THE YOUNG HUSSAR
Macdowall's statue of Vicount FitzGibbon, formally on Sarsfield Bridge, Limerick.

Observations Arising from Comments on the Social Conditions in Clare a Hundred Years Ago

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In 1891 a Scottish traveller passing through Co. Clare ventured suggestions accounting for the social conditions he encountered there. Arising from his 'explanation', he commented on the Earldom of Clare and, in particular, on Viscount FitzGibbon, the young hussar whose fine statue formerly stood on Sarsfield Bridge. Some observations, in the form of extended footnotes, are now offered a century later on the traveller's comments.

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One hundred years ago, on the 2nd of March 1891, a Scot, Sir Arthur Grant, Bart., crossed the Shannon at Limerick, commenting *inter alia* that, "even Irish trains reach their destination some time or other, though never as advertised, and after a weary journey I got to Galway". His comments on what he describes as "the stony lands of Clare" through which he had to pass on his journey make interesting, if equally imperialistically biased, reading:

> The original cause of the social condition in Clare arose centuries ago in the loss of a great battle between the Norman interest and the native race. The great house of the Clares was always absolutely loyal to the English interest. Slowly they increased their power and influence, civilising and conquering the country. At last a federation of the tribes, chiefly O'Briens, was made against them. The Norman houses, even then half Irish, of Fitzgerald and De Burgh, looked on waiting to see the result. The Clares were utterly broken and destroyed(**1**), and the De Burghs became entirely Irish wearing the Irish dress, obeying Irish laws and Irish customs, and "fostering" their sons with the children of the soil(**2**). From that time Clare as a county was lost for years, possibly for ever, to the Norman and European civilisation(**3**). The Earldom of Clare, like the Duchy of Albany, has always been an unlucky title. Three successive families have borne the title. The last heir of the last Earldom of Clare, the grandson of the peasant's son who became the "Great Earl"(**4**), was lost at Balaclava, and from that day to this no trace of him was ever found. Gaily he led his troop in that magnificent charge(**5**), but he never came back, and his body was never seen again(**6**). His statue stands on Limerick Bridge(**7**). Not far from Limerick is the grand domain of his family(**8**), now fast going to ruins, like half the great houses in Ireland.
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> –Sir Arthur Grant, *Eight Hundred Miles on an Outside Irish Car: Letters to the Aberdeen Journal, February and March, 1891, Aberdeen 1891, pp.42-43.*

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OBSERVATIONS

1. The Battle of Dysert O'Dea, fought on the 10th of May 1318 between Richard de Clare and Muirchertach/Murtagh O'Brien, the result of which was such a decisive defeat for the Anglo-Normans that their power in Thomond west of the Shannon was broken for centuries.

2. *Ipsis Hibernicis Hiberniores:* more Irish than the Irish themselves - shortly after this period the Old English, such as the De Burgos, Fitzgeralds, Butlers, and others, began to so mix with the Irish all around them and took on the native Irish way of life to such an extent that it eventually resulted in the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366. These provided, *inter alia,* that the English born in Ireland were to be looked upon in the same way as the English born in England, that, in fact, they were not to be differentiated by calling them "English hobbe or Irish dog, but that all shall be called by one name, the English lieges of our lord the king" - and that on pain of a year's imprisonment and to be ransomed at the king's will. The preamble introducing the Statutes stated that:

> ...and now many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, fashion, manner of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves by the manners, fashion and language of the Irish enemies, and have made divers marriages and alliances between themselves and the Irish enemies, by which the said land and its liege people, the English language, the allegiance due to our lord the king, and the English laws are put in subjection and decayed, and the Irish enemies raised up and relieved contrary to reason.

The Statutes, in consequence, specifically fobade any alliance, fostering of children, concubinage, etc., between English and Irish, enacted that every Englishman in Ireland should use the English language, bear an English name, follow English customs, fashions, manner of horse-riding and dress (this latter was really a reiteration of an earlier Irish statute of 1297 which had laid down that Englishmen "should relinquish the Irish dress, at least in the head and hair"), and even went so far as to forbid the admission of any Irishman "of the nations of the Irish" to any cathedral on collegiate church, or to any ecclesiastical benefice or religious house among the English - the Statutes also forbade Irish minstrels to come among the English or be received by them, "since they spy out their secrets, whereby great evils have often happened". While the Statutes of Kilkenny were not always rigidly upheld, they nonetheless irked and annoyed not only the Irish but also the Old English (or 'Degenerate English' as they were also sometimes termed). This whole attitude led just over a hundred years later, in 1494-95, to Poynings' Parliament, a packed assembly led by Sir Edward Poynings which had no trouble in passing the infamous Poynings' Law, the main element of which was that no Irish parliament had the right to pass laws without first having explicit approval from the English Privy Council, an iniquitous law which lasted until abolished in 1783 by Grattan's Parliament - it was virtually an act of union and a fore-runner of the real one of 1800 (see below, item 4).

3. This equating of the Norman (for which one should perhaps read English?) with European civilisation, as a contrast to that of Co. Clare, is clearly indicative of the author's superiority complex and his apparently contemptuous attitude *vis-à-vis* the native Irish way of life. An alternative point of view, put forward by Liam de Paor on the 15th of August 1991 during the celebrations in Athenry, Co. Galway, for the 750th anniversary of the founding of the Dominican Priory of SS. Peter and Paul there, is undoubtedly more accurate and valid and is worth mentioning. He compared the end-results of two of the major and most significant battles fought in medieval Ireland, that fought on the 10th of August 1316 at Athenry, and that fought almost two years later on the 10th of May 1318 at Dysert O'Dea. In the former

battle the Anglo-Normans under Richard de Bermingham, Lord of Athenry, and William Liath de Burgo roundly defeated, with terrible loss, the Irish under Felim O'Connor and chiefs from Connacht, Meath, Thomond and Brefni. The long-term end-result was that henceforward the Anglo-Normans remained secure in most of Connacht, while in the latter battle, as we have seem above (item 1), the Irish were victorious and a halt was put to the Anglo-Normans conquest of Thomond. Liam de Paor also emphasised that one of the more interesting consequences was that Connacht subsequently developed in a more English European manner, with its feudal customs and laws, while Co. Clare developed in a more Irish but nonetheless European manner, with its Brehon laws and Gaelic way of life. It was not until the Elizabethan, Cromwellian and Jacobite/Williamite Wars that any semblance of uniformity in both areas was accomplished, except that there resulted an impoverished and landless Irish Catholic society on the one hand, and a wealthy, landed Protestant Ascendancy on the other – in both areas. Sir Arthur Grant's observation is clearly based on his own background, typical of the great days of the British Empire " on which the sun never sets". Consequently he could hardly be blamed for his colonial view which saw everything British as best and most civilised, while other cultures and civilisations, be they Indian, African, Australasian or Irish, were regarded as "lost" and beyond comprehension. A better appreciation of Irish history would have given him a different, less biased perspective.

4. This is John FitzGibbon (1748-1802), better known as Black Jack because of his swarthy, olive complexion. He began by practising at the bar for a while but entered politics in 1780 as a member for Trinity College in what two years later became known as Grattan's Parliament. He became Attorney-General in 1783 and Lord High Chancellor of Ireland in 1789. In 1786 he had married Anne Whaley, sister of Thomas Chapel Whaley, better known as Buck Whaley, a famous gambler and eccentric. In 1789 he was appointed Lord Chancellor of Ireland, with which he was given the title of Baron FitzGibbon of Lower Connello. In 1790 he and his former friend Grattan became bitter political enemies, and three years later he began to favour a parliamentary Union with Westminister and in 1795 was created Earl of Clare. An unpopular and much-hated man, his house was regularly stoned and he himself, several times physically attacked. However, by bribery and corruption (*e.g.* granting of peerages[1], etc.) he succeeded in steering the Act of Union through the Irish Parliament in 1800, and in 1801 it became law. He went to London, took his seat in the House of Lords there, but thanks to his arrogant and bullying manner was disliked and distrusted. He returned to Ireland and died in January 1802. To call him a "peasant's son" is not quite accurate. His ancestry may well extend back to the White Knight, one of the three hereditary knights of Desmond[2]. However, due no doubt to the Penal Laws his own branch of the family became dispossessed and impoverished, his grandfather being a small farmer living in Ballysheedy, Limerick. A devout Catholic, one of his sons Thomas, Lord Clare's uncle, entered the priesthood. Black Jack's father, also called John, eventually made a fortune at the bar, which involved changing his religion, and Black Jack was, therefore, born into riches.

5. "Magnificent" yes, but utterly stupid, this was the notorious Charge of the Light Brigade led by Lord Cardigan which took place on the 25th of October 1854, during the Crimean War.

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[1]For an account of these see J. G. Swift Mac Neill, *Titled Corruption,* London 1894.

[2]For these, see G. A. Lee, "The White Knights and Their Kinsmen", in E. Rynne (ed.), *North Munster Studies,* Limerick 1967, pp. 251-265.

6. He was John Edward Viscount FitzGibbon, a young hussar at the time. There are several stories about him subsequently re-appearing many years later, including in the Post Office in Hounslow, London, and in India telling a tale about having been captured by the Russians, presumably after the Charge, and being sent to Siberia. This latter story is probably that recounted in *Miss Finnegan's Fault* (London 1953), a much under-rated account (almost an apologia for Black Jack) of the author Constantine FitzGibbon's search for information about his ancestors, including his great grand-uncle, the young hussar. His version (p.32) is as follows:

> Of this young officer a curious tale is told for the truth of which I cannot vouch. As I have said, he was missing believed killed in the charge of the Light Brigade. A quarter of a century later, during the Second Afghan War, his regiment, the 8th Hussars, was stationed in India, near the Northwest Frontier. One evening a bowed and tattered figure was brought by the sergeant of the guard into the officers' mess. He spoke a halting, rusty English. No officer knew him and yet, since he was apparently a gentleman of their own race in this distant place, he was invited to dine. Since he did not say who he was, no one asked him his name - manners were better in those days - though he mentioned Siberia. He was plainly at home and knew the various regimental customs. After dinner he thanked his hosts and disappeared into the night. An examination of regimental records showed that the only ex-officer of the 8th Hussars who would be the stranger's approximate age, and whose whereabouts could not be accounted for, was Lord FitzGibbon. Kipling based a short story on this strange anecdote, which he entitled *The Man Who Was.*

7. A fine bronze statue of the dashing young hussar shown drawing his sword (see illustration), by Patrick Macdowell (1799-1870), a Belfast sculptor noted particularly for the 'Europe' group on the Albert Memorial in London. It was cast in the Statue Foundry, Liverpool, and was originally intended for erection in the Crescent, Limerick, but was eventually in 1857, erected on Sarsfield's Bridge, facing the Limerick Boat Club, flanked by two canons from the Crimean War. Fine and attractive as the statue was, and popular and all as was apparently the young officer, the statue was considered fair game for the mindless vandalism of self-styled patriots. In 1870 no doubt due to the nationalistic attitude evoked by the Fenians three years earlier, the hussar's spurs were sawn off and cast into the river, and about the same time a rope was stretched between the statue and a heavily-laden barge on the river below in the hope that when the tide went out the barge would not only be lower but also be drifting out to sea and thus pull the statue after it into the river. The scheme failed. Finally, in 1930, the statue was blown up by explosives, "a senseless act of vandalism ... no doubt intended as an act of petty revenge against his grandfather, the hated architect of the Union..." (Constantine FitzGibbon, *loc. cit.*) - I am grateful to Kevin Hannan, who remembers hearing the blast in 1930, for much of the above information. A monument to the Limerick heroes of 1916, by Albert Power, R.H.A., was erected in place of the Fitzgibbon statue in 1956.

8. Mountshannon House near Annacotty, just outside Limerick; a fine mansion erected by the White family in 1750 and acquired later by the FitzGibbons; enlarged and furnished by Black Jack and later (after 1813) remodelled in neo-Classical style by Lewis Wyatt and James Pain for Black Jack's son, John, the 2nd Earl of Clare. Lady Louisa FitzGibbon, daughter of Richard, John's brother who in 1851 succeeded him as the 3rd (and last) Earl, and the sister of John Edward, the hussar, was the last of the family to reside in Mountshannon. She left Ireland in 1887 and a year later sold the valuable contents; about 1893 she sold the house and estate to Thomas Nevins, a wealthy Irish-American. The house was burned down in 1920 during the War of Independence, and when its owner died the Land Commission divided up the 900-acre estate. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*