

After the suppression of the great Rebellion in the reign of Queen Elizabeth more than a half million acres of land in the north of Ireland were at the disposal of the English Crown. The whole county of Donegal fell to the King after the later insurrection of Sir Cahir O'Doherty (a Donegal chieftain) which was suppressed in 1608. At this time, five other northern counties suffered the same fate - Tyrone, Derry, Fermanagh, Cavan and Armagh. So the way was clear for the Plantation of Ulster which took place in 1610: English and Scottish settlers were given land in Ulster, and men who were soldiers of fortune, professional adventurers or cadets of good families for the most part became the masters of huge tracts of land in the north of Ireland. Many of them found their way into Donegal, and may be distinguished into two kinds: 1) those who arrived on the suppression of O'Donnell's rebellion at the end of Elizabeth's reign; 2) those who settled under James I in 1610. The former were almost all of English descent, whereas the latter were Scottish. In Donegal the chief families of the former were the Brookes, the Harts of Doe Castle, the Sampsons, and the Wrays of Castle Wray and Ards. Sampson has a vast tract of wild mountain range lying on the sea, and now comprehending Horn Head and Ards.

Little is known of John Wray of Carnegilla, the first Wray to come to Donegal. He was probably one of the Wrays of Ashby; formerly of EM Durham, the family moved to Glenworth in Yorkshire. He probably came to Ireland at the end of the sixteenth century and was assigned (or bought) 1000 acres of Carnegilla near Letterkenny. He was an alderman in the first corporation in Derry and was later Mayor of that city. He and his wife, Frances, had 8 children, of whom the eldest son, Henry, succeeded to the estate. John died in 1624. Henry got a further grant from the Crown in 1639 of lands, afterwards called Castle Wray, near Lough Swilly together with free fishing in that vast fiord. He probably died while on military service, and his memorial tablet in Letterkenny Church pays tribute to his ex worth: "Et juste et Vrya." He died in 1652 survived by his wife, Elizabeth Gore, and 6 children. Henry Wray's son was William Wray who was living in Castle Wray in 1689.

Wise and prudent, he was bent on improving the w estate: he did not go against King James's army at Derry in 1689, though many of the Donegal gentry did. On the accession of James II in 1688, he was listed for high treason and he fled with his family to Chester. Then followed the siege of Derry on the 30th June 1689 and on the 1st July King William's success at the battle of the Boyne. And William returned to spend the next ten years at Castle Wray. Around 1700, William's elder brother married and took over the Wray estates so that William had to move.

And so it happened that William Wray bought 5,500 acres of land between Dunfanaghy and Doe from William Sampson. His first wife had been Ann Sampson and it was from her family he now purchased this estate. She had died in 1678. It was the Sampsons too who later sold the promontory of Horn Head to Mr. Stewart. And so the singularly wild, romantic and beautiful estate of Ards came to the possession of William Wray. He and his second wife, Angel Galbraith, lived the O'Boyle's Castle, manor house of Pfore, known as Wray Castle, which is situated between Dunfanaghy and Portnablagh. At Ards, William built Ards House which was to be the property of the son by his second marriage whose name was Humphrey. Burke, in his "Vicissitudes of Families" thus describes the house: "a good and large mansion on a sunny bank facing the sweet South, and running down to meet the purple rocks, and white strands and clear blue waters of Sheephaven; and here he (W. Wray of Castle Wray?) lived in a princely way, amidst his woods and pleasure grounds and many retainers, enjoying a climate like that of Italy for softness, where, sheltered from the North and East, the myrtles and geraniums grow richly in the open air, and beds of rhododendrons and fuchsias stretch down to meet the kisses of the salt sea."

In 1710 William died and his widow erected to his memory a mural tablet in Clonderhorky Church (still observable among the ruins.) He is buried in this church. His widow, Angel, survived him by 27 years. Humphrey married Ann Brooke of Co. Fermanagh in 1706 and went to live in the newly completed house called Ards. At that time only the front portion of the house and the outbuildings where the drive now runs existed.

Humphrey was High Sheriff for Co. E Donegal in 1715 and of his marriage with Ann were born three sons and five daughters. Humphrey died c. 1723 at the age of 43. He must have been a careful man as he left his son a vast estate, something little short of a principality in territorial extent.

Their son, "Old William Wray of Ards," is the remembered hero of many a strange recital mingled with a hue of sorrow for his fallen fortunes, and a romantic interest in his having been the last of the old branch of the Wrays, that reigned and ruled at beautiful Ards for so long a time. William was about 15 years old when he inherited the estate. The care of the young boy was probably entrusted to mother and grandmother. He was put to school to the Rev. Mr. McMullan in Dublin who kept an academy for young gentlemen. This lasted until he entered Trinity College in 1726, aged 18. When he returned from Trinity he lived thereafter at Ards. He added to the house, and planted many trees. About 1733 (aged about 25) he married Mary Anne Coningham; and they had one son and five daughters - "the lilies of Ards." Burke in his "Vicissitudes of Families" devotes a chapter of his book to a racy account of the last Wray of Ards.

In Ards, a veritable oasis in the wilds of Donegal, William ruled in feudal state, and with an assumption of power which his neighbours seemed to allow him. He had a kind heart, an long purse, a high step, and an open hand. He was profuse, proud, energetic; jealous, stately, hospitable, eccentric and exclusive. Tradition tells us he had twenty stalls in his stables, kept ready for the horses of his guests, and twenty covers on his table for their masters. At that time there existed only one road from Letterkenny, the frontier town, to Ards. It was a road made by William Wray himself and with such zeal that he caused his labourers to work at it all night by torchlight. It runs straight up and over Lough Salt (a mountain about 1500 feet high). He paved most of it with square flags, and set up huge milestones all along it, and resting-places, as trophies of his engineering prowess. When the guests who were invited to Ards arrived at Kilmacrenan, a village at the foot of the mountain, the postilion unyoked the horses and replaced them

with bullocks, and these animals were regularly supplied by William Wray. So the animals slowly dragged the carriages up the great mountain. As the carriages emerged at the other side of Lough Salt and became visible to the northern region beneath, tradition has it that the Master at Ards from his own lawn took a telescopic observation at a distance of 14 miles, and, reckoning the journey would not take less than 4 hours, he ordered a dinner accordingly. Such was his punctuality. A modern traveller and a descendant of the Wrays, Charolette V. Trench, traversed "Aulá Wullie Wray's road," as it is still known among the older people, by motor-car. She thus describes the view of Ards from the top of Lough Salt: "In the centre of all this bewitching beauty, Ards House gleamed white from amongst the dark woods, as it were the very eye of the picture, and I felt it was no wonder that William Wray could not resist making a road over this inaccessible mountain, to see and to show a marvellous view of glorious country that all belonged to him ..." (Of "The Wrays of Donegal" C.V. Trench: D.U.F. 1945). The milestones were 7 feet high and 4 feet broad and the last of them were still standing in 1830. He made another road over Mongorry mountain between Letterkenny and Raphoe with incredible trouble and cost; now it is used only by cattle-drivers. The road is notable for its straightness.

He was dignified in appearance and manner. One day in Lifford in the Grand Jury-Room, a young fop, wishing to know the time, said: "And, what are you, Sir?" William struck the ground with his gold-headed cane and answered: "I am William Wray of Ards, Sir." In a storm he would allow fishermen to anchor their boats to his trees under the windows. He was good to the poor and he donated the land for Doe Chapel gratis and sent five horse loads of wattles to pale it in.

Of his five daughters, four were married into good families. With relatives and servants coming to Ards, pecuniary difficulties were soon felt. His generous nature let him into trouble and eventual ruin. But it must be said that there was nothing coarse or vicious in the extravagance which beggared the Master of Ards - for he was a thorough gentleman. Their only son, William, probably the youngest child, was born in 1741
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and entered T.C.D. in 1757. He embarked on an army career but gambling and a wild character ruined him. He died in obscurity and poverty in Paris. In 1761 the estate was sold to Mr. Alexander Stewart, brother of first Marquis of Londonderry and uncle of the infamous Lord Castle-reigh, for the sum of £13,250 in order to meet the owner's debts. And so the Wrays left Ards, husband and wife broken-hearted by the cruel twist of fate. William made his will in Bristol and probably died in France, predeceased by his wife.

No account of the last Wray of Ards would be complete without a reference to the famous altercation between him and Captain Stewart of Horn Head. We saw earlier how Sampson had sold Horn Head to the Stewarts around the same time as the first William Wray of Castle Wray had bought Ards. The Stewart in question here had been an officer in King Williams army, and got a grant of lands from him in the King's County, but he migrated North in 1700, and purchased Horn Head promontory where he built a large house. In 1732, a quarrel arose between Stewart and Wray; the occasion of which was the discovery by Wray himself of one of Stewart's girl tenants gathering oysters near his lawn. The correspondence which ensued is extant and it shows the proud, unyielding nature of the young man Wray in the face of an old man of 70 years. Eventually a duel was fixed upon, the site of which was to be Muckish Mountain (2197 ft.) but it never came off due to the intervention of mutual friends.

William Harkin, writing in 1893, called Ards "perhaps one of the finest seats in the North of Ireland." At that time the owner of Ards, Mr. A.J.R. Stewart, was married to Lady Isabella Toler, granddaughter of the infamous Lord Norbury. He was a non-resident land-owner but kind to tenants. Stephen Gwynn, writing in 1899 thus describes Ards: "The most beautiful private demense i have seen ... if a company could get the use of it as a hotel, it would be the most fascinating place in Ireland. If it were in Scotland it would be competed for by millionaires; there would be a yacht in the bay, a boat to row you across to Lackagh." In 1866 Stewart of Ards purchased Doe Castle.

In 1926 Ards House and estate (about 2,000 acres) was sold to the Irish Land Commission. In 1930 the Commission sold the house and immediately surrounding lands to the Capuchins. Since that time Ards House has, except for a short time, been the major seminary for students of the Capuchin Order of the Irish Province. In 1963 the foundations of a new major seminary were laid and this building was completed in 1966. That same year Ards House, which had stood for over two and a half centuries on the banks of Sheephaven Bay, was demolished and now is no more.

Where is now the old Ards with its gay feudal splendour,
The pomp and the power, the pride and elan?
Gone, gone like the snows or the summer dews tender,
And naught left unchanged but the Old Metal Man.

Gone, gone the Ascendancy, "gentry" and others,
That lorded it over the old native clan,
Replaced y by the people, the friars and brothers,
While still to the fore stands the Old Metal Man.

Now the chant of the friars is heard at the dawning,
Or Vespers are wafted away o'er the lawn,
The statues may hear as they stand in each awning
The waves croon their "lauds" to the Old Metal Man ..."

(From "The Old Man" by Aodh Rua,
NOV. 30th 1935).

APPENDIX

Some notes on the Stewarts of Ards, Co. Donegal.

(Submitted by Rev. Fr. T.J. Walsh of Cork)

Property formerly belonged to the Wray family. Speaking without text I am certain that the Wray family acquired property in Cork in vicinity of South Gate at Chichester House sales in 1703-4.

Ards estate purchased from Wrays by Alexander Stewart (b. 1746); he was son of Alex. Stewart of Mount Stewart, Co. Down and younger brother of the first Marquis of Londonderry. Alex. Stewart settled at Ards in 1762 at which time presumably the house was built. He married in 1791 Lady Moore daughter of Charles Moore, first Marquis of Drogheda. (You remember the surrender of Hugh O'Neill at Moore Hall, Drogheda.)

There were three sons: Alexander, Charles and John. The third son, John, Vandeleur married Lady Helen Graham-Toler, third daughter of Hector John Toler, second Earl of Norbury. His second earl of Norbury was son of the infamous John Toler, the judge who condemned Robert Emmet. The old ruffian is buried in the cemetery at the rear of Jervis St. Dublin. A friend of mine delights to tell how he danced on the grave of old Toler the 1st Earl of Norbury.

The first Alex. Stewart mentioned above died 1831 and succeeded in Ards by his eldest son mentioned above - Alex. Robert Stewart of Ards; had another house at Laurencetown; J.P. and High Sheriff for Donegal. He married in 1825 Lady Caroline Pratt daughter of John Jeffries, 1st Earl Marquis of Camden. He died in 1855. Had one son Alexander John Stewart who apparently the last resident of Ards. He also had a house at Gifford, Co. Down.

The Stewart family is famous in Irish history. Old Lord Castlereagh engineered the act of Union in 1800. You remember Byron's savage

"I met murder on the way

He wore on a mask like Castlereagh."

He did not live at Ards but the Stewart home in Co. Down. But he
came out of the same stable. The second and third sons of the first
Alexander Stewart were intermarried with the Vandeleurs of Co. Down -
opponents of O'Connell
