

The Haunting of Plassey House

Introduction

The University of Limerick's ornate 'White House' has long been a symbol of the city's third level educational miracle. Indeed, the building's high ceilings and decorative plaster work easily invoke the grandeur of a world long passed.

However, despite recent celebrations to mark over twenty years of University status, 'Plassey House' and its adjacent lands have, over time, acquired a distinctly crimson reputation.

For these splendid old world surroundings also come replete with strange tales concerning a 'White Lady' who is said to haunt the 17th century mansion. Indeed she was once said to roam the banks of the Shannon River nearby and to have been seen on occasion by local barge workers and fishermen.

Visitors to the house today are immediately struck by a marble bust of the ill-fated Lady Montague and an 18th century painting of a 'woman in white' by Hugh Douglas Hamilton. Although unlikely to be models for the 'White Lady' herself the exhibits have been uncannily chosen by someone with a sense of the house's secret history.

What are the origins of this tale and why has it retained such power over our imaginations down to today?

A Tale of Tragedy

In 1972 the National Institute of Higher Education (NIHE) was established on 240 hectares of prime agricultural land along the banks of the river Shannon. The development was the brainchild of a University Project Committee established as early as September 1959. Following independence from Britain the house had fallen into decay and was increasingly covered by uncut grass and weeds.

Nevertheless, NIHE's President, Dr. Edward M. Walsh, saw huge potential in developing the elegant ruins for educational purposes. In 1970 the decision was taken to acquire the area for NIHE with

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restoration work being carried out on Plassey House in 1971.

Finally, in September 1972 a garden party was held at the site to commemorate the opening of NIHE then based in the old 'White House'. It was not until 1985, however, that Phase One of the university, that we recognise today, was completed.

Despite these modern developments the house was destined to retain its otherworldly appeal. The earliest associations with the supernatural date back to the Williamite conquests during which the city was betrayed and massacred. In August 10, 1690 a local fisherman called Philip McAdam gave William's forces safe passage across the river at Annaghbeg near the 'Black Bridge'. Legend says he feigned injury to avoid detection and was granted a tract of land near the river as his reward.

Other accounts say McAdam had little choice in the matter having been offered either "a block and headsman's axe" or a 'keg of gold'. Whatever the truth of the matter the family grave was ritually desecrated in Kilquane Churchyard for centuries and known until 1918 as the resting place of the 'Traitor McAdam'. Limerick city itself was besieged three times resulting in famine and plague that killed thousands.

The name 'Plassey' was originally derived from a large estate owned by Sir Robert Clive better known as 'Clive of India' and first Baron Clive of Plassey (1725-1774). It was the name of the Newab of Bengal's residence which he used as an operational base. Subsequently, the Battle of Plassey (June 23, 1757) was fought near the village of Palasi, 80 miles north of Calcutta where Clive defeated a Franco-Indian force that had captured Calcutta the previous year.

In doing so Clive had secured the commercial rights to India for the 'British East India Company'. The word 'Plassey' relates to the name of the 'Palas' tree or so called 'flame of the forest'. This name replaced the traditional 'Ballykilty' (the townland of the woods) which was purchased from one Thomas McMahan. Historians dispute whether Clive had any direct connection with Plassey House but his fate was typical of many connected with the site.

No doubt haunted by the scenes of bloodshed he had witnessed in India he suffered periodic bouts of depression. On the 22 November 1774, following an investigation by Parliament into the source of his wealth, he committed suicide by cutting his throat with a pen knife at his Berkeley Square home. This ended the life of the first and last Baron of Plassey but the tragic history continued.

Anglo-Irish families who lived here included the Maunsells. This wealthy family



Ed Walsh at his desk in the White House c.1970 (Limerick Museum)

were friends of the famous educationalist John Henry Cardinal Newman. Ironically Newman was a member of the 'Oxford Movement' whose 'idea of a University' was very influential in setting up the 'National University of Ireland'.

Thomas Maunsell built the eastern portion of the house in 1790 and named it 'Plassey' after his distinguished relative 'Clive of India'. The name 'Moncel' appears in the 'Black Book of Limerick' written in the 13th century as plague ravaged the land.

The family came originally from Buckinghamshire and fought against the Spanish Armada. They also sided with Cromwell against the Earl of Desmond in the rebellion of 1641. Thomas Maunsell was the original owner of the estate and built a manor house here in 1690 called Ballykilty. One member of the family served with Clive in India.

The Maunsells also built and lived in Milford House at the same time as the Russell family were coming to prominence in Limerick. In 1850 Lord and Lady Massey bought the property but Lady Massey died only three years later and Lord Massey sold the property to Edward Maglin Russell.

The Russells and Maunsells were linked by marriage and one of their scion John Norris Russell, who established the firm J.N. Russell and Sons Millers, made a commercial success of the mills built by Robert Hedges Maunsell in the 1820s. Later, 'Russell Mills' was subsumed into 'Ranks (Ireland) Ltd' on the Dock Road.

Milford House was purchased by the Russell family in the interim period and remained with them until the dissolution of the Act of Union with Britain. In October 1923 the 'Little Company of Mary' bought the house after failing to purchase a similar dwelling on the 'North Circular Road'.

By 1860 the Russells employed 2000 people in Limerick city and had a huge fleet of sailing boats and steamships. Tragedy, however, awaited the family when the brothers Richard and Francis Russell died on the same day (August 29, 1871) in strange circumstances.

Later the 'White House' passed to William Wellington Bailey and his wife Florence. The latter lost possession of the property following her husband's death as inheritance laws at that time gave priority to the male heir. Florence was forced to leave for Galway where she spent her remaining days in lonely contemplation.

The property then passed to one Patrick Keating from 1933 until his death in 1961. Keating reputedly lost his fortune in the economic upheavals of the time. He was notorious locally as the man who forbade church goers to trespass on his lands and closed the gates leading to Milford Church.

Strange Tales From Shannon Side

The supernatural ambience associated with the house appears to extend right into the architecture of the place. The 'White House' was designed in the Florentine Palazzo style of the Renaissance by architect William Fogarty. It retains a curious asymmetrical shape to this day.

Fogarty, however, died in 1878 aged only 44 years old of smallpox. A fountain which is still visible outside the White House today is said to have been excavated by Italian adventurers in 1763 from the ruins of Pompeii (1AD). The impromptu eruption of Vesuvius had suffocated many of that town's population.

While both the house and lands are said to be haunted by a mysterious 'White Lady' the ghost of a child has also been

seen at various times particularly in the area downstairs near the kitchens.

The spirits of the dead are also said to inhabit an area known locally as the 'American Ground'. Here human corpses from the coffin ships of famine times were said to have been unceremoniously dumped into hastily excavated pits. Local children were warned for generations not to walk the grounds alone and bargemen reputedly saw spirits walking down from the 'White House' towards the Shannon.

Many legends of this nature in Ireland usually revolve around fairy lore. In rural areas, for example, tales of the 'Púca' and 'Banshee' are common. The legend of the 'White Lady', however, appears to be an urban phenomenon and closely associated with the lives of the gentry and Anglo-Irish stately homes.

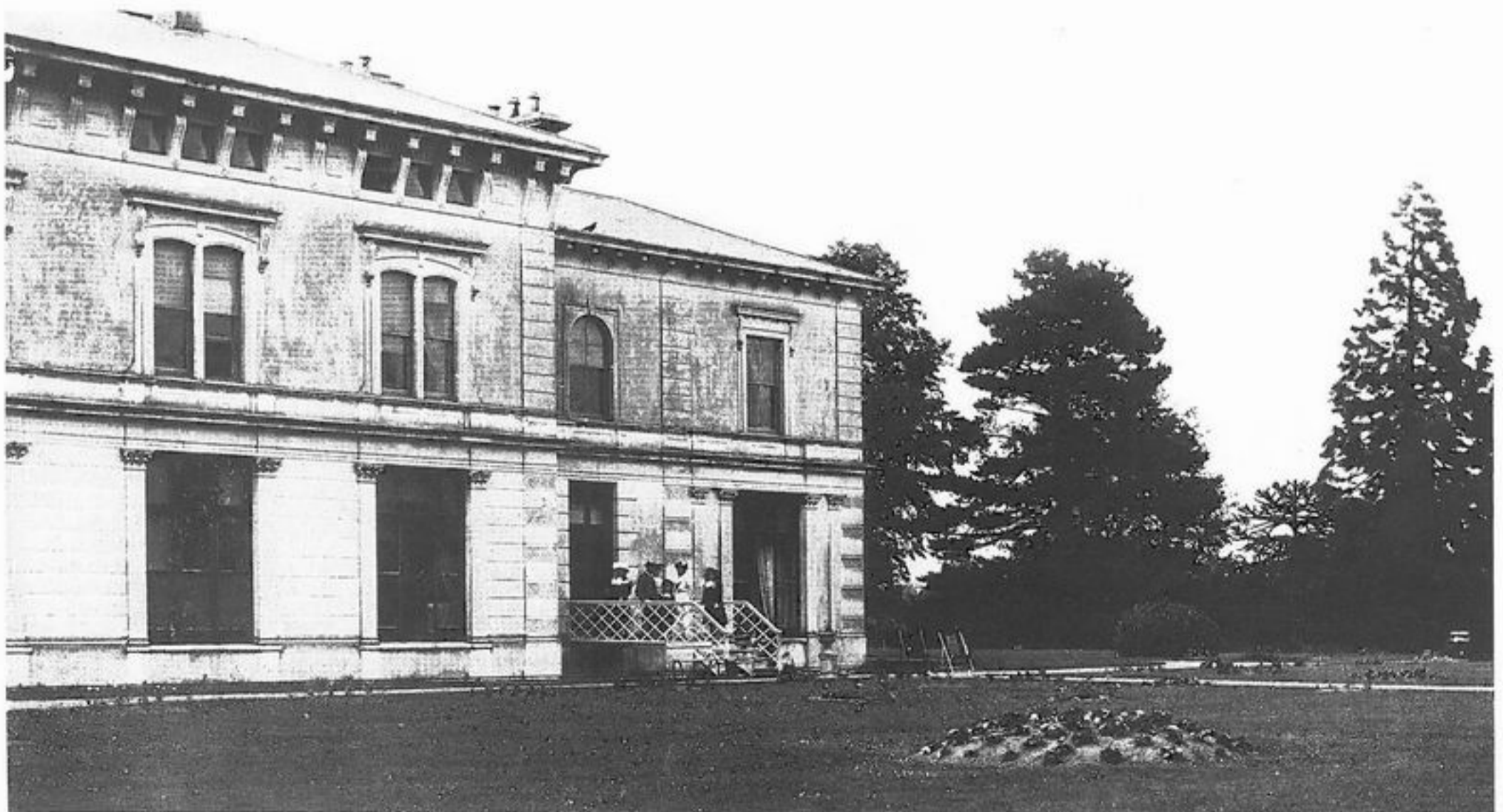
The 'Banshee' was associated with noble Gaelic families and was a harbinger of death. The 'Púca' was related to the fairies and was malevolent being associated with the 'fairy stroke' and other illnesses.

In the 1920s and 1930s in Limerick the population was only one generation removed from the countryside so stories of seeing one's dead relative in a premonition were still common. This may partly help explain the longevity of the Plassey legend.

In addition to 'White Ladies', Irish folklore also has its share of 'black' and even 'red' ladies. It is almost as if the misfortune that has enveloped them in life has now transferred itself over into their deaths colouring their spectral complexions.

Many of the tales involving a 'White Lady' are intended to be cautionary. In the tale of 'Loftus Hall' in Wexford, for example, a stranger is invited in to play cards and bewitches the lady of the house only to be revealed as the devil himself complete with cloven heels.

Old houses tend to have long histories



Plassey House c.1900

(Limerick City Archives)



Plassey House 1920s

(Limerick Museum)

and plenty of skeletons, of one type or another, in their cupboards. A lot of un-savoury events have undoubtedly been swept under the carpet down through the years. Children born out of wedlock in times past carried a stigma while incest and infanticide may also have occurred and been covered up.

In Ireland there is a strong religious sub-text to such sightings which has mixed with centuries of pagan beliefs. The 'May Bonfire', for example, is peculiar only to Limerick. The period 1925 to 1960, in particular, was a time when religious beliefs and the supernatural combined to create a new context for supernatural lore. This is exemplified in Frank O'Connor's story 'The Devil and The Dance Hall' where a young woman is seduced by a man subsequently revealed as having cloven hooves.

Although people may be less interested in the customs of the dead today there are strong leanings in certain sectors of society towards new age beliefs. This is seen, for example, in the growing interest in fortune tellers. Age old fears and superstitions have been merely replaced by updated versions rather than being disregarded completely.

The tale of a 'White Lady' who haunts old ruins or even sections of road is commonplace in cultures as diverse as England and Brazil. There are common themes involved ranging from a woman being taken advantage of by a man of low social origins to a newly wed wife whose spouse is killed on their wedding day.

The unfortunate woman is thus destined to prowl the earth in an ethereal form searching for a love that will never be rekindled. In the US such tales have been modernised with gory tales of road carnage on 'Prom night' replacing medieval settings like castles and mansions.

Contemporary Accounts

supernatural experiences have been reported in more recent times. In a feature article published by the 'Limerick Leader' in 2008 a number of witnesses recounted their personal stories of the house and its lands.

One occupant of the infamous 'ghost room' (Room 111) recalled his memories of the place between 1986 and 2008.

"I think it was quite early in my career here that people in my circle of friends were saying have you heard about the 'White Lady'? Between 1972 and 1976 the campus was located in the White House alone. Everything was there - the Library, Cooperative Office and so on. The first intake was about 200 students in all. I remember one story from those times. One night staff was working late into the night which was not uncommon then. When they came out all their cars had been moved from where they were first located to the side of the building. Someone had seen a ghostly figure walking the corridors on another occasion."

He continued: "I was working late downstairs in the basement around 1987-1988 and decided to go to the lounge area to watch some TV. In those days they had a TV and Billiard room in the University Club in an open plan area downstairs. I sat down and watched the film and when it was over it must have been around 1.00 am. There were no other staff members around and I started feeling very uncomfortable and a bit spooked. I had not experienced anything like it before and the whole ghost business was not on my mind at all. I went upstairs to get out but found to my horror that all the doors had been locked. I saw no security men around nor heard anyone locking up all night. I decided I would phone security but could not get anyone on the line. Eventually I got through to

In another account the same person recalled:

"By September 1989 University Status had been granted to Limerick and I was working with a colleague, printing the lettering conferring degrees on the first graduates from the University. It was a huge logistical task and the terminology and so on had to be worked on exactly. [My colleague] was working in 'A Block' and I had to go back and forth continuously from the White House to get things just right. Once when I was coming back I came through the tunnel connecting the 'White House' and the new building. When I opened the door I walked into what I can only describe as a wall of cold. It was not even air it was an atmosphere or something like that. I think there is an atmosphere about the house particularly downstairs where it can be creepy at times."

One lady, whose family lived near the bridge at the time, recounted her own strange tale which had remarkable parallels to modern accounts:

"When I was young the Shannon floods were so great that the water used to come up around our house at the Black Bridge. We were very friendly with the lady of the White House Mrs. Bailey. She would take us in to stay for a few days with her in the house and give us treats of fruit and so on. She was a very nice person. Her husband William Wellington Bailey had died some time before. The herds man was a man called Moore who lived with his family down by the lodge near the front gates of the modern campus. One night I could not sleep. The place was unnaturally cold and I put a blanket around me and sat on the top of the stairs. Suddenly I heard a strange swishing noise. It was

looked at her and said; "so you can't sleep either". She made no reply as she hurried down stairs. Next day I asked the Lady-in-Waiting to Mrs Bailey who she was. She said; "there is only yourselves, myself and Mrs Bailey here in the house and the dogs that is all."

A long standing canal bank resident also gave his account of folklore in the area.

"When we were kids myself and my first cousin went up to the ruins of the mill near the Black Bridge one day. It must have been in the 1970s. Back then the area was less grown over and there was some black thorn bushes inside in the ruins. Suddenly we saw a woman in a black dress and white hair standing in the mill near what's left of the old tower today. We ran back to my grand uncle who told us that he had seen her himself many times near the old walls. He called her the 'White Lady'."

The area which dissects a field near the new student accommodation is called the 'American Ground'.

"This is where they dumped the ballast [bodies] from the coffin ships coming back from America. We were told never to cross that land late at night. The 'White Lady' was known to walk the area between the White House and the old Mill. I heard of a security guard who went into one of the rooms at the university but could not get out. He was phoning but couldn't get through to anyone. The room had changed somehow. He went mad and

was put into St. Joseph's that is what I heard.

"There was a story told about a field past the 'White House' called 'Maguires'. One day a man was out walking when he met a strange woman and began speaking to her. Suddenly, a friend of his approached and also started talking. He said 'I will be with you when I finish talking with this woman.' His friend said to him 'what woman?' and when he turned around she was gone."

More humorously a security Guard on campus for over ten years told of his own contemporary experience.

"Security go into the 'White House' in the early hours of the morning and I have heard fellas tell me that they heard noises alright. I was in there one night around 4 am. I went down stairs to 'clock' that is where they kept the 'clock box' then. I could not find it because someone had moved it into an adjoining room. I got my keys out to open the door and as it opened I heard the sound of an orchestra. Jeepers I can tell you I got out of there quick but I found out later someone had left a radio on in that room. I have not seen anything there myself but I can tell you that the story of the 'White Lady' was always on my mind when I went in there afterwards."

Conclusions

The extensive and picturesque lands surrounding Plassey House are home to one of Ireland's most modern University's.

Paradoxically, the area is also steeped in ancient folklore.

The origins of the old 'White House' itself are open to debate with the precise timing of its construction uncertain and its provenance largely unknown.

The mystery surrounding the grand manor is heightened by our knowledge that it is home to a mysterious 'White Lady', whose presence has adorned the house and surrounding lands for over 200 years.

Although her precise origins are hazy the concept is a familiar one for stately homes both at home and abroad.

Her lonely demeanour denotes a certain sadness, inspired perhaps by past tragedies but her regal presence continues to inspire historians and folklorists down to present times.

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'White House' or 'White Lady'? Plassey House as it stands today