



Atherton, John (1598-1640)

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In 1640, John Atherton, Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, was hanged in Ireland for sodomy under a law that he had helped to institute. The sensational Atherton case was frequently cited in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as warning of the fate of men who engaged in same-sex sexual relations.

Born near Bridgewater in Somersetshire, England in 1598, Atherton came from a prosperous family and received an education at Oxford University. Sometime in his youth, possibly while at Oxford, he engaged in sexual relations with another man. It is not known how long this relationship continued or whether he habitually pursued sexual contact with other men.

Atherton entered the service of the Church of England, presumably shortly after leaving Oxford. Around 1620, he took a wife and began a family.

It is not clear why Atherton left England for Ireland in 1634, though he had possibly earned a reputation as a libertine that may have played a factor in the move. One anonymous contemporary, in a rhyming pamphlet published after Atherton's death, charged that the cleric had fled after committing numerous offenses, including incest with the sister of his wife.

Atherton later confessed to a series of sins, including reading "naughty" books, viewing immodest pictures, frequenting plays, drunkenness, and neglect of the Ten Commandments.

Under the patronage of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Atherton was appointed Lord Bishop of Waterford and Lismore in 1636.

As the Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Atherton successfully campaigned for the passage of an act that instituted the death penalty for the vice of buggery. In 1640, he became one of the first men accused under this statute.

A lawyer named Butler, involved in a dispute with the bishop over the ownership of some land at Killoges, near Waterford, made a complaint to Parliament in which he accused Atherton of committing buggery with his steward and tithe proctor John Childe. The bishop strongly denied this specific charge, but Childe confessed.

Atherton's fellow clerics rallied around him, partly to avoid the disgrace to the Church that a conviction would bring, but to no avail. He was convicted.

Court spectators hailed the verdict of guilty, and Atherton was nearly murdered on his way from the courtroom to the prison in Cork. He did not strenuously protest his conviction, seeing God's hand in it. He also confessed to having committed unspecified heinous sins that, if publicly known, would increase the scandal surrounding him.



The title page of the anonymous booklet *The Shameful Ende of Bishop Atherton and his Proctor John Childe* (1641).

On the morning of his execution, Atherton declared himself unworthy of the Communion of the Dead, though he had written his wife that he expected to see her in Heaven. As he prepared for transport, the bishop sought to have his arms pinioned to his sides with a black ribbon, but the sheriff insisted on using the cheap cord typically reserved for common criminals.

Atherton was hanged on Gallows Green on December 5, 1640. At ten o'clock that night, he was buried in a far corner of the yard at Christ Church in a place where some rubbish used to be cast and where no one else lay.

His partner in sodomy, Childe, was hanged at Bandon Bridge in March 1641.

In Stuart England, the case of John Atherton became a topic of sermons and moral writings that denounced same-sex relations. Later, English gay men, notably William Beckford, subsequently collected these accounts as evidence of the existence of other men attracted to their own sex and as reminders of the viciousness of English attitudes toward same-sex sexual relations.

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