

Major-General Sir Thomas Aiskew Larcom



Major-General **Sir Thomas Aiskew Larcom, 1st Baronet** PC FRS (22 April 1801 – 15 June 1879) was a leading official in the early Irish Ordnance Survey that started in 1824. He later became a poor law commissioner, census commissioner and finally executive head of the British administration in Ireland as under-secretary to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, a position the government of the day was eager for him to take.

The longest-serving under-secretary (1853–1868), and a man of unusual abilities, Larcom had a distinguished career in his adopted country and acted with an impartiality that won him respect from all parties. In 1868 he was admitted to the Irish Privy Council and created a Baronet.

Obituary: Irish official, second son of Captain Joseph Larcom, R.N., commissioner of Malta dockyard from 1810 to 1817, by Ann, sister of Admiral Hollis, was born on 22 April 1801. After a brilliant career at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, he was in 1820 gazetted a second lieutenant in the corps of royal engineers. In 1824 he was selected by Colonel T. F. Colby [q.v.] for the work of the ordnance survey of England and Wales, and in 1826 was transferred to the same service in Ireland. For the next two years he was occupied in working with his friend Major Portlock upon

the 'great triangulation,' the term applied to the series of observations by which the Irish survey was connected with that of England. In 1828 Colby appointed Larcom as his assistant in the central organisation of the Irish survey at Mountjoy, Phoenix Park, near Dublin. Here he soon had the work in his own hands. He organised the large body of civilians and soldiers required for the multifarious operations of compiling, engraving, and publishing the county maps of Ireland, the beauty of which has never been exceeded; adopted the electrotype process and introduced the system of contouring. Mountjoy thus became a centre of scientific education, and the resort of scientific men. Larcom, however, aimed at something more than mechanical excellence. He 'conceived the idea that with such opportunities a small additional cost would enable him, without retarding the execution of the maps, to draw together a work embracing every description of local information relating to Ireland' (Colby, Londonderry—Parish of Templemore—Ordnance Survey, Pref.). The Irish government sanctioned the scheme, and the account of Templemore, a parish in Londonderry, was the result (Dublin, 1837, 4to). But the government declined, on the ground of economy, to permit a further development of this work. Larcom, however, had made a scientific study of the old Irish language, had instructed numerous agents to work under him in the collection of information, and ended by accumulating a rich store of local information concerning the history, the languages, and the antiquities of Ireland. Dr. Todd, the president of the Royal Irish Academy, to which many of Larcom's manuscripts passed, observed that 'this information has been of singular interest. ... In many places it will be found that the descriptions and drawings presented in the collection are now the only remaining records of monuments which connect themselves with our earliest history, and of the folklore which the famine [of 1846] swept away with the aged sennachies, who were its sole repositories.'

On the results of Larcom's collected information were based many subsequent improvements. In 1832, three years before his friend Thomas Drummond [q.v.] had become under-secretary, he prepared the plans required for working out the changes made necessary by the Irish Reform Bill. In 1836 he prepared the topographical portion of the 'Report on Irish Municipal Reform,' when elaborate maps of sixty-seven towns were completed in a month. In 1841 he became a census commissioner. It was owing to him that the census in Ireland for the first time included a systematic classification of the occupations and general conditions of the population, as well as its numbers, and that a permanent branch of the registrar-general's department was formed for the collection of agricultural statistics. England afterwards adopted the general plan of the Irish census. In 1842 he was appointed a commissioner for inquiring into the state of the Royal Irish Society, and again, in 1845, for purposes relating to the new Queen's Colleges.

On the completion of the ordnance survey in 1846 the government offered him a commissionership of public works, and he had scarcely accepted it when the great Irish famine called forth all his powers. Larcom had already assisted Sir Richard John Griffith [q.v.] as assistant commissioner in connection with the system of public relief works undertaken in the initial stages of the famine. He now became the chief director of those works; and though some of them turned out to be of little permanent value, they proved the salvation of such portions of the people as were not hopelessly stricken.

The effects of the famine soon made it evident that the whole of the Irish poor-law system must be dealt with afresh, and Larcom was placed at the head of a commission of inquiry. In 1849 he held the same place in the commission for the reform of the Dublin corporation. In 1850 he became deputy-chairman of the board of works. The unions and electoral districts of all Ireland were then remodelled in exact accordance with the reports of the various boundary commissions over which he presided.

When the post of under-secretary for Ireland fell vacant in 1853, Larcom was at once appointed to the office, which was now made for the first time non-political and permanent. Every effort was needed to harmonise differences between the two great sections of the Irish people, the catholics and the protestants, whose mutual antipathy had been intensified by the revival of the agitation for repeal. Larcom, adopting the policy of his friend Drummond, undertook to govern all parties alike with even-handed justice, to remove abuses, and to prevent disorder, not only by systematic vigilance, but by disseminating a belief in the ubiquity of the government's power. His unique knowledge of the country enabled him to use his position for the development of its material prosperity in a manner hitherto unexampled. He encouraged everything which would promote public confidence, attract capital, or give employment to the poor, and maintained the strict supremacy of the law on exactly the same principles as prevailed in England and Scotland.

Larcom devoted himself strenuously to the development of education. He supported the policy of the Irish National Society, which sought to evade religious differences by teaching the working classes only just so much religion as would not be obnoxious to any of the great contending forms of Christianity, and he strenuously promoted the development of the 'Queen's Colleges' for the upper classes.

In spite of the momentary check to the prosperity of Ireland given by the Phoenix conspiracy of 1859, Larcom was able to point to a great and steady increase of prosperity during his tenure of office. Year after year he drew up memoranda, which were read on public occasions by successive lords-lieutenant, showing by official returns the progress of agriculture, the evidences of improved conditions of life, and the diminution of crime. In the decade which ended in 1860 offences specially reported fell from 10,639 to 3,531, agrarian offences from 162 to 60, and robbery of arms from 1,006 to 377. But the great Fenian movement initiated in the United States was seething in Ireland from 1861 onwards. In 1866 the storm broke and taxed all the energies of government. On Larcom fell the main duty of meeting the emergency. He acted decisively, and when he retired in 1868 Ireland was tranquil.

Larcom had been made K.C.B. in 1860, and grateful addresses and presentations from all classes in Ireland commemorated his departure. He died at Heathfield, near Fareham, on 15 June 1879. His later years were devoted to the collection of information concerning his own period of rule in Ireland, which he arranged and bound in hundreds of volumes. These he left to different learned societies, chiefly Irish, with many of which he had long been closely associated. Some professional literature of his composition will be found in volumes of the ordnance survey, including the 'Memoir of Templemore,' and in memoirs of his friends Drummond and Portlock, besides articles in the 'Aide Mémoire' of the royal engineers, and a valuable edition of Sir William Petty's famous 'Down Survey,' published by the Irish Archaeological Society in 1851.

Larcom married in 1840 Georgina, daughter of General Sir George D'Aguilar [q.v.]. He was succeeded by his third son, Colonel Charles Larcom, R.A. In person Sir Thomas was of middle height and strongly built, with a remarkably fine head. There is a bust of him at Mountjoy, Phoenix Park.

['Obituary Memoir of Sir T. A. Larcom,' in the Proceedings of the Royal Society, No. 198, 1879; Edinburgh Review, No. 336, 'A Century of Irish Government;,' manuscript Life of Sir T. A. Larcom, by the Right Hon. Mr. Justice Lawson.]