

Cahara House Tragedy

Cahara House is situated on the outskirts of Glin village on the road to Limerick and overlooking the Shannon Estuary. It is now the home of the Hogan family, but has been home to many families in the past, including members of the Knight of Glin's family, the Pegum fish-merchant family and the Quin-Sleemans. The Quin-Sleeman family, through their generosity and kindness, saved many lives in the Glin area during the Great Famine and in the process they faced financial ruin themselves.

In 1844, prior to the famine, a tragic accident occurred at the house, which must have shocked the locality at the time. We are indebted to contemporary police reports of that time for the account of the tragedy. The authorities in Dublin Castle were alerted once the police became aware of unusual activities in their area. So, on 1st March, Head Constable Thomas Hornibrook reported that two young women servants of Richard Quin-Sleeman were found dead in their beds at 9 o'clock the previous morning. The matter was reported to him by Morgan Sweeney. He stated that the evidence at the inquest into their deaths revealed that they went to bed the night before at 10 o'clock apparently as well as ever. The door of the room in which they slept was locked from the inside and the windows were also fastened. The lock had to be broken off the door to get in, where they were found lying in bed as if asleep, without any mark of violence, nor their features in any way distorted. The coroner was sent for and he held an inquest. The verdict was "We find Mary Shaughnessy and Johanna Boyle went to bed last night about 10 o'clock in Cahara House in apparent good health and were found dead this morning in their bed, therefore we believe they died by the visitation of God."

The matter did not rest there, as Hornibrook's superiors were not happy with his report. He was admonished for his meagre report and instructed to take more care with his reports in future. On 8th March, he replied to some queries and displayed some displeasure at being rebuked. He stated that there was no chimney nor was there coal or turf burning in the room. Neither of the deceased been afflicted with illness of any description. Had any of those particulars been the case, he would of course have stated them, but tempered his remarks by saying he would endeavour to be more particular in future.

Hornibrook's superiors in Dublin Castle were not satisfied, so they appointed L. C. Smyth to hold an enquiry into the matter. Smyth wrote to the Under Secretary, from Abbeyfeale, on March

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18th 1844. He had arranged a meeting with the Knight of Glin and other magistrates the previous Saturday, at the noon petty sessions, to ascertain the cause of death of the two girls. Those present included magistrates Hamilton and Harnett, the coroner Mr. Harding, Doctor Enright and several of the jury and witnesses.

Smyth's findings were damning, as he said the deaths were not satisfactorily accounted for before the inquest and the verdict of the jury was not justified by the circumstances and the conduct of the coroner and doctor betrayed the most culpable neglect. He went on to defend his allegations against the latter by stating that they did not endeavour to restore animation by bleeding, warm baths and chafing, as the bodies were still warm on the sides where they lay. They retained their natural and usual colour and had composure as if asleep, with the exception of a little froth issuing from the mouths. Ultimately, they were remiss in not having a post mortem examination. The room in which the two deceased lay was a very small one situated upon the ground floor near the kitchen, about 9 feet long by 7 feet wide and about 8 feet in height, with very small windows very closely fastened, no chimney and no ventilation, except through a small space at the bottom of the door and the key hole.

Smyth continued his report by saying that Mr Sleeman had taken his family to Limerick, together with his coachman and cook and had left the house in the care of the steward, who slept in an out office, and two women in the capacity of nurses, who slept in a room upstairs. The nurses went to bed at half past nine that night leaving the two girls (deceased) sitting by the kitchen fire. He said that it was generally believed that the girls had carried lighted turf into the room to heat it for some time before they went to bed and replaced the turf on the kitchen fire before retiring. The fumes and noxious vapours caused by the smoke remained in the room due to lack of ventilation and was cause of their deaths. Their appearance upon breaking in the door the following morning would indicate that nothing else could have caused their deaths. The cook sometimes heated the room in this way when she slept there herself. There were no grounds for supposing that the girls took any poison, as there were no drugs, medicines or bottles of any description.

Smyth appeared satisfied with his findings, but in order to fully satisfy the public mind he decided to exhume the

bodies of the two girls in order to perform a post mortem examination. Smyth was accompanied by the Knight of Glin, Mr. Sleeman, Captain Hamilton, the coroner, two doctors and a police force. They proceeded to the churchyard and remained there for some time. The Knight and Mr Sleeman tried to persuade some of the people present, who were supposed to know where the girls were buried, to show their graves, but to no avail. No one would acknowledge or identify the graves and Smyth believed there was "an obstinate horror" among the friends of the deceased girls of disinterring the bodies or opening them for examination. He said the spectators believed that a curse would follow anyone who would interfere against their consent. The party left without accomplishing its purpose.

Smyth went on to vent his anger once again on the coroner and doctor for not trying to restore animation in the deceased or adjourn the inquest for further evidence. He said that it was not just his opinion, but that of the magistrates of the locality and the jury who sat at the inquest. They said that though they signed the verdict as dictated by the coroner, they were still not satisfied.

Smyth's attack on Harding and Enright was a bit extreme, as he found no additional evidence to that of the first inquest. He did not mention finding any remains of turf or ash in the room to support his theory that the girls brought lighted sods into the room. He seemed to use the fact that the cook did so to support his theory. The verdict "visitation of God" was not unusual at the time, when the cause of death was unknown and where there was no other suspicious evidence.

The fact that the bodies were still warm was not a sign of animation, as indicated by Smyth. Being in a bed would retain heat and it is stretching credibility to think a doctor would not know if life was extinct.

The fact that the people of Glin refused to have the bodies exhumed or examined may be more to do with their belief that the dead should rest in peace, rather than trying to hide any evidence. It is unlikely that a post mortem would have revealed any further details on how the two girls in Cahara House met their death on that cold February night in 1844.

SOURCES

- National Archives CSOP 17/1867 (Mar 1844).
- National Archives CSOP 17/4019 (Mar 1844).
- National Archives CSOP 17/4365 (Mar 1844).