



Some Limerick Palatines

In Search of Myself: Looking for Family History in Ireland.

by Bob Reece

Like so many other Australians of Irish ancestry, I was brought up with very little knowledge of what that meant. All I knew as a child was that my maternal grandmother was born Catherine Murphy in Cork and that she went out to Melbourne with her family as a girl, and later married my grandfather, William St John, in Western Australia.

My grandmother died in Perth in the early 1950s and all I can remember of my one meeting with her is an old lady dressed in black and leaning on a stick. I was only ten and would not have known what questions to ask her.

However, her sister, Auntie Maggie, told me that Catherine had met William when he stayed at the boarding house in Swanston Street, Melbourne, which their mother conducted after their father's death. In about 1905 he and three brothers went to Western Australia where the gold discoveries of the early 1890s were still drawing fortune-seekers from the economically depressed eastern states. One brother went to the goldfields at Cue, another found a job on the railways and my grandfather worked as a tram driver in Perth.

Somehow he managed to persuade

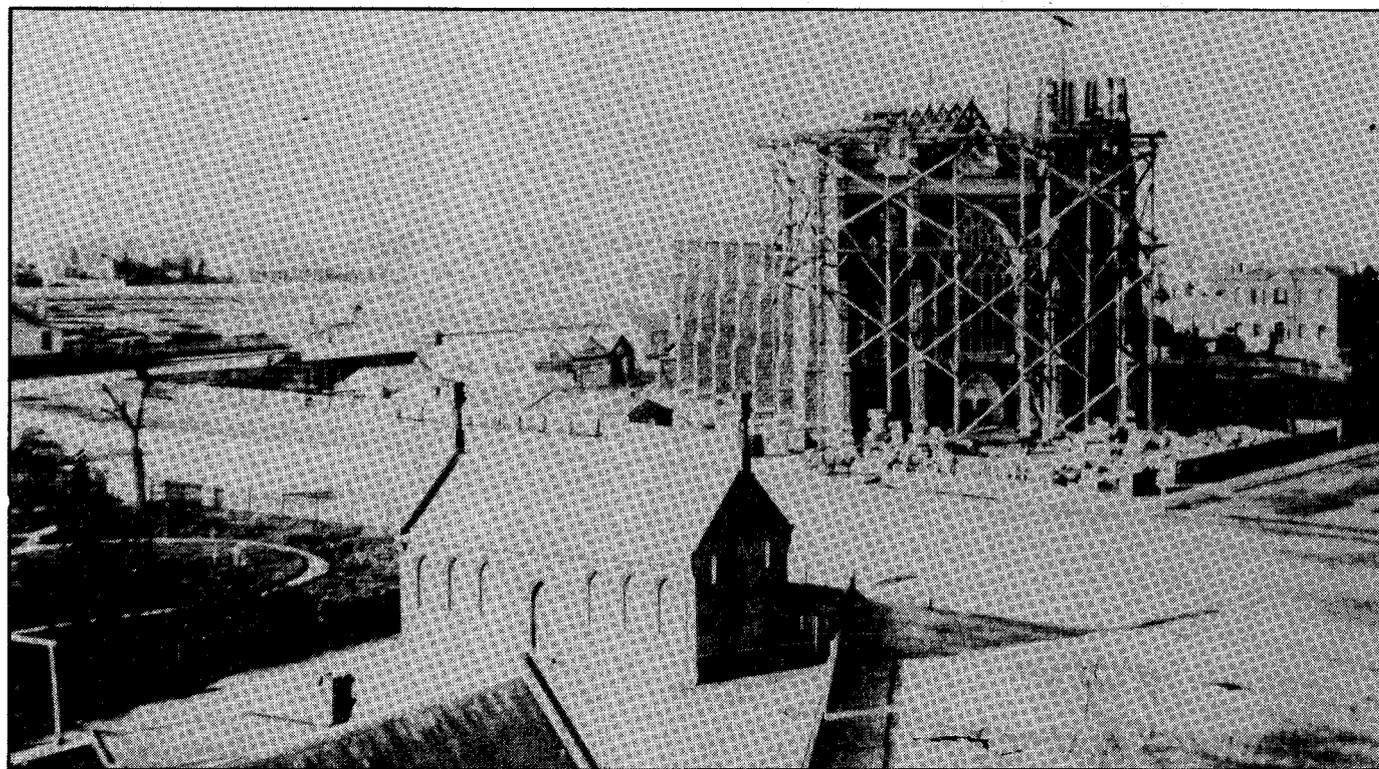
Catherine, who worked as a tailoress for a well-connected Melbourne fashion house, to take a steamer to Perth. They were married at St. Brigid's Church in West Perth on 6th June, 1906, and went to live in Victoria Park, a working class suburb, within easy tram ride of the city centre. There is a photograph of my grandmother taken a few years later with their first child, Dorothy, outside their comfortable weatherboard house.

As the eldest daughter, Dorothy (Auntie Dorrie, as I always knew her), was probably the main repository of the Irish ways and traditions that my grandmother brought with her from Cork. She was energetic, garrulous, hospitable and fun-loving, and I think that this must have reflected some of my grandmother's Irishness. Although not much more than five feet tall, I can't remember anyone who could walk as quickly as she did. To go shopping with her in Puckle Street, Moonee Ponds, (since immortalised by Barrie Humphries) was a thrilling adventure as she dashed in and out of the crowds.

As a teenager, Dorrie was keenly interested in photography. With one of the little Box Brownies which were then becoming popular in Australia and her

own developing and printing outfit, she made a unique record of life on the farm which my grandfather settled in 1911. Under a conditional purchase scheme intended to foster agriculture along the Great Southern railway connecting Perth with Albany in the south, he took up a block of virgin bushland and cleared it for wheat-growing. He also pioneered the introduction of sheep into the area. My grandmother was an invaluable helpmate in those hard-working days and was well-known in the district as a generous and vivacious hostess.

It was those photographs of 'Hazelwood' near Ongerup, that first fired my interest in family history. However, it was a long time before this could be fulfilled. It was not until I was writing my doctorate at Oxford in 1974 that I began to investigate my Irish links, and in Easter that year I came over to Cork on the ferry, armed with a birth certificate which had the address of the house where my grandmother was born on 12th January, 1876. No. 14 Peter Street turned out to be a badly run-down three-storey terraced house divided up into dismal bed-sitters with solitary gas-rings. The tiny leprechaun of a man who came to the door had the purple nose and cheek-bones of an alcoholic and a canary-like Cork accent which I found almost unintelligible.



St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, at the building stage. 'Margaret was a convert to Catholicism, and in her old age in Melbourne she spent most of her pension on bricks for the new cathedral there'.



An early nineteenth century painting of Adare, Co. Limerick.

At any rate, anyone who might have known of Catherine Murphy and her parents John and Margaret had long since disappeared, and I only had the satisfaction of photographing the house for the record. But on that drizzling and, I am sure, absolutely typical, Cork morning I was able to appreciate why John and Margaret had decided to take their family to Australia. Their youngest son, Moses, was an asthmatic and they had been told by the doctors that only a dry climate could save him. Ironically, they fixed on Melbourne, which has one of the dampest climates in Australia, and Moses died not long after their arrival. I only noticed recently that the receipt for his burial plot was signed on 26th February, 1891, by John Gavan Duffy, whose father Charles had enjoyed a spectacular career in Victoria after the frustrations of the Young Ireland movement.

There had been no other reason for the Murphy family to leave Cork. John Murphy, designated 'plasterer' in my grandmother's birth certificate, had evidently been making a good living from his work, which often involved laying mosaic tiles in churches, and I am sure that much of it survives in Cork today. His wife was a McDonnell from Wales, but of Scottish origin, being descended from one of the families who had been forced out of the highlands after the Battle of Culloden. Her father's occupation was also given as 'plasterer', and it seems likely that she met John when he was working with him in Wales.

Margaret was a convert to Catholicism, and in her old age in Melbourne she spent most of her pension on bricks

for the new cathedral there. The one photograph of her reveals a neat little old lady with her snow-white hair arranged in a bun. From my grandmother's birth certificate it is also clear that Margaret was illiterate, so it is hardly surprising that she left so little in the way of records.

I had become aware that my grandfather's parents were also Irish-born and from the Limerick area, so I spent some days there telephoning all the St Johns in the book and making inquiries. However, the response was not exactly overwhelming, and I can only think it was because they thought



At a Co. Limerick Palatine's cottage door.

I was an inheritance seeker. This is true to a point, of course, except that the inheritance is not of a material kind.

Some years later one of my mother's cousins passed on a copy of an old marriage certificate which launched me into a new phase of investigation. At Limerick on 7th July, 1857, Teresa St John, widow, married Thomas Carroll, railroad overseer. Teresa's maiden name was Musgrave and her father, George, was a farmer.

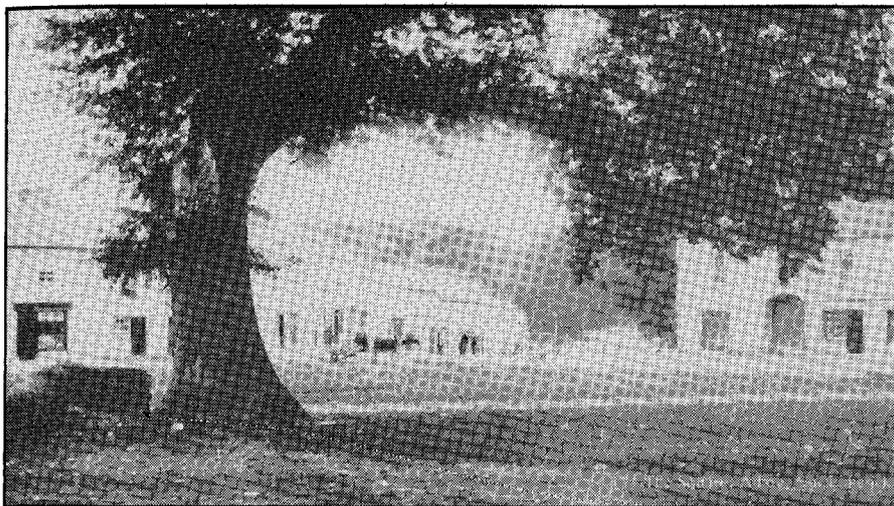
Nothing was known of her first husband, but, according to family tradition, Thomas Carroll died shortly before they were due to emigrate to Australia. Teresa decided to go ahead, however, and in about 1874 she arrived in Sydney or Melbourne on the *Great Britain* with her seven children (four by the first marriage and three by the second) and her unmarried sister-in-law, Anne St John.

How they fared no-one knows, but her eldest son Philip St John worked as a farrier in Fitzroy, Melbourne, and became involved in designing and making agricultural machines. The only surviving photograph shows him standing austere, in bowler hat and three-piece suit, before a shed housing agricultural equipment of some kind. Family tradition has it that he was never properly rewarded for his inventions, but the records of the company which employed him still survive and this can probably be checked.

In 1873 Philip married a woman called Mary Hogan, who had been born in Clare in 1856, and my grandfather William was the youngest of their five sons. His mother died when he was about two years old and he was fostered out to his aunt, Mary Carroll, who had married a wealthy Jewish bookmaker called Joe Nathan. No expense was spared in William's upbringing, even to the extent of a private tutor, but he was only interested in horses, and at the earliest possible opportunity went to work on a horse stud near Wangaratta in Northern Victoria.

Grandfather enlisted for the Boer War when he was nineteen and went to South Africa with the Fourth Battalion, Australian Commonwealth Horse, arriving just in time to see the end of the war. However, his skill with horses must have made a good impression, because he was promoted to corporal. On his return to Melbourne he was proudly photographed in the full uniform of the Australian Light Horse, complete with ostrich feather in his bush hat. By this time he had a neat moustache which made him look much older than his twenty years.

What happened to him during the next few years is not clear, but it is believed that he worked as a street photographer. He had taken a camera to South Africa and apparently made some extra money taking 'snaps' of his



'Oh sweet Adare', home of many Co. Limerick Palatines, at the turn of the century.

comrades in the field. One of our few family heirlooms is an album of photographs from that time, depicting operations at the end of the war. Most striking of all is a photograph of a poverty-stricken Boer family standing ragged and bare-footed outside their mud hovel.

When I arrived in Dublin in January, 1987, to spend three years at University College there didn't seem to be much time to pursue family research myself because of my teaching and other commitments, so I wrote to the Mid-West Archives Office in Limerick seeking information on the background of the St John family in the Limerick area.

From the records of St. Nicholas' Church in the parish of Adare, it was clear that my St John ancestors had lived in the area since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Philip St John, who died on 28th May, 1847, had married Anne Dolmage (died 19th August, 1847), and it was their son Elias who had married Teressa Musgrave on 10th August, 1848. There were also records of the births of their four children: Catherine, Philip (my great-grandfather), Eliza Jane and George, who later accompanied their mother and aunt Anne to Australia. According to the Griffith's Valuation for Adare, compiled in 1852-53, Elias St John was recorded as living at Kilgobbin townland, where he held 32 acres of land from the Earl of Dunraven.

What caught my interest was an excerpt from Hank Jones' typescript study of the German Palatine settlers in the Limerick area, which stated that the name St John (also Singeon and Sinsion) had actually been derived from John or Shon, and that the brothers Philip and Elias John, who came to Ireland in 1709, were the founders of the Irish line. The official list of the fourth party of Palatines indicates that their full names were Johan Philips Jöhn and Johan Elias Jöhn. According to

census records, Philip John or Shon was head of a family in 1715, and on 29th September, 1720, was living on the Southwell Estate in County Limerick. Elias Sinsion or Singeon was a freeholder of Ballingrane in 1747, 1755 and 1759, but there is no indication that he married.

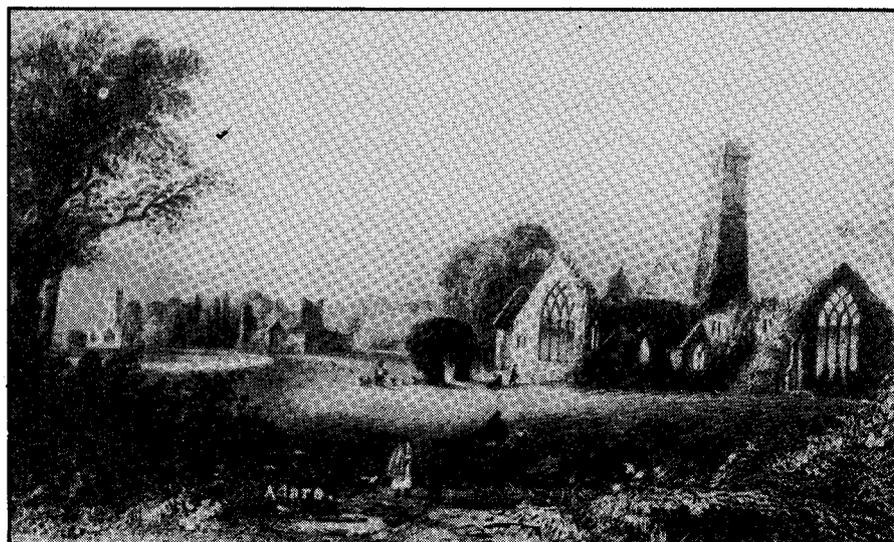
The second generation is more difficult to trace but there is a record of a Jasper Singeon who was registered as a freeholder of Pallas (Palleskendry) in 1747, who appeared on the religious census for Protestants for the parish of Nantinan in 1766, and was of Ballingrane when his will was proved in 1790. It seems likely that he was the father of Philip St John who married Anne Dolmage of Castle Matrix on 25th January, 1784, and was a freeholder at Ballingrane in 1789/90, Martha St. John, who died on 1st April, 1832, aged 21 years, and was buried at St. Nicholas's, Adare, was probably their daughter, and sister to the Elias who married Teressa Musgrave on 10th August, 1848.

The story of the Palatines in Ireland has been told many times and it is unnecessary to rehearse it here, except to point out that the tradition of their being religious refugees is seriously challenged by the most authoritative work on the Palatine emigration by the American historian (and Palatine descendant) W.A. Knittle. He claims that while the plea of religious persecution won the Palatines sympathy and support in the court of Queen Anne, their more serious motive was to escape the political and economic conditions which had made life difficult in the Palatinate of the Rhine during the early years of the eighteenth century.

More interesting in some ways is that so many of the Palatine families re-migrated to North America and Australia in the nineteenth century and it was no surprise to me that additional information on the brothers Philip and Elias came from a Canadian Switzer who wrote to another member of the far-flung St John family in Melbourne recently. From the *London Church Books and the German Emigration of 1709* he had extracted the information that on 24th July, 1709, in London, Philip Sohn, son of Johan Wilhelm Sohn of Diedenhausen in the parish of Wielmeister, Weilb Hesse, married Anna Catherine Kúhn, daughter of Herman Kúhn of Langen Schwabach in Hesse.

I have since written to the Institute for Palatine Studies in Kaiserslauten, Pfalz, to ask if there is any information on these two families in their extensive card index of the Palatines. It seems likely from their name that the Jöhn or Sohn family were originally French Huguenots who fled into Germany after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day.

There are still a number of gaps to be filled: the line of descent from Philip and Elias St John to the Philip St John who died at Adare in 1847 and the ori-

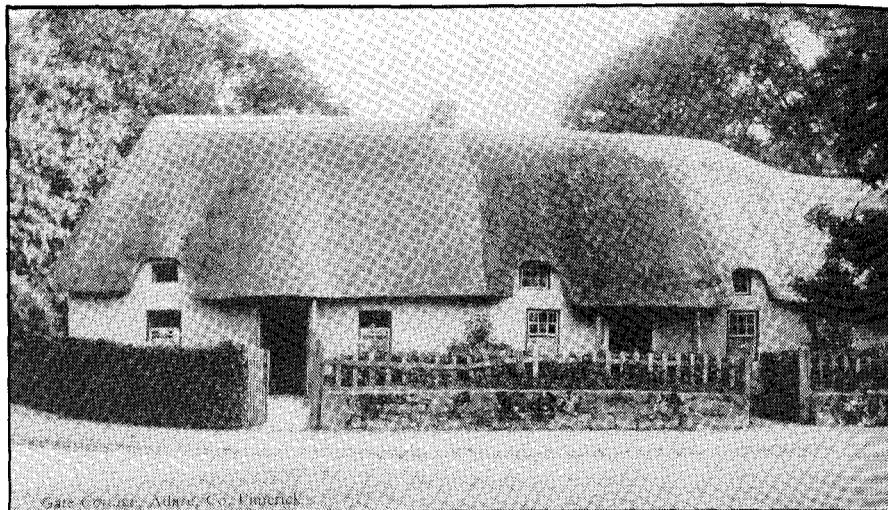


Adare, one of the most picturesque villages in Ireland, from an old print.



gins of Teresa Musgrave in Kildare, Thomas Carroll in Limerick, Mary Hogan in Clare, John Murphy in Cork and Margaret McDonnell in Wales. The earlier history of the John and Kühn families in Germany (and possibly France) could also be investigated. However, there must be some point at which the increasingly remote connection ceases to invest those remote and shadowy ancestors with any personal interest. In the absence of any written records other than the occasional marriage certificate or grave inscription, the imagination cannot dwell for long on what these people were like. Curiosity is naturally focussed on those ancestors whose physical appearance survives in photographic or other images, whose facial expressions convey some hint of personality and character. The significance of this is the belief that elements of human personality are genetically inherited: an hypothesis which remains in the limbo of ideas which cannot so far be proved or refuted by science.

It would be interesting to pursue all the earlier leads that I have discovered, but the purpose of the search would no



Thatched cottages at Adare.

longer be the desire for self-knowledge and identity, which fuels most genealogical inquiry, but a more general and abstract inquiry into what family history can reveal about wider historical patterns which have helped to determine family experience.

References

W.A. Knittle, *Early Eighteenth Century Palatine Emigration ...*, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1979 (originally published 1937).

