

Trouble on the Bilboa Estate

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The background and immediate context of a threatening letter written to the land agent on the Bilboa estate of the Earl of Stradbroke is discussed. Some of the people mentioned are identified and a date for the letter is suggested. The full text is then reproduced without any alteration in spelling, grammar or construction with the frequent underlining for emphasis of the original retained.

The letter printed below was sent to Abraham Coates, agent to John Edward Cornwallis Rous, 2nd Earl of Stradbroke, the owner of the Bilboa estate near Cappamore, Co. Limerick. It is transcribed from the Stradbroke papers in the Suffolk County Record Office in Ipswich. While the letter is undated, it appears to have been written in 1830. The reference to rents due in 1831 shows that it was written prior to that year. The term 'King Daniel O'Connell' implies it is post 1829 and the fact that Captain Blood was assassinated in 1830 confirms this dating. The mention of Fr Ryan as Parish Priest is of no value as Fr John Ryan, PP of Cappamore 1808-33 was succeeded by another Fr John Ryan, PP 1833-49.

The Bilboa estate comprised about two thousand acres and was situated partly in Co. Limerick and partly in Co. Tipperary. In Limerick, it included the townlands of Bilboa, Islandorough, Kilgarraf, Shanaclune, Crehane, Lackabeg, Lackamore, Curraghlahan and Clonteen in the present parish of Cappamore. The name Bilboa is from the Irish, Béal Átha Bó, the mouth of the ford of the cattle. The estate was acquired in the seventeenth century by Gameliel Warter whose granddaughter, Catherine, co-heiress with her sister Margaret, married Rev. George Story, the Williamite army chaplain and historian of the 1690-1 sieges of Limerick. In a petition to the King in 1701 Catherine claimed that the total damage to her estate during the war amounted to £13, 068 including the burning of the manor house and market town of Bilboa. Bilboa Court, the ruins of which still survive, appears to be a later eighteenth century replacement for this manor house.

There were no children of the Story marriage and the estate passed to Edward Wilson, the son of Margaret Warter, who had married Ralph Wilson, son of a Cromwellian settler and High Sheriff of Limerick in 1695. Edward added the Warter name to his own and married Frances Ann Evans, daughter of Lord Carbery. Their only child, Frances Juliana Warter Wilson married in 1788 Sir John Rous of Henham Hall, Wangford, Suffolk, who became the First Earl of Stradbroke in 1821. He is called 'Old Rous' in the letter. Frances died in 1790, leaving an infant daughter but her husband took over the Bilboa estate and in 1827, on his death, it passed to his eldest son from his second marriage, John Edward Cornwallis, the 2nd Earl and the man referred to as Stradbroke in the letter.

The letter shows that the Wilson family, not surprisingly, disputed Stradbroke's title to the estate and the 'Garryowen Boys' cleverly attempt to exploit this. They use their threat of support for 'old Wilson' to force concessions regarding evicted tenants and arrears of rent from the Earl and his agent. There is an amusing ambivalence throughout, suggesting on the one hand that the Wilsons are the rightful owners and will treat the tenants fairly in return for their support while on the other hand prepared to accept Stradbroke if he concedes their demands. There is no way of determining if the claim that the

Wilsons had promised concessions to the tenants in return for their support in recovering the estate is correct but its use as a threat is very clever. The references to the dire fate of others are clearly intended to intimidate. Captain Blood was the agent for the estate before Mr. Coates and he was killed in East Clare; Wheeler, another agent in East Limerick and Keys, a tithe proctor had also been murdered.

The writer is very articulate and handwriting, spelling and grammar are generally of a good standard. The letter has been reproduced exactly as written with the underlined passages shown. The Earl of Stradbroke sold the estate not long afterwards to Waller O'Grady of nearby Castlegarde. While the uncertainty over title and the threatened legal action by the Wilsons may have been a factor in this decision, it is tempting to speculate that this letter and the longer one sent directly to Stradbroke, might have been the decisive reason why the estate was sold and the threats of the Garryowen Boys on behalf of the Bilboanians may have succeeded far beyond their expectations or indeed their intention.

Sir,

We the Garryowen boys the brothers and friends of the Bilboanians and of all the tenants on the Bilboa estate wrote a long letter this post by our Secretary to Stradbroke but it was afterwards voted in our committee that the secretary should write this post to you, that we should not loose two days with you and Stradbroke from the cause of our country. We gave Stradbroke in our letter to him a great deal of information and good advice, & to you also to take damn good care of yourselves whenever ye go to Bilboa again or to Limerick for the most of the country is old Wilsons friends, and Shanahan who lives at castle yard is son to Mary Wilson, daughter of old Wilson's grandfather, & he is very intimate intirely with old Wilson and Father Ryan the parish priest of Bilboa and Cappamore & Father McCormick the nephew of father Ryan who lives in the house with to him are old Wilson's friends also old Wilson and his sons stop always at father Ryans, & father Costello the parish priest of Abington is friend to Father Ryan and to old Wilson also and the leaders of the factions are to get farms from old Wilson if old Wilson gets Bilboa and they would sooner die than loose their farms for they know that if old Wilson does not get Bilboa they wont get their farms and you and Stradbroke would be shot before now only they thought that old Wilson w^d be in peaceable possession of Bilboa every day so they did not think it worth their while to shoot ye till now because they think ye are keeping old Wilson too long out of possession of it and of course keeping themselves out of their farms. In our letter to Stradbroke we explained every matter fully to him so we wont take the trouble to write that over again to you altho we will give you a pretty good sketch for we have a deal of plans & business of consequence in hand which must be attended to, and which is of more importance to us than to mind you for neither the Bilboanians nor we will ever write or take the trouble to hint to you or Stradbroke again nor have we even time to throw upon ye from the cause of our country so study this letter well and mind it also four your own sakes, this is the second letter that was wrote about the business of the Bilboanians one from them and the other from us to Stradbroke and you. The Bilboanians are venturing their lives for you and Strabrooke in taking your part and his against that devilish wicked set all of old Wilson's friends, & 'tis little they got by it and the least you can do is to obey our commands and to give them some compensation or if ye dont ye will suffer for it. In the first place Stradbroke must give the Bilboanians and all the tenants on the estate a receipt in full for all rents and arrears of rents that will be due on the first day of Nov^r 1831 and on the first day of Nov^r 1832 and their farms at their own valuation during Stradbrokes own time which is short enough for the priest said the other day Wilson got a deal of money & that he is soon to get more, enough to attack Stradbroke by law to recover his estate from him. And this is true for the priest and the Wilsons are one and everybody says that old Wilson will gain his estate. And our fathers told us the same thing. And you and Stradbroke must

put in again into their farms all the poor tenants that you so cruelly turned out to beg upon the wide world, and if ye dont do so remember what we are telling you that ye will suffer for it why should not ye do it for surely it is nothing out of your pockets seeing that Stradbroke and old Rouse his father has old Wilson's estate ever so long for nothing at all. Ye can very well afford to let the poor tenants have their ground for the value after all the bad years they had and they are asking little enough. The dirty bribes and promises are vain that you and Stradbroke gave the Bilboanians and tenants the other day in Limerick when ye were there. They dont call a pinch of snuff for all your dirty bribes and promises coaxing the Bilboanians and all the tenants to join you and Stradbroke to defraud old Wilson out of his lawful right and this is what every body says and it is time for them and that you and Stradbroke would not what ye did the other in Limerick. Only ye were in dread of Wilson so we dont thank ye for what ye did in Limerick and a good right ye have to be indread of Wilson for when Old Rouse sometime ago was trying to sell Bilboa and after advertising it in the papers and when old Rouses papers were examined by the gentlemen who were going to purchase Bilboa they found that Old Rouse had no title at all to it but that title was in old Wilson. Indeed we must say that you and Stradbroke are honest men knowingly to act so fraudulently toward any body but why should not Stradbroke do what his father old Rouse did, & why should you not do what Blood did but see what Blood got, & you and Stradbroke will get the same and all the County Limerick poor and rich know it to be old Wilsons just right. Therefore ye must give the Bilboanian and all the tenants the bargain we mentioned. Since it is nothing out yere pockets to give away what belongs to another man. The tenants themselves have a better right to the estate than ye have and if ye do not do so we are warning you and Stradbroke never again to come to the County Limerick nor Limerick either as it is our sworn duty and intention to serve you and Stradbroke after the same manner Keys the proctor who was shot sometime ago within in Limerick and we had his houses and his property burnt in the country so we are giving you timely notice to obey our commands in full and be sure of it that the Co Wicklow wont save you nor will England save or protect Stradbroke from the Bilboanians for they or we will come at ye where ever ye are the County and City of Limerick. Know your person and Stradbrokes person so well that the cannot be mistaken in ye no more than they were mistaken in old Wheeler when he was shot and ye have our liberty to shew this letter to every one ye wish as ye shewed another letter to the tenants the other day when ye were in Limerick and to paste this letter in the coffee house in Limerick and publish it in all the newspapers in the world and see what ye will get by it. We are taking a deal of trouble with you and loosing our valuable time the property of true Irish-men and which we w^d not do, if we did not wish to be merciful to you provided you obey our commands in every thing we command ye but if ye dont blame yourselves for what will happen. And, besides King Daniel OConnell will soon give us an Irish parliament of our own in spite of you Englishmen and if England dont give it by fair means she must give it by foul means and there is no doubt of it. King Daniel OConnell will get the upper hand of them for all Ireland is backing him, and 'tis then Irish men will get fair play, & 'tis then and before then you and Stradbroke must keep far away from Bilboa. If ye dont obey our command tis then we will defy England 'tis little power the will have over us, even now we dont care a Bull-rush for her best for King Dan! is taking our part and the part of all Ireland and he will give us everything we want and even if King Dan! did not there are as good and ten thousand of them and tens of thousands as good as he is and better that are taking our part and the part of Ireland, so if you and Stradbroke have a mind to keep a while skin upon yourselves, do as we order ye in full. And at your Peril and at Stradbrokes peril let us not find that you or he ever will distrain or drive or cant or sue by law or otherwise for rents or arrears of rents any of the tenants upon the Bilboa estate so Remember that we are giving ye this last chance for your lives.-

Secretary to the Committee

James Fitzgerald

