

Ards House

Mr. Edward MacIntyre contributes an important historical article on the recently demolished manor at Ards.

Father Benedict, O.F.M.Cap., who recently acquired a doctorate in History from Oxford University, introduces the article.

We also publish for the first time two very historical pictures of its previous owners.



The former house of Ards. Over 200 years it stood as a symbol of Landlordism in Ireland.

ARDS HOUSE

by Edward MacIntyre

Introductory note by Fr. Benedict, O.F.M.Cap., M.A., D. Phil. (Oxon.)

When I accepted an invitation from the Editor of the **Father Mathew Record** to prepare an historical account of Ards House I had not anticipated the appearance of the following article in the *Derry People*. Mr. MacIntyre's informative account of the vicissitudes of the centuries-old mansion has therefore rendered superfluous on my part any lengthy treatment of the subject.

It is to Mr. MacIntyre's credit that he has been able to dispel a misconception as to how the property at Ards came into the possession of the Wray family. James Fleming in an article in the **Weekly Irish Times**, 28th April, 1939, erred when he stated that the Ards estate had been granted to the Sampson family after Sir Cahir O'Doherty's rebellion in 1608. On this point Fleming got his information from Hill's **Plantation of Ulster**, but the error is also found in McDevitt's **The Donegal Highlands** and Burke's **Vicissitudes of Families**. However a perusal of Pynnar's **Survey of the Plantation** would have shown that an estate, which included Ards, was granted to Tirlough Oge O Boyle at the time of the Ulster Plantation. This property was subsequently held by Sir John Stephens and later by Sir John's assignee, Hugh Hamill, from whom it was purchased by William Wray about 1700. C. V. Trench in her **The Wrays of**

Donegal put forward some evidence to show that Wray bought the lands at Ards from both William Sampson and Hugh Hamill. But this evidence is not conclusive, and there remains a reasonable doubt as to whether in fact Ards was ever held by the Sampson family.

Though the Stewart family added to and embellished the mansion, it can be said that Ards was in its hey day about the middle of the eighteenth century. Among the many guests who stayed there was Bishop Pococke, who visited it during his **Tour of Ireland** in 1752. That celebrated traveller found the house "well sheltered, not only by the hills to the north, but by the fine plantations about it, and from those hills there is a beautiful prospect of the sea, and of the country and the bays that are near." "Here I saw," wrote Pococke "melons ripe, and fruit in great perfection." When the bishop gazed across Sheephaven Bay towards Doe Castle, he was looking across a stretch of water on which Owen Roe O'Neill had sailed into Ulster in 1642. O'Neill's frigate was named the St. Francis, and his mission was one which included the recovery of their estates by the Old Irish. But it was not until 1930 when the Irish sons of St. Francis came to live at Ards that an era of landlordism in North East Donegal was brought to a close.

THE Ards peninsula lies in the Barony of Kilmacrenan. In the early part of the 17th century, when it was escheated under the Crown, we are told that it was a "remote, lonely, wild, inhospitable and uninhabited stretch of land; stony, mountainous, lashed by the fiercest gales and thickly wooded." Nevertheless, because of its extent, and possibly, too, because of the fact that it commanded a strategic position in the Sheephaven inlet, it was deemed to be of some value, for it was included as part of the planted lands of Ulster.

Some time after the quenching of the Rebellion towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, more than half a million acres in Ulster were at the disposal of the English Crown, part of this property being in the possession of the O'Donnells. After Sir Cahir O'Doherty's insurrection, the County of Donegal became forfeit.

The Lifford Inquisition

Sir Arthur Chichester, the Lord Deputy, informed an Inquisition held at Lifford that the septs of MacSwynes of Bannagh, Fanad, and Doe, and the O'Boyles and O'Gallaghers, had passed over their claims to freeholds, "if they ever had any," to the Earl (of Tyrconnell), "which he got from them cautiously and by unworthy devices." Chichester suggested the division and disposal of these lands to several men of the Septs. His advice was followed, and the only settlement which need concern us was that granted on 26th February, 1610, to Turlough Oge O'Boyle, consisting of one-quarter of each of the following lands: Carrowblagh, Cloonmasse, Anahire, Ballymore, Kildorragh, Carrawamaddy, Clonmore, Brad-

ard, Aghalative, Altcrone, Femore, Car, ricknasmere, Carrowmassinassa, Kilmckelowe, Gortnaleckie, Greslagh, and half-quarter of Breaghwy—in all 2,000 acres, to be held by him on several conditions, but principally on the understanding that he would abstain from taking part in a rebellion. The penalty for infringing any one of the conditions was forfeiture. In the 17th century Ards was variously known as 'Anahire,' Aulturnin' or 'Aultrum.'

In 1618, Nicholas Pynnar notes in his Survey of the Plantation that "Turlough Oge O'Boyle hath built a good bawn of lime and stone in which he and his family dwelleth." This structure, erected in the middle of his estate, is now in ruins, and referred to locally as "Faugher House," or "O'Boyle's Castle" or as "Wray's Castle."—the reason for the latter appellation we shall presently see.

John ("Half-hanged") MacNaughton

In the Rebellion of 1641, when MacSwiney sided with his kinsmen against the English, all the above-mentioned lands were forfeited. They were granted to Sir John Stephens, later assigned to Hugh Hamill and William Sampson, and purchased from them by William Wray in 1700. Of the early history of this Wray family little is known, except that the first of them to arrive in Ireland, John Wray, was a soldier of fortune, who had served his Queen faithfully; that he was an Alderman of Derry City, and that for his military service he was granted various estates in Co. Donegal, including 1,000 acres at Cornegilla, along with part of the portions of Muff and Burt. He died in 1624, leaving his property to his eldest son, Henry. He too, was a soldier. Henry bequeathed his estates to his son, William, in 1666, who two years later married Ann Sampson of Burt, to whom

a son was born in 1669. Within ten days of the birth of their next child, a daughter, Ann Sampson, died. William was married again, to Angel Galbraigh, in 1679, and brought her to reside with him in the family home in Castlewray, as the Manor of Carnegille was now called. William was attainted for high treason at a Parliament held by James II in Dublin on 7th May, 1689, and fled to Chester, England, bringing with him his wife, his son Henry of the first marriage, and his son Humphrey, of the second. In the winter of the following year, after King William's ascent to the throne, they returned to Castlewray, where they lived for a further ten years. Henry, the son referred to, married in 1700, thus inheriting the Castlewray property. In that year, too, William, with his wife Angel, and their son Humphrey, moved to Ffore— (Faughy)—to the house built by Turrough O'Boyle, taking more active interest in the property he had purchased from Hugh Hamill and Wm. Sampson, which stretched from Doe Castle to Dunfanaghy. Henry died in 24th June, 1710, and was buried in Clondahorkey (Dunfanaghy) Graveyard, being survived by his wife and family consisting of Humphrey, Lettice, Elizabeth, Isabella, and Mariam. Lettice in later life married Wm. Richardson, of Castlehill, Co. Tyrone; Elizabeth became the wife of James Sinclair of Hollyhill, Strabane; Isabella married Capt. Richard Babington of Roe Park, Limavary, and Mariam became Mrs. George Knox of Rathmullen and Money-more: in course of time she was the grandmother of Marianne Knox, whose tragic death at the hands of John ("Half-hanged") MacNaughton is known all over the north of Ireland.

The Builder of Ards House

Of Humphrey Wray, little is known.

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His mother decided that he would have a mansion surpassing that of Castlewray, owned by her stepson, Henry. The resources of her inheritance were centred on the building of the stately residence, later called Ards House. Humphrey married Anne Brooke, of Colebrook, Co. Fermanagh, but beyond that fact, and of his having served as High Sheriff for Co. Donegal in 1715, very little else has come down to us concerning him. Estimates put his death as occurring in the year 1733. Sir Bernard Burke says "Humphrey Wray of Ards appears to have been a careful man, as he left his son a very considerable estate; indeed something little short of a principality in territorial extent, and with a splendid rent roll."

Inherited by son

On Humphrey's death the estate was inherited by his son, William Wray, then only fifteen years of age. He is remembered as the hero of many a strange story, and for his having been the last of the old branch of the Wrays that reigned in Ards. He inherited a wide spreading property, complete with mansion, lying along the north strand of the bay, while at the rear of the house outoffices, including a stablery, coach houses, and a number of workshops for tailors, saddlers, shoemakers, carpenters, and slaters; in short a little world of artisans to supply the numerous household. The immediate vicinity of the House was an oasis in a desert; outside the entrance gates, about a mile from Ards House, the terrain was mountainous, with stony valleys and tracts of bog, redeemed at intervals with lush grass and large stretches of forest. In this large mansion reigned William Wray in feudal state. It is said he was a martinet to his family, to his household staff, and to the farm workers.

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Road from Letterkenny

He decided, more as a display of wealth than because it was needed, to build a road from Letterkenny to Ards. He costed the project, and having satisfied himself that his finances would measure up to it, he embarked on the task. But progress was exceedingly slow. In order that the work should be finished according to his self-imposed time schedule the men were obliged to work at night with the aid of torchlights. This road skirted the Bay of Ards, for William Wray wished his guests to see—and admire—the beautiful situation and splendour of his home.

He built a second road across Mongorry Hill, Raphoe, at incredible trouble and cost, a road which is seldom used nowadays.

Magistrate

In addition to his road-building activities, William Wray was also a Magistrate with an exaggerated sense of duty. On one occasion, while a brig was sheltering off Ards, he determined to pay her a visit. On discovering that the cargo consisted mainly of tobacco, and suspecting it to have been smuggled, he ordered his men to bring the tobacco ashore and there set fire to it. The Captain reported the matter on his return to Derry. The damages subsequently awarded at Lifford Assizes cost the adventurous William Wray over £600.

Challenge to a duel on top of Muckish . . .

On another occasion he encountered a young girl gathering cockles in Ards strand, without his permission. She informed the Master of Ards, when he accosted her, that she had been sent by Mr. Stewart of Horn Head. From this episode

grew a furious correspondence between the two men, which culminated in his challenging Mr. Stewart to a duel. Stewart replied, facetiously, that a suitable venue would be the top of Muckish (2,110 ft.). This only infuriated William Wray all the more. Further insulting letters followed. News of the affair leaked out, mutual friends intervened to restore peace, just in time to prevent the duel taking place.

Beggard the Estate

Despite his frugality in some matters, his interest in road-building, coupled with the cost of lavish entertainment, beggared the estate so completely that he was obliged to offer it for sale in December of 1781 to pay his mounting debts. It was purchased in 4th April, 1782 by Mr. Alexander Stewart for £13,250, which sum, it was claimed, paid but a fraction of the debts. Wray's wife, unaware of the position until then, died shortly afterwards of shock. William Wray, an old



Lady Ena on the main stairs of Ards House. She was the last of the Stewarts to inhabit Ards, before it became a friary.

man, broken with grief, retired to Paris, where his son was leading a dissipated life. He survived for only a few years after leaving Ards, dying in a garret he had rented in Paris, poor, forgotten, and completely deserted by his rich relatives, among whom were the Gores, the Knoxes, the Sinclairs, the Olpherts, and the Mansfields.

Uncle of Lord Castlereagh

Mr. Alexander Stewart, the new owner of Ards, was brother of the Marquess of Londonderry, and uncle of the infamous Lord Castlereagh. He was High Sheriff for Co. Donegal in 1791. In October of that year he married Lady Mary Moore, daughter of the Marquess of Drogheda. His family consisted of Alexander Robert Stewart (his heir); Rev. Charles Moore Stewart; John Vandeleur Stewart (later of Rockhill, Letterkenny); Mary Frances and Gertrude Elizabeth. Alexander Stewart died in 1831, aged 85 years. He was succeeded, as stated, by his elder son, Alexander Robert, then in his 36th year. He married in 1825, Lady Caroline Anne Pratt (daughter of Marquess of Camden, Lord Chancellor of England). He was High Sheriff for Co. Donegal in 1830. He died on 25th March, 1850, being in turn succeeded by his son, Alexander John Robert Stewart, who married, on 17th May, 1851, Lady Isabella Rebecca Graham-Toler, daughter of the 2nd Early of Norbury, and therefore a close relation of "The Hanging Judge."

Land Acts

During "A.J.R.'s" (as he was known) lordship in Ards, particularly in 1870, the Land Acts were passed, which aimed at giving a tenant an interest in his holding. But this ran counter to his seigniorial ideal. No sort of opposition was allowed

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to stand in his way; if one man sold tenant right to another his method was simple—he evicted both. To his tenants, he was, in plain English, a tyrant. He was not avaricious; he did not extort unusually exorbitant rents; but he insisted that every tenant on his estate should hold his land absolutely at the landlord's pleasure. He evicted them for the most trivial cause, or none. He died in 1904, unmourned by the tenants, aged 77 years.

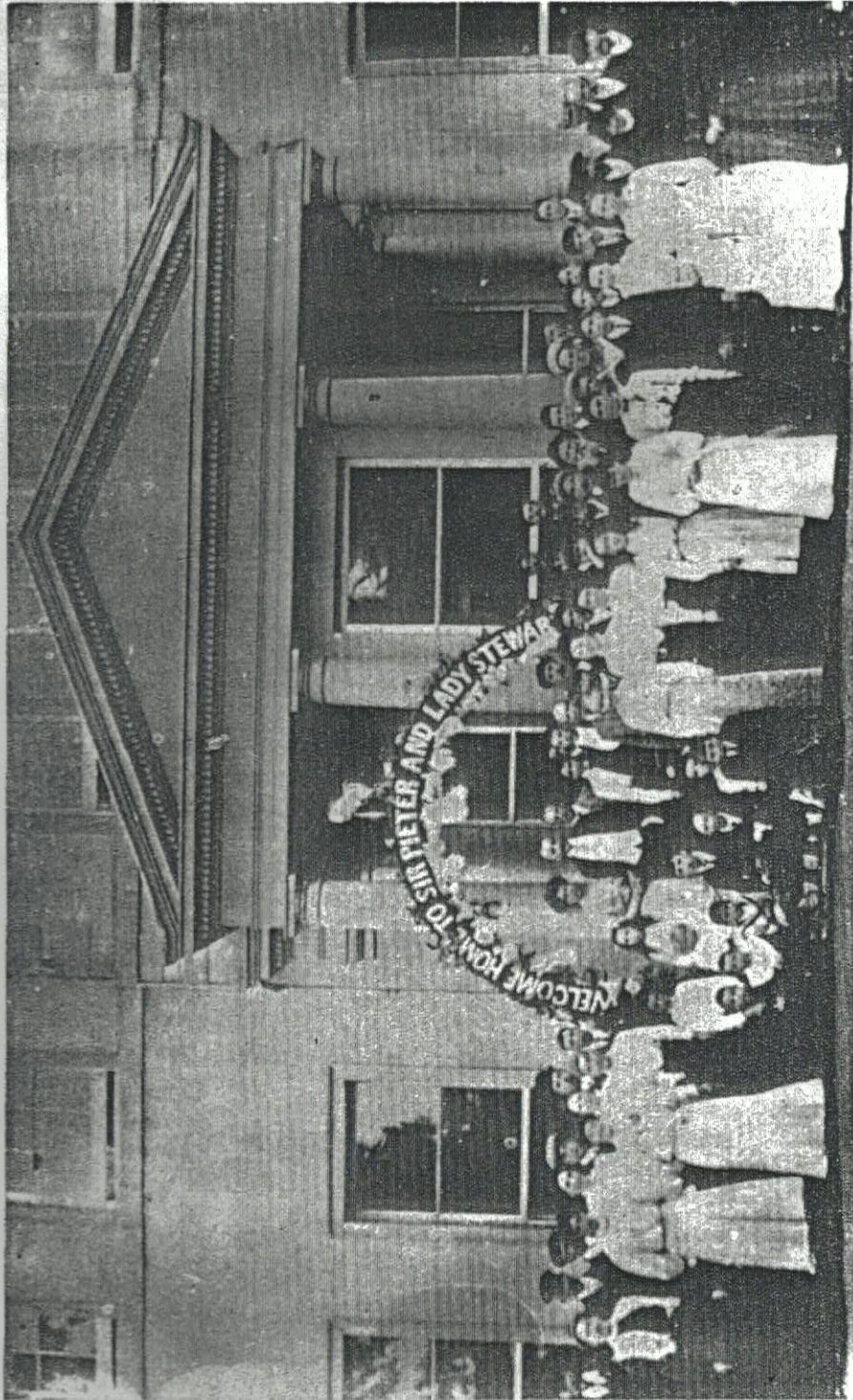
The estate would have passed to his eldest son, Alexander George John, a Barrister-at-law, but as he died in 1897, aged 45 years, he thus predeceased his father by seven years. The estate was inherited by Alexander George John's daughter Ena Dingwall Tasca Stewart. Ena, as she was affectionately known in the locality, married Sir Pieter Canzius van Blommestein Bam, in 1910. Sir Pieter was a native of South Africa. He assumed, with his wife, by Royal Licence, the prefix, surname and the additional arms of Stewart on his marriage. The estate henceforth became known as the "Stewart-Bam" estate, and remained in the possession of this family until 1926.

Ard House itself is solidly built, some of the walls being three feet thick, but the impression of spaciousness given by the external dimensions is deceptive, as the house was badly planned, leaving rooms of little practical use. Part of the house was poorly lighted too so that a large open space running from basement to roof, covered with glass, was necessary to relieve the darkness.

Chapel and Choir

On taking possession the Franciscan Capuchin friars converted the great drawing room, situated at the left hand side of the spacious entrance hall, into a chapel. On the opposite side of the hall, the former dining room was utilised as the

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Lady Ena Stewart of Ards with her husband, Sir Pieter Bam, being welcomed home by the tenants and domestic staff. They were married in 1910.

choir for the community. The sacristy was originally the breakfast room, while the billiard room became the communal dining room. Some of the rooms retained their old uses—the library, for instance, was continued as a library, but generally it was necessary to divide a number of the rooms in order to provide for the needs of the community.

When the Capuchins acquired Ards House they changed the name of the area from Ards to Ard Mhuire, dedicating the peninsula to the Immaculate Mother of God. For some months after their taking up residence, the House was first used as a novitiate, but it was later raised to the dignity of a House of Theological Studies, and in that function it has served the Orders since. Many of the fathers now labouring in the Mission Fields of Africa, America, New Zealand, Australia, and other parts of the world were former students of Ard Mhuire. During its existence Ard Mhuire has endeared itself to the people of the district in a way that Ards House never did or could.

A GREATER LANDLORD

When it was rumoured that Ards House had been purchased by a Religious Order, the news was received with caution by the people of the locality. Old men who had heard their fathers relate stories of evictions, of families being thrown out of the houses to starve by the roadside could hardly be blamed if they refused to believe that anything so revolutionary could occur within their lifetime. Gradually their unbelief turned to joy when it was realised that there was now a greater Landlord in Ards House than it ever could boast of. He will watch over the magnificent new building which the sons of St. Francis have erected in honour of His Blessed Mother in this beautiful corner of Donegal.

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