

Chapter 10

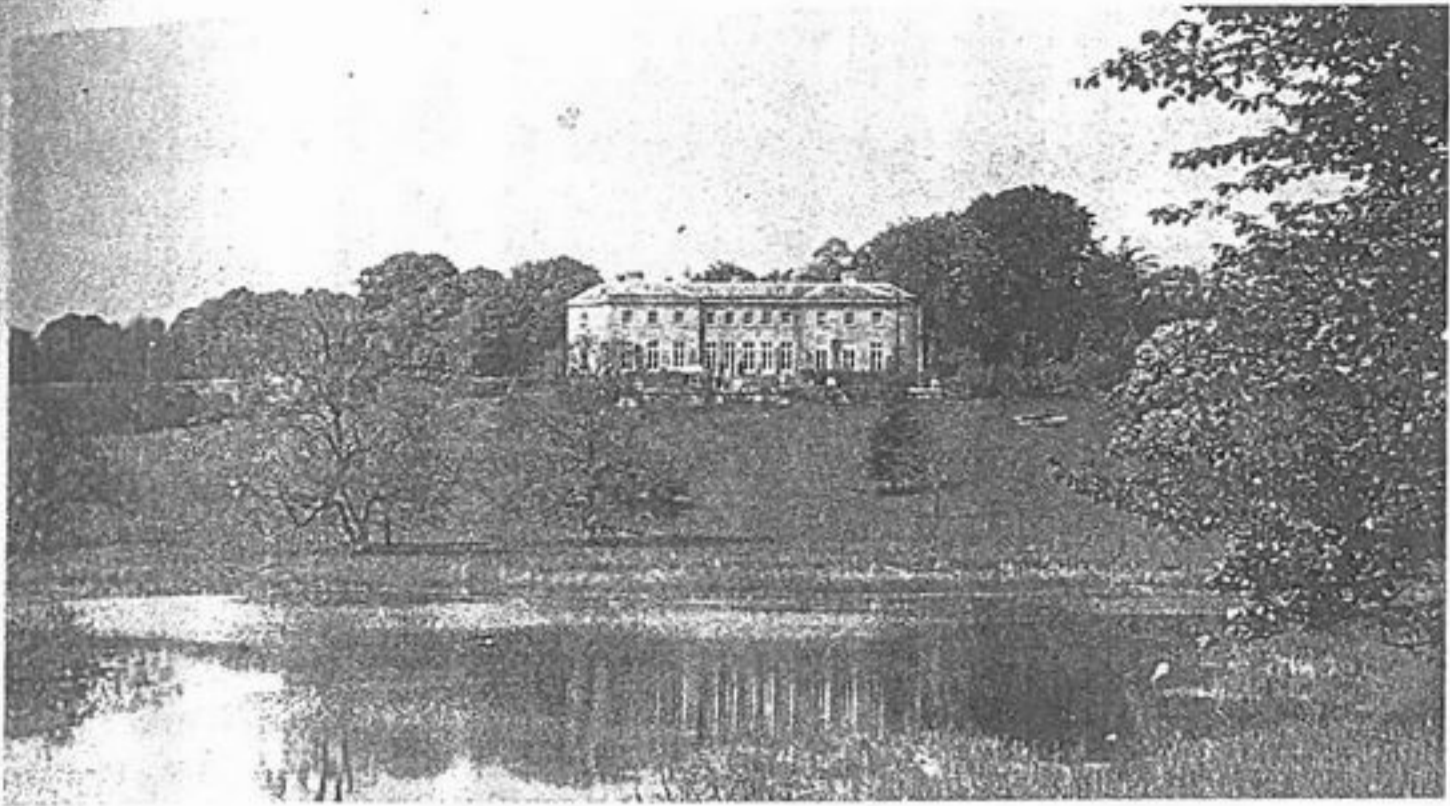
Curragh Chase

COUNTY LIMERICK

ABOVE a reed-fringed lake in West Limerick, with woods stretching away to distant hills, stood Curragh Chase, the many-windowed Georgian house of the de Veres. The house had two adjoining fronts which, though of the same style, were of different periods. The shorter of the two was eighteenth-century and by a Limerick architect; the longer entrance front, rising from a terrace with a broad flight of steps leading up to it, was probably added in 1829 by Sir Aubrey de Vere to the design of an English architect named Amon Henry Wilde. Sir Aubrey, a poet who wrote *Julian the Apostate* and *The Duke of Mercia*, took the surname of de Vere on account of being descended in the female line from the de Veres, Earls of Oxford, the family name having originally been Hunt. Sir Aubrey's father, Sir Vere Hunt, was made a baronet in 1784; his seventeenth-century ancestor Vere Hunt was a Cromwellian officer from Essex who settled at Curragh Chase in 1657.

Better known than Sir Aubrey as a poet was his third son, Aubrey de Vere, most of whose childhood was spent at Curragh Chase shortly before the house was enlarged. 'My earliest recollections are of our Irish home,' Aubrey de Vere wrote towards the end of his life, 'and I always see it bathed as in summer sunshine.' He remembered how, on Sunday evenings, the family and their guests would go down the long ash avenue to join the country people dancing at the gates; when with 'gay, though half-bashful confidence . . . some rosy peasant girl would advance and drop a curtsy' before one of the party from the Big House, 'that curtsy being an invitation to dance'. There was also an open space in the woods where the neighbours danced and to which, as a little boy, he once ventured; only to be picked up and to his annoyance carried home to bed by one of those 'merry maids whose tresses tossed in light'.¹ Like many of the Irish gentry of those days, Aubrey's family mixed easily with the ordinary people, while keeping up considerable state; his grandmother used to drive about the demesne of Curragh Chase with four greys and an outrider.

Aubrey de Vere spent his boyhood at Curragh Chase, taught by a tutor, having returned at the age of ten after three years in England. At dusk one evening in 1829, when he was fifteen, he climbed to the top of the column on the hill opposite the



Curragh Chase.

house and waved a lighted torch to celebrate Catholic Emancipation. Though he and his family were Protestants, they rejoiced with the Catholics who lit bonfires on all the surrounding hills.

Three years later, Aubrey went to Trinity College, Dublin where he made friends with the mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton, Astronomer Royal for Ireland. Hamilton stayed frequently at Curragh Chase and Aubrey would sit up with him in his room until nearly sunrise, listening to him, such was his gift for language. In fact it seemed to Aubrey that to have known Hamilton made up for never having known Coleridge. He would take Hamilton for long walks in the demesne and listen to him talking; they were once going along a road that was flooded and he went on talking about transcendental philosophy until the water was halfway up to his knees. Then he said 'What's this? We seem to be walking through a river; had we not better return to the dry land?'² When there were a lot of people in the house, the only way Aubrey could have the benefit of Hamilton's talk was to get him alone; for in a room full of noisy company he would sit reading Plato in the original Greek.

In 1846 Aubrey's father Sir Aubrey de Vere died. Aubrey was away in London when he was taken ill. He returned to Curragh Chase; the coachman met him at the gates, pale and weeping, and told him to make haste. Up at the house, he found all the family standing, kneeling or sitting in his father's room. His father saw him, raised himself up, threw his arms around him and exclaimed: 'O my dear Aubrey, do I see you again? I am so happy.'³ After Sir Aubrey's death, his room was filled with the poor of the neighbourhood who came to pay their respects.

Aubrey, who never married, continued to live at Curragh Chase after his father's death; first with his mother and then, after her death, with his eldest brother, Sir Vere de Vere, and his wife. He continued to sleep in the little bedroom overlooking the deer park which he had occupied as a child; but he took his father's place at the desk in the library, a room completely lined with books. He had already published *The Waldenses and other Poems* in 1842 and *The Search after Proserpine and other Poems* in 1843; now he wrote 'A Year of Sorrow', a poem about the horrors of the Famine, which had the country in its grip. While his brother Stephen sailed to Canada as a steerage passenger in an emigrant ship in order to see at first hand what the Famine emigrants had to endure, Aubrey threw himself into the work of the Famine relief committees. And showing no less of a talent as a prose writer than as a poet, he wrote *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds*, a book upholding the Crown and the Union yet intensely Irish in sympathy.

In 1848, the year in which this book was published, Tennyson stayed at Curragh Chase for six weeks. He imposed various conditions for his stay, to which Aubrey agreed; these included having breakfast alone, being allowed to smoke in his room, and being left alone for at least half the day. One night he and Aubrey turned his poem 'Day Dream' into a charade which they and other people acted. The part of the Sleeping Beauty was given to a beautiful girl whom Tennyson used to call 'that stately maid', Tennyson himself taking the part of the Prince. While he was here Tennyson wrote his poem 'Clara Lady Vere de Vere'.

Tennyson was not the only great poet among Aubrey's friends. He also knew Wordsworth and, later in his life, Browning, and also the two Catholic poets Coventry Patmore and Gerard Manley Hopkins. And he had friends in the artistic world as well as the literary, including Ruskin and the painter George Frederick Watts. When Watts came to stay at Curragh Chase he drew figures of Dante and Beatrice on a wall of the staircase. Unfortunately, a housemaid of a subsequent period took it upon herself to scrub away the picture of Dante and, by the time she was discovered, not much was left.

Among the poets who were friends of Aubrey, mention should also be made of the churchman John Henry Newman. Aubrey first met him when he visited Oxford in 1838, seven years before Newman's conversion to Catholicism. In 1851 Aubrey himself became a Catholic, on a journey to Rome in the company of another convert clergyman and future cardinal, Henry Edward Manning. Some of his later poems were Catholic hymns, notably a rousing hymn about the Church — 'Hers the Kingdom, Hers the Sceptre' — which is now, alas, seldom if ever heard, being no doubt regarded as 'triumphalist'.

When Newman came to Dublin as Rector of the newly founded Catholic University, he appointed Aubrey to be Professor of Political and Social Science. But the post carried no duties with it and did not take him away from Curragh Chase,

where he continued to lead the life of a literary country gentleman, reading and writing in the library and wandering for hours on end in the demesne. There were numerous paths through the pleasure grounds which his father had laid out; one of them, which went down to the lake and into the woods, was his favourite walk in the evening and became known as the Sunset Walk. There was a particular mound where he would sit and meditate and perhaps get ideas for his poetry, which takes the reader to Curragh Chase again and again:

O that the pines which crown yon steep
Their fires might ne'er surrender
O that yon fervid knoll might keep
While lasts the world its splendour!

If the weather was bad, he would walk up and down the hall, a tall, spare, clean-shaven figure wearing the black Inverness cape that he wore out of doors. The hall was one of the two grand rooms in the house, the other being the saloon. It had a classical frieze and was adorned with sculpture, including a cast of Michelangelo's Moses, a reclining figure of Niobe and a bust of Newman.

Sir Vere de Vere died in 1880, leaving no children. His brother Stephen, who succeeded to the baronetcy, lived mostly on an island in the Shannon estuary; so that Aubrey remained for the rest of his life at Curragh Chase, where he was now to all intents and purposes master of the house. Writing of his home as an old man, he speaks of it as 'haunted ground'. It seemed to him 'a sort of enchantment. The present becomes almost nothing – a mere vapour – and the past becomes so distinct that I recognise the steps of the departed as well as their voices. The most trivial incidents rise up before me wherever I go; and in every room of the house and every walk of the garden or woods I see again the old gestures, expressions of faith, even accidents of dress . . . the old jests are repeated, but with a strange mixture of pathos and mirth.'⁴

Aubrey died at the age of eighty-seven in 1902, in the same small room that he had always occupied. On the death of his brother Stephen two years later the baronetcy became extinct, and Curragh Chase passed to his sister's grandson Stephen, an O'Brien of the Inchiquin family who had taken the name of de Vere. Stephen de Vere was in the Colonial Service and he continued with his career as the Curragh Chase estate did not pay its way. During the long periods when he and his wife Isabel were abroad, the house was looked after by the English cook-housekeeper Mrs Egglestone, who was North Country and a great character. He and her daughter were here through the Troubles, from which the house emerged unscathed; when some men came with cans of petrol to burn it, the locals dissuaded them, telling them how good the family had been to everybody in the past.



Aubrey de Vere aged eighty-seven.

When the family was at home, two maids and a boy were recruited to assist Mrs Egglestone. They were fed on large legs of mutton, milk puddings and tarts and unlimited milk, just as the servants had been fed in former times; though the servants' hall beneath the saloon, with its carpet and comfortable chairs, was now seldom used. The laundry, further along the basement passage from the servants' hall, was likewise no longer used, for the washing was now sent out; but the dairy near the kitchen remained cool and spotless with pans of milk waiting to be skimmed and once a week the noise of the wooden churn could be heard. The lamp room was also very much in use, for the house was never wired for electricity and the large brass paraffin lamps had to be trimmed, cleaned and polished. For a time there had been acetylene lighting, the gas being made by a plant in the yard; but at about the end of the Great War the pipes had become unsafe and the paraffin lamps had been brought back into use.

As well as having no electricity, Curragh Chase in the 1920s still had no motor car. On Sundays, Dinny the ploughman would put on his Sunday best and drive the family to church in the brougham, which was drawn by the two farm horses specially groomed for the occasion. During the service, Dinny would put the horses into

a stable adjoining the Church of Ireland church and go off to Mass. Once, when they were driving back from church, they met the family dog running across a field with the Sunday joint in his mouth, chased by an irate Mrs Egglestone. As well as the brougham there was a governess cart pulled by a donkey, in which the de Veres' daughter Joan, often accompanied by Mrs Egglestone's daughter, would drive into the village of Adare, five miles away, for messages.

Joan spent her childhood at Curragh Chase during the Great War and afterwards. She was an only child but never lonely here, happy roaming the woods with the birds, the rabbits and the squirrels as her playmates. She looked for wild flowers which were more plentiful than they had been now that the grounds were not so well kept up. She had many secret places where she could hide from parental authority; though it was not possible to hide all the time and she would be sent on errands taking food, clothes and medicine to the people living in the cottages on the place. Once, when she was about ten, she took a bottle of medicine to an old retired gardener. To her alarm, he drank the whole bottle at once, saying 'That'll do me good!' He had not noticed the label which said 'Take a dessertspoonful three times a day'. However, it seems that he was none the worse; indeed, the medicine may have effected a lasting cure, for she was never asked to take him another bottle.

When not roaming the demesne or going on errands of mercy, Joan did her lessons in the schoolroom off the back stairs, which had a cupboard full of old toys and was sometimes called the office because it had been used by Aubrey de Vere's brother Stephen when he came over from his house on the island to collect his rents and see to the estate. Further up the stairs was a lavatory in which young Joan would lock herself as she enjoyed looking down on the comings and goings between the yard and the kitchen door.

Joan's bedroom was known as the Green Room and had a four-poster bed. It was haunted; many years earlier, a child's coffin with a skeleton inside had been found beneath the floorboards of the adjoining room. When, as a child, Joan walked upstairs to bed, holding her candlestick with its flickering candle, she would feel that she being followed. Having reached the safety of her room, she would pile furniture against the door as a precaution. Then, as soon as her head touched the pillow, there would be three sharp knocks on the door. She would sit up and say 'Come in' and the knocking would stop. This would happen several times each night. She never experienced anything when she slept in this room as a grown-up; although a doctor who was given the room when he came to stay woke up one night and saw a female figure leaning over him; he was so scared that he left first thing next morning.⁵

There were various strange occurrences elsewhere in the house. Perhaps the most remarkable was the periodic disappearance of all the umbrellas and walking sticks in the hall stand; they would be found eventually in some out-of-the-way place upstairs. In spite of ghosts, the house had a very happy atmosphere; though people



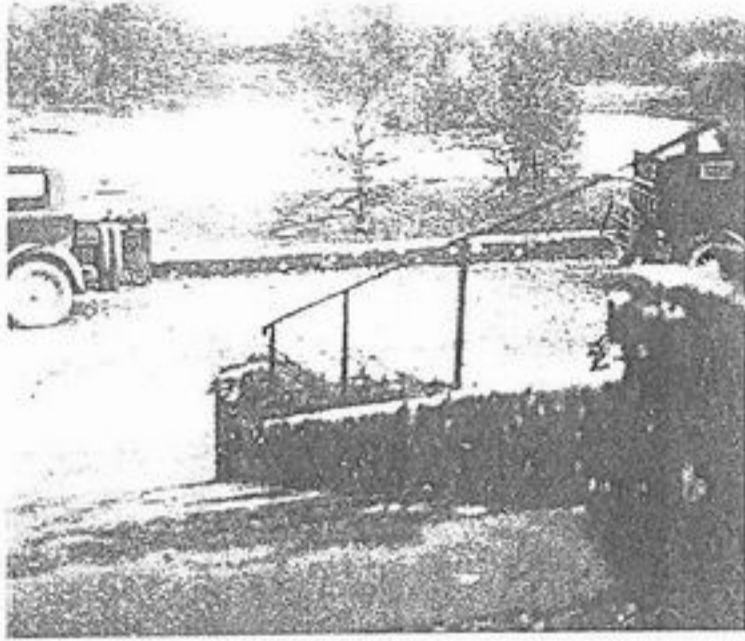
A shoot at Curragh Chase in January 1936. Isabel de Vere's neighbour Hon Charles Spring Rice is third from the left with his wife third from the right. Near her stands their nine-year-old son Gerald (afterwards Lord Monteagle), who when he came here would be given a glass of whiskey which he thought revolting.



The beaters at the shoot at Curragh Chase in January 1936.

spoke of a curse and also of bad luck because the steps leading up to the terrace were thirteen in number.

After Stephen de Vere's death in 1936 his wife Isabel lived on at Curragh Chase. A neighbour ran the shoot for her; when his nine-year-old son came here he would be given a glass of whiskey, which he thought revolting. An American lady once came to the shoot to watch and when they had finished shooting one of the guns asked her if she had ever fired a twelve bore. She said she had not so he handed her his gun to have a try. They were standing by the marshy edge of the lake and she fired



Looking down to the lake where the American lady threw the gun.

at a bulrush; then, frightened by the bang, she hurled the gun away from her. It landed in the mud barrels first, its stock sticking up into the air.

The place was becoming run down, the flat roof of the house gave trouble, there was a damp patch in one of the bedrooms. But Isabel de Vere cared for it as best she could and managed to preserve what one of her guests, the young British writer and authority on country houses James Lees-Milne, called 'the wonderfully undisturbed flavour of peace and meditation'.⁶ The library was left exactly as it was in Aubrey de Vere's lifetime, though it was used as the family room in winter since it was impossible to heat most of the other rooms.

It was in the library, one night in December 1941 shortly before Christmas, that the fire started. Isabel de Vere was alone in the house with two maids who were sleeping downstairs. They woke in time to get out but since there was no telephone the fire brigade did not arrive until the roof was on the point of falling in. People looking towards the lake, which was lit up by the blaze, thought they saw a shadowy figure moving and the cry went up: 'The Lady walks.' One person watching the house burn down said 'Now the curse is gone!'⁷

Among those who mourned the passing of Curragh Chase was James Lees-Milne. Yet he admitted to 'a sense almost of satisfaction in the particular brand of fate' that had 'befallen this truly enchanted place'. For it seemed to him that 'a lingering, mouldering end' would have been 'far, far sadder'.⁸