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The story chooses you: author Helena
Close on writing what asks to get written >>P4



Icemen cometh: Red
Eskimo have embraced DIY
recording as the way to go >>P6



On our knees: the
recession has sent us
back to religion, says
Patricia Feehily >>P3

FEATURES 1-4
FASHION 5
ENTERTAINMENT 6-7
BUSINESS 16

Sale of the last century

Knight of Glin Desmond FitzGerald tells
Norma Prendiville that despite the
imminent auction of 200 items of art and
furniture from Glin Castle - to help with the
castle's upkeep - he is looking forward to
developing Glin's cultural tourism appeal

SOME people think it is an empty house now," says Desmond FitzGerald, Knight of Glin. This is one of the myths that has grown up since the announcement in March that the Knight was putting paintings, furniture and other collectables up for sale.

And the story also gathered legs that somehow, he must also be broke.

This week, just days

before the auction of some 200 items at Christies in London, the Knight sought to nail the myths.

"We are not broke yet," he said.

But he admitted they do need the money from the auction to keep up the house and grounds he inherited at the age of 11.

"There is a huge cost in keeping it and that is why we are selling," he says simply.

The beautifully-produced Christies catalogue for the sale lists 200 lots,

complete with photographs - old landscapes, portraits and prints, paintings by more modern artists such as Derek Hill and Mildred Ann Butler, furniture dating from the Georgian period, porcelain and sculptures. The estimates for the lots range from £200 sterling to £100,000 for an Irish George 11 mahogany bureau writing cabinet.

"The pieces going on sale at Christies are, for the most part, pictures and furniture I bought myself," the Knight explains. There

are also pieces of family silver which had, in any case, he says, been kept in the bank. "I never used it."

He is sanguine about their exit from his life. "Having collected them myself I feel they fly away to others. It doesn't matter. We need the money."

And he reasons that "it's like an investment". He bought them very reasonably. Now, when he needs to, he is calling in the return.

>> CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Knight of Glin, Desmond FitzGerald and his wife Madam Oida FitzGerald in the hallway of their home at Glin Castle

PICTURE: ARTHUR ELLIS/PRESS22

features

Leader2

Sale of the last century

» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Besides, he seems quite pleasantly surprised at how well the house looks, now the items are gone. Their absence lies lightly on the house. There has been some strategic rearranging of paintings, a small bit of pushing furniture around. But only the keenest, most intimate connoisseur, would notice.

"Yes," the Knight says. "Decluttered is the word. It is amazing really."

He can date his first foray into the world of collecting back to when he was 14. "The first thing I bought was a statue of Andromeda at Ballinagard near Ballineety. It was in a field with a lot of nettles around it. She had no head, though I found a hand belonging to her. I think I paid a pound."

Andromeda now stands in a bower in the walled garden – still headless – but not for sale at Christies.

This sparks another thought. "I do realise that recent publicity promoting the sale in London does give the impression we have ceased trading."

That is most definitely not the case. Glin Castle is still open for business. Only the hotel side of things is gone, after 14 years, he points out. This is a matter of some regret to the Knight, as it involved letting 10 members of staff go.

"That was very sad," he says. Particularly so because many of them had worked for many years at the Castle. But he is hopeful that, with a renewed focus on other aspects of the business, there will be at least part-time work available in the future. Meantime, a small, permanent staff remains in the Castle and in the grounds.

And the business of cultural tours and seminars will continue. "We had had almost every museum in the US here and the Chicago Art Institute is coming later in the year," Desmond FitzGerald explains.

A Decorative Arts weekend planned for September already has 20 participants signed up. Garden tours and garden semi-



Knight of Glin, Desmond FitzGerald and his wife Madam Olda FitzGerald in the hallway of their home at Glin Castle PICTURES: ARTHUR ELLIS/PRESS22

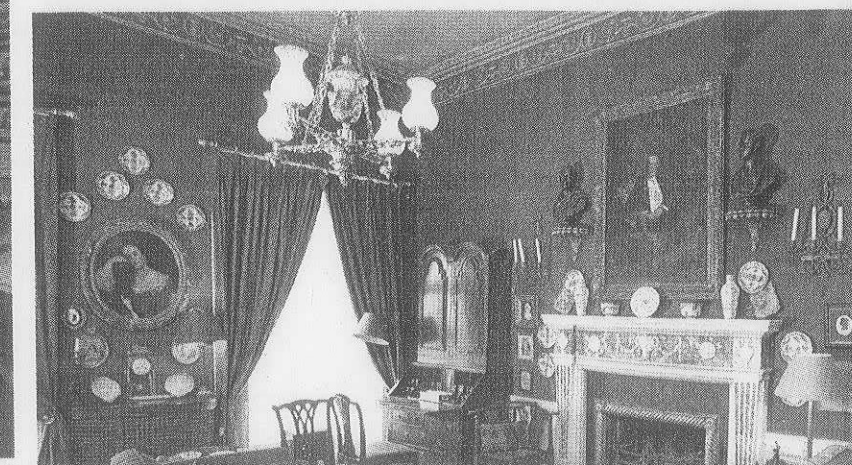
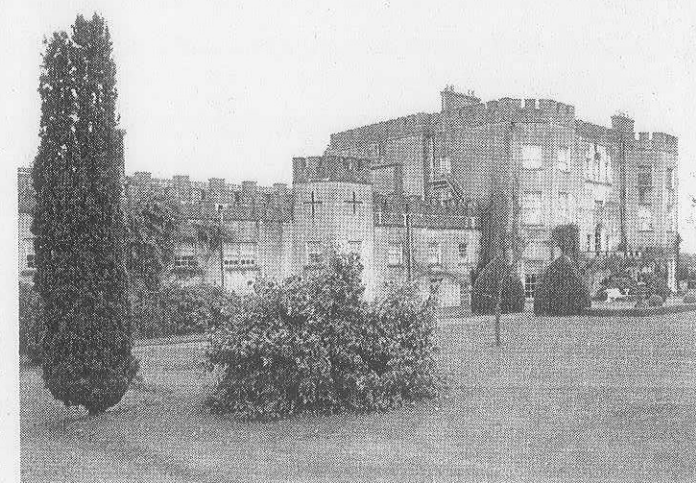


The opulently appointed drawing room in Glin Castle

PICTURES: ARTHUR ELLIS/PRESS 22



Artwork and family photographs in the drawing room of Glin Castle



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Garden tours and garden semi-
nars will also continue. And the
house and gardens will be avail-
able as always for "family
reunions, weddings, anniver-
saries and group dinners. Only
last week, Newcastle West bridge
club hosted a dinner for some 38
members there.

In the past, too, Glin Castle
was taken for a week or for
weeks at a time for house parties
- and Desmond FitzGerald is
hoping there will be some return
to this kind of letting. He also
points out its suitability as a
small-scale conference centre for
team-building exercises or
retreats.

The hotel side of things, he
explains, was the least viable
because of the high number of
staff involved. "We lost out in the
end. The Americans were not
travelling and they are still not
travelling."

The farm side of things, which
is a dairy operation, also took a
hit, when the price of milk fell.
"That was another blow," the
Knight says. But, he laughs, con-
trary to rumour, he did not lose
money in Anglo-Irish shares.

"I have no Anglo shares."

"We are making every effort
to bash on," he continues. "This
house and this family has had
just as many upsets in the past."

Over 700 years, various



Knight of Glin, Desmond FitzGerald and his wife Madam Oida FitzGerald in the hallway of their home at Glin Castle PICTURES: ARTHUR ELLIS/PRESS22



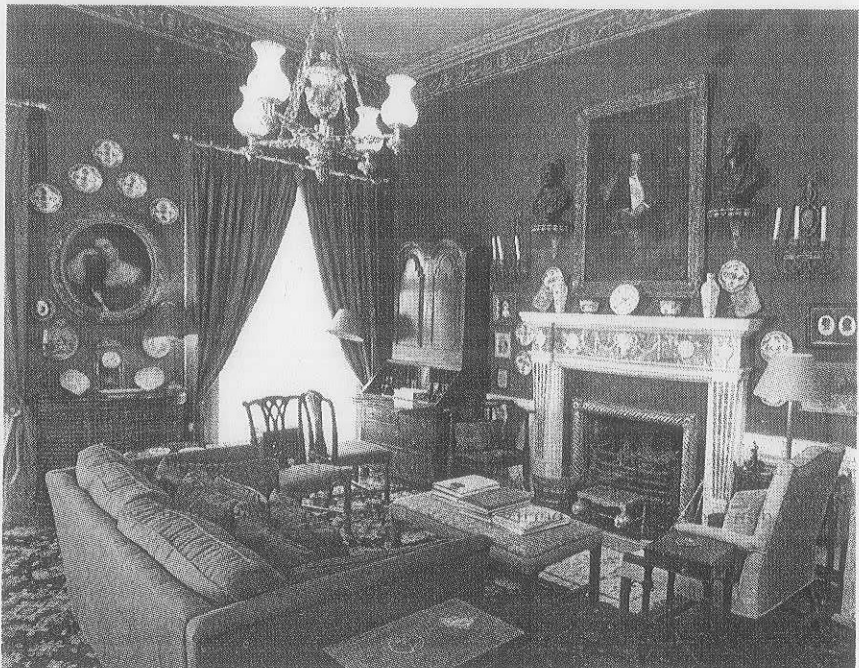
An external view of the castle, which remains busy with functions



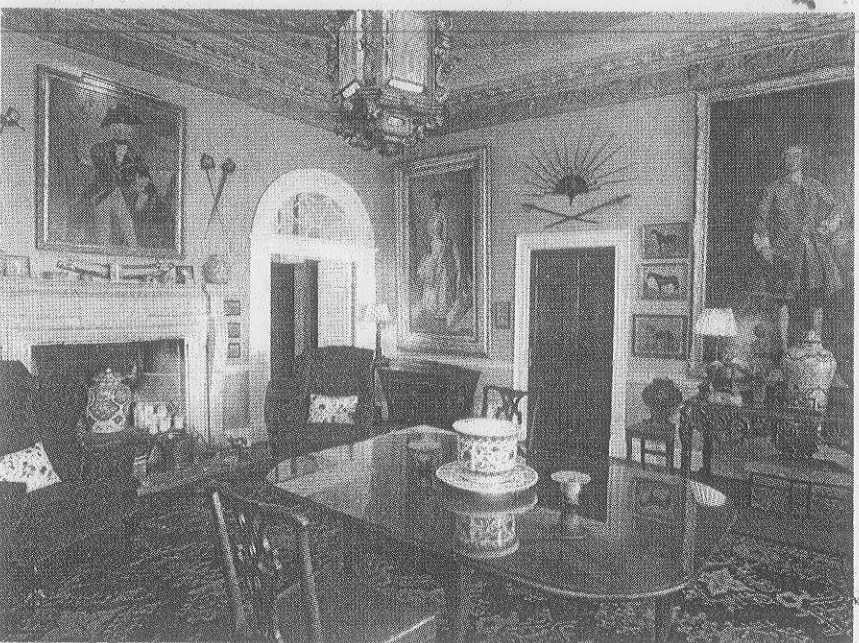
A view of some of the collectibles in the drawing room



Artwork and family photographs in the drawing room of Glin Castle



The library at the castle would play a part in any future cultural tourism development



Another view of the hallway at Glin Castle, home to the FitzGerald family

Knights of Glin survived confiscations and sieges and even in August 1803, the auctioning off, by order of the sheriff, of almost everything, bar a few portraits, in the Castle.

In light of that, this Thursday's sale seems more like good house-keeping.

"One has to be an optimist. There is no point in the wailing and gnashing of teeth. You have to try and make a go of it. You have to push ahead. It would be very pathetic not to do so."

"We are getting the website redone. This year will be fairly quiet but we will build up for next year, particularly with the weddings, and so on. This house has always had something going on - lunches, dinners, lets."

What the future will hold ultimately for Glin Castle is still not clear. The Knight had hoped that eventually, the Irish Heritage Trust might take it over, as they did with Fota House in Cork and as they had planned to do with Anne's Grove in Castletown-roche, also in Co Cork.

But a cut in funding has now left the Anne's Grove sale in limbo and raises doubts about future acquisitions. "That was

the template I hoped for here eventually. I don't see any possibility of that now," Desmond FitzGerald says.

But he most definitely has not given up hope that cultural tourism can be strengthened here in Ireland. As recently as a few weeks ago, in his capacity as president of the Irish Georgian Society, he approached the Minister for Tourism, Martin Cullen

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**- Knight of Glin
Desmond FitzGerald**

with the argument that cultural tourism needed a clearer focus.

Faillte Ireland has estimated that cultural tourism, of which historic houses and gardens are an integral element, is worth about €2 billion to the Irish economy. And unlike other aspects of the tourist business, it is continuing to grow by some 15 per cent each year, outstripping general tourism.

"So many of the tourism and cultural agencies are all so separate. They need a platform in order to get a single voice. The Minister has told us he is setting up a forum for cultural tourism. There are all these bodies around that need to be integrated," the Knight insists.

"A lot of people want to come and see what we have here," he says, looking around at Glin's formal rooms and through the windows beyond to the formal gardens, the walled garden, its woods.

"In Co Limerick we have one of the most unknown counties in Ireland, unlike Clare. I do think Limerick needs to be promoted more. Look at what the OPW has done with the castle in Adare or in Newcastle West."

One element of Desmond FitzGerald's planning for the future has, however, taken a hit. Some years ago, he had engaged consultants Buchanan to come up with proposals that would lead to a greater integration of the Castle and the village and generate redevelopment, renewal and new growth in Glin.

A lengthy consultation took place between the consultants and locals and the emerging plan included, among other things, development of woodland paths in the demesne. Desmond is hopeful that can still go ahead but his dream of developing new housing on the edge of the castle grounds is most definitely put on hold.

That said however, the future still beckons for Desmond FitzGerald. Plans are still fermenting, new ones being hatched. And, if this Thursday's sale goes well, he will have, at the very least, bought himself a reasonable hiatus.

Meanwhile, he is highly pleased with his latest acquisition, an old landscape print. "My wife says I can start collecting all over again."

And he just well might.