

# A GLENSTAL BOYHOOD



*The lake and boathouse at Glenstal.*

**W**ell, Master Croker, this was the way of it. The coachman, Mr. Whelan, was driving the pony trap by Cappernuke bog one winter night and heard a baby crying under a clump of heather. So he just put you in the trap and brought you up to the Castle'. This was the answer to a child's question, given by one of the staff.

The real event had already taken place in November, 1909, and although I was christened Alexander Fitzwilliam Croker, the last was the family name most familiar to the local people during my early days. My parents always called me 'Fitz', and only Fitzwilliam, full out, if I was being reproved for bad behaviour.

My brother, Charles, had always been known as 'Pat', since the Limerick horse, Ardpatrick, won the Derby on the day he was born.

I was an afterthought in the family, my

*by Fitzwilliam Barrington*

sister, Winifred, being eleven years older, and my brother seven years older than myself. So I was to some extent left without playmates, since the age gaps tend to become exaggerated at that early stage.

In those days, there was a large indoor staff at Glenstal, consisting of: butler, footman, odd-job man, cook/housekeeper, housemaids, nanny, nurserymaid, my mother's 'lady's maid' and the laundry maids, which made up a total of twelve. The most unenviable job was that of the junior kitchen – or scullery-maid, who had to be up around six o'clock in the morning to get the bathwater hot.

The cook/housekeeper, the lady's maid and the butler took their meals in the "House Keepers' Room" and the others in the 'Servants' Hall'. Nursery

meals were sent up on a tray.

Outside in the stable yard were the coachman, who looked after the horses, and the chauffeur, who also ran and maintained the electric light engine.

In the garden there were Mr. MacBean, the head gardener, who had his house close by, and about nine other men, who came up from Murroe. This staff not only tended the gardens and glasshouses, but also the ornamental paths and shrub plantings etc. around the inner part of the estate.

The gardens were laid out in an Italian terraced style, said to be the earliest of this kind in Ireland. I well remember that daily, at twelve noon and six in the evening, when the Angelus rang in Murroe, all the men took off their hats and said a prayer.

The gardens supplied flowers, fruit, vegetables and honey for the house, and every evening a bunch of cut flowers and ferns was sent up to decorate the dinner



**Fitzwilliam's mother, Lady Mary-Rose Barrington, on her wedding day, 1895.**

table.

Mr. Gow was the steward at the home farm, about a mile from the house, where he lived with his family. The milk, cream, eggs and other supplies were sent up every morning to the Castle, whilst the main bulk of the milk went to the creamery at Abington. Mrs. Gow was an expert cook of Scottish scones and cakes, so I greatly looked forward to being invited to tea, when there was always a lavish spread of good things.

My father was a keen sportsman, and on the estate there was good shooting of woodcock, pheasant, duck and snipe. Mr. Verrant, the keeper, had several foresters who worked under him. The pheasant population was maintained by rearing the chicks under a turkey, before they were released into the wild.

In the earlier days, there were large shooting parties, with some guests staying in the house. With the advance of World War I, these were less frequent, and were finally discontinued in the early 1920s, when sporting guns were prohibited.

My mother was also a good shot, as well as being a keen fisherwoman. There were several lakes in the park at Glenstal, which were well stocked with trout, and there was good trout fishing also in the river up at Vancluse. The mayfly season on Lough Derg was an important seasonal event.

Prior to 1914, my parents took a grouse moor and fishing in Scotland for August and September. In subsequent years, we all went to a house near Moyard in Co. Galway, where there was good sea and lough fishing.

During the Great War years, we took in a Belgian refugee family, who occupied a spare cottage in the grounds. The husband, a hard worker, was employed in the gardens, and the children attended school in Murroe. We used to visit them every Sunday afternoon, taking supplies of tasty extras

etc. When the time came for their repatriation many tears were shed. They took back a lasting memory of Ireland, as Monsignor Dwan in Murroe christened their younger son Charles Albert Patrick.

In nursery days, I was brought down to the dining-room at breakfast time by my nanny and sat down beside my mother to be taught to read and write. After the lesson had finished, I was allowed to draw trains in the exercise book, except on Sundays when only churches were permitted. My father taught me Latin tags, which I had to recite parrot-wise for the amusement of any guests, who reckoned I must be rather a bright child!

After breakfast, I was returned to the



**Fitzwilliam Barrington, aged 3, at Glenstal.**

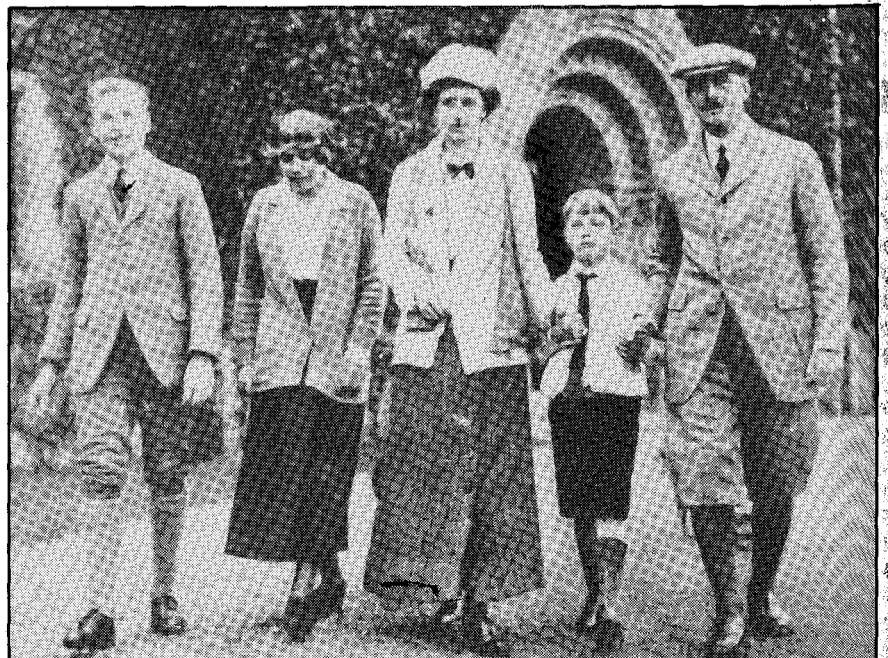


**Fitzwilliam's brother, Charles, Glenstal, 1908.**

nursery and did not see my parents again until I was brought down to the drawing-room in the evening at six o'clock. Then my mother might read stories to me, or often we sang songs at the piano, but on Sundays only Bible stories and hymns were allowed.

On Sunday mornings, any tenants, or others, wishing to consult my father would come to the stable yard to state their problems. After that, we drove down to morning service at Abington in a horse-drawn covered 'waggonette'. When this was required to come to the hall door, my father blew on a bugle; this signal also applied when a motor car was needed to take us to Limerick or elsewhere.

In those days, there was no television, so we made our own entertainment: playing cards or other paper games and



**The Barrington family, Glenstal, 1917. From left: Charles (15), Winifred (19), Mary-Rose, Fitzwilliam (8) and Sir Charles.**



*Gargoyles at Glenstal Castle.*

listening to the gramophone. I was very attached also to my clockwork model railway. Sometimes I was able to go to the staff quarters to dance 'sets' and reels to accordion accompaniment.

In late spring, I was sometimes sent with my nurse to a hotel at Lahinch for some sea air. This meant the excitement of travelling on the West Clare Railway, immortalised by Percy French.

On the subject of accoustic gramophones, a relation of my mother's – who had invented the turbine engine – gave us a machine which somehow amplified sound under air pressure produced by an electric motor; it had a copper horn six foot in length, and when Caruso records were played out through the window, the sound could be heard almost two miles away.

On Christmas Eve there was the annual 'giving out of the meat'. A suitable animal had been killed and butchered at the home farm, so the beef came up to the Castle in easily divisible form. The family assembled at 6 p.m. in the gun-room and my father, assisted by help from the home farm, presided at a big table to divide up the meat. All the estate tenants waited their turn outside in the yard and my father called their names which were relayed by a linkman at the door. They were then asked 'How many are you?' and a suitable joint of beef was accordingly handed over. Then came thanks and Christmas greetings to my parents and the family as each recipient took his leave.

When my sister was twenty-one,



*The driveway to Glenstal Castle.*



**Fitzwilliam Barrington, with wireless set, in first year of public broadcast programmes.**

there was a ball in the house. At the supper table I was offered 'tipsy cake'. As a ten year old, not being used to strong drink, I got quite a shock and have never cared for trifle laced with wine ever since!

Out in the park there were deer, red, fallow and japs; as a small child I remember two emus, as well as swans on the lakes. My father was very keen on golf and there was a nine hole course laid out in the park, whilst on the lawn, up at the house, he practiced shots with a woollen ball, fashioned with a crochet hook.

Saturday was the day for motoring ten miles to shop in Limerick. It was a slow journey as the Ballyvarra road was in poor state in those days. The first visit would be to Mr. Woodhouse the grocer, then to Mr. O'Malley the butcher, and then probably on to Todd's department store. After that, my father retired to the Country Club and my mother to the Ladies' Club – in Bedford Row I think – to play bridge. I was sent off with the nanny to Miss Smith's tea room, and in later years occasionally to the Coliseum or Gaiety cinemas.

I very much wanted to see a silent film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, but sadly it could not be shown, as a permit to obtain the explosive sound effects would not be granted.

The first time I went to a theatre was to the pantomime *Cinderella* at the old Theatre Royal. There were some catchy songs and local riddles like 'Why did Barrington Pier?' – 'To Cedar View', and 'Why was Bunratty?' – 'Because Cratloe Wood looked down on her'.

Often when in Limerick my father would attend committee meetings at Barrington's Hospital. During World War I, I was taken there by my nurse to visit wounded soldiers, probably from Irish regiments.

In 1915, my father, aged sixty seven, went off to drive an ambulance in France.

He carried the rank of a colonel in the Limerick Militia.

When I was seven years old, the nanny was replaced by a governess, who extended my education to French, geography, arithmetic, history and so on. When I was nine and a half, I was sent away to board at a preparatory school, Castle Park, at Dalkey, Co. Dublin, where my education was extended further to take in Latin, geometry and algebra. There were also team games like soccer, rugger, hockey and croquet.

Great was the excitement on coming home for the holidays by the 9.15 a.m. train from the then Kingsbridge Station in Dublin; after that, a change at Limerick Junction and on to Boher Station where I would be met by the coachman. At Abington there was always a friendly stop at Mr. Power's bar, where I was regaled with lemonade and the coachman with porter. My mother could never make out why the drive up from the station took so long!

When I was eleven my sister died; it was very sad for me as we were just beginning to become friends. Leave, to come home for the funeral, was not requested either for my brother at Eton College or myself at Castle Park. My parents believed it would be too upsetting for us.

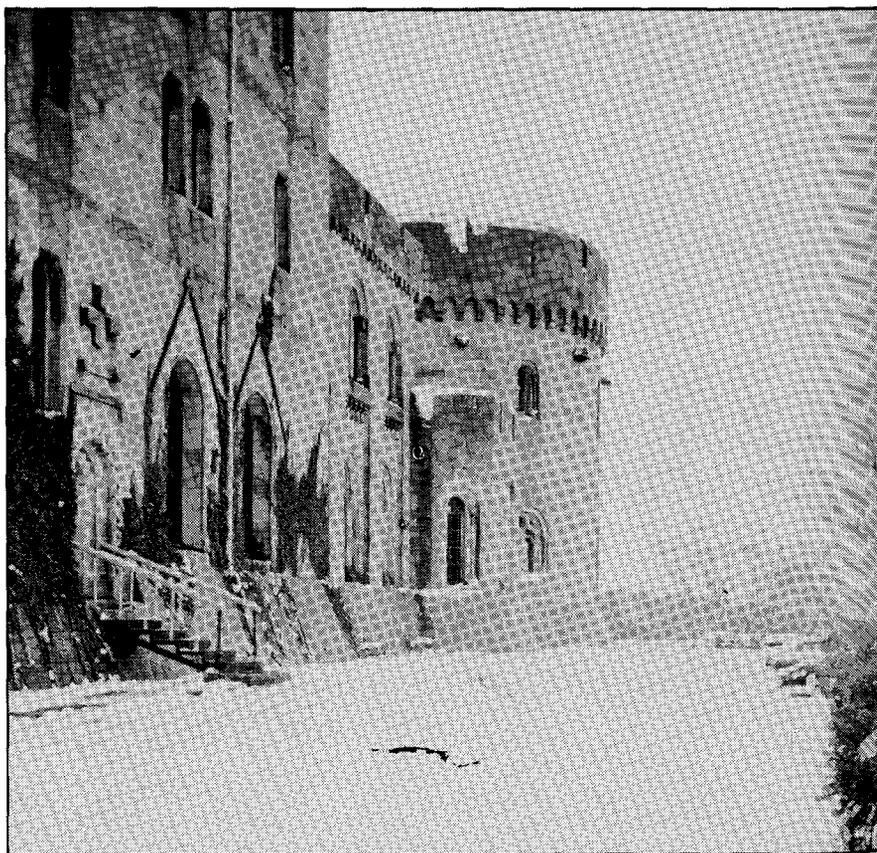
In 1922, the country became very unsettled and we received columns of 'visitors', both regular and irregular. They all behaved correctly and I found them all friendly. At that time, we were all advised to sleep with our bags packed, in case of an emergency, but my luggage only

consisted of my stamp album, my precious model trains being too big.

By autumn 1923, I was approaching fourteen, and the time came to go to a public school in England; Shrewsbury School had previously been selected, being easily accessible from Ireland. However, by the Christmas holidays of 1923, my parents had already started to move to England, and I was to spend only one more school holidays at home in the summer of 1924. Thereafter I did not see Glenstal again until 1939.



**Fitzwilliam, after his return from Second World War, in 'demob' suit.**



**Winter scene at Glenstal.**