as one of the most magnificent altars to be found anywhere and was featured in many art publications including its use as the cover picture for a church art calendar in the 1960's. Along with the High Altar the two side altars were also removed and the Communion rail dismantled. Attempts to explain the new ways emerging from Vatican Two were of little consolation to the plain people of the parish who witnessed the passing of the shrine they had known and prayed before from their infancy. The newly appointed Parish Council came in for some criticism, for it was felt that the Council could have done more to retain the altars, but in hindsight it must be remembered that at the time the Parish Council was in existence a mere week and as such were a body completely inexperienced and with very little say in church or parish affairs other than in an advisory capacity and were in no real position to change the situation. There was also among its members a reluctance to go against the decision of the Diocesan Authorities.

But as time passed the new layout of the sanctuary was accepted, although the removal of the altars in Castleconnell and Ahane continued to be a contentious topic of conversation for many years after. Fortunately a change of heart by the Hierarchy allowed the use of the table-type altar while still retaining the original altar which meant that most of Ireland's beautiful altars were preserved. Alas, the decision came too late for our altars here and Castleconnell and Ahane were among the very few churches in the country to lose their High Altars. The sanctuary in Castleconnell church as it is today bears little resemblance to its original design when it was first opened for public worship back in 1863. The only remaining feature from that time is the stained glass window behind the sanctuary, now partly hidden but still very much admired and retaining all its glorious colour and splendid detail.

24 (12 pages)

CHAPTER 7

The Great Houses and Landmarks of Castleconnell

In the mid eighteenth century and for the following seventy years or so, Castleconnell enjoyed a great building boom with the erection of many fine Georgian houses in the locality – most of them built on or close to the Shannon. In no other part of the country were so many splendid and beautiful dwellings to be found, all within a distance of a few miles and all in close proximity to each other while still retaining their own distinctive features and spacious private grounds. The houses fringing the river had the added advantage of the sheer magnificent river scenery coupled with fishing grounds that were part of the estates then. On both sides of the stretch of water from Newgarden to World's End there were nineteen houses, with several more sited further back from the Shannon. On the Castleconnell shore were Mountshannon, Prospect, Hermitage, Stradbally, Belmont, Woodlands, Shannon View, Stormont, Island House, The Grange, Lacka and World's End House, while on the Clare side were Bellisle, Landscape, Doonass House, Summerhill, Waterpark, Rose Hill and Erinagh.

The first of these fine dwellings to be erected was Mountshannon Mansion – by far the largest and most impressive of the many great houses of Castleconnell. It not only laid claim to have been one of Ireland's most beautiful mansions, but also earned its place in the annals of Irish history by virtue of its association with the controversial personage of the notorious first Lord Clare, Black Jack Fitzgibbon. Erected on a 900 acre estate of the best of arable land, about two miles on the Limerick side of Castleconnell, Mountshannon was bounded on the west by the Shannon and by the Mulcair river on the south and the estate extended from Newgarden to Annacotty. Almost half the domain was once covered in trees, Mountshannon Wood, that skirted the estate and secluded from prying eyes this noble and often mysterious mansion where few – apart from the aristocracy – dared to venture near. Magni-

ficent Mountshannon with its seven-bay entrance portico on four huge Ionic columns. It is said that the house had three hundred and sixty five windows – one for every day of the year and that the entrance hall was so wide that a coach and four could be easily driven through it.

The estate and house were serviced from the working area where there were quiet a number of buildings including servants quarters, stewards houses, stables, coachhouses, laundry, its own gas making plant and several other utility buildings which made this area in itself larger than many an Irish village. Some of the great features of the estate were its beautiful gardens and rolling parklands which were laid out and landscaped by John Sutherland, one of the most famous landscape gardeners of the time and who was responsible for designing many of the splendid country gardens of Great Britain and Ireland. In its heyday Mountshannon employed an army of gardeners and estate workers. In summertime, work for the gardeners began each day at first light as they had to have the days work finished and everything in order before the guests of the Mansion rose to take breakfast on the lawns and spend their days in the delightful surroundings of the estate gardens. During the summer months as many as a hundred guests would be in residence there.

• Mountshannon House was erected by Silver Oliver of Kilfinnane where after many years of work the place was finally occupied in 1750. Soon after, the famous White family bought the estate and it came into the Fitzgibbon ownership around 1765. John Fitzgibbon from Ballysheedy, a Catholic who had studied medicine in his youth, decided to change his profession and his religion to become a lawyer. He converted to the Protestant faith because at that time Catholics were debarred from practising in the Irish Courts. He amassed a great fortune and bought Mountshannon. Along with being a brilliant lawyer, having written many papers and books on law that made him very successful and wealthy, he was noted too for his humane treatment of his tenants, an honest man who preferred the privacy of his beloved Mountshannon to the public glare of the courts of justice and were it not for the shameful activities of his notorious offspring he might have been remembered with more honour and respect. When he died in 1780, his son John, later known as Black Jack, inherited Mountshannon.

Born in 1748 at Ballinguile House in Donnybrook, Dublin, he was educated at Trinity College and called to the bar. He entered politics in 1780 and soon made his mark rising quickly to the position of Attorney General. In 1789 he was appointed Lord High Chancellor of Ireland. He was knighted in 1795, becoming the first Earl of Clare. But already success had gone to his head and he turned his back on the Irish and became much hated for his opposition to Catholic Emancipation and

more so for his part in putting down the rebellion of 1798. His well-recorded saying that he would make the Irish as tame as a mutilated cat evoked more hatred and bitterness towards him and he was in constant danger of being attacked. On one occasion when returning to his Dublin house in Ely Place, a dead cat was thrown into his carriage which was surrounded by a mob of several hundred, armed with clubs, forks, sledges and other implements. Luckily for Fitzgibbon, the mob dispersed on hearing of the approaching military, but not before his carriage was stoned and he received several head injuries. Following this escapade Black Jack had an iron fortress erected around his Dublin home. Even in Mountshannon he lived in constant fear and there was a further attempt made on his life when the Mansion was attacked and one of his servants killed while defending the place.

Fitzgibbon's final sell-out of his country came when he backed the Act of Union – which brought about the uniting of the Parliaments of Great Britain and Ireland and came into effect in 1801. His last act of treachery was to oppose the granting of Civil Liberties to Catholics. Following the Act of Union, Lord Clare, as he was now titled, took his seat in the House of Lords. During a debate there in which Fitzgibbon ranted and raved, the great British statesman, William Pitt, was heard to remark, "Good God, did you ever in all your life hear such a rascal". Pitt's famous remark is probably the most accurate and apt summing-up of the character of Black Jack Fitzgibbon. He soon found himself out of favour and unwanted even by the British who now saw him for what he was and even despised him for his betrayal of his own country. The pity was that Fitzgibbon – the ablest of politicians and a brilliant mind who had achieved the greatest honours possible for an Irishman then – did not use his high position and influential status for the benefit of Ireland and his countrymen. But in his blind obsession with more power he rejected his nationality and lost sight of all integrity. His shameless pandering to gain favour with the British proved to be his eventual downfall.

In fairness to Fitzgibbon, however, it must be said that he was not completely devoid of human feeling and there were occasions when he showed a different and more pleasing side to his character. He was once involved in a duel with John Philpot Curran, when Fitzgibbon, a crack shot, fired wide of his opponent so as to spare his life. He was also instrumental in saving the lives of several of the United Irishmen after the rebellion of 1798. He visited Lord Edward Fitzgerald in Newgate Prison and offered him a pardon if he desisted from his campaign. Fitzgerald refused and died later in prison. There were many more acts of mercy and good deeds attributed to the much maligned Earl and it may be that he has been treated somewhat too harshly by history. But

then history is a poor respector of sentiment and in Fitzgibbon's case the scales weighed too heavily on the more unsavoury side of his career.

Dejected and disenchanted with the world of politics, Fitzgibbon retired to Mountshannon and busied himself with the running of the estate and there are many tales of his cruel treatment of the workers and tenants there. Every year about a hundred women were employed to harvest the estate's huge corn plantation and Lord Clare himself supervised the work and was present there every morning and after satisfying himself that all the workers were present and everything was in order he would give the signal to commence work. He was in complete control and insisted that the day's toil should not begin unless he was present. What was not generally known was that Black Jack was an excellent farmer and several farming methods were initiated and used by him – including his ingenious Liquid Manuring Scheme, by way of streams through the land – farming skills that were to be copied and used by many generations of farmers.

One morning after the Lord had wined and dined to excess the night before he did not rise at his customary time to oversee the starting of work despite the appeals of his servants who informed him that the women workers were waiting and growing restless. In a rage he ordered his servants to set the dogs on the workers and drive them off the estate. His orders were carried out and many of the women were savaged by the animals. One woman in particular was badly torn about the face. Later in the day when Fitzgibbon had come to his senses and his better nature appealed to him, moved by remorse, he sent his servants to bring back all the workers. Each woman was paid a full day's wages and given the rest of the day off. The woman with the badly injured face was given £1, a good amount of money at that time.

Following a fall from his horse at Mountshannon in the Christmas of 1801 Lord Clare was badly injured and on the advice of his doctors he set out to travel to the Continent for special treatment. He had only reached his Dublin house on the first leg of the journey when his condition deteriorated and he died on 28 January 1802 in his early fifties. He was buried at St. Peter's Church in Dublin where the bitterness and hatred he had once aroused surfaced again with the appearance of the dead cats – thrown on his coffin and grave. It was an ignominious finale for poor Fitzgibbon, the man who in his relatively short life had attained so much, yet lost so much more. John Fitzgibbon is remembered in happier times in a life-sized portrait by the Dublin painter Hugh Douglas Hamilton showing the Earl in full dress and robes of office of Lord Chancellor of Ireland, complete with beautifully embroidered bag containing his seal of office and other important documents. The

painting, the property of the National Gallery of Ireland can be seen at Malahide Castle in County Dublin. Clare Street in Limerick and Dublin's Fitzgibbon Street commemorate his name.

Black Jack's son, also named John Fitzgibbon, then became the second Earl of Clare and in 1803 just one year after taking over Mountshannon he built a school for the education of the children of his estate workers. Here in the little stone building, still there opposite the present schoolhouse at Rich Hill, boys were taught reading and writing while the young girls for some strange reason were taught needlework only. During his career the Earl spent much of his time in foreign parts and even became Governor of Bombay for some years. There is a story told locally of how, while on an inspection visit to the construction site of a new pier in Bombay, he recognised a face among the convicts carrying out the work. On questioning the man he found that he was a blacksmith from Lisnagry who had been transported five years previously for a minor transgression. Lord Clare had the man reprieved immediately and arranged for his free passage home to Ireland.

When the Earl died fifty years on, his youngest brother Richard became the third Earl of Clare. He represented the county and city of Limerick in parliament for many years. He was noted for his many acts of charity and his concern for the poor was well known to whom he constantly supplied food from the estate and firewood from his woods. He also contributed handsomely on several occasions to the building of the Catholic Church in Castleconnell. His son John Charles Henry Fitzgibbon died at Ballaclava in 1854 while leading his troop of Royal Irish Hussars in the famous charge of the Light Brigade. A statue to his memory was erected on the Wellesley Bridge (now Sarsfield Bridge) in Limerick city but was destroyed in an explosion in 1930. The site is now occupied by the 1916 Memorial.

Lady Louisa Georgina Fitzgibbon, a sister of the Viscount and daughter of the third Lord Clare came into possession of Mountshannon on the death of her father. She was a very extravagant and over charitable woman who gave lavish banquets and balls at the Mansion to which all the aristocracy and landed gentry from Limerick and neighbouring counties were invited. The road to the main entrance which was from the present Mountshannon Road, would on these occasions be crowded with coaches and carriages drawn by teams of sleek and magnificently groomed horses with coachmen in uniform and top hat carrying the upper classes to the great extravagances at the Mansion. Crowds would gather near the entrance to witness the passing parade of riches, style and glamour. It was as close as any of the ordinary people were ever likely to get to such wealth and lavishness. The spectacular

scenes witnessed on these occasions were so far removed from the simple mundane lives of the working classes as to be unreal and belonging more in the realms of make-believe.

But the world of reality eventually took control as Lady Louisa frittered away the Fitzgibbon fortune and ran up huge debts in an effort to keep up the grand lifestyle she had become accustomed to. She became engaged to a Sicilian nobleman, The Marquis Della Rochella, thinking his wealth would rescue her from financial ruin, only to discover that her betroth was himself almost penniless and was marrying her for the same reason. During a sumptuous party in the Mansion to announce their engagement the sheriff arrived to seize some of the Mansion's valuable effects. Two large paintings hanging in the main hall were among the items earmarked for confiscation, but were found to have holes burned through the canvas when the sheriff's men were removing them. One of Louisa's cigar smoking gentlemen friends had secretly burned the canvas and the sheriff, thinking the paintings had lost their value, left without them. The restored and still very valuable pictures were in later years hung in the hall of Dublin Castle. It was on this occasion that the Marquis discovered that Lady Louisa like himself was bankrupt, but noble gentleman that he was he went ahead with the marriage – even if it was a misguided union. The Marquis unaccustomed to the Irish climate fell into bad health and died a few years later still pining for his native sunny Sicily. Still struggling to keep face, Lady Louisa was forced to sell much of the contents of the Mansion including the priceless collection of books from the family library. Soon the lavish entertainment, the sumptuous feasting and the glittering balls were all gone and the magic that once was Mountshannon disappeared. Gone too were Lady Louisa's wealthy friends, leaving her at the mercy of her creditors who quickly foreclosed on her and she was forced to sell the Mansion and Estate. Lady Louisa left Mountshannon in 1887 and went to live in the Isle of Wight at St. Dominic's Convent where she spent the rest of her life. When she died some years later she was buried in the convent grounds. The remains of a public water fountain erected by Lady Louisa can be seen at Carrowkeel near Annacotty and a chalice presented by her to the parish in 1863 was in the possession of the Presentation Sisters at their convent in Castleconnell. The powerful Fitzgibbon line that had stretched across one hundred and twenty years at Mountshannon had finally ended.

The next owner of Mountshannon was an Irishman, Thomas Nevins, who had made a large fortune in America and returned to Ireland with his wife and three daughters and purchased the Mansion and estate. For the Nevins, who were a decent and honest Catholic family, their years at

Mountshannon were fraught with trouble and ill-luck, so much so that people said the curse that many believed was on the place must surely have touched on these unfortunate people. One of the daughters married a Dublinman named William Doyle but the marriage soon broke up and she returned to her parents at Mountshannon expecting a baby. The baby was stillborn and the unfortunate girl died during the delivery. Her husband William could not be found and the girl's father, not wishing to carry out the burial until he could be traced, had her remains and that of her baby placed in a little house which had at one time served as a cold storage building where meat and other perishable foods were kept. Doyle however, never returned and it was learned later that he had left the country. Shortly after, poor Tom Nevins – like Lord Clare before him – was thrown from his horse while riding through the estate and died a few months after from his injuries. His body was also placed in the Cooling House, as was his wife's who died some years later – the little building had by then become the family burial chamber. Over the years the vault had been savagely desecrated on many occasions, the lead from the caskets stolen and some of the remains scattered outside the vault. When one of the skulls was found on the roadside near Rich Hill it was decided to brick-up the vault entrance permanently. So at last the tragic Nevins family rest undisturbed and entombed in what was once the cold storage house for Mountshannon Mansion.

A Corkman, Dermot O'Hannigan was the last owner of Mountshannon and in 1921 during the War of Independence, in a spectacular and devastating fire, the flames of which could be seen, it is said, from the hill of Park and many other parts of Limerick city and county, the beautiful Mansion was burned to the ground. The estate was eventually taken over by the Land Commission and divided up into several farm holdings. Little remains of Mountshannon Mansion today but the ivy clad shell of the great house, its four huge columns at the entrance still stand defiantly against the elements and even time itself, like some battle scarred warriors still guarding the faded remnants of a grandeur that is no more.

• High on the hill at Hermitage many centuries after St. Senan had converted the inhabitants of the settlement there, Massey's Mansion, as it later became known, was built. Commanding a more magnificent view of the Shannon than any of the big houses, this fine dwelling was second only to Mountshannon in size. It was erected by George Evans Bruce, a Corkman, who made a fortune gambling in the casinos of France and England. His methods were seemingly questionable for he was caught cheating and expelled from the gambling houses of Paris and London. He returned to Ireland and set up a banking business in Limerick City. In 1789 he bought the estate at Hermitage and built the beautiful mansion there.

Massey's Mansion in the early 1900's.

His trickery at the gambling tables was the least of Bruce's crimes for the list of outrages he perpetrated against his fellow man were so numerous that it was incredible that he was never brought to justice except on a relatively minor charge of demanding excess interest on loans from his bank. He struck up a friendship with his near neighbour, Lord Clare, who was reluctant at first to have anything to do with him. But the cunning bruiser, using all means of deceit and intrigue, eventually convinced Clare that he was a reformed character and he was appointed a Magistrate on the Earl's recommendation. Shortly after he was made High Sheriff of the county, a position that brought out the very worst in this already notorious and ruthless character. He broke all the laws of society, ill treated his wife, encouraged young boys to gamble, declared himself an atheist and spoke publicly against the religious beliefs of others, betrayed the secrets of the Jury room and so many more crimes that he finally alienated himself completely from society and, despite his close association with Lord Clare, his obvious wealth and property which included the prestigious mansion and estate at Castleconnell the gentry of the county turned their backs on him and he became a social outcast. Early in the nineteenth century he sold Hermitage to the Massey family and left the area.

Castle Lough with Island House and Stormont in the background.

The Masseys first came to Ireland in 1641 when General Sir Hugh Massey was sent by Charles the First with a command to suppress the Catholic rebellion of that year. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the family tree spread to many parts of the country. One of the principal seats of the Masseys was at Hermitage where the sixth Baron Massey lived. Directly across the Shannon from Hermitage was the home of another branch of the family, Sir Hugh Dillon Massey and his family who built and owned Doonass House between the two houses there was the tragic love story of the young lady, Massey and her cousin in Doonass House who carried on a secret affair. To keep a rendezvous with her lover the girl persuaded two of the family servants to take her across the river. It was an ill-fated venture for the totally inexperienced boatmen were no match for the treacherous waters of Doonass, the boat was overturned and the unfortunate trio were swept through the rapids to their deaths. The young Lady Massey was interred in the family vault and her two boatmen were buried in an unmarked grave inside the boundary wall of Stradbally church and opposite the main entrance door.

Like Mountshannon, but on a much smaller scale, Hermitage could boast of rich arable fields, beautiful well cultivated gardens and verdant

pastures rolling through its wooded slopes to meet the ever passing Shannon waters. On its tree lined winding avenue in summer the leaf laden branches entwined overhead to form a magnificent shady tunnel of greenery – Massey's bowers – the dream and inspiration of poets and songwriters, its gardens were so extensive and fertile that each season they produced not only enough vegetables and fruit for the needs of the Mansion but the profit from the sale of the surplus crops was sufficient to pay the wages of several gardeners for a whole year.

But the enchanting wonderland that was Hermitage passed all too soon, for following the death of Lord Massey in 1916 the family left Hermitage and the Mansion remained vacant for some years. Sadly on June 14, 1921 the great house met the same fate as Mountshannon, for it too was a victim of the War of Independence. For two days a huge fire raged fiercely through the beautiful house and boatmen on the river below told for many years after of the frightening thunderous noise as the massive roof finally caved in. The gutted ruin stood for many years after – an object of curiosity and wonder to many a passing stranger. But to those who remembered, it was a pitiful legacy from a time of beauty and from days of gracious living. Perhaps the most appropriate epitaph for Massey's Mansion is the little prize winning poem by Patricia (Baby) Hartigan who lived close to Hermitage when the remains of the great house were demolished some fifty years after.

I watched with friends a setting sun
Shine on a lonely scene,
The landmark, Massey's Mansion
Pulled down by mod' machine.
The ropes were put around it.
We saw it wave and quiver,
Then down it came – no more to reign
O're Shannon's lovely river.

Many stood around it and gazed upon the scene.
Some were sad and lonely, others just serene,
History seemed to whisper as we bid our last adieu,
It housed the wealth and splendour of an era now "taboo".

The setting of this Mansion was truly very rare,
With waterfall and forest sure nothing could compare;
It was a noted rendezvous for every type of fun,
The fisherman, the gunsman and lovers by the ton.
But each century has its changes, the twentieth too, I guess,
Everything is so different now, the name is just Progress'.

At Belmont House, a short distance from Hermitage, lived Thomas Grady or Spectacles Grady as he was known because of his short-sightedness. Born in County Limerick in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century, he was known to have favoured the passing of the Act Of Union and for his outspoken welcome for its introduction he was raised to the position of County Judge. Despite his aspirations to a more exalted station in the field of law, Grady who had began his career as a barrister, rose no higher and was considered to have been no great success in his chosen profession. Grady retired from public life and turned his attention to writing poetry. It was here his real talent came to the surface and his highly polished and elegant style of writing won him many admirers. Some of his better known poems of the time were "The Flesh Brush" dedicated to Lady Clare of Mountshannon, "The West Briton" written in praise of the Act of Union and another "The Two-penny Postbag" a satire from his days as postmaster of Limerick Post Office. His great talent might well have placed him among the immortals of Irish writers were it not for the fact that he became bitter and cynical, refused all social invitations and, locked away in his Belmont home, he began to pour out the most scathing satirical verses about those who fell foul of him. It was this merciless power of poetic expression that was to prove his undoing.

Grady obtained a loan of £1300 from the banker George Evans Bruce, but the pair had a disagreement some time later which resulted in Bruce calling in the loan. Grady paid back in full but took his revenge by writing "The Nosegay", a satirical poem in which he castigated Bruce and heaped scorn on the character of the banker with it was said – a pen that was as merciless as a scalping knife, as deadly as a poisoned arrow and as ruthless as the scythe of time. The lengthy poem which contains passages of the most violent and venomous satire ever written in the history of Irish literature caused a sensation when it was published complete with the most repulsive drawings and caricatures of Bruce. The first edition was sold out and a second edition issued. Bruce at once took a libel action against Grady, claiming damages of £20,000. The trial was held at Limerick Court and on Grady's Defence Counsel was the ablest of barristers, the great Daniel O'Connell, then at the height of his brilliant career. Counsel for Bruce was Thomas Goold Pennefeather, who was from the outset placed at a great disadvantage, for not one person of standing could be found to take the oath and vouch for Bruce's character. Neither was Pennefeather able to match the great linguistic talents of O'Connell whose speech on that occasion was one of the most memorable of his illustrious career. Not surprisingly, the Jury awarded Bruce a mere £500, just a fraction of his claim. Grady however, refused

to pay even this small amount and after selling Belmont he left the country forever. He died at Boulogne in France in 1863.

Much of Tom Grady's satire "The Nosegay" is – even allowing for liberal present day standards – so venomous and nauseating as to be unfit for quotation. Suffice to present the following comparatively mild short extract from the lengthy poem that gives some idea of the unsavoury content of Grady's lampoon.

Is there one evil word you have not spoken?
Is there one humane tie you have not broken?
Is there one vice a stain to mortal reason?
Is there one crime from swindling up to treason?
Produce the catalogue and let me hear,
Even one exception in your black career.

Across the Shannon the name Grady was also very prominent – the O'Gradys, who between them owned three fine houses and estates, Landscape, Rose Hill and Erinagh. While the families were very much a part of the social scene of eighteenth and nineteenth century Castleconnell and each house and family had its own background story, they never gained, or even sought, the same degree of publicity as some of their contemporaries on the Limerick side of the river. Undoubtedly, the best known progeny was the son of Admiral O'Grady of Erinagh – Standish Hayes O'Grady, born in 1832 and regarded as the greatest Irish scholar of his time. His great love of the Irish language conquered all other influences in his life and at an early age he left the comfort and security of his father's estate to wander the countryside collecting folk tales and customs. For some unknown reason Standish surprisingly left Ireland while he was still a young man and spent thirty years of his life in America, qualified as an engineer and lived in California. On his return to Ireland he continued his writings and his most famous work was a translation of a collection of Irish stories into English under the title Silva Godelica. In his twilight years Standish Hayes O'Grady moved to Hull in Cheshire where he died in 1915. An obituary written by a wellknown writer of the time, Eleanor Hull, referred to him as the last of the grand old scholars of Ireland.

Directly across the river from the Ferry were two more splendid domains, Summerhill and Waterpark. Home of the Vincent family, Summerhill House was regarded then as the finest house on the Clare shore and rivalled even Mountshannon and Hermitage with its sheer beauty and elegance. Set amid rich green riverside parklands dotted with oak, beech, elm and lime it was yet another example of the splendour

enjoyed by the Landed Gentry of that time. The Vincents left Summerhill in 1910 and went to live at Muckross House in Killarney. Summerhill House was demolished in 1938 and only the servants quarters and the walled kitchen garden remain today.

Another famous and well remembered house was Waterpark which was situated close to Summerhill and slightly upstream. Built by the Phelps, a Northern Unionist family who were prominent on both sides of the river, this beautiful Georgian dwelling is best remembered for its magnificent marble staircase and when the house was being constructed the Phelps brought not only the marble from Italy but also the Italian tradesmen to erect the stairway. The house was in later years owned by Jack Hartigan, known as Black Jack because of his very dark complexion. Hartigan kept and trained racehorses and employed a staff of stable hands. A famous racehorse called Lough Lomand, winner of many classic races in the British Isles, was trained by Jack Hartigan. He had two daughters who were noted for their skill in handling boats. They regularly crossed the Shannon to Castleconnell village and always berthed their boat at a slipway on the Mall known as Broderick's slip.

An interesting story associated with Waterpark concerned the capture of a high ranking army officer during the War of Independence. Brigadier-General Lucas, Commander of the British army in Cork, was captured by the I.R.A. and held prisoner in Waterpark House for some time in the custody of Commandant Sean Carroll who lived across in the village. Lucas and Carroll were men of the outdoor life and pursuits, both had a great passion for fishing and in Waterpark they were beside some of the best fishing in the land. A couple of rods were provided by Sean Carroll and, there in the tranquility of Castle Lough, for just a brief interlude, the lure of the ancient craft of salmon angling swept aside the bitterness and hatred of those troubled times as the famous British army man and the equally well known Irish freedom fighter fished side by side while the Crown forces searched the country for them. Waterpark House, like its near neighbour Summerhill, has disappeared too from the riverside scene and not a trace remains of this once splendid dwelling.

Gone too is another landmark almost directly across river from Waterpark – Coolbawn House, where another famous family, the Vansittarts, lived. Coolbawn, too, had its brush with troubled times and was used on two separate occasions to billet soldiers, in 1922 and again in the 1940's. During the Civil War when fighting began in Dublin against the Provisional Government, units of the National Army in Limerick were forced to retreat under attack to Coolbawn House where they were garrisoned for some time. Eventually General Michael Collins arrived at Coolbawn where he endeavoured to raise the flagging morale

of the soldiers and their leaders. In an impassioned address to the men Collins urged them to go and take the City of Limerick. The following morning the Free Staters marched unopposed into the city and took over several public buildings including the Courthouse and Custom House. The first company of soldiers to enter Limerick on that morning was led by another famous Castleconnell figure, Brigadier Timmy Murphy. Shortly after his one and only visit to Castleconnell Michael Collins was to die in a mysterious shooting incident at Beal na mBláth in Co. Cork.

Across the castle meadows from Coolbawn, seated on high ground and commanding a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside, is Rock Lodge or The Rock as it is known locally. Its location is the hill on which were sited Ginkle's big guns for the attack on the Castle in 1691 almost a century and a half before The Rock was built. Its original owners were the Gillie family who were said to be descended from royalty. Thomas Gillie served in the army, rose to the rank of major and married into wealth. On his retirement from active service the major turned his attention to his favourite pastime, carving and sculpture work. He was a brilliant and gifted artist and at Rock Lodge he turned out some beautiful work in wood and stone. Gillie's most famous piece of sculpture was one that many considered to be bordering on the bizarre, for the major spent many years of his life on the making of his own tombstone. Hewn from a huge hunk of granite, it was fashioned in the exact likeness of a fallen tree with its trunk and limbs forming the shape of a cross. The work is so expertly executed and finely detailed even down to the very leaves and bark of the tree and so realistic that it is only on touching the surface that one comes to realise that the work is indeed in stone and not in wood.

When Gillie died in 1867 he was buried in the little cemetery at the rear of Stradbally Church and in the shadow of Rock Lodge. On the day of his burial by some strange quirk of nature and the elements, a violent storm hit the countryside and many trees were up-rooted in and around the village. The road to the cemetery had to be cleared of several fallen trees before Gillie's funeral could take place. Sometime after this, the tombstone, the product of his own hands, was put in place and the relevant details of his death were recorded meticulously on the stone by his son Tom Gillie who had not only inherited The Rock but some of his father's great talent too. Now, after more than a century, Gillie's sculptured monument can still be seen in perfect condition, one of the finest works of art to be found anywhere and certainly among Ireland's most unique gravestones. Major Thomas Gillie was a genius in stone but he was a humble man too, for the epitaph he chose for himself reads simply and appropriately – "As the tree falls, so shall it lie".

These then were some of the great houses of Castleconnell in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fine dwellings that became landmarks, not only for their grace and beauty and the idyllic setting of many of them, but also because of the people who inhabited them through the centuries. There were many more fine abodes here also where the owners lived out their lives quietly and away from the glare of publicity, so much so that they tended to be overlooked and even forgotten. But despite the fact that much of the history of these places is confined within the families, many of the owners left their mark by virtue of some achievement or contribution to the life and times of that age. Several recorded instances come to mind, like the owner of Prospect House in Newgarden, Eyre Lloyd, who is remembered for his caring endeavours during the Famine, and his discovery of a new recipe called Turnip Cake. Then there was the very generous White family of Castle View and Shannon View Houses who contributed so handsomely to the building of the Catholic Church in Castleconnell, and remembered, too, is the man who designed the structure, William Corbett of Shanacloon House. There was Captain Rich of Woodlands House who gave his name to a hill field that is today Rich Hill. Woodlands was the home too of the widely known Shaw family of the Limerick Bacon Factory. World's End House was the seat of another of the O'Grady clan, Thomas Grove Grady. It passed later to the Enrights, Richard Enright one of the great rod making and fishing family. Close to World's End lived the Gonne Bells of Lacka House and the Bannatynes of The Grange. Among the many owners of The Grange was Lady Georgina Fraser who died in 1909 at the age of 86 years. She had the distinction of being the first person in the locality to own and ride a bicycle. When she got too old to cycle she gave the machine to her gardener, Jimmy Connell, who lived near Nelson's Cross, and he became the envy of everyone as he cycled through the village on Lady Fraser's bicycle. Castle View, Shannon View, Shanacloon, Woodlands, World's End, Lacka and The Grange are among the houses that have survived and continue to flourish.

Near the castle ruin is Stormont House, once known to the locals as Island House. It was home to the De Burgos, a name steeped in Castleconnell's history. The house reverted to its original name, Stormont, with the erection of the present Island House which is close to the little Friary chapel ruin on Cloon Island. This house was built by the Inghams, a wealthy Welsh coalmine owning family.

Stradbally House, close to Belmont House, was originally named Shannon Lodge. The first known owner of the property was John Stephen Dwyer who probably built the house in the early part of the nineteenth century. Sometime after, it became known as Stradbally

House. One of its best known inhabitants was Thomas Johnston Stoney who married Emily, the daughter of John Dwyer. Stoney's family originated from the Ballycapple and Ballyknochane area of Co. Tipperary. He was an extensive land owner in the parish and when he died in 1936 the house and gardens were sold separately and most of the outlying land was bought by local farmers. The house was unfortunately destroyed by fire during the Christmas of 1983 but, even as these lines are being penned, Stradbally House is rising phoenix like from its own ashes to make its own historical claim, for it is the only one of the great houses of the locality to be rebuilt to its exact original plan.

On the Ahane side of the parish there were several fine houses also, all built in and around that great and lavish era when the Big House syndrome was gripping the imagination and desires of the wealthy classes by Shannonside, and when to own one of these properties was then very much part of the criteria by which one was judged to have reached the top of the nineteenth century social ladder.

The most important houses in the Ahane district were Thornfields, owned by the Bourkes, Woodsdown House, home of the Bannatynes and later of the Goodbodys, Rich Hill House and the Howleys who gave their name to the nearby crossroads, the Ryans of Raheen House and the once well established Gabbet family who lived at Caherline House close to Mountshannon.

The Woodsdown property consisted of about 200 acres on which two separate houses are in existence today. The farmhouse with farmyard nearest to the Mulcair river was the older site, dating back to the mid eighteenth century. It was here in this old house that Field Marshal, the Viscount Lord Gough, hero of the West Indies and Peninsular wars, was born in November 1779. In 1850 the two properties were joined together when the Bannatyne family who carried on a flour milling business in Limerick, came to live in the present larger house. The beautiful and impressive main entrance and sweeping avenue, together with the gate lodge were constructed by the Bannatynes in 1865. They also extended the original Georgian house-front with mid-Victorian bay windows. The Bannatynes sold Woodsdown in 1902 to the Dowling family of Co. Clare and the family moved to Castleconnell and bought The Grange. In 1910 Gerald Goodbody bought Woodsdown. The Goodbodys were also in the flour milling business and owned the giant Ranks Mills in Limerick and also a plant in Clara, Co. Offaly. The Goodbody connection with Woodsdown is probably the best remembered, for the family occupied the house for 42 years during which time they employed a large staff on the estate and in the big house itself. In 1952 Goodbodys sold out the property to the Sisters of Charity.

Since 1811 Thornfields House, the estate in the parish of Ahane, has been the seat of the Bourkes. The Bourke connection with Castleconnell can be traced back to the year 1199 when their ancestor William Fitzadelm De Burgo, Viceroy of Ireland, settled in Castleconnell and married Isabel the daughter of Richard Coeur de Lion. The family have long been land owners in Limerick and Tipperary.

The most noted and famous member in the Bourke lineage was Sir Richard Bourke who was eighth Governor of Australia from 1831 to 1837. Born in Dublin in 1777 he was educated at the prestigious Westminster School in London. Following his graduation from Oxford University with a Law Degree, he immediately joined the Grenadier Guards and served with distinction overseas. In action in Holland he was shot through the jaw, an injury he quickly recovered from to marry his namesake Jane Bourke of Carshalton in Surrey. A young man of great intellectual brilliance, he soon made his name, rising to the position of superintendent of the Royal Military Training College, teaching military matters, languages, classics and science.

In 1811 Sir Richard bought Thornfields House and estate, but spent little time there in the early years as his career took him not only to the countries of Europe but much further afield to South America, South Africa and Australia. In South Africa he became Governor of the Cape Colony and his experience here was invaluable in leading to his appointment as Governor of Australia in 1831. Noted for his ability and humanity, he introduced state aid for all religious communities in New South Wales and recommended self government for the colony.

Sir Richard returned to Thornsfield in 1840 and was at last able to spend time on his estate where he concentrated on farming development and afforestation. He was among the local gentry who helped by giving extra employment during the tragic Famine years. He was very much concerned with local affairs and, along with being a magistrate of the Limerick Court, he was also chairman of the Irish Relief Committee. In later years the Bourke family combined their special interest in the local community with their love of art by setting up wood carving classes in a room of the old police barracks near Thornfields. In what became known after as the Carving Room, young people of the Ahane area learned the skill and some fine examples of their work, turned out in the Carving Room are still preserved at Glenstal Abbey.

Sir Richard Bourke of Thornfields died in 1855 and was laid to rest in the very imposing family vault in Stradbally churchyard. Now, after close on two centuries, this grand old country house set in a quiet wooded area of the Ahane countryside is still in the ownership of the Bourke family. It is unique in this respect, for of all the great houses and

domains and the powerful families of the aristocracy that held sway in that noble era, not one of the remaining seats, except Thornfields, is occupied by a descendant of the original owners.

Amongst the most striking features of the fine houses of Castleconnell were that all of them were completely surrounded by trees and, apart from the obvious seclusion and privacy they afforded, all the original owners, it would seem, had a great natural love and respect for the great oaks, beeches and limes. They also showed a truly laudable foresight in planting trees they would never live to see mature.

Through the ages and up to the early twentieth century the road from Castleconnell village to Annacotty was lined on both sides with trees, mainly beech. The castle was at one time surrounded by trees and the avenues to Coolbawn, Shannon View and Woodlands houses were all tree lined, as was the river bank on both sides. Hermitage and Mountshannon had their own woods, particularly Mountshannon which was quiet extensive. In the ages before the building of the castle we know that the area of the present village of Castleconnell was a dense forest. The great oaks of which there was an abundance at one time were the first to disappear from the area. This was largely because of the great demand for oak for shipbuilding and Castleconnell with its closeness to Limerick city and the reasonable short haul for timber merchants was one of the first places to lose most of its oak. Today the great oaks are very few and far between in the locality. The beeches were later to follow and in the late 1930's and during the war years of the 40's, a great number of beech trees were cut down for commercial use and, sadly, no young trees were planted in their place. It was only in the vicinity of the big houses that were still occupied that trees were preserved. This is particularly true of Clonca Island, Woodlands, Rich Hill and Woodsdown where many fine beech and lime are still standing. This admiration for the great trees of Castleconnell and well merited praise for those who planted them is delightfully recalled in Patrick Shyne's lovely poem "Sweet Woodlands".

Who planted all these lovely trees that we admire each day,
The mighty oaks and towering beech that in the west wind sway.
That grove that grows along the bank of the river Shannon wide,
A cluster of ten beech or more their story won't confide.
Who hasn't stood beneath those trees on a blustery autumn day
And heard them whisper soft at times, yet know not what they say?
In a gentle breeze they whisper low, but in gales they moan and shriek
Complaining to the elements that their limbs are growing weak,
If only trees could speak like us, what stories they could tell,

Of mighty trees that once they knew, but in some tempest fell.
Perhaps when they were very young, great woods were cut away,
Their timbers used to build the fleets that sailed so far away.
This lovely place by Shannonside, sweet Woodlands is its name,
Preserved with great and loving care by those who went and came.
This place changed hands at least three times in fifty years or so,
Great credit to each owner who allowed these trees to grow.
How often in those fifty years have others been cut down.
Some lovely trees that beautified our village now a town,
But Woodlands stands a tribute to the man who laid it out,
A man of vision who loved his land, of that there is no doubt.
He must have known so long ago that generations would enjoy,
The fruits of all his care and work when he had bid it all goodbye.
What little thought we give to him, we take for granted all we see,
If only we would pause and think, we would see him too when we admired the tree.

Back in the days before the coming of post offices and the inception of a national postal service, the mail was delivered from posting houses. Castleconnell had its own posting house – an inn situated near the Spa and owned by a family named Dowling. From here a daily delivery was made by posting boys, who carried the mail on horseback in bags straddling the horses back. In those days the post was only delivered to the authorities and to those who were deemed to be important people. The posting boys also looked after the horses and stables, for along with delivering the mail Dowlings were also in the business of hiring out horses and carriages. In 1777 a tax was imposed on the hiring of horses and this was collected by the innkeeper who issued a ticket. To hire a horse then cost one shilling a day and two shillings for a horse and carriage. On leaving the village the hirer had to pass through a toll gate where the ticket was collected by the gateman. The toll gate at Castleconnell was at the top of the main street, where all the roads to the village were connected.

In 1853 the use of the toll gate in the village was discontinued but Dowlings continued to hire out horses and carriages for some years after. The inn was then known as the Hawthorn Hotel – a fine three storied building with large spacious rooms on each floor. An interesting and impressive feature of the place was the long wide flight of stone steps bounded on each side by a parapet wall that led to the hotel entrance. At the rear was a large stable yard where the traveller could have his horse looked after during his stay or hire one from the innkeeper. In the late 1850's the hotel went into decline when the last of the Dowling family,

Katherine, married William Enright and took over the running of the Shannon Hotel. In the years that followed, the building, then owned by the Enrights, was turned into a tenement and several families lived there up to the early 1950's. In 1965 it was demolished and not a vestige remains today of the old Posting House. The site is now occupied by modern bungalows including the priests' residences. Long gone too is the old Castleconnell toll gate – the only reminder that it ever existed is an antique shop nearby aptly named "The Village Gate".

Moving upstream from the village, the stretch of river between the Spa and O'Brien's Bridge has, along with famed Doonass, been one of the best known areas by Shannonside for close on two centuries. World's End, is a derivation from its original name, Worrall's Inn, where the waters run deep and wide with a calm and quiet that breeds tranquility and, it is said, that when the summer breezes come from the north west they blow directly from Galway Bay, bringing with them the tang of the sea and a hint of salt in the air. Although just a matter of minutes away from the hustle and bustle of modern life, it still has a serenity all of its own and a unique solitude that is only found in more remote parts, but it was not always so, for centuries ago it was a busy and thriving little trading post that drew a steady flow of river ships that plied the upper Shannon region. Conveyance of goods by water was then preferable as many places were more accessible by river or lake than by the roads which were in many cases little more than tracks through rough and often dangerous terrain that made haulage for the traders a slow and laborious chore.

In the early years of the eighteenth century Joseph Worrall came to Castleconnell from County Offaly. A Yorkshire man, he had seen many years of service as an officer in the British Army. He was posted to Ireland with the Cheshire regiment and stationed in Offaly. Worrall's army career was coming to an end and in retirement he was given the riverside holding at Castleconnell. Quick to see the potential of the place, he erected a good size inn there and a stone quay where ships could berth. In order to keep the water level sufficiently high during the dry summer months a dam was later built three quarters of the way across the river, reinforced with huge beams hewn from native hardwood trees and bolted together to hold the large stones in place and support them against the pressure of water.

In that time the Shannon was only navigable down as far as Castleconnell and Worrall's Inn was the last trading post on the Shannon route. Consequently, all goods destined for points further downstream had to be off loaded here and merchants used the quay also to dispatch goods up river. The inn was a stop over point and a favourite haunt of boatmen,

merchants and other river travellers. It was often the scene of boisterous revelry with the sounds of river songs and sea shantys, echoing across the water and the occasional bar room brawl among the crews as they quaffed the landlord's ale before making the return journey up the Shannon.

But all during this time, while the little trading post continued to flourish and Joseph Worrall's Inn was a welcome respite at journeys end, work was in progress to cut a waterway between Limerick and O'Brien's Bridge. Twenty years of gruelling and often almost impossible labour that could only be described as slavery was beginning at last to show results as the canal wound its way up through Gillogue and Clonlara to eventually link up with the parent river at a point between Worrall's Inn and O'Brien's Bridge. When it was finally made navigable in 1802 it spelt the end for Worrall's trading post as ships could now proceed all the way to Limerick city. A passenger service was introduced when a complete and unbroken waterway was opened up between Limerick and the Grand Canal to Dublin. These passenger boats were called paddle steamers and were fitted out to offer reasonable comfort to travellers making the Dublin trip which often took the best part of a week to complete.

From the turn of the century and for the following fifty years the little quayside was party to a different kind of trade – a trade in human misery – and was the setting for many a drama of heartbreak and despair, beginning with the dreadful years of transportation of convicts to New South Wales. During these years 141 unfortunate people, most of them from outside areas, were brought to Worrall's Inn, then the nearest point of departure, to await the arrival of The Minerva, The Little Lady Balfour or the Countess of Cadoga, the boats that would take them down the canal on the first leg of their journey to join the larger ships at Limerick Docks for the long voyage to Australia – a voyage of no return. Close to Worrall's Inn, at Eyre Mount, later known as the Old Barrack, convicts were kept under lock and key and chained together while awaiting the arrival of the boats. In the 1820's and 30's there was an amount of emigration from the area and hundreds left Worrall's Inn and O'Brien's Bridge for foreign parts. Scenes of tearful farewells at the little harbour were commonplace and the heart-rending cries and wailing of the emigrants and those left behind filled the air and continued until the ship went out of sight. Those were dark days by Shannonside and worse was to come, for in the later years of the 1840's Worrall's Inn was to witness an even greater tragedy in the exodus of people fleeing from the Great Hunger. There was no room for tears then as hundreds of starving and dying people made a desperate attempt to get away from the scourge that haunted their lives.

Coolbawn House in the late 1940's.

Towards the end of the century a chalky, limey clay called marl was discovered at Worrall's Inn. The substance which was used as a fertilizer to improve land was dug out and loaded onto boats and shipped up the country. The amount discovered was, however, not very extensive and the vein soon ran out leaving many hollows still visible in the riverside field. This marked the end of trading at the place. Joseph Worrall had long since vacated the inn and returned to England. The old building was demolished, and as was the practice then, the stone and rubble were taken to the site where a new house was being built. The materials from Worrall's Inn were used by the Scotsman McNab to build Mona Lodge a half mile upstream. Not a trace of the old inn remains now, but a business house in Castleconnell's main street still perpetuates the name of Worrall's Inn. Worrall's End, as it is now known, went back to nature, back to the wild birds of the water, the heron, the coot and the cormorant and today only the plaintive call of the curlew disturbs the peace there.

CHAPTER 8

The Enrights and the Castleconnell Rod

John Enright & Son
Castleconnell County Limerick,
Ireland.
Fishing rod and tackle makers.
All the World Championships for
long distance casting have been
won with Castleconnell rods,
40 awards for rod and tackle.
Awarded the Grand Prix of London
in 1904 for Salmon Flies.

This was one of the advertisements which appeared in newspapers, fishing magazines and sporting publications in Ireland and abroad in the early years of the twentieth century. It was the proud record of the famous Enright family who gave to the world's fishermen their expertise in the manufacture of fishing tackle and flies. The Enrights turned out in their factory – small as it was by to-days standards – a rod that was to revolutionise the sport of salmon angling not only at home but across the world. The "Castleconnell Rod" as it became known, was, and still is a prized possession in any angler's collection.

The Enrights first came to Castleconnell from Shinrone in County Offaly around the year 1500, and although the family engaged in many diverse ways of making a living, they all had an unbounded love of fishing and all the trappings that go with it. It was this great interest in sport fishing that was the primary reason why the family settled in Castleconnell. Although successive generations of the family engaged in the craft of rod and tackle making it wasn't until around the middle of the nineteenth century when John Enright and his son William bought