

## Arts and Studies

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## Memories of Curragh Chase

CURRAGH CHASE, the home of the nineteenth-century poet Aubrey de Vere, now stands an empty shell in the midst of beautiful parkland.

Situated near Adare in Co Limerick, the outer walls remain almost intact, but the inner heart of the building was consumed by an accidental fire in December, 1941. Before this disaster it was the home of my childhood and the holiday refuge of my youth.

When entering the house, which was of the early Regency Period and solidly built in cut stone, one's first impression was of the vastness of the hall. Looking up towards the lofty ceiling one's eyes were immediately caught by the splendid Flaxman frieze which ran along the tops of the walls. The hall's parquet floor was composed of many coloured woods from the trees on the estate.

An enormous plaster cast of Michelangelo's Moses stood at the right of the entrance. This was said to be one of the only two casts made from the original in Rome and reached almost to the ceiling. There were two other figures in the hall, one of Niobe in plaster and a marble group called Maternal Love. Just beside the door was a bust of Cardinal Newman, who had a great influence on the family and was a personal friend of the poet... as were Tennyson and Wordsworth. Tennyson stayed in the house for five weeks in 1848.

A large door off the hall led to a supposedly fire-proof safe which held, among other things, manuscripts of Tennyson and Wordsworth which had been given to Aubrey de Vere along with considerable correspondence between the poet and Cardinal Newman, covering the time when Aubrey and his brother, Sir Stephen de Vere (who travelled to Canada on a "coffin ship" and brought the dreadful conditions on board to the attention of the British Government), were preparing to become members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Sadly, the fire did penetrate the

JOAN WYNNE JONES recalls her childhood in Curragh Chase, the home of the nineteenth-century poet Aubrey de Vere, which was destroyed — along with priceless manuscripts and art works — in a fire forty years ago.



An old family photograph of Curragh Chase before the 1941 fire. The large bow window in the centre was where Aubrey de Vere had his desk and where he did all his writing.

safe and destroyed all its irreplaceable contents. Elsewhere, in the drawing room, the cross believed to have been worn by Charles I at his execution was also burned in the fire and now its charred remains are in Limerick Museum with a few other items that were saved from the blaze.

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THE HOUSE was large, but not enormous. The most impressive room on the ground floor was the saloon. Busts of various members of the de Vere family stood on the tables and mantelpieces, watching all with a benign gaze. In the middle of the room was a marble table inlaid with a huge picture of Aurora in her chariot, and beside it a lovely little French table with the monogram of Marie Antoinette set in enamel. At the curved end of the room was a grand piano and a large harp, which lent a romantic air to the interior. Enormous Chinese Ming vases, full of

potpourri and said to have come from the sack of Peking, stood along the sides.

The library was also on the ground floor. It was lined with books and the doors covered with dummy ones. It took a practised eye to tell the dummy books from the real ones and this, naturally enough, caused some consternation amongst visitors.

A gently curving staircase led upstairs to the two bedroom wings of the house. Just before the stairs curved to the left one saw a life-sized charcoal outline of Beatrice, done by the artist G. F. Watts while visiting the house. Beside Beatrice, Dante had also been portrayed, until a new and over zealous employee was one day found vigorously removing all traces of it from the wall with a scrubbing brush!

The two rooms which held the strongest connection with Aubrey were his bedroom and the library. In the left bedroom wing were two very large master bedrooms and

one very small room. It was this little room to which Aubrey, as a younger member of quite a large family, was relegated as a child and in which he slept to the end of his days. It was never used afterwards and became a place of pilgrimage to people interested in the poet. In the impressive library visitors were shown the large desk by the window at which he wrote, and the swivel chair he sat on.

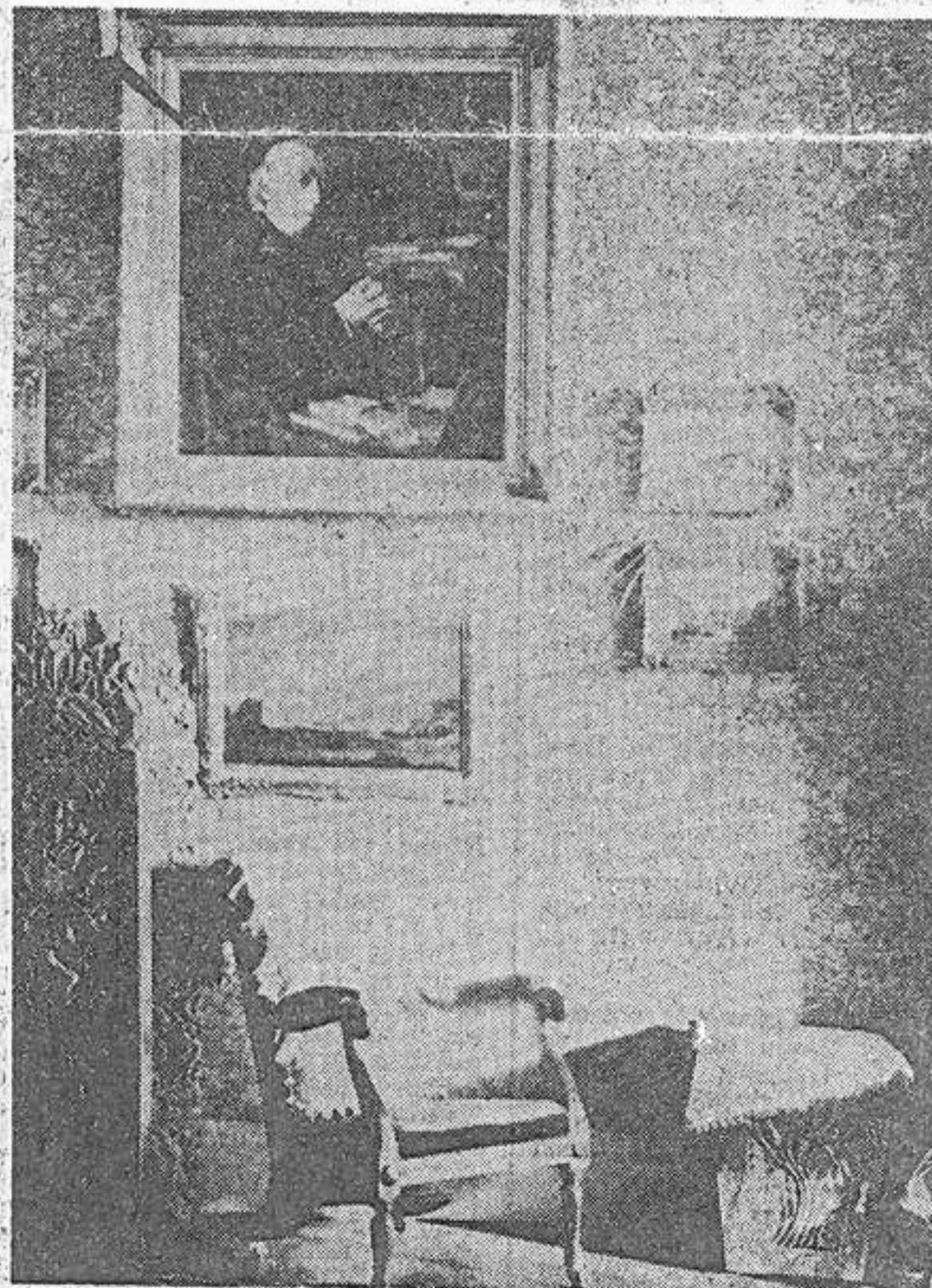
WHEN HE became a Roman Catholic, following the development of the Oxford Movement, he devoted much of his poetry to religious subjects. This is probably the reason his works are not now generally read, except in the case of one or two shorter poems and sonnets.

The house was reputed to be one of the most haunted places in Ireland. I slept in the "haunted room" and, along with numerous others, can say such rumours were well founded. Despite these phenomena, the house had a benign and peaceful atmosphere.

The family had always had a good reputation as landlords, and indeed during the troubled times, when people from a distance came to burn the house down, local people prevented them from doing so.

Though Curragh Chase was only one of many impressive Irish houses we probably didn't appreciate the wealth of artistic and cultural objects which were so lovingly accumulated over the years. Scarcely any of these objects now survive, and the rest can only be recalled in memory.

But at least part of the beautiful grounds remain, and now that the Government has acquired the property it is pleasant to feel that it has been turned into a public parkland which so many people can enjoy.



A portrait of the poet, by his cousin Dermot O'Brien, hangs above his favourite chair. The picture was lost in the 1941 fire.



Aubrey's brother, Sir Stephen de Vere (left), with Bishop Butler and Lord Emchy.