

Dual Action

Some happenings in the lives of four women from a Croagh, Rathkeale, Co. Limerick, family, born in the last century, are recounted, mainly because they place them so much ahead of their time. These ladies were sisters Mary and Elizabeth Cowhey of Ardnaprehaune, Croagh, and sisters Elizabeth and Mary Cowhey of Churchtown, North Cork.

The family of the Cowhey sisters were very staunch supporters of Parnell and the Land War effort. When the strategy of this war was changed in the 1880s to what was known as the 'Campaign', they became strong advocates of this change. This involved the tenants of the farms deciding by resolution on each estate what reduction they would demand on their rent. If this was refused, they would transfer the money, less the abatement sought, to a few trustees in whom they possessed confidence. The money was to be used to support any tenants evicted by obdurate landlords. The National Land League promised to guarantee these funds against misappropriation and, if necessary, continue supporting evicted tenants after these local funds had been exhausted.

In January 1889, the Cowhey family applied for a reduction of rent and were refused. They immediately prepared to resist any eviction or taking over of their land. A plan was quickly put in motion. All opes, windows and doors, on the ground floor of their house were built up in masonry and stocks of Indian (yellow) meal, water and fuel were laid in. It was decided that the house would be defended by women, so avoiding any long-term severe jail sentences on the men. Accordingly, the Cowhey sisters, a few cousins



Bessie Cowhey with Derby winner, Loch Lomond, at the Curragh, 1919.

by Maurice Cowhey

and some other Croagh women took up abode in the house awaiting the authorities efforts to take it over.

This occurred quickly when the sheriff and a large force of police and bailiffs arrived and endeavoured to enter the house by placing ladders up to the first floor windows. The women kept them out by throwing boiling Indian meal and water mixture on them from above. This resistance continued successfully for a whole day. On the second day, the police arrived with a battering ram and entry was forced through one of the built-up ground floor opes. All the women were held but later released, with the exception of Mary

and Elizabeth Cowhey, who were arrested and charged. The farm was placed in the hands of an 'Emergency Man'* and a posse of police, as was the family's other nearby house and farm at Gorthrea, Croagh.

The two sisters were brought before magistrates J.B. Irvine Rolls and C.H. Rolleston, who sentenced them to six months in Limerick Prison under the Criminal Law and Procedure Act, '50 and '51 Vic. Chapter 20.

The following details are taken from the General Register of Prisons:

*Limerick Prison Female Section
Prisoners committed 1889*

Mary Anne Cowhey

*Age 29 years. Height 5'7 Black Hair
Black Eyes.*

Elizabeth Cowhey

*Age 23 years. Height 5'6 Black Hair
Black Eyes.*

Born Croagh Rathkeale

Residence Croagh Rathkeale

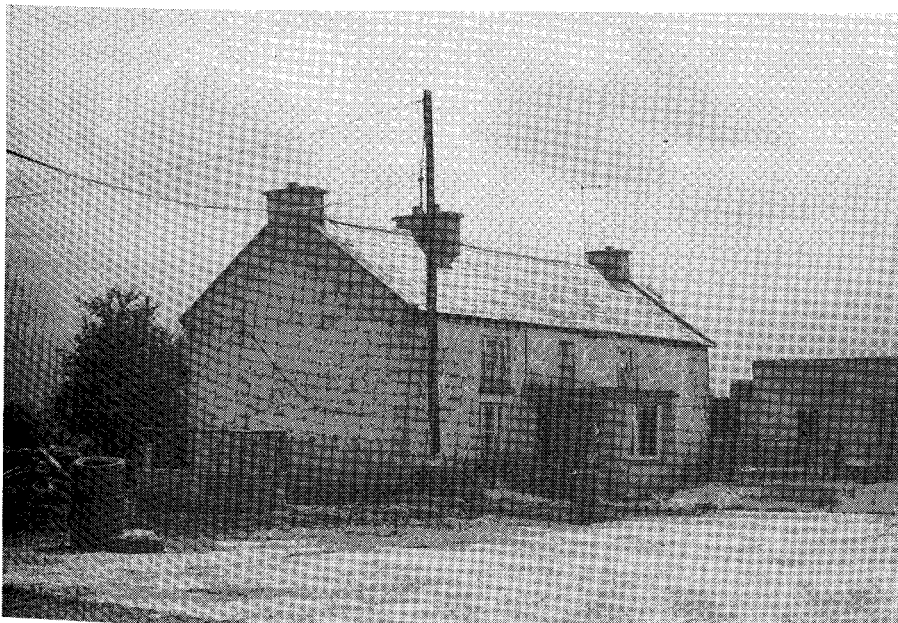
Occupation farmer. Religion R.C.

Education R and W

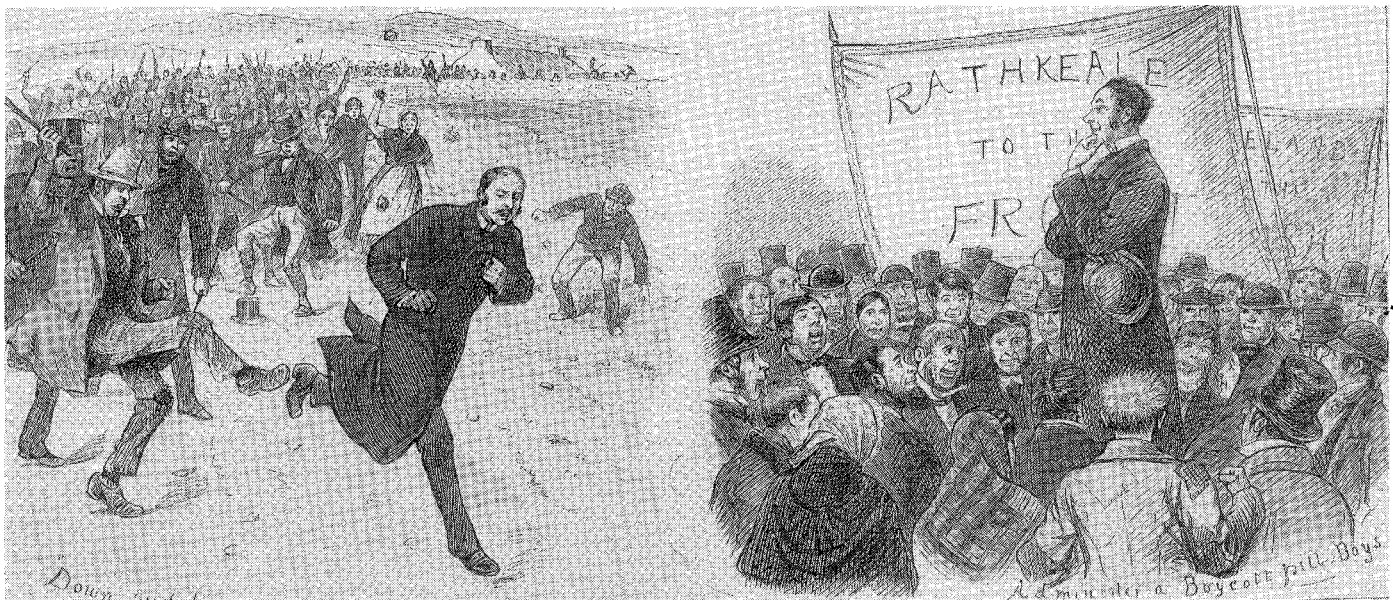
Offence obstructing Sheriff

The following description of Limerick Prison appeared in the Irish Times in the Spring of 1997: "Limerick prison is a gloomy place, old buildings, dark narrow corridors with low ceilings. You stoop to get through low doorways into narrow cells three times the size of a single bed with a window set high in the end wall. The women's exercise yard had high steel walls around a space the size of a tennis court and has been accurately described as a cage."

The 'Campaign' was having quite a success country-wide putting pressure on



Ardnaprehaune farmhouse.



Land agitation at Rathkeale. From *The Graphic*, 8 January 1881.

Limerick Museum.

the authorities and this was probably one of the reasons why the sentence on the sisters was slightly commuted. They were released on 28th July 1889, and a large number of people welcomed them at the gates of the prison. They proceeded home by train and, on alighting at Adare station, were met by a crowd estimated in hundreds which conveyed them home to Ardnapprehaune, many walking and others in all kinds of vehicles and preceded by a band. As T.D. O'Sullivan MP, poet, literary writer and chairman of the Central Branch of the Irish National Land League, wrote in the *Cork Herald*: "The people cheered behind them and the music played before them until they arrived again at their native place."

The farms were all purchased after the various Land Acts of 1895 to 1910. Both sisters married, Mary becoming Mrs. Liston and Elizabeth Mrs. Cotter.

Some of the Cowhey family from Ardnapprehaune and Fiddihy, Croagh, moved to the Churchtown area of North Cork very early in the 19th century. After some years they occupied a number of large farms. One family moved into Churchtown House. At the turn of the century it was owned by James Cowhey, who had inherited it, and living with him were his two sisters, Bessie, who was born in 1876 and Mary, often called Molly, born 1880. James, ably aided by Bessie, was rapidly building up a stud of high-class thoroughbred horses. As their foundation stock, they purchased the mares at the U.K. sales, mostly at Doncaster. At the Musker dispersal sale in the U.K. in 1906, they purchased a yearling filly named Mary Melton. She won a few modest races and, when she came to breed, was mated to Lomond, standing at Fort Union Stud, Adare, the property of the Earl of Dunraven. At her waiting times to and from Fort Union, she was stabled at Gorthrea farm in Croagh.

From the mating came a colt which was named Loch Lomond. When raced as a two-year-old in 1918, he showed great

promise and was given time to develop. Unfortunately, James Cowhey died at the end of 1918. He bequeathed his Churchtown farm, stud and bloodstock to Bessie. Loch Lomond ran in her name in the 1919 Irish Derby and won comfortably, defeating a high-class field which included



Charles Stewart Parnell.

Vanity Fair cartoon.

two fancied English challengers, who were joint favourites to take the prize. A comment on the race from the Irish Independent says: "One left hander was all Loch Lomond required to carry Martin Quirke clear for a decisive six length victory. Even allowing for an element of patriotic bias, it was an immensely popular victory, and Miss Cowhey, the first successful woman owner in the history of the race, led her colt in amid prolonged cheering." Still among the older people in the locality there is a tradition that Bessie and Mary were keen horse women and athletes and indeed it would seem that Bessie remains a legend for her excellence and fearlessness.

Mary (Molly) entered the old University College, Dublin, Medical School (the Newman Catholic University Medical School) in Cecilia Street in 1898. She and another woman were the first two women to enter the school. She qualified as a doctor in 1905. Among her classmates who qualified at the same time were Dr. Richard Hayes, who later became the film censor and well-known historian and writer, and Dr. John Devane of Limerick. She set up practice in her native Churchtown. Just like her sister, she has become a local legend for her caring, kindness and freedom with her medical attention. Bessie became Mrs. E.M. Crofts and Mary did not marry.

* An 'Emergency Man' was a person who took over the house and farm at the behest of and under the protection of the authorities, a much hated figure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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