

The Diaries of John Singleton of Quinville, Co. Clare

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Among the manuscripts acquired by the National Library of Ireland during the past few years there are two companion volumes of special interest to people in Co. Clare. They are Mss. 16884-5 and comprise two volumes of diaries of John Singleton, the first being a travel journal for 1816-17 and the second a diary for 1845-51.

John Singleton, whose family motto was "Mutare Sperno" ("I scorn change") lived at Quinville, near Quin Abbey, and also had a farm of 200 acres at Baltard, near Kilkee, which was offered for letting in 1855 as "well worthy of attention to farmer, capitalist or speculator". The *Clare Journal* wrote of Quinville on 21st November 1872: "The mansion nestles in the bosom of cherishing foliage giving it a sweet air of repose."

John Singleton, son of Edward Dalton Singleton, was born on 16th February 1793. He was married on 1st April 1819 to Isabella Carew. She died on 1st April 1861, and on 27th March 1867 Singleton married Emma Woodforde, a widow. He died on the 5th August 1877 at the age of eighty-five, and within eighteen months three of his brothers, Anthony, Hugh and Edward, died.

Ms. 16884 contains an account of Singleton's travels on the continent in 1816 and 1817. It also contains a list of the books in the library at Quinville Abbey. This list covers the range one would expect in a gentleman's library at that time, Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Plowden's *Ireland*, lives of Bryon and Sheridan, the works of Maria Edgeworth, and so on. But Singleton was a Justice of the Peace and had a large estate, so we also find four volumes of McNally's *Justice of the Peace* and White's *Farrier*. The whole total on "August 13th 1841 (wet day)" was 621 volumes.

The first entry in his travel diary is dated 13th January 1816, and records a visit to the Catacombs at Paris where "I proceeded to view two million four hundred skulls!! all piled in the most perfect order together with the bones belonging which were taken out of the different churches at the time of the revolution chiefly with a view to make room for the numbers that were assassinated at that disastrous period."

With a companion, Fyler, Singleton travelled by carriage through southern France into Germany. At Baden, a town famed for its spa, he found the waters had "all the smoking appearance of boiling water that I would not take two sups together".

The trip from Paris to Vienna, which Singleton reckoned to be about 840 miles, took less than a month and it is no wonder that the travellers were a little fatigued. He enjoyed Vienna enormously, and went to see the Prater where everybody from the Prince to his valet went to promenade. He enjoyed the bands but one thing annoyed him: "their great predilection to smoking is sometimes very annoying and if a stranger could attempt to alter the manner of a foreign country in any shape I should be induced to prevail upon the Emperor to forbid pipes in the Prater (as he does in the streets) for in my experience I have not known any lady ever take pleasure

in a cloud of smoke being puffed up in her face as she passes a Greek, Turk, German or Jew, who frequent this place so commonly."

But Vienna and Hungary, especially, disappointed him very much in the beauty of their women, a defect "no dancing though ever so grand nor no music though ever so heavenly can compensate, which was the great want of anything like a pretty girl"; "in vain I looked and relooked for one I would willingly bring myself to make my partner for one waltz, merely to have it to say I danced in Hungary."

Singleton enjoyed the scenery through Bohemia, Prussia and Saxony but he looked upon it as dearly bought "from the many toils and bad accommodation I was obliged to put up with"; the roads were bad and the changes of horses were often delayed because the horses were at work in the fields and had to be fed before he could continue his trip.

It was when he was in Salzburg that one effect of the Napoleonic Wars forcibly impressed itself on Singleton: "I cannot at this moment but remark what at the time struck me in so singular a point of view, seeing all along the way every species of husbandry and country work done by much a greater proportion of women than men. It was really astonishing to see them work in the fields, even mowing the meadows was performed by female hands, they reap the corn, and do all the harvest work, and even guide waggons, and heavy carloads of hay which I have seen them fill themselves, and in short are the chief parts of the labourers of this country but more or less I might have made this remark all over the continent, and also that for horses, oxen are in a great measure substituted, especially in France, Austria and Bavaria . . . Nothing but the cruel effects of war can account for this scarcity of men and horses, articles so necessary for the business of the farmer and the soldier."

One of Singleton's overnight stops in Switzerland was at the town of Guldau on which he comments: "Oh execrable Guldau! shall I ever forget thy bugs?"—Hilaire Belloc put it more tunefully when he spoke of "the fleas that tease in the high Pyrennees". To redress the balance of Swiss hospitality, he found in the village of Andermatt "comfortable beds and supper with good accommodation for our nags".

Singleton arrived in Milan on the 11th November 1816. Though his journal does not refer directly to it, he seems to have lost his heart to a Milanese senorita. His last entry for Milan is a poem of parted lovers and his entry for Cremona, dated November 28th, is addressed to "my dear Giuditta". The journal continues in this manner, describing the trip in letters interspersed with declarations of love until the 8th of December from Venice: "Ah Giuditta! what bliss should you experience could you but participate in half the happiness your fain letters brought me yesterday; and then perusing those honied lines traced by still sweeter hands was felicity indeed . . .".

When he reached Rome he explored all the ruins "with more than common care" and he attended some of the Holy Week ceremonies of 1817 in the Sistine Chapel where he heard "some of the finest sacred musick and singing that probably was ever heard by human ear".

The last entry in the journal is dated from The Hague, 21st October 1817, "the evening previous to my embarkation for England."

In 1845 John Singleton was in his fifties and was living the life of a gentleman of his time. His diary (1845-1851) records his regular attendance at Petty Sessions and the Board of Guardians, fox-hunting and Church service. And there was the never ending round of visits to the neighbouring big houses, Castlecrine, Carrigoran, Carnelly and Dromoland. The following are extracts or summaries from this diary (Ms. 16885).

10 April. "Had a vessel of very fine cyder (a present from my friend Wilson) this day bottled 12 dozen."

12 July. "Attended as one of a committee of the G. Jury appointed to examine the plans of a new court house and deliberate on a site therefor."

14 July. "Walked all round town [Ennis] examining several sites for a new court house—reported in favour of two, one near the Chapel—the other near the College Road."

11 Aug. A very fine day—a festive scene this evening at Quinville by reason of a great dinner, dancing, music, prizes, etc. to all the labourers, tenants, their wives, daughters, sons &c. &c. amounting to about 150 as a farewell to John who goes off to London and Woolwich tomorrow to join his Royal Regiment of Artillery for the first time, nothing could go off better, happier or more harmoniously than the whole affair; dancing kept up in the barn 'till $\frac{1}{2}$ past one o'clock."

On the 9th of September he returned from a month's stay in London and found "the harvest in a fine condition". He was at Ballinasloe for the horse fair on the 7th of October: "colt sold at 10 o'clock to a Mr. Howe from Co. Longford price £55—much less than I expected . . . never saw such a horse fair or such a number of buyers, some very high prices but not many . . . a large party at Gills today all insisting upon setting me up for the county at next election; they were probably half seas over!" On October the 13th he recorded "an awfully wet and tempestuous night and this morning wild and windy with much rain". On the 29th of October he refers to the failure of the potato crop for the first time: "to Ennis this day and attended the Board of Guardians at the Workhouse, much discussion on the melancholy potatoe failure of this year". A few days later the Guardians addressed a memorial to the Lord Lieutenant on the subject.

On the 10th of January they were still talking of a memorial to the government "for the furtherance of drainage and other useful public works for the employment of the people during the apprehended season of distress and for the permanent benefit of the county".

"Up at 7, breakfast at 8, chapel at 9 . . . a long and agreeable walk" is a fair summary of Mr. Singleton's diary around this time. The newspapers of the period report regular attacks for arms by groups of armed men and on March the 2nd Singleton speaks of "the state of the county—Whiteboy outrages of such frequent occurrences".

In his own district of Quin, Singleton noted on the 2nd of April: "Many poor people in direct distress for want of food and almost all of employment". Meetings, resolutions and subscription lists were not much good without employment; 8th April: "Mr. Hill, Co. Surveyor here to lay out some work in Quin for the relief of the poor . . . the village is to be improved and thank God that something is about being set in foot at last after such long delay."

The failure of the potato crop was not curtailing John Singleton's social round: "April 25th—went to dinner this day with Sarah, Mary and John to Castlecrine where we had as usual a cheerful and agreeable party, near 3 when we returned."

In May Singleton went to his farm at Baltard in West Clare, and here he found his tenants "with few exceptions are free from the prevailing distress and many

having potatoes to sell". He came back to Quin to find the Indian meal being distributed to those in need. On the 10th and 11th of May he wrote: "busily engaged with the poor this day in want of work and food, half of the applicants for the former were obliged to be rejected and heart rending and difficult was the task".

On the evening of the 16th of May, "a pleasant little party and dinner this evening", but on the 19th, "too many still in want of employment to enable them to purchase their daily meal".

The relief works set in train by the Board of Works were not always welcome; they planned a new road from Quin to Ennis but on the 10th of June Singleton "rode up to the parish of Doorra where assisted in pacifying the poor people who were giving opposition to the Doorra Road".

The weather through the summer was variable, but on the 17th and 18th of August came "the wettest days and the heaviest fall of rain remembered for many years day and night! considerable damage done to the corn cut and uncut and to the potatoes and hay irreparable!! Attended Relief Committee at Quin when we adjourned sine die". This adjournment implies an expectation which was doomed to failure.

The weather at the end of August was kind and the harvest was good "save the unfortunate potatoes whose complete failure is now well ascertained to be universal, and the complaints and lamentations of the people loud and general in consequence both on the part of those whose sufferings will be great and those who make a pretext of it, God help the one and forgive the other! The landlords in the long run will be the real sufferers".

Before the end of September the Relief Committees in Quin and Newmarket were active again; grants were being given for the building of roads and other relief work, but there was a lot of unrest. On the 3rd of September: "To Ennis this day, sad disturbances going on in the county, horses being shot taking in corn to market; farmers cruelly beat for threshing and selling it, armed parties disguised traversing the roads intimidating the country people calling at the different houses swearing and threatening the inhabitants." The *Clare Journal* and *Limerick Journal* of the period confirm this diary entry; the raids were frequently in search of arms, while others were designed to put a stop to the shipping of corn from Clarecastle to Limerick. The people believed it was being exported, but Russell, the miller in Limerick, asserted that not only would he not export it while there was a shortage in Clare but he would make far more flour available than he was getting in corn from the county. One of those whose houses were raided was Hugh Hickman of Fenloe, a landlord with extensive holdings. He sold out and went with his family to Tenby in Wales.

The 10th of November was "a lovely fine day. Went out hunting to dissipate vexation and annoyance after attending Quin Relief Committee and Petty Sessions"—there must have been many thousands of his fellow countrymen who would gladly have exchanged places with him in his comfortable life, vexation or no. Clashes arose between landlords themselves or between landlords and people about details of relief work; 16th November: "a stirring and blustery day in more ways than one, violent rioting to try and force the new intended line from Quin to Kilkishen through my field instead of the lower one as decided on by Mr. Hill". 18th November: "Engaged till 2 o'clock this day in the same troublesome occupation preparing relief lists when we all set out for Ayle where we are engaged to dine and sleep, had an agreeable and pleasant party."

1847

1846 ended with Singleton praying that matters would improve, but he records on the 26th of January 1847: "no diminution of distress! and prices of food still rising!!" The early months of the year went by with meetings of relief committees and petty sessions interspersed with the social round. 13th April: "Relief committee this day at Quin; our boiler up at the soup kitchen and this day first set into operation." Up to this point John Singleton has not mentioned in his diary any deaths arising directly from the famine, though the local newspapers mention several as a result of fever and a very odd one as a result of hunger.

On the 7th of June he was away from home and his diary makes the first mention of his wife: "Received also this morning a truly happy sensible and kind letter from my dear Isabella for which I thank her truly and sincerely, indeed I have reason to praise God for such a wife and daughters in this my hour of affliction . . .".

10th and 11th June: "Passed these mornings chiefly in Quin amongst the poor people who are in the deepest misery—hunger and disease—the cooked food being given out all day long they are not satisfied with it in the prepared state neither in the compliment given in proportion to their families." 17th June: "Hundreds of famishing and discontented people up at the avenue gate this morning crying out loudly against the cooked food; obliged to go down to Quin with them and pacify and set matters to right." The famine seems to have been at its height at this time in Quin but the weather at the end of June was glorious: "the crops all looking beautiful and promising an abundant harvest under Divine mercy". In spite of the famine and of the continuing protests against the quality of the food served at the relief centres, Quin Fair was held on the 7th of July, but prices were not very high.

25th and 30th July: "Harvest work going, barley and oats cutting and all the hay saved, a large stack of which in haggard." On the 23rd of August he records: "the harvest appearing very fine, all my corn cut and now digging out my potatoes for fear of their being dug for me and carried away of which many visible symptoms have been exhibited; they appear as good and as abundant as ever".

It was around this time too that the Valuation of Ireland was undertaken, which is still the basis of our system of rates. On the 14th of September Singleton "attended at Spancilhill this day as one of the Committee of Appeal for the valuation of the upper half barony of Bunratty under the Ordnance Survey, Mr. Griffith the Commissioner was in attendance when all went off satisfactorily, no appeal being entered against the valuation".

In spite of the good harvest, Singleton's diary for the 15th of December 1847 has this entry: "Went to Ennis to attend meeting of Poor Law Guardians, dreadful distress! God help the poor! and aid us in our endeavours for their relief." The year of distress ended with a ball at Tulla "which did not break up till 6 o'clock next morning".

1848

The Special Commission sat in Ennis in January 1848 and heard several cases involving murder, assault, posting threatening notices and stealing guns. John Singleton sat on the jury which found three men guilty of the murder of James Watson. They were executed and several others were transported.

The 16th of February 1848 was Singleton's fifty-fifth birthday and this is his diary entry for the day: "How thankful I must feel to my gracious and merciful God for

having, in addition to his other manifold and great blessings, given me such repeated years of opportunity of altering all my sinful and worldly thoughts and actions and becoming acceptable in his sight . . .”.

There is a whiff of revolution in the air in Singleton's note for St. Patrick's Day: "It is to be hoped all will pass off quietly and that the vast preparations for defence in Dublin, Limerick &c. will prove unnecessary." Singleton regularly visited his property in Baltard; in March he recorded: "rents slowly paid, none at all from the majority, but the poor rate awfully high 6s. 5d. in the pound".

The entry for the 22nd of May depicts the long day's journey to Dublin: "Started with Sarah and Mary at 7 this morning en route to Dublin, reached Limerick for the day coach by which went to Templemore where got aboard the railway train for Dublin where arrived at 9 o'clock p.m."

The press of 1848 regularly reported that people were still dying from fever and destitution in Clare, but Singleton found affairs in a more hopeful state in July: "all well at Baltard, crops, stock &c. all looking prosperously and the tenants not complaining, plenty to eat, thank God!" but on the 21st of August: "one of the wettest days I ever remember at any time of the year, floods very high, hay and corn damaged and in many cases irrevocably ruined. The unfortunate potatoes likely to suffer still more by the continued wet! prospects of every kind gloomy in the extreme". Though the diary has so far given little indication of Quin being anything other than a peaceful area "the new barrack at Quinville given up to the police who came into occupy it for the first time this day", the 27th of November.

Singleton continued very assiduously to attend the Petty Sessions, Relief Committees, Board of Guardians and other bodies which were the duty and preserve of his class. On the 20th of December he attended the Ennis Board of Guardians: "outside relief daily increasing and destitution to all appearance but half relieved! prospects of the total ruin of all landed property and proprietors seem as certain!" And he ended his diary for 1848 with even more gloomy forebodings of the future of Ireland and its people: "if the Almighty in his goodness does not see fit to rescue us and our unfortunate country from the evils and misfortunes now pending . . . dreadful indeed will be the condition of Ireland and its people ere the new year, to commence, draws to a close".

1849

The 12th of January has an entry which seems to be self-righteous and sanctimonious "some of the poor tenants who from their heavy arrears of rent due and their total inability to recover themselves I should be under the necessity of ejecting have given proof of their honesty and good conduct in giving me up quiet and peaceable possession of their land which could be no longer of any use to them and for the present will be a heavy incumbrance to me; burdened with rate taxes and 3 or 4 gales of rent due, but still the poor people could do no more and fully merit the compensation (exclusive of my losses) which I propose giving to each of them poor people".

An outbreak of cholera in April seems to have passed very quickly without causing much damage. Spencilhill fair on the 24th and 25th of June was "a great horse and cattle fair considering the sad times, missed selling my fillys unfortunately". Starvation and destitution were widespread in west Clare in 1849, growing crops were cut down at night and cattle and sheep were killed by the suffering people; on the 10th of

September Singleton visited the Auxiliary Work House in Kilrush, formerly an hotels "now the resceptacle [*sic*] of 500 paupers all well off no doubt". He granted "large abatements to such tenants as are able to pay their rents and stand their ground—great losses by those (and they are not few) that I shall be obliged to get rid of"—the gentleman who was so dutiful in attending Board of Guardians meetings and whose diary bears witness to his regular attendance at church could speak of his tenants as if they were vermin.

1850

The diary regularly records the state of the weather: 5th February: "during the night and next morning the 6th blew the most tremendous storm I ever remember; it was quite terrific and equal to the great storm of 6th January 1839", the Night of the Big Wind.

The new courthouse in Ennis was opened during the autumn of 1850: a celebration ball was held there on November 27th which "went off in all respects far better than we could have expected; dancing kept up till after 5 o'clock."

The diary closes on 1 February 1851.