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# the mac adam tradition

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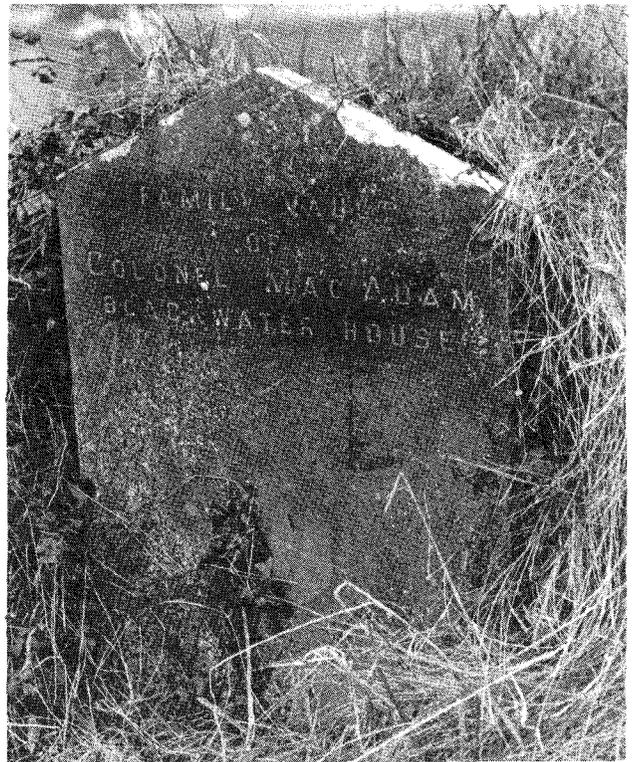
Among the many traditions associated with the Shannon perhaps there is none more intriguing than the one concerning that portion of the river flowing by Parteen. During the Williamite siege of Limerick a local fisherman, Philip Mac Adam, is supposed to have betrayed a ford on the river to William's forces. Though one does not hear much about the incident in Parteen nowadays, the persistent folk-memory lingers on. Such were the feelings of bitterness nurtured against Philip Mac Adam and his family through the centuries, that they frequently erupted into acts of bitter desecration, even within living memory.

The story arises from the war of the Two Kings, William of Orange had defeated James II at the Boyne, had conquered nearly all of Leinster and West Munster and then had set out for Limerick. The Jacobites had decided that the Shannon was to be their strategic line of defence and that the Williamites were to be prevented from crossing at all costs. (1) Athlone and Limerick were the two fortified towns on the river and already, in July, Athlone had been defended successfully against William's Lieutenant-General Douglas and 10,000 men. Now it was Limerick's turn and, as autumn settled in, so did William to his task.

"Limerick was a place of considerable natural strength. The main, or English, town was on an island in the Shannon linked to the Clare side by Thomond Bridge and to the Irish town on the County Limerick side by Ballsbridge, which spanned a branch of the river". (2) William approached the city from the Caherconlish direction. To mount an attack from the Thomondgate side he would have had to cross the Shannon, pass through Parteen, the bog of Monabraher at Longpavement, and approach the city from the west. Later in the siege his troops travelled to Thomondgate by this route as was subsequently documented by Rev. George Story, Chaplain to William, who wrote a detailed eye-witness account of the campaign. (3) Maurice Lenihan describes the crossing of the river:

It was expected by the Williamites that they would meet with great difficulties and dangers in the passage of the river - first, because the troops of the besieged were so advantageously placed - and secondly, because the river at this season of the year was particularly swollen and rapid; but they did not. Tradition states that the ford or pass, through which the hostile army passed over to the Clare side of the river, was betrayed by one Mac Adam, who is said to have lived by fishing on the Shannon, and that his knowledge of the fords of the river was consequently very good. He is said to have conveyed private information as to the place where the army of William might pass with safety; and in order, if possible, to escape the odium of having been supposed voluntarily to sell the pass, he feigned sickness on the approach of the besieging army, whilst all the other fishermen ran off to the woods of Cratloe and the Clare mountains, as well as to avoid being present as in fear of their lives from the cruelty of William's soldiers. As the army approached, a block and hatchet and keg of gold were placed outside the door of the betrayer, who was accompanied by a boy of the neighbourhood, who had rowed a boat. The rich

by Michael McCarthy



The Mac Adam family grave, the burial place of Philip Mac Adam

lands adjoining were pointed out to him. He was asked which he selected - the gold and the lands, or the hatchet and death. The tradition goes on to say that as he had already determined, he at once proceeded to point out to the enquirers the only place in that portion of the river which they could pass in the manner they desired. A rock was near the river bank, some few perches above the old churchyard of Kilquane, and to this rock, ever since called Carraig-a-Clouragh, or Chain-Rock, were attached chains, which are said to have crossed the river from Corbally, nearly opposite Corbally House on the Limerick side. A bridge of boats, or a pontoon bridge, was thus constructed by the engineers. The rock appears to have been cut umbrella-like, or of mushroom shape, in order the more securely to hold the chains. For many years it was the object of singular curiosity; men of science, archaeologists, historians, enquirers, and patriots from all parts of Europe were in the habit of visiting it in the course of their tours of Limerick. There were shallow holes in the top of Carraig-a-Clouragh, and when rain fell, the holes, thus filled with water, appeared as if saturated with blood, the stone being of a reddish colour (4).

Unfortunately, Carraig-a-Clouragh or Carraig na Slabhraighe as it was known to some, has nearly disappeared since Lenihan's time. About 1840, Captain Hamilton Jackson, the landlord prior to the late R. Holmes, on whose property the rock stood, blasted it with explosives. His attempt to destroy it failed. Discussoins took place at one time to put the historic rock together again but nothing came of them. The opening of the Shannon Scheme in 1929 altered the face of the river considerably by syphoning off a tremendous volume of water which lowered the level of the water. Subsequently, the fragmented Carraig-a-Clouragh became partly submerged in sediment and rushes.

The crossing was made by the Williamites at a point about 400 yards below Athlunkard Bridge, which was not to be built for another 40 years. To the old Abbey fishermen this part of the river was called Callagh Beolain or Carraig for short. (5) It was known as an "enuire" i.e. a stretch of river which was allocated to a crew of four men by lottery, to fish for 24 hours. Between Doonass and the city there were 12 enuirs, each one being subdivided into draws. Every enuire and draw had its own name. The relevant draw on the Limerick shore was Soughmor (others called it Corneed), and those on the Clare side were Glassa Crubeen and Lugnafearna. (6) The Corbally Mill dam, built in 1844, marked the lower part of these draws.

An interesting question in relation to the crossing is why the Williamites chose to cross at this point? A short distance downstream stood the largest stone weir in the country at the time spanning 500 yards of river. The Parteen Lax Weir with its piers made of stones encased in wood and its stronghold would seem to have been a much more suitable crossing point, particularly if tin boats or copper pontoons were to be used.

Perhaps the presence of the 2,500 cavalry under Sarsfield on the Meelick and Cratloe side of the city was sufficient deterrent to the Williamites moving too far downstream. (7) Besides, the butchery of the former occupants of the castle during the Cromwellian campaign 40 years before may have made the soldiery of 1690 more stout in their defence of the fort. In fact, Story in his account referred to the subsequent surrender of the garrison in September 1691. (8) At any rate, the Williamites decided to cross at Carraig na Slabhraighe and not at the Lax Weir nor at Lanarone island further upstream, as they were to do on the following year. (9)

Philip MacAdam was reputed to have been a fisherman. Needless to say, his knowledge of the river would have been expert, particularly where one considers the system of draws which the fishermen used for allocating the various stretches of river. The lottery method ensured that fishermen moved about the river and got to know the various pools, weirs and fords. Interestingly enough, there is another tradition that during the siege the fishermen were granted a pass to enter and leave the city to carry on their trade, and that a medal was struck to commemorate the occasion.(10) One could legitimately surmise that if MacAdam, a fisherman, did betray the ford to the Williamites, special privileges could have been granted to the fishermen as a body. It is reported though that at a public inquiry held in the city courthouse in 1935, mention was made of a metal pass issued to the fishermen by the Williamites during the siege and that it had been tendered and taken as security in Clohessy's Bar in exchange for porter.(11).

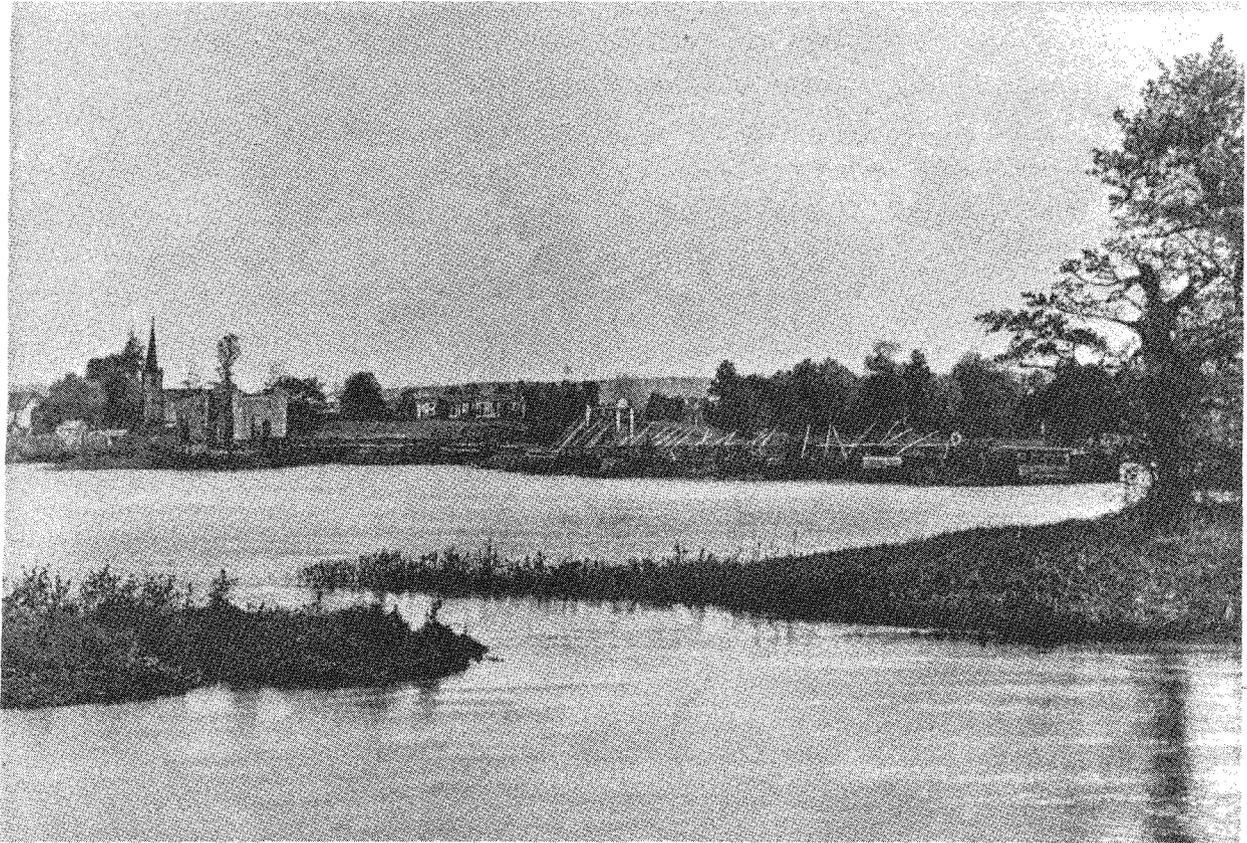
The MacAdams lived in Blackwater House, about two miles distant from Carraig-a-Clouragh. The exact date of when they received title to their estate is a crucial point in the tradition. Lenihan, in his account, intimated that Philip received the lands from the Williamites for services rendered. White in his **History** of Clare boldly stated that Philip MacAdam "received, after the surrender of Limerick, to which he so materially contributed, a grant of land along the riverside".(12) White, however, does not offer any evidence in support of his statement. Descendents of Philip MacAdam denied the truth of the tradition that William bestowed the lands on their forebear for his co-operation during the siege. In fact, Lenihan noted that Major Thomas Stannard MacAdam showed him documents which established that his ancestors were in possession of the lands some years prior to the siege, that they rented them from the Earl of Thomond, and that they did not obtain them by any act of treachery.(13) Major MacAdam was a county magistrate for Clare at the time.(14) It has been suggested that the documents shown to Lenihan in 1865 were spurious, and carefully counterfeited to counteract the suggestion of treachery.

The claim of Major MacAdam that his family owned the lands before the siege is corroborated by Burke in his **Landed Gentry** (1886), who stated that Philip MacAdam purchased the estate of Blackwater, Co. Clare, from James Craven, Esq., in 1684.(15) However, against that, it must be said that all other



Kilquane graveyard.

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The Lax Weir, with St. Patrick's Church, Parteen, in the background.

available evidence would seem to indicate that the MacAdams were not landowners in Clare before 1690.

The Down Survey (1654) puts the Earl of Thomond as proprietor of the area occupied by the Blackwater estate in 1641.(16) The **Census of Ireland** (1659) has Tho's Foote as the titulado in the townland, with no mention of MacAdam.(17) Many of the property owners in Clare acquired their titles through the Acts of Settlement and Explanation in the reign of Charles II. However, there is no record of the MacAdam family acquiring a title under these Acts from 1666—'84.(18) Neither were they included in the grants of land made under the Commission of Grace, 1684—'88.(19) In 1712 the Earl of Thomond decided to sell a great portion of the Thomond property. "The earl, having no direct issue, and being probably in monetary difficulties, sold on fee-farm titles, under a special Act of Parliament, considerable portions of the O'Brien territory, of which English feudal laws made him sole owner, at the cost of the Clan".(20) It is recorded that the Earl made leases for ever of Ballykeelaun (where Blackwater estate was located) to Alderman Craven of Limerick, and to Thomas MacAdam at the yearly rent of £70.(21) This is the same Craven from whom, Major MacAdam claimed, his ancestors bought the estate in 1684.

The estate, containing 82 acres, was taken over by the Land Commission on March 1, 1935, and subsequently divided. The company of solicitors who handled the transfer of the property for the then owner, Mrs. Mary MacAdam of the Isle of Wight, has moved offices since 1935 and many of their old files, including the MacAdam file, were jettisoned in the move. The Registry of Deeds offices have little information on the estate. So, while there are certain indicators as to when the family came into possession of the lands, one cannot say definitively that it was before or after 1690.

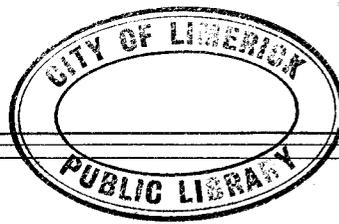
It has been said that the MacAdams of Blackwater House were related to Lieutenant-Colonel John MacAdam who was shot during the siege of Bunratty in 1646.(22) If this was so, and it is a possibility which must be considered, then maybe the Blackwater family could claim title to the estate through him. Available evidence, however, does not support this hypothesis.

Lieutenant-Colonel MacAdam, a fine officer and military strategist by all accounts, had come to Ireland from Scotland with the Scotch army in 1642.(23) He commanded the Parliamentary defence of Bunratty Castle against the Confederates and gallantly withstood their army until his accidental death which, according to most historians, was the main cause of the castle's capitulation. However, in 1646 when the Committee of the Admiralty and Navy were being moved to defend the coasts of Ireland from pirate ships, a directive was included to the effect that "A pass was to be issued to ensign John Plummer to return via Cork, Youghal or Kinsale, to Bunratty. He had brought letters from Col. MacAdam, Governor of that place".(24) However, there is no reference in any relevant source to Lieutenant-Colonel MacAdam receiving property in Clare during the 17th Century.

Other MacAdams, possibly related to Lieutenant-Colonel John MacAdam and therefore to the Blackwater family, were the three officers of the "49".(25) They served in Ireland before June 1649 and received grants of property in lieu of cash payment. While they were granted land and other properties in Drogheda, Dublin, Limerick and Cork, they received nothing in Clare.(26)

An interesting feature of the name MacAdam was its relationship to the MacGregor clan of Scotland. In 1603 an Act of Parliament proscribed the name of MacGregor because of the clan's lawlessness.(27) In fact, the name was to be abolished under pain of death. Gregor MacGregor, second son of the Chief, and Captain of the Clan, fled to the South country but was captured and executed in Edinburgh. His son, Adam, took the Act of Parliament more seriously than his father did and changed his name, calling himself Adam MacAdam.(28) It is from him that the MacAdams of Blackwater House claimed descent.(29) As verification of this lineage, the family coat-of-arms, which was granted to Col. Thomas Stannard MacAdam in 1856 by Letters Patent, was changed in 1913 by his son Capt., Philip MacAdam to incorporate the arms of the MacGregor clan.(30)

It seems that the vexed question as to the precise date of ti-



tle is going to continue unanswered. But it must be acknowledged that the burial of Philip MacAdam's parents in Kilquane graveyard in the early 1700s would indicate that the family was living in the Parteen area for some time at that stage. He himself died, unmarried, on 24 June 1729(31) but not without having joined over 200 or his fellow Claremen in converting from Popery to Protestantism.(32) He was buried in his parents tomb at Kilquane.

The people of Limerick were not prepared to forget MacAdam that quickly though, as Lenihan describes: "Townfolk for a long period, and up to the last few years, were in the habit of going out to Kilquane on Sundays, and heaping every indignity on the grave of the alleged traitor. A couplet was also cut on the tombstone, and, as a specimen of the spirit of the poet of the times, it deserves to be recorded:-

**Here lies the body of Philip the traitor  
Lived a fisherman and died a deceiver".(33)**

Others were to add:

**The devil came for him in flashes of thunder,  
Now he is in hell and it is no wonder.  
Here lies the grave of MacAdam the traitor  
Who's burning in hell with the thirst,  
And anyone who doesn't desecrate his grave  
I pray that their belly may burst.(34)**

The MacAdam family crest is still to be seen in the east wall of Kilquane church, but the tombstone bearing the inscriptions mentioned by Lenihan is badly mutilated and some of it has disappeared. Incidentally, the little church with its round tower was destroyed during the Cromwellian campaign of 1641.(35)

The family lived on in Blackwater, under the shadow of the tradition, until the early 1900s. Most of the menfolk served overseas with the British army. From 1818-'34 the family returned to the river to lease the Lax fishery. The present solid cut stone piers on the north side of the weir were built by them and, reportedly, they went broke as a result. Now not one descendant lives in the area.

**The snapnet fishermen who worked the Shannon and kept alive the memory of their former colleague are also dead and gone. To a great degree the tradition died with them. Yet, it is recorded. But the questions remain, as if guaranteeing its perpetuity and testing the old adage "Qui nimis probat nihil probat" — He who proves too much proves nothing.**

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Maurice Lenihan's 1866 sketch of the broken tombstone.

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The toll gates at Athlunkard Bridge.

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