

A Kerry 'Moonlighter'

CON COSTELLO

Hugh Brosnan was one of the nine children of Patrick and Catherine Brosnan of Tullig, Castleisland, Co. Kerry, and a nephew of Canon Timothy Brosnan, P.P., V.F., Cahirciveen. Canon Brosnan was responsible for the building of the O'Connell Memorial Church in Cahirciveen about a hundred years ago.

Hugh Brosnan, born in 1855, qualified in Medicine at the Queen's University, Cork, in 1880, after a particularly distinguished course. A printed pamphlet of testimonials¹ shows that he also held qualifications of Master of Surgery, and a Diploma in Midwifery; the Carmichael School of Medicine awarded him a First Prize, and fifteen eminent medical men testified to his competence. These included the Professor of Medicine at Cork University, a professor from the Royal College of Surgeons, various medical examiners, and notable Cork physicians and surgeons. After a period in the Meath Hospital, Dublin, Dr. Brosnan was appointed Dispensary Doctor in Killarney, and he took up residence in Kenmare Place there. He was also medical officer to the Royal Irish Constabulary, and this office was used in his defence when he was tried as a 'Moonlighter' in 1886.

At this period agrarian disturbances were widespread in Co. Kerry, and following the frequent outrages the courts were crowded with litigants. The district around Castleisland was particularly notorious for agitation, but it was considered something of a scandal when the Dispensary Doctor from Killarney was himself accused of unlawfulness.



Dr. Hugh Brosnan, 1855-1906.

In August, 1886, the doctor, accompanied by a few friends, went in his horse-drawn car to Puck Fair at Killorglin. That evening, at Fermanagh, near Farranfore, there was a shooting incident in which a police foot-patrol claimed to have been fired at by men in a car travelling towards Lahern crossroads.² The policemen traced what they believed to be the offending party to the farmyard of a family named Connell, where they found Dr. Brosnan and three other men. They arrested all four and took them to Farranfore RIC Barracks, where the men were summoned to appear at the Munster Winter Assizes in Cork. For the intervening four months the doctor and his companions were held in Cork Gaol.

On December the 17th, before Lord Chief Justice Morris, the men were charged with "being armed with firearms and other offensive weapons, assembled at night, with other evil-disposed persons, to the terror and alarm of Her Majesty's subjects." Solicitor for

¹ *Testimonials of Hugh Brosnan, M.D., 1880*; now in the writer's possession.

² *Cork Constitution*, 18th December, 1886; all the quotes relating to the trial are from this source.

the defence was Mr. J. P. Broderick from Tralee, and he engaged as counsel Mr. R. Adams and Mr. G. Lawrence. Twelve Cork jurors were sworn, and at one point in the address to the jury counsel warned that "they should not convict those men because they were Kerry men." Sir Edward Sullivan stated the case for the prosecution, noting that the prisoners were technically accused for what was known as a "Whiteboy offence." He drew attention to the fact that among the prisoners was "a gentleman occupying a high professional and social rank—Dr. Brosnan. It was the first case within his recollection in which one in his position had been charged with an offence of this character." After emphasising to the jury that they were not to assume that the prisoner was innocent on that account, he recommended that he be treated just as the other prisoners in the dock.

The constables gave evidence that they saw the offending horse and car outside public houses in Currans and that, later, when it proceeded towards Lahern Cross they heard shots being fired, which they presumed to be at themselves. When they came to the farmyard where they found the accused men they heard Dr. Brosnan say to one of his friends "It is not the first time that you got me into trouble." The keys of the doctor's surgery, which at first the searching policeman took to be a revolver, were found in the pocket of one of the men. They took the prisoners to Farranfore Barracks. The Head Constable said in evidence that, in Killarney Barracks, Dr. Brosnan told him it was a piece of 'jack-larking.'

Dr. Brosnan, making his defence before the court, said that on the evening of Puck Fair he did not pass through Currans village at all. He did, however, have a drink at Mrs. O'Herlihy's public house in Farranfore; in fact, with his friends he remained on the premises until ten-forty, though ten o'clock was closing time. When all of the evidence had been heard Mr. Adams addressed the jury, remarking that while the liberty of all the men was dear to them, the case "was all important to a young man like Dr. Brosnan, commencing an honourable career—in the early stages of manhood—a young man who had a most brilliant career in college, holding the position of doctor to the police in that district. That fact in itself was pretty good evidence that whoever appointed him did not believe that he was a 'Moonlighter' or a 'Whiteboy'." "He implored the jury to forget that he came from Castleisland, "a district notorious for crime and disorder...remembering at the same time that there was no duty cast upon Cork jurors to, as the common phrase went, to nail every Kerryman that came before them in the dock". There was an attempt at applause in court at the end of this speech, but the judge silenced it.

Summing up the case, Lord Chief Justice Morris commented that "If Dr. Brosnan had gone home at some reasonable hour of the night and not be knocking up every public house he met on the road, he would not have got himself into any trouble, but that was not the question they had to consider, the question they had to consider was, whether he was one of the four men that started from Kennedy's house that night and was present on the car when the firing took place". After fifteen minutes the jury returned with a verdict of "not guilty", a finding which was received in the court with loud applause. The judge said some stern words to the District Inspector for not keeping order in the court, and Dr. Brosnan and his companions were released, to be greeted with great cheering outside the building. Large crowds followed them to their hotel, giving cheers at intervals.

The full story of this incident may never be known. In the Brosnan family there is a tradition that Hugh was involved with the agrarian agitators only in that he attended them professionally. As he was the official police doctor it may have been that the constabulary knew, and disapproved, of his medical relationship with sick or injured 'Whiteboys'. One particular case in which Dr. Brosnan was involved became the subject of a popular ballad. A farmer named Curtin, of Castle Farm, Firies, was on friendly terms with the agent of

Lord Kenmare and one day the latter dined with Curtin at Castle Farm. When the visitor had left, the 'Moonlighters' descended on the place and demanded from Curtin that he surrender any guns in the house. Curtin, who had been drinking, took up his gun and fired at the 'Moonlighters', killing one of them. In the ensuing *mélée* Curtin escaped, but his brother was killed, and another 'Moonlighter' was injured. This man was brought to a hiding place in the 'eye' of a lime kiln, and there Dr. Brosnan attended him. A ballad-maker was inspired by this happening, and part of the verse included the lines "again he rode away, hasted for Brosnan Hugh, the doctor O; they both arrived in right good time to save the wretched Bawneens O".

Despite his appearance in court, Dr. Hugh appears to have remained on good terms with the public officials. When he died, a bachelor, in 1906 there was genuine regret,³ particularly as his death was believed to have resulted from his having orally drawn a typhoid patient. The Bishop of Kerry presided at the Requiem Mass in Killarney Cathedral on January the 12th, after which the funeral took place to the family burial ground at Killentierna. An obituary in the *Kerry Sentinel* said that he had been Medical Officer to the Killarney Union Infirmary for over fifteen years, and for some years a Member of Killarney Urban District Council: "He was a staunch Nationalist, and was held in high esteem by all classes in Killarney, but especially by the poor in whom they had always a true and sincere friend". The funeral was "of imposing dimensions, and representative of all creeds and classes in the county, bearing eloquent testimony to the esteem in which the deceased gentleman was held".⁴ Numerous letters of condolence were received by his brothers, including one from The McGillicuddy of the Reeks; this gentleman wrote that he "no longer looked forward to going into Killarney since Hugh died", and he offered specially nurtured rose-bushes for his friend's grave in Killentierna.⁵

The arrest and trial of Dr. Brosnan and his companions on the charge of 'Moonlighting' must not be isolated from the considerable agrarian unrest in the Castleisland district in the 1880s. In 1883, following a murder in Scartaglin, two men were executed and, in the year of the incident involving Dr. Brosnan, Parnell had "sent Michael Davitt to Castleisland to appeal to the people to stamp out the outrages... as a result of Davitt's visit moonlighting decreased for a time but by no means did it end".⁶

APPENDIX

In *The Ancient Land Tenures of Ireland*, D. Coghlan, describing the dairyman of Munster, wrote that he "occupied a position somewhat peculiar. Socially his status lay between that of agricultural labourer and farmer, it formed a ladder by which the good type of agricultural labourer ascended to the social status of farmer. There is at least one case on record where the dairyman not only bought the farm he was dairying, but also the small estate of which the farm formed part".⁷ This, in fact, is precisely what would seem to have happened in the case of the Brosnan family of Tullig. Griffith's *Valuation* for 1853 shows Patrick Brosnan, son of Thomas, as the occupant of the dairy-house and lands, with offices (111 acres, 2 roods, 18 perches). The rateable valuation of the holding

³ *Kerry Sentinel*, 13th January, 1906.

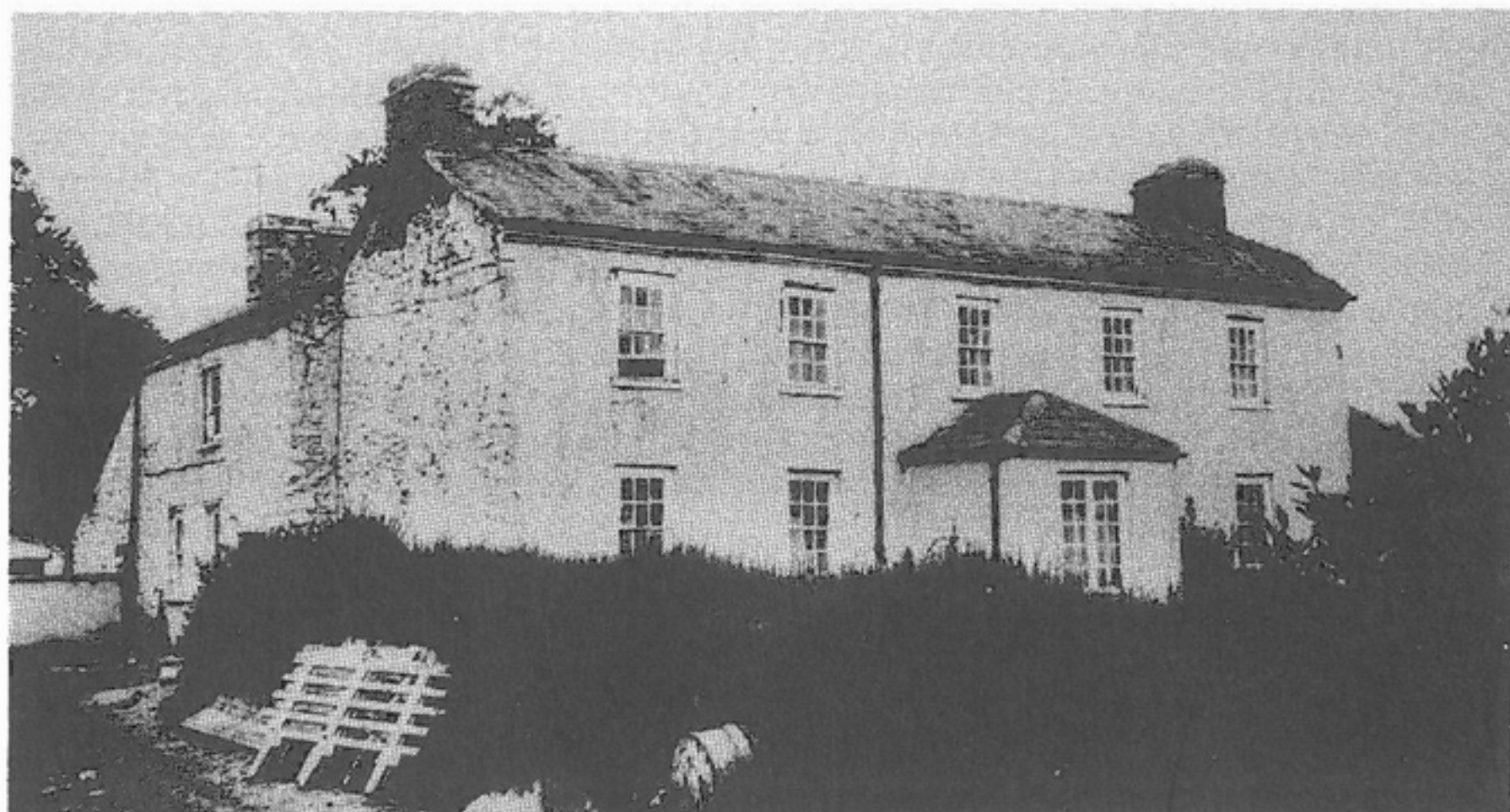
⁴ *Kerry Sentinel*, 17th January, 1906.

⁵ Letter in the papers of the late Mrs. M. Mannix, Castleisland.

⁶ Rev. Kieran O'Shea, *Castleisland, church and people*, Castleisland 1981, p. 28.

⁷ D. Coghlan, *The Ancient Land Tenures of Ireland*, Dublin 1933, pp. 75-76.

was £49.15.0, and of the house £2.5.0, which would suggest that the land was reasonably productive. Patrick is also shown as immediate lessor of the house and garden occupied by Daniel Connell, and of a house and garden occupied by John Connor.⁸ Before his death in 1884, Patrick Brosnan had the satisfaction of seeing not only his dairy-house, but Tullig House itself and the house and farm at Knockbane, settled on his three sons. However, it must be noted that Tullig House was then described as being "old, with the roof bad".⁹



Tullig House, 1971. (Photo: Tim Murphy)

Tullig House, known locally as 'The Great House', was built about 1750 on what was part of the extensive Herbert property; the agents for this property were the Sandes, and in 1778 a member of this family occupied Tullig.¹⁰ Thomas Brosnan, grandfather of Dr. Hugh Brosnan, was probably the first of the family to settle in Tullig, having come, according to family tradition from Killentierna, prior to 1827, when the Tithe Applotment Book for the parish of Castleisland records him in Tullig. By occupation, it is believed, he was a dairyman. This occupation was described by the English traveller Arthur Young, when he visited the neighbourhood of Castleisland about 1777, as a man who "hired between twenty and forty cows, with pasturage, in addition to a cabin in which the family lived very indifferently, their privilege being all their profit, and sometimes not that".¹¹ The dairy was managed on the *bonne clobber* method, that was, allowing the milk to stand for four days before removing the cream.

The three farms of Tullig House, Tullig dairy-house and Knockbane are still worked by the Brosnan families.

⁸ Griffith, *Valuation for the Barony of Trughanacmy*, Dublin 1853, p. 102.

⁹ Valuation Office, *Cancelled Office Books*, tenancy of Tullig lands 1853-1907.

¹⁰ Taylor and Skinner, *The Roads of Ireland*, Dublin 1778, p. 180.

¹¹ Arthur Young, *Tour in Ireland*, 1776-79, London 1780, p. 122.