accepted with respect to political purity was somewhat different in those days from what it is now.¹

The Irish House of Commons in the eighteenth century was composed of 300 members. They were all Protestants, for in 1691, when the subjugation of the country to William III. was completed by the capitulation of Limerick, the English Parliament passed a Bill excluding Roman Catholics from seats in either House. For the next thirty-six years Catholics were able to exercise the franchise; but in 1727, when the party which directed the policy of the Castle, as the Irish Government was called, feared that the Catholics would join their opponents, the Government

¹ Grateful acknowledgment should be made of my indebtedness to Lecky's *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (vol. iv.), of which chap. xvi. is devoted to the history of Ireland from 1760-1778. I have, however, myself consulted all the principal printed authorities on the subject in hand, and have worked at the two volumes of Lord Harcourt's official correspondence while Lord Lieutenant, transcribed for his chief secretary, Sir John Blaquiere, afterwards Baron de Blaquiere, and now preserved in the Public Record Office as S.P. Ireland, 1772-1776, vols. 443, 444.

procured the assent of the Irish Parliament to a Bill enacting that no 'Papist' should be admitted to vote at the election of a member to serve in Parliament. By this Act four-fifths of the people were deprived of any representation.¹

Nor was the House of Commons really representative even of the Protestant minority. Of its 300 members only sixty-six sat for counties, and 200 were returned for 100 small boroughs, some with a mere handful of inhabitants, such as the borough of Tusk, co. Roscommon, then 'a miserable hamlet consisting of a few mud cabins.' In 1783 it is said that of the whole House only seventy-two members were returned by free election of the people, that fifty-three peers nominated 124 members and influenced the election of ten others, and that fifty-two commoners nominated ninety-one.² A private report drawn up in 1784 states that 116 seats were at the disposal of twenty-five proprietors, that Lord Shannon sent sixteen members to Parliament, the Ponsonby family fourteen, Lord Hillsborough nine, and the Duke of Leinster seven, while the Castle itself held twelve seats.³ A member provided with a seat voted on all important questions in accordance with his patron's wishes; he formed one of the great man's followers, and the influence of the borough owners was increased by relationship among themselves, and by their power of extorting from the Government places and other favours for those who did them good service. Our document gives a list of twenty-four borough owners with the followers of each of them, 110 in all,⁴ in the House of Commons in 1775, and to these must be added the members sitting for the boroughs held by the Castle.

The House of Lords consisted of twenty-two spiritual peers, four archbishops and eighteen bishops, and, in 1775, of 142 temporal peers.⁵ The prelates were for the most part chosen for the support which they had given, or were prepared to give, to Government, or to satisfy the demands of great borough owners on behalf of some clerical relative or

¹ 1 Geo. II. c. 9, Irish; Plowden, *History of Ireland*, ii. 91-92.

² Gordon, *History of Ireland*, ii. 288.

³ Massey, *History of England*, iii. 264-265.

⁴ Pages 54-55.

⁵ *Royal Kalendar*, 1775.