James Bourchier
Baggotstown, Bruff,
1850 – 1920

The Rila monastery, taking its name from the mountains on which it was built, lies one hundred and seventeen km south of Sofia in western Bulgaria. The monastery had been a spiritual centre of the Orthodox Church for centuries, and is visited as a place of pilgrimage by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. It was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1983 and is a jewel in Bulgaria’s crown.

In May 2006 a poignant ceremony took place at a grave situated at the end of a rough path leading up from the monastery. Among the attendance was the Irish Ambassador to Bulgaria, who laid a wreath on the flat tombstone which covered the grave. The inscription, in Cyrillic script read ‘James Bourchier 1850-1920’. Beside the grave there is an official notice about the man buried there, which describes him as an ‘Angliski journalist’ who became the diplomatic champion and staunch friend of Bulgaria, which honoured his contribution to the country by granting his wish to be buried in its most revered shrine. On the day that the Irish Ambassador laid the wreath, a promise was made to him by the Abbot of the great monastery that the description of the man buried there as ‘Angliski’ will be changed to reflect his real nationality, that of an Irishman; people perhaps were not conscious of the difference at the time, and the mistake would be put right.

The Irishman, James Bourchier is also honoured in the capital, Sofia, where a road is named after him, and the hotel Bulgaria, where he spent his last days, has a plaque in his honour. On his death, according to what is known, his body lay in state in the Cathedral and people from the highest status to the lowest filed past, and thronged the streets of Sofia as his coffin went by on its journey to the monastery at Rila for burial.

So who was this man who caused such a stir in this small nation bordering on the Black Sea?
James Bourchier was born in Baggottstown, Bruff, Co. Limerick in 1850, the fourth son of John Bourchier J.P. and Sarah, (nee Aher) from Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny. After graduating from Trinity College Dublin in Classics, the young James went to England where he secured a teaching position in Eaton College. Unfortunately, his increasing deafness made it impossible for him to leave teaching, and in 1888 he headed off for Roumania and Bulgaria as the Times’s Balkan correspondent.

It is said that he was very good company and had a talent for music and languages and was well liked. He developed a large circle of friends ranging from royalty to ordinary people, and became knowledgeable about the mores and manners of the Bulgarian people, occasionally dressing in the national costume of his adopted country. In fact a series of stamps depicting Bourchier in the Bulgarian national costume was produced to honour him. In such high esteem was he held that he represented Bulgaria’s interests at the Versailles conference in 1919 after the First World War, an onerous task as Bulgaria had incurred the wrath of the victors for its support of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian alliance. Bourchier also reported on the beginning of the Russian Revolution from St. Petersburg, but in 1918 he retired from his position with the Times. He died two years later of a heart attack, away from his family and his native land, but revered in his adopted country.