



Curragh Chase as it is today

(LL)

Memoir of Curragh Chase — an insight into local life

Memoir of Curragh Chase

— an insight into local life

By **RON KIRWAN**

VISITORS to the glorious grounds of Curragh Chase must wonder what it was like to live in the Big House which, sadly, was destroyed by fire in 1941.

"In Ruin Reconciled: A Memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959" by Joan de Vere, the last child to be brought up in the Big House of Curragh Chase, gives a fascinating glimpse into what was a great house and also her beloved home.

Born at Auckland Castle, the seat of the Bishop of Durham, on January 11, 1913, Joan de Vere was known as the "Castle baby" until her adoption by Bishop Handley Moule.

Her adoptive father's name had originally been Vere O'Brien, of the Inchiquin family, but when he inherited his County Limerick estate through the female line, it was on condition that he assume the surname of the family which had lived there for generations and he became Robert Stephen Vere de Vere.

A barrister, he practised his legal calling in the Colonial Service in such exotic locations such as the New Hebrides, the Seychelles, Cyprus, and Grenada in the West Indies, where he was Chief Justice.

Joan moved to Limerick with her adoptive par-



A portrait of the author, Joan de Vere, as a young woman in the early 1930's

celled because of the de Veres' status and good reputation as landlords in the area.

"It perished in an accidental fire in 1941, at Christmas-time, when there was no help about, no telephone; the water pressure was low and the fire brigade late."

Joan did not have a very happy childhood, although it must have seemed a privileged one and grew up in a time when even the most wanted children were left in the care of nannies and governesses.

Her father's career took her parents away for long periods of her youth and she became solitary and self-reliant.

"And then she was caught in that extraordinary trap laid by custom for the well-bred young woman of those days," reveals Mary Leland.

"Having been forced, all her young life, to practice independence, judgement and self-control, she was forbidden to exercise any of these qualities when the time came for the major decisions about her future life."

Her way out of this dilemma is part of the story of her book and she tells it as it happened.

In 1936, Joan married Martin Wynne-Jones who she met in Grenada.

On his return to Ireland, he became a teacher and, later, a clergyman, and for nearly twenty years they worked together in the parishes of Ballyorgan and Knockaney in county Limerick.

A terrific parish worker, she also bred dogs and fowl and was secretary for the British Legion in the county.

They had five children: one, Patrick, was born at Curragh Chase, in the Octagon Room.

"Inside the house, the

many unique period pieces bought by previous generations were left undisturbed in the quiet years where they had remained for many years.

"In the great hall, with its parquet floor composed of many coloured woods from the trees on the estate, was a frieze by Flaxman and a bust of Cardinal J. H. Newman. Beyond, in the saloon, was a towering plaster-cast (one of two known) of Michelangelo's Moses carrying Tablets of the Law, brought from Rome; here too was an enor-



Eamon de Valera and his daughter, Mairin, guests of Isabel de Vere, at Curragh Chase on December

mous polar-bear skin and a buhl cabinet flanked by two huge pot-pourri-filled Ming vases, spoils from the sack of Peking.

"A small display cabinet held the playing cards, stamps and money issued by the old Sir Vere Hunt when he owned Lundy Island in the Bristol Channel, and another contained a cross said to have been worn by King Charles I on the Scaffold.

"The one painting in the house said to be of value was a portrait of the sculptor Roubiliac supposedly by William Hogarth.

"In the library the collection of leather-bound books consisted mainly of the Greek and Roman classics, while others such as the three pre-Famine volumes of wild flowers painted by Lucy Standish, wife to Sir Vere Edmond de Vere, eldest brother of Aubrey, reflected more local interests.

A gently curving staircase led upstairs to the two bedroom wings of the house.

"Just before the stairs curved to the left was a life-sized charcoal drawing outline of Beatrice, drawn 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 great basement kitchen was my favourite place. When my parents were absent I would be left in the charge of Mrs Egglestone, or 'Eggie' as I called her, the cook-housekeeper.

"Her daughter, Jenny, was near my own age and, seated on the inglenook of the kitchen window, we would play with our dolls, give a hand with the wooden churn until the 'slap slap' of the forming butter could be heard, or go to the ice-cold dairy to watch the cream being skimmed from the large round pans of milk.

"In the main part of the stately building, as one wandered through the vast hall, large saloons or book-lined library on a winter's evening, I hid every corner and the solitary flame of a candle did little to hasten their retreat.

"There was always a presence behind one, not malignant but persistent.

"After I left the nursery, I was put to sleep in a large room at the top of the house known as the Green Room.

"It was well known that this room was haunted, but it was felt that a child sleeping there would have a calming effect. Almost every night I would be kept awake by continual and peremptory knocking at the door which only ceased when I sat up in bad saying

disturbed during the dark hours by a noise like buckets hurtling down the front stairs. Some said that this could be the clatter of knights in chain-mail.

"A visitor to the house once saw a woman stand-



The dust-cover of the new book portrays an early landscape of Curragh Chase.

ing by his bed but, although the sighs I heard may have come from her, I never saw her myself.

"In the Big House, when I knew it, cold was ever-present in the winter and it is one of the most vivid memories of my childhood.

"Chapped hands, with their sore stinging feel, nearly always accompanied the frosty weather, this in spite of my being warmly dressed in wool vest, liberty bodice, fleecy lined knickers, woollen socks, jersey and serge skirt.

"Chilblains also were a torment, even when rubbed with a cut onion which was guaranteed as a cure.

"It is probable that the humble cottager kept warmer than we did; there was always warmth around the open hearth and none of the smaller number of rooms was very far removed from it.

"In the Big House, however, there was no form of central heating and possibly only one of the several reception rooms would regularly have a fire.

"In the case of illness, wood would be laboriously hauled up to the top of the house and a fire lit in the sufferer's bedroom.

"The soft sounds of the crackling timber were a companionable accompaniment to drowsiness, but when a log dropped lower in the grate and the flames leapt up, fearful shadows shot across the dark room leaving vacant corners where lurked one knew not what.

"Without electricity there was no question of switching on a heater for instant warmth.

"The house depended upon a constant supply of wood during winter, and in the yard the cross-cut saw and hefty axe would keep the men busy in cold weather when little other work was possible."

"In Ruin Reconciled: A Memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959" by Joan de Vere, completed shortly before the author's death in 1989, is published by The Lilliput Press and is priced at £11.95.



Mrs Isabel de Vere, the author's mother

ents before the end of World War One, and fell hopelessly in love with Curragh Chase and its playground of 800 acres of woodland and pasture, farmyard and dairy, kitchen garden, pleasure grounds, lake and stream, deer park and lime avenue.

There was of course the Big House, roofless today—"not the result of violent politics," explains writer Mary Leland, who helped to edit the book, "a proposed IRA reprisal burning in the War of Independence was can-



Stephen de Vere, the poet's brother, with bishop butler and Lord Emly, during the mid-19th century



The long east front of curragh Chase, seen from across the lake