

Johnsons—Lineal Descendants of Uí Néill

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In Edmund Spenser's "plotte"¹ for the reformation of the realm of Ireland one of his "wyse counsellis" was the "breakinge of these heades and septes . . . one of the greatest strengthes of the Irishe, me thinckes yt should doe verie well to renewe that old Statute that was made in the raigne of Edwarde the iijth in England, By which yt was comaunded, that whereas all men then used to be called by the name of their septes according to there seuerall nations and hadd noe surnames at all, that from thenceforthe each one should take unto him self a seuerall surname eyther of his trade or facultie or of some qualitie of his bodye or minde, or of the place where he dwelte, so as everie one should bee distinguished from other or from the most parte whereby they shall not onelye not depend upon the head of their sept as now they doe, but also shall in shorte tyme learne quite to forgette his Irishe nation and herewithall would I also wishe, all the Oes and the mackes which the heades of septes haue taken to their names to be vtterlye forbydden and extinguished for that the same beinge an old manner (as some sayth) first made by Obrin for the strengtheninge of the Irish, the abrogating thereof will as much enfeeble them."²

The Oes and Macs were not objected to as personal names, but because as chieftainry titles they carried authority and sovereignty. In the seventeenth century even the great royal family of the Uí Néill sometimes found it expedient to change their name, largely because of the policy summed up in the words of Queen Elizabeth to her Deputy, Henry Sidney, to have Tyrone "made free from any captenry of Irish and specially the committing thereof to any of the family of the O Neills".³ Consequently Sir Henry held a parliament in the eleventh year of Elizabeth's reign to extinguish the name of O Neill and to entitle the Crown to the greater part of Ulster.⁴ This policy, however, could not be fully implemented until after the escheatment of the six Ulster counties (Antrim, Down and Monaghan being the exceptions) following on the Flight of the Earls in 1607, and later on by outlawry, confiscations and transplantations during the Commonwealth period.

One branch of the Uí Néill changed their name to Johnson, thus concealing their patronymic, as can be seen in a manuscript⁵ now preserved in the Genealogical

¹ Composed in 1596; first published in 1633.

² Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (ed. W. L. Renwick), London 1934, pp. 200-201. Dr. MacLysaght, in whose honour I humbly present this effort in genealogical history, has commented on the traditional belief that it was Brian Boru who first introduced surnames to Ireland (*Surnames of Ireland*, Shannon 1969, p. 9).

³ T. Ó Laidhin (ed.), *Sidney State Papers, 1565-70*, Dublin 1962, p. 74.

⁴ J. Morley (ed.), *Ireland Under Elizabeth and James I*, London 1890, p. 400.

⁵ Genealogical Office MS. 177, pp. 114-119. For assistance in consulting this manuscript I am indebted to Mr. Gerard Slevin, Chief Herald of Ireland, Genealogical Office, Dublin Castle. In his *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall*, Dublin 1923, pp. 99 and 404. Fr. Patrick Woulfe states that the MacShanes of Tyrone are a branch of the O Neills, while Dr. MacLysaght also notes the change from Mac Shane to Johnson, and the O Neill connection, in *Irish Families*, Dublin 1957, pp. 17 and 306, in *Guide to Irish Surnames*, 2nd edition, Dublin 1965, p. 121, and in *Surnames of Ireland*, Shannon 1969, p. 130.

Office in Dublin Castle. The remarkable point about this manuscript, drawn up in 1847, is that, in an official document registered by the Ulster King of Arms, it clearly demonstrates the change of name affected by the translation from *Mac Shane* to the English version *Johnson*, and that the Johnsons are thus seen to be direct descendants of the O Neills (see Appendix). The document is, furthermore, embellished with the arms of the Johnsons, which are identical with those of the O Neills except for the use of a crest and motto (Fig. 1)⁶.

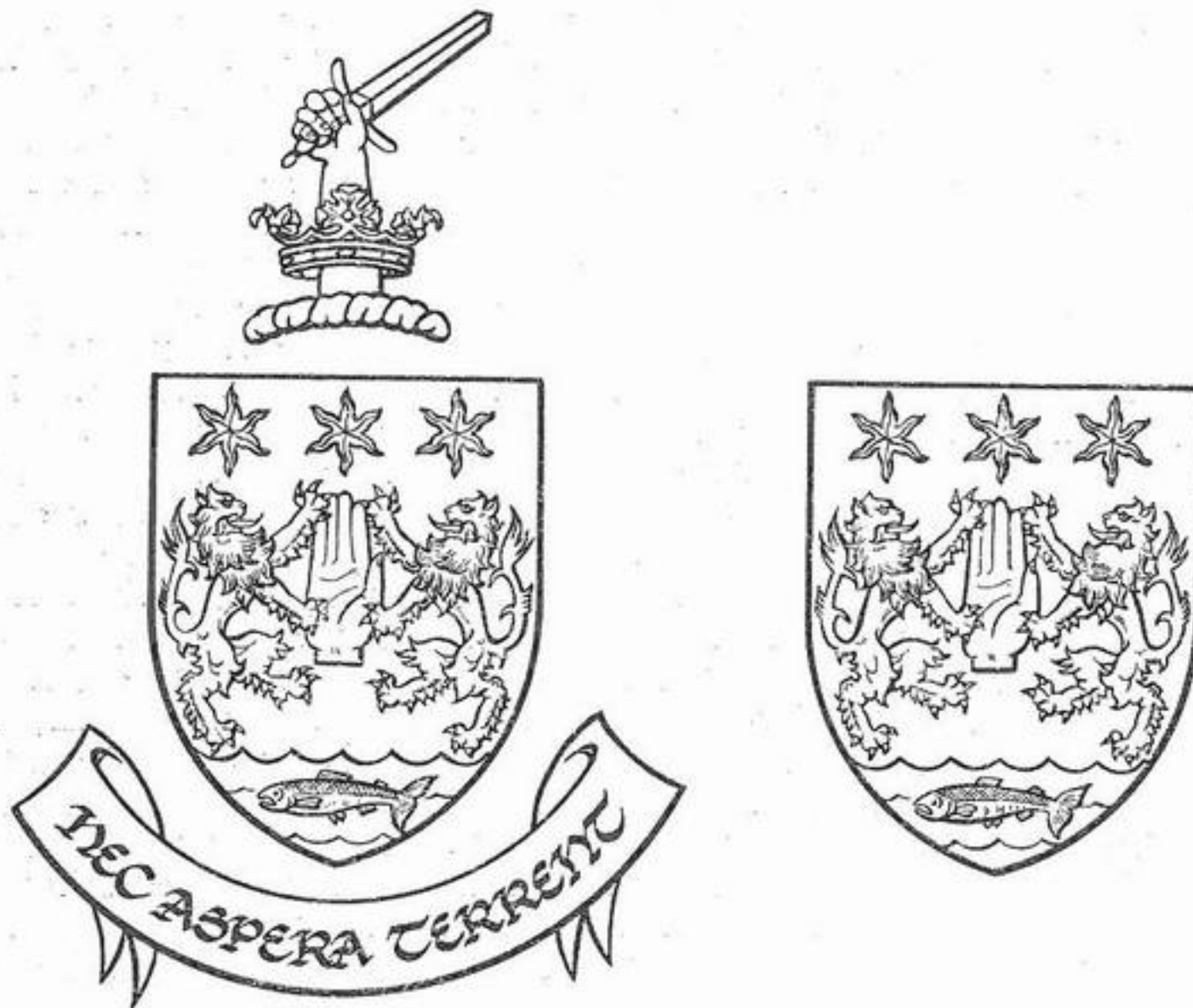


Fig. 1. The Johnson and O'Neill arms.

The pedigree derives from the marriage of Sir Tirlagh O Neill of the Fews⁷ (uterine brother of Hugh, Earl of Tyrone) and Sarah, daughter of Sir Tirlagh Lineach O Neill, Knt.⁸ Sir Tirlagh of the Fews was the elder son of Henry of same by Johanna, relict of Rt. Hon. Mathew O Neill, Baron of Dungannon, who had been knighted by the Lord Deputy in 1604.

⁶ The drawings are by Mrs. Nora O'Shea, Heraldic Artist, Generalogical Office, Dublin Castle.

⁷ For information about the O Neills I am indebted to Fr. Tomás Ó Fiaich, *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, vol. VII, nos. 1 (1973) and 2 (1974), and to Fr. Paul Walsh, *The Will and Family of Hugh O Neill, Earl of Tyrone*, Dublin 1930 (henceforth referred to as *S.A.* VII, 1 and 2, and Walsh, *Will*, respectively).

⁸ Two poems by Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn on Toirdhealbhach Luineach (Turlogh Luineach) in *Irish Texts Society*, 22 (1920), 41-56 and 23 (1921), 43-43.

Henry, the son of Tirlagh O'Neill⁹ and Sarah, who died in 1640, married Mary, the daughter of Sir John O'Reilly, of Kilnecrott, Co. Cavan. Their son, John O'Neill, of Dungannon, married Letitia (Lettice) who is referred to in the pedigree as the daughter of the Rt. Hon. Edward, first Baron Blayney, though rightly his granddaughter. He, himself, was known as Seán O'Neill, son of Henry, son of Tirlagh of the Fews, or *Seán Ó Néill mac Énrí mac Tordhealbhach ón bhFíodh*, in short, Shane O'Neill of the Fews.¹⁰ He took an active part in the war from 1641. Ó Mealláin attributes to him the burning of the castle of Glassdrummond, the chief castle of the O'Neills of the Fews:¹¹ apparently Shane and his company were still within the walls when the English forces recaptured Dundalk and prepared to place a garrison in the castle, so in order to prevent its occupation as an English outpost he set fire to it. In 1646 Seán Ó Néill mac Énrí mac Tordhealbhach ón bhFíodh is mentioned as campaigning with Eoghan Rua Ó Néill after the Battle of Benburb. He is thought to have been one of the several O'Neills of the Fews slain by Coote and Venables (Cromwellian officers) as "Shane O'Neill, Major General". The date of his death is not known, but certain it is that he died before 1661, since in that year administration of the estate of his widow Letitia (Lettice) was granted to her two sisters.¹²

In the document under review, MS. G.O. 177, the son of John O'Neill and Letitia Blayney, Thomas (called Mac Shane), changed his name by translating Mac Shane literally into English as Johnson, *which name he assumed*. This was within the decade of the Cromwellian Wars, the confiscations, and the transplantations of landowners, when the O'Neills of the Fews lost their lands and patrimony at Glassdrummond and were obliged to transplant to Newcastle, in the barony of Gallen, Co. Mayo, in 1655.¹³

To digress momentarily from the direct line of the O'Neill-Johnson family, the change of name from Mac Shane to Johnson may well provide a clue to Esther Johnson (Swift's "Stella") as belonging to the Uí Néill. The name of her father, Edward, first appears in the Kingston (Surrey) Register as the father of his children: Esther, born in 1681, Anne in 1686 and Edward in 1688.¹⁴ The name Edward may derive from the maternal side of the marriage of John O'Neill and Letitia (Lettice), granddaughter of Edward, first Baron Blayney of Castleblayney. This deepens the mystery of his disappearance after 1688. He may have espoused the Jacobite cause like his cousins in Mayo and died in exile, but enquiries at the Overseas Archives in University College, Dublin, were negative. Edward Johnson's wife was Bridget. She and her children were living with Sir William and Lady Temple at Sheen, near London, and Moor Park, near Farnham, when Swift went there in the Spring of 1689. She is said to have been a relative of Lady Temple.¹⁵ Esther Johnson, like her mother, acted as lady-in-waiting to Lady Gifford, the sister of William Temple, and they were treated as members of Sir William Temple's family. Lady Gifford had

⁹ Walsh, *Will*, pp. 75-81.

¹⁰ Fr. Ó Fiaich refers to him as Shane of the Fews (*S.A.* VII, 2, p. 272).

¹¹ T. Ó Donnchadha (ed.), "Cín Lae Ó Mealláin", *Analecta Hibernica*, 3 (1931), 11.

¹² *S.A.* VII, 2, p. 276.

¹³ R. C. Simington, *The Transplantation to Connacht, 1654-58*, Shannon 1971, on page 207 lists Henry O'Neale of The Fews as being allotted land (jointly with John Nolan, of Sligo, and Richard Tirrell, of Cavan) in the barony of Gallen, and on page 188 as also being allotted land (jointly with Sir Maurice Hurley) in the barony of Carra, Co. Mayo.

¹⁴ Kingston (Surrey) Register, pp. 75, 78 and 88.

¹⁵ J. Longe, *Martha, Lady Gifford*, London 1911, pp. 179 and 218.

lived in Co. Meath before her marriage to Sir John Gifford, and when the household at Moor Park broke up after the death of Sir William Temple in 1698-99, Esther Johnson and Elizabeth Dingley¹⁶ removed to Trim, where they are known to have had relatives. They lived at Talbot Castle (formerly St Mary's Abbey), with William Johnson and his wife Jane (née Blakeley). Esther Johnson was always treated as a person of distinction in Swift's correspondence and in those parts of the *Journal to Stella* of which the original holograph letters are extant.

From 1696 several signatures of William Johnson appear in the Trim Assembly Book, evidence of his residence in the town. In August 1698 he was sworn burgess,¹⁷ a freeman of Trim, and attended meetings of the Corporation in 1700-1701. Up to 1707 he signed the Assembly Book regularly. In the years 1705-1707, when Thomas Ashe held the office of Portrieve, a note in the Minutes of the Assembly states that William Johnson's rent for Commons lott was in arrears to the Corporation and in September 1708 having left for England, his lott had been transferred to another.¹⁸ William and his wife Jane Johnson had already disposed of their residence, Talbot Castle, to her brother John Blakely of Rochestown, Co. Meath, for the sum of £45. The conveyance was registered in the Registry of Deeds on 30th May-1st June 1708.¹⁹ Esther Johnson purchased the house in May 1718 for £65 and sold it to Jonathan Swift some months later for £200.²⁰ He sold it to George Dennis of Summerhill, Co. Meath for £223.²¹

In 1722 William Johnson was one of the witnesses to a codicil of Lady Gifford's will of which he was a beneficiary and is referred to by her as having been the longest in her employment. A comparison of his signature in the Trim Assembly Book and that on the will establishes his identity.²²

The change of name from O Neill to Johnson helped the O Neills to avoid the hostility of officials and planters as it concealed their origin. After the Restoration in 1660, the O Neills (*anglice* Johnson) having lost their patrimony in the Fews, William the son of Thomas went to live as a tenant in Smithstown, Co. Meath.²³ As Catholics they could not own land. This was the denomination of one of the lands of Dardistown (a forfeited estate)²⁴ granted to Henry Osborne by the Act of Settlement (1662) as payment for his work on the Down Survey.²⁵

With the marriage of the grandson of Thomas, Christopher (also of Smithstown) to Anne, the daughter of Michael Warren of Warrenstown, the two families—Warren and Johnson—were joined. There was no relationship between the Warrens and the O Neill-Johnsons until this marriage. The name was originally Waring or Waryne, of old English stock. Warrenstown was their home for centuries during

¹⁶ Elizabeth Dingley's relatives were Hammonds, long resident in Trim.

¹⁷ National Library MS. 2992, p. 217. Others of the name Johnson signed the book at the turn of the century, namely John, Robert, Patrick and Charles (M.A.), Robert was twice Portrieve, in 1702 and 1703/4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208; 27 September 1708.

¹⁹ Reg. of Deeds 19. 430. 10479.

²⁰ Reg. of Deeds 222. 127. 1158.

²¹ Reg. of Deeds 222. 333. 1278; 14 November 1718.

²² Public Records Office, 7 Richmond.

²³ R. C. Simington (ed.), *Civil Survey (Meath)*, Dublin 1940, p. 5 (henceforth referred to as *C. S. (Meath)*).

²⁴ *C. S. (Meath)*, p. 6.

²⁵ Pamphlet in Marsh's Library, L4. 3. 18.

which the spelling varied Warynestown or Waringstown to Warrenstown.²⁶

There was a branch of the family in Co. Down who kept the earlier form of the name, one of whom was a classmate of Jonathan Swift at Trinity College, Dublin.²⁷ Jane Waring (Swift's "Varina"), to whom Swift proposed marriage when he was in Kilroot, may have been a cousin or sister.²⁸ In 1717 Swift wrote to Archbishop King from Magherlyn, Co. Down, requesting the transfer of Mr. Warren from Clogher to the living in Galtrim in the barony of Deece close to Warrenstown.²⁹

Peter Warren was the father of John Warren who died possessed of Warrenstown in 1638. His son, Oliver, married Christian Roe³⁰ and inherited the property. He is listed in the Civil Survey of County Meath, parish of Knockmark (The Hill of the Horses), in 1654, as an Irish Papist and possessed of half a plowland (253 acres) in Warrenstown³¹. His property was confiscated but he and his mother appeared before the Court of Claims and having proved innocence of involvement in the Rising of 1641 they were restored to their lands.³²

His sons, Captain Michael Warren, Patrick, James and Oliver were attainted in 1692 for taking the side of James II,³³ and the estate was once again forfeited. By surrendering under the terms of the Treaty of Limerick, Captain Michael was offered the alternative of going to France and abandoning his estates or of remaining in Ireland in submission to William and Mary and being restored to his lands. He decided to stay in Ireland.³⁴ Michael Warren married Catherine, daughter of Sir Christopher Aylmer of Balrath, Bart. At this date the Warrens were in poor circumstances so that Captain Michael Warren had to raise a mortgage by indenture on part of the lands of Warrenstown.³⁵

After the death of his father, Oliver put his youngest brother Peter (b. 1703) under the care of his maternal uncle, Rear Admiral Matthew Lord Aylmer, Commander in Chief, in 1715, who, although Peter was born a Catholic, brought him up as a Protestant. He placed him in the Royal Navy where he made rapid promotion through the influence of his uncle.³⁶ He received his Commission of Lieutenant in 1722 and five years later he was appointed master of the *Grafton* when the Captain was sent with an address of loyalty from the Baltic fleet upon the accession of George II. From that time he accumulated a fortune through prize money and investments in land in America where his principal purchase was 14,000 acres in the Mohawk Valley in the province of New York and several parcels of land on Manhattan Island, the most important of which was a 300 acre farm at Greenwich now Greenwich Village.³⁷ In 1738 he brought over his nephew, William Johnson, son of Christopher (not

²⁶ For information about the Warren family background I am indebted to the pamphlet entitled *The Families of Warren and Johnson of Warrenstown, County Meath*, by Franz V. Recum, New York 1950 (henceforth referred to as Recum).

²⁷ J. Forster, *Life of Swift*, London 1875, p. 38.

²⁸ H. Williams (ed.), *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, London 1963-65, vol. I, pp. 18 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 266-267; May 1717.

³⁰ Roe was also an O'Neill name of the line of Enrí Ruadh (+1650); Walsh, *Will*, p. 52.

³¹ *C. S. (Meath)*, p. 145.

³² Appendix to the 19th Report of the Deputy Keeper of Public Records, p. 46.

³³ J. Dalton (ed.), *King James's Irish Army List*, vol. II, 2nd edition, Dublin 1860, p. 37.

³⁴ Trinity College, Dublin MS. N.1.3.

³⁵ Captain Michael Warren made an indenture in 1708 on the lands of Warrenstown for £1,100 to John Hussey of Co. Kildare (Reg. of Deeds 1. 45. 25); he died about 1712 (Recum, p. 2).

³⁶ Recum, p. 3.

³⁷ Julian Gwyn, "Prize Money and Rising Expectations: Admiral Warren's Personal Fortune", *Social History*, 8 (Carleton Univ., Nov. 1971), 84-101.

mentioned in the genealogical table) to act as manager and supervisor of his estates in New York.

Admiral Sir Peter Warren's first interest when he had made some money was to redeem the home property of Warrenstown. Part had been mortgaged by his father, Christopher, to maintain his declining years and in 1723 his son Oliver, now a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, sold certain lands for £2,100³⁸ to pay off the mortgage. He died without issue in 1724 and the property passed to his brother Christopher who, when appointed guardian of the Franciscan Convent of Kildare, sold it to his brother, Peter, for £500 in 1729.³⁹ However, Peter Warren was unable to buy the alienated portion until his fortune improved about ten years later. When he received a clear title in 1750, he established his nephew, John Johnson, the youngest brother of William Johnson, as his principal tenant and agent in Warrenstown. This laid the basis of the prosperity of the Johnsons in Ireland and their rise in the social scale from tenant farmers to land-owners.⁴⁰

Admiral Sir Peter Warren died without male issue in Dublin in 1752 where he had been negotiating further purchases of land and had received an honorary degree from Dublin University.⁴¹ The Warrenstown property was inherited by his daughters, all born in England. Anne (b. 1737) married in 1758 the Hon. Charles Fitzroy, 1st Baron Southampton. She died in 1807. Her sister Susan (b. 1742) married Lieutenant General Sir William Skinner of New Jersey, U.S.A., and Charlotte (1752-1794) married Willoughby Bertie, fourth Earl of Abingdon.⁴²

Meanwhile William Johnson who had been managing his uncle's estates in New York became one of the greatest pioneers and wealthiest colonists of his day. He was friendly in his relationship with the Indians. He lived amongst them and associated with them as equals, wore Indian clothes, spoke their language and improved their economy by the introduction of sheep and blooded horses. He is said to have received from the Six Nations a gift of 100,000 acres in the Mohawk Valley. He built Fort Johnson in 1743, the village of Johnson, and later in 1764 his residence, Johnson Hall.⁴³ He won the battle of Lake George against the French in 1755, and was created Baronet of the United Kingdom. In the following year he was appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs. He communicated to the Philosophical Society of the Royal Society in London a letter on the language and customs of the Indians (1722). He died in 1774. During the time he was living in America he was visited by his Irish relatives from County Meath. Bridget Johnson, youngest daughter of Christopher, died there in 1774, a few months before her brother. William kept in communication with his family and in his will he left large tracts of land in New York to the issue of his brothers and sisters in Ireland.

Guy Johnson (1740-1788),⁴⁴ the son of John Johnson and Catherine Nangle, joined his uncle William in America to help him in the management of the estates. In 1763 he married his first cousin, Mary Johnson, the daughter of Sir William, who built a home for them, Guy Park Hall, in New York. Guy Johnson succeeded his uncle as Superintendent of Indian Affairs (1774-1782). During the American Revolution

³⁸ Reg. of Deeds 35. 525. 23364; June 1723.

³⁹ Reg. of Deeds 63. 55. 42633; 1729/30.

⁴⁰ J. Gwyn, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴¹ *Alumni Dublinensis*, Dublin 1935.

⁴² Recum, p. 3.

⁴³ Johnson Hall is now the centre of the Johnson Society—founded in 1906 and directed by the New York State Historical Trust. There is a museum, and the library contains fourteen volumes of Sir William Johnson's papers. (Information from the Cultural Division, U.S. Embassy, Dublin.)

⁴⁴ Not included in G.O. MS. 177.

he tried to organize the Indians of the Mohawk Valley against the Colonists. This was not successful. He left New York and went to reside in England in 1783 where he died in 1788, his wife having predeceased him at Oswego, New York in 1775, leaving no issue.

John Johnson (1742-1830),⁴⁵ the son of William, succeeded as second Baronet in 1774. He organized the Tories and inspired Indian raids against the Colonists in the Mahawk and Schorarie Valleys during the years 1771-1781. He was appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1782 in place of his cousin Guy Johnson who had gone to England. After the American Revolution the property in New York State having been confiscated he was granted an estate in Canada by the English government.⁴⁶

In 1786, John Johnson, 2nd son of Christopher Johnson and Catherine Nangle, leased from the heirs of Sir Peter Warren all Sir Peter's land at Moorestown, County Meath (160 acres at £180.5.6 p.a.) and in 1791 his son John rented Warrenstown for £506 p.a. in trust for his father's life and for himself after the death of his father.⁴⁷ In 1808 he bought out all the property for £14,400.⁴⁸ He died in 1818. His only daughter, Ann, became the wife of Walter Dowdall of Castlerichard, County Meath. Late in 1790 they went to America bearing a letter of introduction to George Washington from the French Ambassador, the Marquis de la Luzerne.⁴⁹ Their object was to get back the part of Sir William Johnson's American estate which he had willed to his family in Ireland and which had been sequestered at the Revolution. They spent several years in America but were unsuccessful in their mission and returned to Ireland empty-handed.⁵⁰

In 1793 John Johnson had conveyed to his seventh son, Charles Robert Johnson, his interests in the estate of Sir William Johnson and sent him to America to claim it. In 1796, he brought for £2,460 land in Havershaw, Rockland County, New York (351 acres), and he settled down there. He married twice and had four children. He died intestate in 1801.

His eldest son, John Johnson, inherited the Warrenstown property on the death of his uncle John in 1818. He was the last male owner his two daughters who inherited died without issue.⁵¹ Eliza Mathilde Johnson married Edward Aloysius Lynch in 1866. She died in 1917 leaving her share of the Warrenstown estate for the establishment of an industrial foundation for the benefit of the locality. Her sister, Annette Mary, the wife of Thomas Leonard, died the following year. After her husband's death in 1920 the bequest was handed over to the Salesian Fathers who founded the Warrenstown Agricultural College in 1923.

The extensive property of the "three Warrenstowns" in the barony of Duleek and Dunboyne,⁵² situated close to Swift's parishes in County Meath, by the bequest of the lineal descendants of the O Neills, provided the centre where future farmers would be educated in the principles of good husbandry which Swift had advocated in the words spoken by the King of Brobdingnag who gave it as his opinion "that

⁴⁵ *Webster's Biographical Dictionary*; G.O. MS. 177, p. 116.

⁴⁶ *Webster's Biographical Dictionary*.

⁴⁷ Reg. of Deeds 482. 270. 308478.

⁴⁸ Reg. of Deeds 610. 300. 420297.

⁴⁹ Now in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

⁵⁰ *Recum*, p. 6.

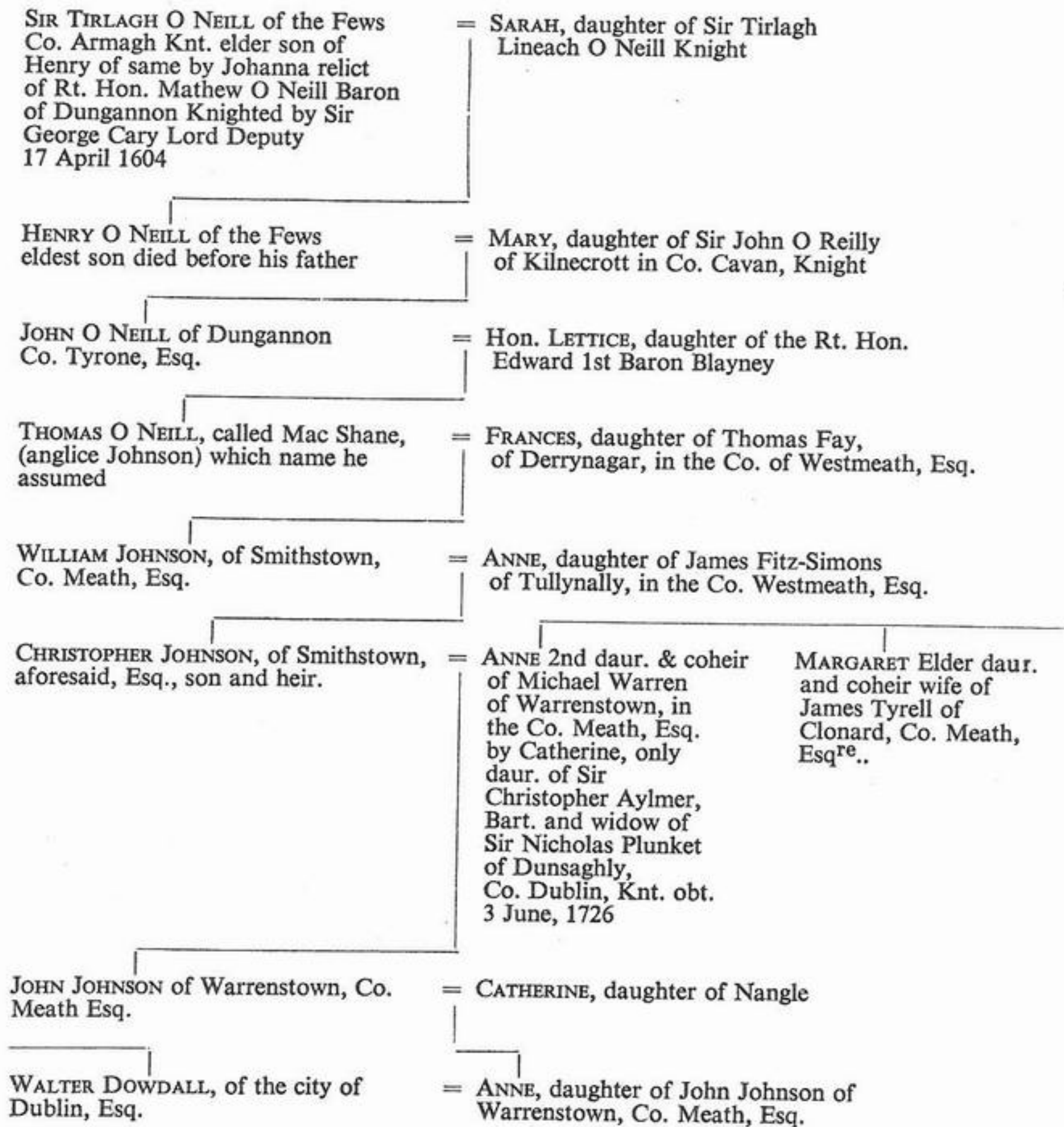
⁵¹ Historical note on Warrenstown in *Warrenstown College Magazine* (1970), p. 15.

⁵² *C. S. (Meath)*, pp. 127, 145 and 152.

whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together.”⁵³

APPENDIX

The following is that part of the G.O. MS. 177 showing the change from O'Neill to Johnson (with the arms of both—above, Fig. 1) and the joining of the Johnson and Warren families by marriage.



⁵³ T. Scott (ed.), *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, vol. VIII, London 1905, p. 140.