

# MOUNTSHANNON HOUSE AND THE FITZGIBBONS



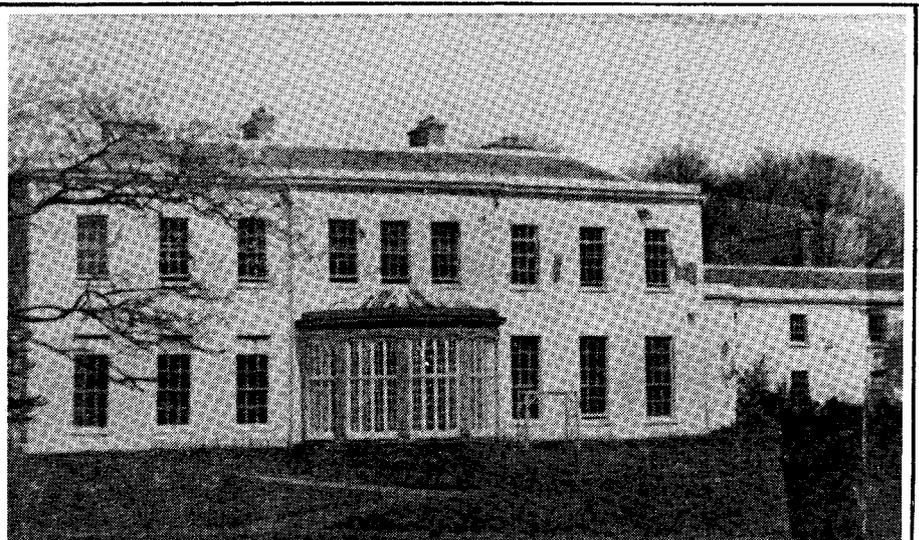
ountshannon House, situated in the parish of Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, is an imposing building, even in its present ruined state. In the days

when the estate was thriving it must indeed have been magnificent. Built in the mid-eighteenth century, the house has a seven bay entrance and four splendid Ionic columns. The estate consisted of about nine hundred acres, more than half of which was devoted to plantations and well stocked gardens. John Sutherland, the best known landscape gardener of the time, worked on Mountshannon during the 1820s. Among the other parts of the house to be seen today are the remains of the stables, the laundry, the gas-making plant, the servants quarters, the steward's house and the coach houses.

Although sources differ, it appears that John Fitzgibbon and not his son (the future Earl of Clare), as sometimes stated, bought Mountshannon from the White family soon after it was built. Fitzgibbon was born at Ballysheedy, Co. Limerick in 1708, the son of a farmer. He was seen to have great ability and qualified in 1724 for a place in the Irish College in Paris to study medicine. However, this did not suit him, so he returned home and became a law student. In order to do this, it was necessary for him to change his religion and become a Protestant, as the Penal Laws were still enforced at that time. He qualified as a counsellor in 1731 and his book **Notes on cases determined at Westminster** brought his name to the fore, thus helping to make him very successful. He died in 1780 a wealthy man.

His son, also John Fitzgibbon, then inherited Mountshannon. Nicknamed "Black Jack" in later life because of his sallow complexion, he was born in 1748. He practised at the bar for a short time, having graduated from Christ Church, Oxford in 1770. By 1776, he was involved in cases of a political nature and was elected to the

by Carole Gurnett



The rear view of the house.

Irish Parliament as a university member for Trinity College in 1780. By this time the Irish Volunteers were supporting Grattan in his fight to get the English government to accept that only the King, the Irish House of Lords and the Irish House of Commons had a right to legislate for Ireland. In a letter to his constituents soon after his election, Fitzgibbon stood staunchly with Grattan, stating:

**"I have always been of the opinion that the claims of the British parliament to make laws for this country is a daring usurpation on the rights of a free people and have uniformly asserted the opinion in public and in private".**

In 1782, when the resolution declaring independence of legislation for Ireland was passed by the Irish House of Commons, Fitzgibbon made a speech in which he said:

**"My declaration, therefore, is that as the nation has determined to obtain the restoration of her liberty, it behoves every man in Ireland to STAND FIRM".**

Even though Ireland gained legislative freedom in 1782, the King was represented in Ireland by the Lord Lieutenant, who was nominated by the British Government. The Lord Lieutenant was in charge of the Irish Executive who, in their turn, were responsible for the allocation of peerages, places and pensions, all of which were used to sway the opinions of M.Ps. This meant that in reality the British Government was still exercising control over Irish affairs. Therefore, in order that the Irish Parliament be made truly representative of the majority of Irish people, parliamentary reform was essential.

Fitzgibbon was made Attorney-General in 1783 with the approval of Grattan. He soon saw that higher, more influential offices were within his grasp as long as he supported whichever policy was preferred by the ruling power. Consequently, he upheld the British interest by resisting vehemently any reform of the Irish Parliament which he considered would result in the breaking of the link between

# Hallowe'en

by ANTHONY O'BRIEN



*A magic blue grey white red  
Sun sets across the horizon.  
It glows all around.  
Shines like silver along  
The rain-stained pavements.  
Mirrors the panes of every house.*

*Is it the last sunset  
Of all creative seasons?  
Is it the calling up of  
All resources against darkness?  
Is it the fire of pagan Gods  
Burning in our eyes?*

*Fire works out aggression.  
Wards off evil spirits.  
Around it we indulge  
The excess of the harvest.  
We are secure.  
We hope.*

*Children play tricks,  
As they always will,  
Glowing like embers  
About to burst into flame.  
They are sentinels.  
Rewarded with nuts and berries,  
They dance fearlessly around  
The principal of spirits,  
Bountiful in the fruits of summer,  
Innocent of the ruthless winter.*



Ireland and England. Believing that it would lead directly to parliamentary reform, Fitzgibbon was emphatically against Catholic Emancipation.

In his speeches, Fitzgibbon maintained that the bond with Britain was essential to the peace and stability of Ireland, and expressed his horror of the militancy of the Volunteers. He also warned of the threat of French revolutionary ideals. The following extract from a speech made in 1789 is typical of his viewpoint:

**"God forbid I should ever see that day; but if ever the day on which a separation shall be attempted may come, I shall not hesitate to embrace a union rather than separation"**.

As his attitude was now in direct contrast to that expressed at the start of his career, when he appeared to be supporting Irish liberty, he was generally regarded as having betrayed Grattan, and became the object of much scorn.

The Regency Crisis of 1789 was used by Fitzgibbon to great advantage. George III of England became insane and the Irish Parliament, wishing to demonstrate its independence, decided to elect the Prince of Wales as Regent regardless of what arrangements were made in England. Fitzgibbon declared that this was against the law and took sides with Pitt, the leader of the Conservatives, then in power, in speaking in opposition to such a move. The

crisis came to an end when the King recovered his sanity. In recognition of his stand, Fitzgibbon was made Lord Chancellor of Ireland and created a peer of the realm before the year was out.

In 1795, he was made Earl of Clare and 1798 saw Fitzgibbon actively involved in putting down the rebellion of that year. He was also largely instrumental in the passing of the Act of Union in 1801. Needless to say, this increased the torrent of hatred against him, as did his notorious statement "that he would make Ireland as tame as a mutilated cat". (Barrington Vol. II p.215). As a result, his life was in constant danger and in 1799 his own servants at Mountshannon were attacked and one of them murdered. In 1802, when Fitzgibbon died, a dead cat was thrown on his coffin as it was lowered into the grave at St. Peter's Church in Dublin. Despised though he was, John Fitzgibbon was not entirely devoid of compassion. After the rebellion of 1798, he saved the lives of the United Irishmen Bond, Neilson, McNevin, Emmet and O'Connor.

After his death, Fitzgibbon's eldest son, John, inherited the title and became the second Earl of Clare. Born in 1792, Lord Clare went to school at Harrow in England where he formed a lasting friendship with the poet, Lord Byron. In his "Detached Thoughts, October 15th, 1821-May 18th, 1822", Byron wrote:

**"My school friendships were with me passions ... that with Lord Clare began one of the earliest and lasted longest ... I never hear the word "Clare" without a beating of the heart ..."**

The second Earl travelled extensively and brought back with him large quantities of bronzes, busts and pictures with which he adorned Mountshannon House. In 1826 he married Elizabeth Burrell but she deserted him after only three years of marriage, leaving him childless. A story put forward by Constantine Fitzgibbon (great, great grandson of the second Earl) in his book **Miss Finnegan's Fault** suggests to us one reason why this union was ultimately unsuccessful and barren of children. There is, however, no guarantee that the tale is authentic.

Apparently lords Clare and Byron, while both travelling together through the Ottoman Empire, managed to gain entrance to the local Pasha's harem. In the middle of their escapades, they were interrupted by the Pasha's men and Lord Clare was captured while Byron escaped. The prisoner was given the choice of losing either his masculinity or his life. The story goes that he chose the former.

When the Earl died in 1851, the title passed to his brother, Richard Hobart Fitzgibbon, who then became the third Earl of Clare. Before his inheritance Richard lived with a Mrs. Moore whose



*The front of Mountshannon House.*

husband sued the Earl in 1824 and was awarded £6000 in damages. When they were living together their first child was born with the name Moore, but by the time the second was born, Mrs. Moore had divorced her husband and married Lord Clare, so that it was their second son, Viscount Fitzgibbon who became the legitimate heir.

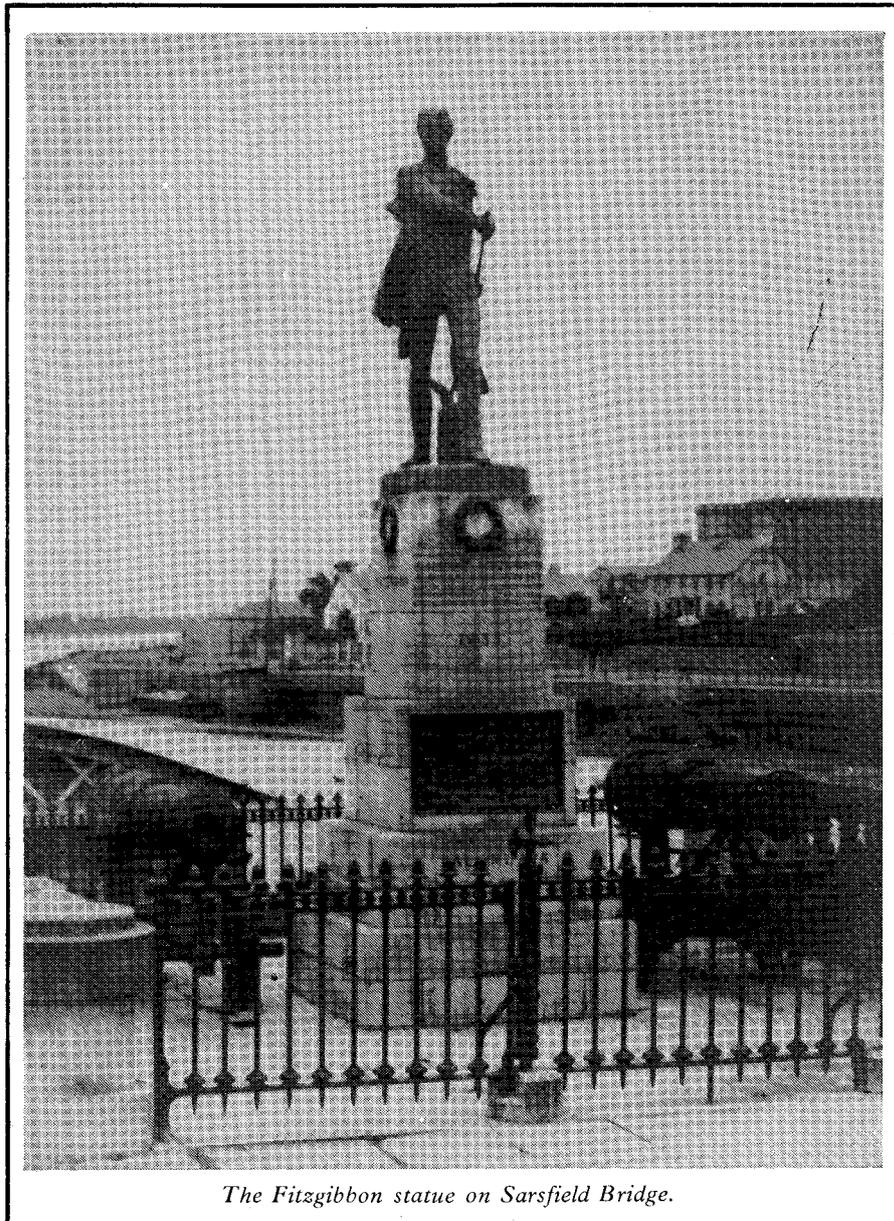
At the age of twenty five Viscount Fitzgibbon was reported as missing presumed dead at the Charge of the Light Brigade in 1854. Once again Constantine Fitzgibbon has a curious tale to tell relating to this event, although it has never been verified. During the second Afghan War, twenty five years after the Charge of the Light Brigade, the Eighth Hussars (Viscount Fitzgibbon's regiment) were stationed in India near the North West frontier. One night a dishevelled looking man who spoke English, but seemed unaccustomed to doing so, was brought into the Officers' mess. He was invited to stay for dinner where he surprised all by having an uncannily good knowledge of the regimental customs, thereby indicating that he was an ex-officer of that regiment. He was not asked to identify himself, but on examining the regimental records it was discovered that the only ex-officer of the Eighth Hussars, whose whereabouts had not been positively accounted for, was Viscount Fitzgibbon.

Rudyard Kipling was intrigued by this tale and used it as a basis for his short story "The Man Who Was", in which a man arrested for gun-stealing and believed to be an Afghan turns out to be an ex-officer who has been a Russian prisoner for many years before escaping and finding his way back to where his regiment was originally stationed.

A statue was erected on Sarsfield Bridge in memory of the Viscount but it was blown up in 1930. The Bard of Thomond wrote a few lines about the statue, referring to the third Earl's relationship with Mrs. Moore:

**"There he stands in the open air,  
The bastard son of the late Lord Clare.  
They call him Fitzgibbon but his name was Moore,  
'Cause his father is a cuckold and his mother is a whore".**

When the third Earl died in 1864, his daughter, Lady Louisa, inherited Mountshannon. After the death of her first husband, Gerald Normanby Dillon, it appears that Lady Louisa, having no knowledge of money matters, became wildly extravagant in her lifestyle. She continued giving spectacular balls and dinner parties at Mountshannon in spite of warnings from her financial advisers that she could not afford to do so. Her father's library had already been sold at Sotheby's by the time she met the Sicilian nobleman, the Marquis



*The Fitzgibbon statue on Sarsfield Bridge.*

della Rochella, who owned extensive property in Sicily. They married. It appears that it was, in the main, a marriage of convenience. The Marquis, having seen the lavish parties given at Mountshannon, expected to be able to use Fitzgibbon money to pay off the mortgages on his estates in Sicily, which were encumbered. Lady Louisa, not realising the position of the Marquis in relation to his land, was hoping to use his money to pay her debts. They were; therefore, both disappointed in their aims.

In desperation, Lady Louisa turned to some London moneylenders who soon foreclosed on her, making it necessary to sell the contents of Mountshannon. Lady Louisa left the country to end her days in a convent on the Isle of Wight. The house remained empty for a few years before it was bought by an Irish-American, Thomas Nevins. When he died, a few years later, the land was divided up by the Estates' Commission while the house, which was purchased by David O'Han-

nigan of Co. Cork, was subsequently burned down around 1920 during the Troubles.

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