

THE SATURDAY INTERVIEW

Elgy Gillespie talked to

Desmond FitzGerald

the Knight of Glin

THE VISITOR to Glin Castle will see it pretty much as it was nearly two centuries ago. The double staircase after Adam, the gleaming flags and the unspotted mirrors and gilt frames breathe of a feudal lord's court still, invisibly supported by a staff of 12 or more; and it was here that I recall the 29th Knight of Glin flinging open his massive double front - doors upon the night air after an evening's planxying by the Chieftains and shepherding guests out.

In summer, Bed and Breakfast (from "Gracious Living In Ireland" and by phone appointments) give way to three-month lets to romantic Americans, who pay heavily for a fortnight's feudal comfort. The Knight and his three little flaxen-haired daughters and Madame Olda FitzGerald (her name is Leopoldina) retire to the wing behind the kitchens where the gilt gives way to their mistress's Dutch tiles and sunny yellow emulsion, pine dressers and chat of Writers' Week and Anthony Blunt. The Knight says "frightfully" a lot, and Madame — in a delightful half-Dutch accent — inclines to "absolutely", relaxing by a good wood fire.

This is the wing that is always warm and where the Knight and his wife's paper-strewn office is installed. They are, they explain, running five businesses.

As well as the castle, the farm (dairy, 180 cattle) and the kitchen gardens, he is Christie's representative in Ireland and director of HITHA (Historic Irish Tourist Houses Association). The phone goes constantly; a lady wanting a painting valued, a tour wanting to see Glin, the eminent and varied guests coming to stay.

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DOWN THE corridor past the Wellingtons is the loo where hangs a framed poem by Betjeman, "The Small Towns of Ireland", copied out by the Laureate himself and illustrated round the edges:

*"But where is his Lordship who
once in his phaeton
Drove out twixt his lodges and into
the town?
On his tragic misfortunes I will not
dilate on
His mansion's a ruin, his woods are
cut down
His impoverished descendant is
dwelling in Ealing
His daughters must type for their
bread and their board
O'er the graves of his forbears the
nettle is stealing
And few will remember the sad
Irish lord..."*

But the Knight's daughters will be typing only because they want to, and may find Ealing preferable. Flaxen haired and adorable, and 8, 6 and 3, they do not share his sense of duty about Glin.

The FitzGeralds are expecting a fourth child in a fortnight, and pretty Olda FitzGerald is very funny about her nightmares that it won't be the 30th Knight of Glin after all, despite all the people who say to her: "Ah, ye have a little Knight in there."

"I hope Mummy has a little boy, so he can marry Honor," says the oldest, pointing to the youngest, "and then they can marry and look after Glin and we can go to Dublin, or London, or Canada."

They see Canada nearly every year, because the Knight's mother married a Canadian the second time round, and it was he — Ray Milner of Vancouver — who virtually saved Glin. Wherever big houses have been reroofed and heated it has usually been because of foreign marriages that brought in foreign money, remarks the Knight, citing the Welsh coalmines that supported Kilruddery, home of his grandma's family. Probably only 30 or at the outside 40 are left, not all of which belong to HITHA by a long chalk. "Only by running them as a very commercial proposition can it be done," he says, going on to cite his gate shop where teas and meals are served and functions held; the horse-drawn caravan-park; the guided tours of the house by appointment, et cetera.

"I've never been so busy in my life", says Olda, who is of Dutch, English and American parentage. She is a warm and charming woman with a strong grasp of business and arrived in Limerick from London (where the Knight was working as Deputy Keeper in the Victoria and Albert for a while) with some misgivings.

She thought the Bowenesque decay of big houses and woods being cut down, Kilcass like, would give her the glooms. "But there's so much to do, and whatever you give comes back to you manifold. I know it sounds soppy. But what would I have done if we hadn't come back here from London? I'd have been like 50,000 other girls, all competing."

Eventually they'd like to see Glin open all year round, but there isn't any way you can make a stately home pay all the way for itself, asserts the Knight. If it wasn't for the summer let and his job with Christie's, which means driving up to 40,000 miles around Ireland a year evaluating house contents, it just couldn't be managed at all. He has reclaimed



some 80 acres for his dairy pasture, but nevertheless considers his 400 acres uneconomic — "no estate has made anything since the land Commission" — and says no stately tourist-ridden home other than Woburn or Longleat could ever pay for themselves. He wants to see a system of State-supported National Trust-financed big houses eventually, along foreign lines.

"And the trees are just as important, of course." His are mostly beeches and are reaching the end of their lifespan (and indeed all over the country those landlords — and RDS planted beech trees are quietly coming to the end of their days).

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THE KNIGHT of Glin isn't the man to despise a well-cut jacket, a London shoe. You never see his elbow poking out of a jersey the way you often do with the gentry making An Beal Bocht.

He had a childhood of ruins, towers, cloister houses, glebe houses, and his mother (a Villiers) collected porcelain and pictures. His father's family, down-at-heel squires, still had the odd "good" thing left, but lacked a sound roof; they rejoiced in an ancestor (the Knight's own favourite) called John-of-the-Woman, with a habit of fathering all around him. His great-great-grandfather was the 3rd Lord Dunraven, an archaeologist who produced a few weighty and beautiful tomes with a Miss Stokes. So it is interesting to note that his descendant produced "Paintings of Ireland" with the same Miss Stokes's great-grandniece, Anne Crookshank.

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AT SCHOOL the Knight was "just sort of hopeless" and while being reared at his aunt's in Kilruddery went to a private school in her dog-cart. He was so unpopular that the other children stoned him and he kept having to climb a tree. He was then sent to three different preparatory schools in England, where he failed Common Entrance three times, and to Stowes. Blessed was the day his mother married the American, according to the Knight: it wasn't till he got to Canada and then to Vancouver University that he acquired some education, and did art history afterwards at Harvard.

Thereafter he began to isolate his specialisations as Irish pastels and Irish Palladian architecture, and he now hopes to turn his MA on the second into an exhibition.

Briefly he cast off this erudition in the late sixties to enjoy a reputation, according to Olda, as "the wickedest man in all the land." He married Lulu de la Palaise, who graced last year's Listowel Writers' Week in tweed harem pants, stilettos and leather bomber jacket, a Parisian exoticism among the north Kerry fields.

But scholarly books such as his "Ireland Observed", written with Maurice Craig, and returning to Kerry and to Glin have rubbed away the last traces of his nefarious reputation, and his second family don't give him the time to be wicked. Instead, he has become a kind of crusader for big houses and for things like 18th-century furniture: "In Ireland we've lost so much... Not that I think one place should have everything, we needn't be parochial about art, which is ultimately international. But we do have more cause to be worried about the drift of paintings and antiques than other countries."

It sounds anomalous from the lips of the Christie's representative, but he does tell people when important things are up for auction in Christie's so that they can buy them and bring them back again — for a larger sum than would be reached here, of course.

"If something frightfully important is leaving, there should be a mechanism. Say these Robert Healy's, for example... The Knight gestured towards some early Victorian cobs in Stubbsian style "... if they were sold, it would be a major tragedy for them to leave the country, so what I'd suggest for very valuable objects would be a reviewing committee which would at least record and photograph the things if not stop them from going, instead of the current system of stamping them in the National Library." There would then be an option to buy them and a control of antiquities within the country. He feels this might have prevented the tremendous leakage of Irish baroque 18th-century pieces, of which he is an expert and often writes.

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HIS MENTORS in Kerry and local history were Paddy Healy, carpenter to the Glin estate of yore, Professor Wardell of Shanagolden, who was good particularly on ghosts and genealogy, and Stan Stewart, a Limerick chemist and great antiquarian who enlivened his childhood forays to Limerick. Proper listing of buildings is dear to his heart, and he is involved in the National Trust archives above the RSAI in Merrion Square with Nick Robinson as a founding contributor.

Such things make him hopeful about the attitudes of future generations to their pasts, and he thinks school curricula are a good indication of the change. So are, paradoxically, the pseudo Georgian estates which play upon notions of grandiosity in the suburbs. "It's so deeply ironic that these estates should go up despite the cry against belted earls while places like Doneraile are still being allowed to decay."

Ah, the Elizabeth Bowen decay bit again. The passage in which she most incisively drew their plight was a piece in the *Bell*, where she wrote: "The big house people were handicapped, shadowed and... finally queered by their pride, by their indignation at their decline and by their divorce from the countryside in whose heart their struggle was obsessed and exalted. 'Can we not,' their big half-empty rooms seem to ask, 'be as never before sociable? Cannot we scrap the past with all its bitterness and barriers?'"

The Knight would like to think so, and when I asked him about why the struggle was worth it and why he liked being a Knight, and indeed about the general overall whyness of it all, he said he owed it to his family and their efforts not to be the first to give up and the last to live there. "Ennui is kept at bay by constant exigencies. And I suppose I have a certain amount of ego..."

MEMORANDA

the problems of sexual minorities from the Swedish director Vilgot Sioman, called "Taboo", Sioman

run at the IFT last year. Also arranged is a week of Yugoslav films to be shown in late

range of stylish guitar playing to be found in Ireland; with him as the T.H. Trio are Ronan Guilfoyle