

## The Shannonside Series

By Courtesy of RTE Radio One

# From Stonewall Jackson To Padraig Pearse

It was a quiet summer afternoon in August 1923. Two old men walked into the offices of the Weekly Observer, the newspaper published by my grandmother at Newcastle West. One of the men, Patrick Roche of Bridge Street, approached the Editor, Sean Brouder, and simply said, indicating his companion: "This is Captain Guiry, I'm sure you would like to meet him".

No further explanation was necessary. Brouder felt a proud glow to find himself face to face with the man whom he described as "this legendary hero of my youth — the gallant, chivalrous Captain Guiry".

The man who stood before Brouder was eighty six years old, but yet, his tall frame and bright eyes were just as he had been depicted in so many fireside tales throughout County Limerick for two generations past.

For Guiry was one of the most romantic figures of Limerick in the nineteenth century — a story of rags to riches, a story of adventure, of intrigue, a story which inspired many young men — including Brouder — to express their nationalism.

John Guiry was born in 1837 in Shanrath, outside Castlemahon, County Limerick, the son of a tenant farmer. When he was only a child, the famine struck, and the family were forced to emigrate, penniless, to America. They were received well in Kentucky where John, aged twelve, adapted to a new life in Louisville.

### CIVIL WAR

But, when John was only 23, the Civil War broke out in America, and he, with many others, joined the Confederate cause. In common with the three sons of John Mitchell, he fought against the North, battling, in many cases against fellow Irishmen of Meagher's Irish Brigade.

John Guiry served under General Stonewall Jackson, and rose to the rank of Captain. He stayed with the fighting throughout the war, right up to Lee's surrender at Richmond.

While with the Confederates, he joined the Fenian Brotherhood, pledged to offer himself to come to Ireland when the American conflict was over. He was one of those of whom James Stephens wrote, from Kentucky, in 1864, that as officers, they were excellent.

And so, in 1866, Captain John Guiry, along with many others,

## The life of John Guiry

was sent to Ireland to help train the volunteers for the rising planned for later that year. He was given three months pay in U.S. dollars in advance, along with a similar amount in what were described as Bonds of the Irish Republic. On arrival in Ireland, he was to be paid his salary regularly by the financial agents of the Fenians.

### HOME

Guiry was sent to his native County of Limerick, and told to organise his men. He set up his headquarters at the house of his cousins, the Dowlings, of Shanrath. From there, he organised recruiting and training sessions. As there were virtually no arms, however, this proved difficult.

But Guiry persisted, and, his confidence growing, he decided to become bolder. He would meet as many people as he could at the only place where nearly everyone would congregate — at the great butter market at Newcastle West.

And so, on that day in August 1866, Guiry, still only 29, made his way to Newcastle, where he went to the shop of George Roche of Bridge Street. There he met Roche's son, Pat, a staunch Fenian, and was received royally.

Word spread all over the town, and Guiry spent the morning meeting people from many parts of the county, ascertaining the state of readiness in each parish.

But there was another young, athletic man in town that day. He was Head Constable O'Sullivan, who saw the prospect of arresting Guiry as a sure guarantee of further promotion to add to his already meteoric rise within the police force. O'Sullivan decided to effect arrest singlehandedly. Nobody else was going to share in this moment of glory.

### THE STALK OF GUIRY

When Captain Guiry brazenly walked out of Roche's Shop after lunch, and mingled openly with the throngs in the streets, O'Sullivan dogged his footsteps. Both men knew that arrest would be impossible among the milling crowds attending the market.

It was not until several hours later, as the last of the farmers were leaving the town, and as dusk was beginning to close, that O'Sullivan decided to move.

Guiry, his day's work done, walked toward the bridge on his way home. O'Sullivan crossed the street and approached him.

Guiry turned quickly, glared at the Head Constable, and told him to stand back. "Don't approach me, or you will regret it", he said. Guiry walked on a few paces, but Sullivan still approached.

"Go back", said Guiry again, and again. But as he crossed the bridge, he turned suddenly, and fired a single bullet from his heavy Colt pistol. He shot the Head Constable where he had intended — in the thigh — to immobilise him, but not to kill him.

That single shot, the first fired by a nationalist in the town for more than 150 years, brought police and the garrison running from the Square.

Guiry fled the town across fields, making his way to a number of safe houses. In the succeeding days he was hounded, and all of his known associates were rounded up. He came close to arrest on one occasion when, hiding in a chicken-house on the farm of the Hartnett's of Glenduff, the searching military actually stood on the roof above him to get a better view of the area around.

Eventually Fr. Walsh of Templeglantine gave him refuge and, on the following day, again aided by the Ambrose family of Dunganville, he was transferred to the care of Fr. Nolan of Ardagh. Fr. Nolan, an uncle of one of Limerick's first TDs, Sean Nolan of Foynes, gave him clerical clothing, which enabled him to escape from the county. He made his way to the East coast in the succeeding days, thence to Glasgow in a ship crewed almost entirely by Fenian sympathisers, and from there back to America.

### SILENCE

And there, for fifty-seven long years, the story rested. Guiry was gone, his name a legend, but nobody knew what became of him — until that day in 1923 when aged eighty six, he walked into the Observer office in Newcastle.

And then it became clear that Guiry had been far from inactive during that time. Now a prosperous member of Louisville society, he had, it was true, become despondent, and had despaired for the national cause. But when, in 1916, he read of the Dublin rising and the events which followed it, Guiry, in his eightieth year, helped to organise rallies of support among the Irish Americans in Kentucky. He did everything in his power to help the cause in Ireland.

Brouder describes Guiry's actions in 1916 "the last rally of the Old Guard".

Guiry decided to return to Ireland as soon as independence was secured. Having visited his old haunts, he continued his travels to the Continent. Two years later he was dead.

In himself, Guiry was not really important. He had been in Ireland as an active Fenian for only a couple of months. The only act of defiance which he perpetrated was to shoot one policeman in the leg. When the actual call to arms came in 1867, Guiry was already back in America, and County Limerick was found to be sadly lacking in support. Only one operation was undertaken — the attack on Kilmallock police station — and even that failed miserably.

But, I suppose, even relative failure has its advantages. Because, without the telling, and retelling of the story of John Guiry, the man from Castlemahon and his cowboy-like show-down on the bridge at dusk, the imagination of the young people might not have been fired enough to take part in the establishment of the State. An establishment which, by providence, Guiry lived to see.