

The True Story of Colleen Bawn

BY KEVIN GRATTAN

Most people have heard of the Colleen Bawn in some connection. Dion Bouicault's play of the same name was first produced in 1860 in New York and became a huge hit in both sides of the Atlantic. It was a staple of touring companies and also the amateur drama movement well into the middle of this century. Even now it receives regular revivals in the English speaking world.

Bouicault's plot still catches the imagination of the public with its romanticised depiction of Irish country life and sly humour of rogues and peasants. The play in turn was based on Gerald Griffin's book, *The Collegians*. Griffin, a young reporter at the time the events took place, adapted them to suit his novel, and the story also served as the basis of Benedict's well-known opera, *The Lily of Killarney*.

Leaving aside the comic melodrama of the play and the romance of the opera, what is the true story of the Colleen Bawn? Who, in fact, was she, and more importantly, what really happened? On September 10th 1819, at Moneypoint, on the Clare side of the River Shannon, a badly decomposed body was washed up on the shore. A leg and the other leg had a rope tied around it and attached to the neck. The skull was bereft of hair and the body was naked apart from a small bodice.

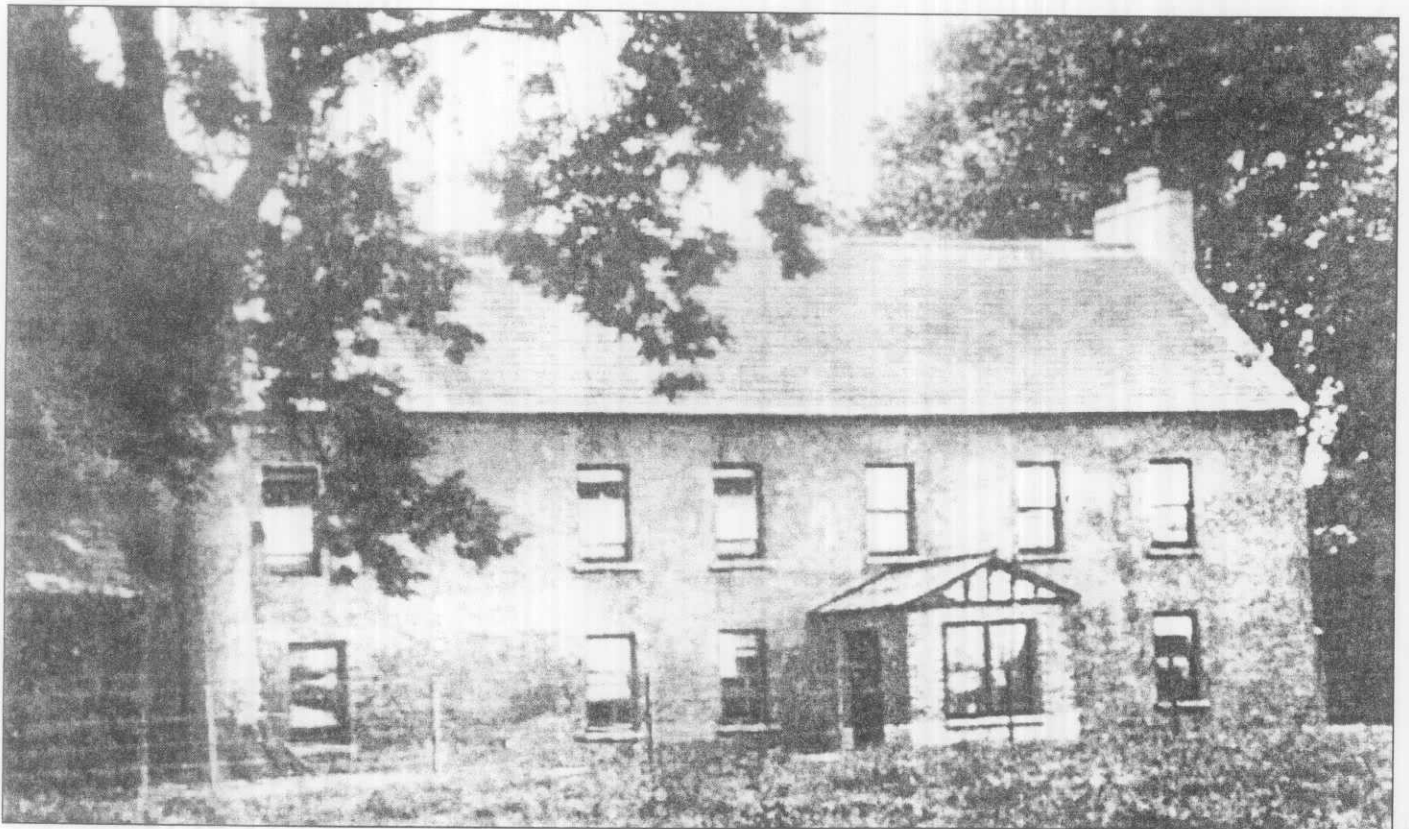
The previous July a young girl, not yet sixteen years old, had gone missing. She was Ellie Hanley, who had been living with her husband, John Scanlan, at Ballycahane, Croom. They had been accompanied by Scanlan's

servant and boatman, Stephen Sullivan. Though only a few years older than his master, Sullivan enjoyed privileges not usually associated between master and servant. It was rumoured locally that he was Scanlan's foster brother, a strong tie in Ireland in those days.

Ellen Walsh, a local woman, had been engaged by Scanlan as a part-time maid and companion for his young wife, Ellie. After the disappearance, Walsh had recognised some of her mistress's clothes in the possession of others. She had gone to the Knight of Glin, who was the magistrate for the area. He had been asked earlier to intervene in a row between the two women over the ownership of a grey cloth mantle which Ellen Walsh recognised as having belonged to the missing girl.

While she was still telling her story to the Knight, two policemen arrived with the news of the discovery of a female body on the Clare side of the Shannon. Fearing the worst, the magistrate asked Ellen Walsh to accompany him to Moneypoint for possible identification of the body. John King, a local boatman, was hired to bring them across the Shannon. The group arrived to be met by the fisherman who had made the discovery. They dug up the body away, covered it with seaweed and buried it in the sand so that no further debasement could be done to it until the authorities arrived.

When the body was disinterred, it was obvious that identification would not be easy. An inquest was called immediately in Kilrush. In giving evidence, Ellen Walsh



Ballycahane Castle.

could not say that this was the body of the young girl whom she had known so recently. However, when pressed by the Knight of Glin to try and think if there were any physical peculiarities which would render identification possible, the woman remembered. Ellie Hanley had two protruding teeth, one on each side of her gums. The body was examined again. The teeth were missing, but the sockets plainly visible.

Ellen Walsh had last seen the young girl two months before with Scanlan and Sullivan in a boat as they pulled out of the landing site at Glin. She was not seen alive by anyone else thereafter.

As further corroboration, John King, the boatman who had brought the Knight of Glin and Ellen Walsh across the Shannon, swore that he recognised the rope with which the body was tied. It was, he said, the same rope which he had loaned the previous July to John Scanlan who had borrowed it to go boating on the Shannon. Questioned as to how he could be so sure that it was his rope, he said that he would know his own particular splicing anywhere.

As a result, the Coroners Court brought in a verdict of wilful murder against John Scanlan and Stephen Sullivan in the case of Ellie Hanley. The Knight of Glin immediately went back across the Shannon with the intention of arresting the accused, but they had gone to ground, and it would be months before anything concrete came of the affair.

The people of Limerick were outraged at the brutality of the crime against one so young and helpless. Justice was demanded, but the authorities were embarrassed at



Bronze sculpture of Ellie Hanley, the Colleen Bawn, near Burrenane graveyard, erected by the community of Killimer.

having to act against a family of the Scanlan's class. Half-hearted attempts were made to find John Scanlan. It was rumoured that he still appeared at local hunts. But of Sullivan there were no sightings whatsoever. However, the image of the young beautiful girl so savagely done to death would not leave the public consciousness which demanded that action be taken.

Ellen (Ellie) Hanley was the daughter of a small farmer from Ballingarry, Co. Limerick. When she was six years old her mother died and she went to live with her uncle, John Connery, a shoemaker, near Ballycahane, Croom, Co. Limerick. He was a middle aged bachelor and he doted on her. In the meantime her father remarried.

Although she was of peasant stock, Ellie was possessed of a beauty which affected all who knew her. Certainly, her bright and friendly manner captivated all those around her adopted hometown and made her extremely popular.

Across the fields from where Ellie lived in 1819, the Scanlan family occupied a large run-down estate which contained stables and ragged acres of land. They had come there just a few years previously and had connections with the best names in the county. They were also very conscious of their social position. Mrs. Scanlan, in particular, coveted her standing and would never concede to mix socially with those whom she deemed her social inferiors.

The Scanlans were 'planters'. Part of the ruling Protestant class of Anglo-Irish landlords who lorded it over the Catholic peasantry. They owed their political position to the Act of Union of a mere few years previously. This was the enforced union between Britain and Ireland which had given this minority class a political supremacy in a land which was not quite their own.

John Scanlan, one of the sons, was 23 years of age at the time and an ex-officer in the Royal Marines. He was a squireen or a 'half-Sir'; his lifestyle was that of a young buck, much given to the pleasures of women and sport. His reputation among his peers was one who got what he wanted. His servant and boatman, Stephen Sullivan, had a dog-like devotion to him. Nevertheless, their relationship was more than that of most master/servant relationships, giving Sullivan an almost even footing when they were together.

Ellie Hanley lived simply with her uncle. However, her beauty meant that she caught the eye of the local lads. In 1819, when John Scanlan retired from the Royal Marines and came home to Ballycahaill, near Croom, he also noticed her. As a result he determined to get to know her better.

This opportunity presented itself one day when he was out fowling with Sullivan. On the excuse of being caught in a downpour, he knocked on the cottage door and asked for shelter for himself and Sullivan until the rain stopped. Connery made them both welcome and invited them to sit near the hearth to dry off and get warm. He further invited them to stay and have supper, and called for Ellie to come and meet their visitors.

Scanlan talked about their lack of success in the after-



The outbuildings where John Scanlan was arrested at Ballycahane.

noon's sport, but all the time his interest kept shifting to the young girl who was busy preparing the evening meal. She had seen him going to the hunt on many occasions, and returned his glance with interest.

When Scanlan casually enquired of Sullivan if he knew what had happened to their setter hound in their rush for shelter, Sullivan gleaned his master's objective. They had no dog with them that afternoon, but Sullivan immediately offered to go and search for it. As he had hoped, Connerly said he would go along too before it got dark. He gave Sullivan an oilskin to throw over his shoulders and the two men set out on their quest.

Alone with Ellie, Scanlan took the opportunity to invite her to talk beside him at the fire, and before the others had returned some time later, he endeared himself to her and they determined that they would see each other again.

Over the coming weeks, Scanlan called to the cottages on many a pretext, and they met for secret walks at every opportunity. They enjoyed each other's company and actively sought it out. Ellie was smitten with, and flattered by, the attentions of the 'squireen' Scanlan.

Scanlan's family, however, were less than pleased when they heard of his latest romantic attachment. They were used to his many dalliances, but this was something

different. A sustained and keen interest in a young peasant girl of little social background was not to be encouraged by the class based attitudes of Scanlan's milieu. Mrs. Scanlan, particularly, would hear of no such relationship or tolerate any possibility of accepting Ellie into the household. No amount of protestation from her son that Ellie was different from all the others would sway her. She determined that this young girl would gain no foothold within their family circle.

This attitude hardened John Scanlan in his resolve to continue his liaison with Ellie Hanley. She too abandoned caution. So taken with her by the dashing Scanlan that she agreed to elope with him. There is little doubt that Ellie's background would not allow her to step outside the boundaries of moral acceptability, and that the only way that she would permit the consummation of their relationship was by a proper marriage. On the other hand, Scanlan could quite reasonably explain his difficulty with his family to her, saying that they would not take him seriously now, but that later on when they saw that there was nothing to be gained by being obstinate, they would come to accept her. Hence, eloping was the only reasonable thing that they could do.

Scanlan arranged that they should go to Glin, a village

some thirty miles away on the Shannon estuary, where he often stayed for shooting and fishing. They would bring Sullivan with them, and nothing would look out of the ordinary to his family, until they should eventually hear of what he had done, by which time it would be too late for them to protest further.

Ellie had told Scanlan that her uncle had his life savings, reputed to be over £100, hidden in the house. This was intended as a dowry for her when the time would come for her to settle. That time, her companion suggested, was now. The young girl was so in love with Scanlan that he did not find it difficult to take her dowry, since they would be using it for the purpose for which it had been intended in the first place.

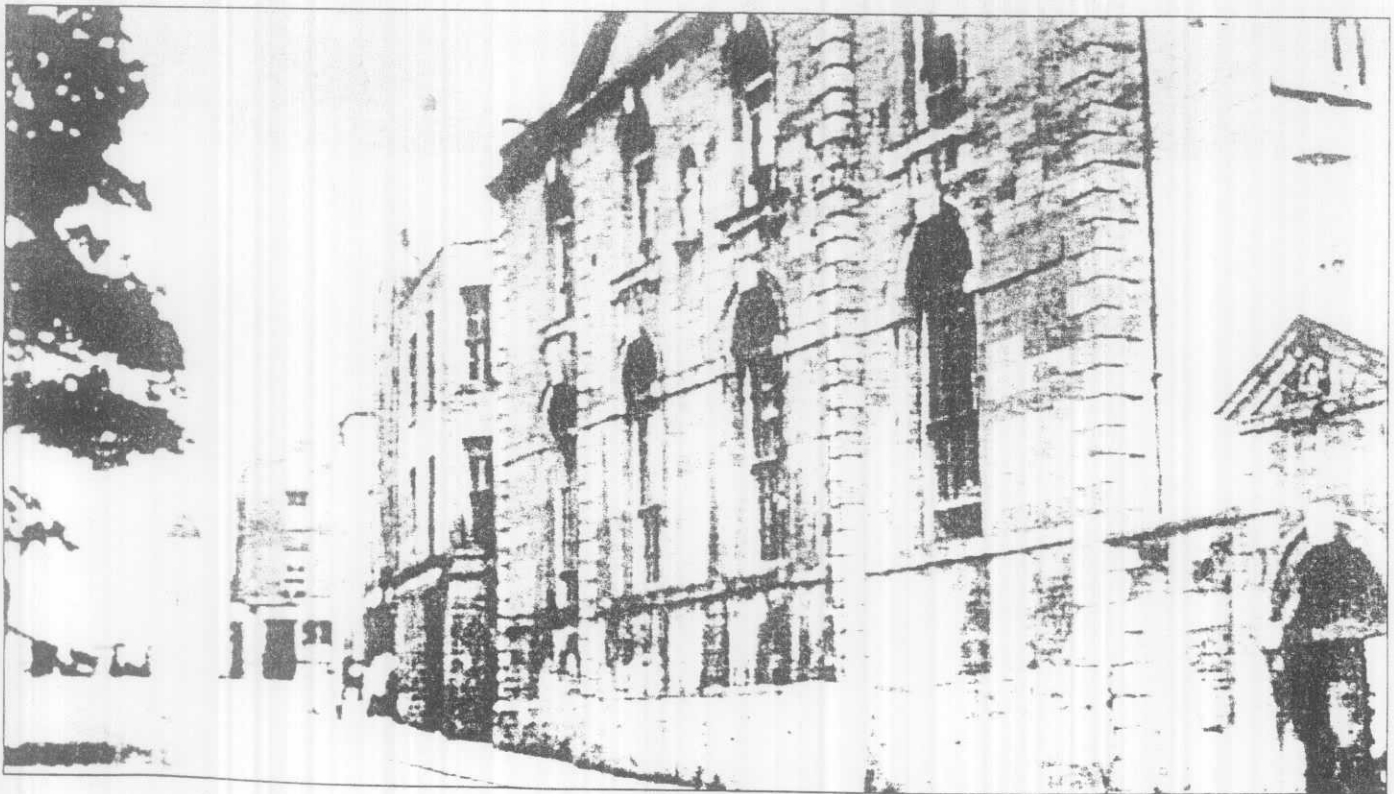
Ellie was anxious about going away from her uncle without saying anything, but Scanlan reassured her and set all her misgivings in perspective. It was agreed that they would meet on Tuesday, 29th June 1819, and go to Limerick where they would get married. From there they would travel to Glin.

At the appointed time Ellie gathered her few belongings into a bag while her uncle was out, and having taken the money from its hiding place, went to meet Scanlan. A form of marriage is generally accepted to have been undertaken by the couple in Limerick which was performed by either a silenced priest or an imposter. What is not in doubt is that Ellie fully accepted the marriage.

The day after the 'marriage' Scanlan and his wife sailed from Limerick to Glin on the packet, the *Lady Frances*, to begin their life together. Stephen Sullivan accompanied them. They took lodgings, and Scanlan engaged Ellen Walsh, a local woman to act as part-time maid and companion to his wife.

For the first week everything went well, but it wasn't long before Scanlan realised that the union was ill judged. The arrival of Lieutenant Scanlan into her life at the age of 15 must have been bewildering to so young a girl. She had obviously been flattered by his attentions and could not foresee what a disaster a match between them would be. Her first language was Irish, and her knowledge of English would not have equipped her to move with ease in the circles in which Scanlan belonged. He, however, fully realised all of this soon after they arrived in Glin. Sullivan knew what his master felt and was anxious to help make things right in any way he could. He and Scanlan even discussed the feasibility of putting Ellie on a boat to America. There were disagreements between Scanlan and his wife.

On 13 July they sailed to Kilrush with Sullivan and spent the day there. Scanlan bought Ellie some new clothes and two gold rings. On the same day Ellen Walsh and three local men from Glin had also gone to Kilrush. However, when they were ready to go home, the boatman who had taken them refused to return, saying that he had not completed his business. It was late in the evening and the sky was overcast and threatening. At that point it looked as if they would be stranded on the quay. As luck would have it, just then Ellen Walsh saw Scanlan, Ellie and Sullivan approaching. Ellie was carrying a small trunk containing her new purchases. Taking advantage of her acquaintance, Ellen Walsh asked if they could go back on the boat with them. Scanlan appeared reluctant since there were so many of them, and he feared a storm was approaching. Nevertheless he agreed, and they all clambered aboard and set off for Glin.



The Old Courthouse, Limerick.