Dromore Castle

by Marian Locke

As one travels along the N69, from Limerick towards Foynes, a Disney-like structure looms large in the distance. The ruined castle of Dromore, situated on a craggy promontory overlooking Dromore Lake west of the village of Riddins, is a magical sight on the horizon. Dromore Castle was designed and built by Edward William Godwin, a distinguished English architect and designer, for William Hale John Charles Pery, the third Earl of Limerick. When William Pery succeeded to the title in 1867, the family did not have a country residence in Ireland, although they owned vast estates in Limerick and Cork, and William wished to remedy that position. As he had been friendly with Godwin for a number of years, since they had been President and Vice-President, respectively, of the Bristol Society of architects, it was natural that Pery should ask Godwin to build his castle.

Godwin travelled to Ireland in 1867 and viewed the Earl’s estates. He did not find a suitable site for the castle on the main part of the estates, but, almost as an afterthought, went to see a shooting lodge, situated by Dromore Lake on forty acres owned by Pery. To be precise, the Primary Valuation for the Barony of Kentry, 1850 gave the acreage as 48 acres, 2 roods and 5 perches, but there was a tenant called Michael Roohan who had a house on the land, and who also rented out part of the lake leaving the Earl with forty acres and 31 perches. Godwin immediately fell in love with this position, describing it as “...a dream-like situation on the edge of a wood ... overlooking the water, which would reflect the castle one hundred feet below.”

Building commenced in 1868 and there are varying reports about how long it took to complete, with one suggestion of two years. Mark Bence-Jones tells us that it was completed in 1869 and Mr. Brendan McMahon informing me that the date of 1876 was scratched onto a stone within the castle, indicating that date as the completion date. In any event, in order to be satisfied with the location of the castle, the Earl bought up roughly another two hundred surrounding acres, which included seventy acres of lake, to form his castle estate, thus forcing the move away from the area of a number of farmers and smallholders. The entire cost of the operation was something in the region of £80,000 to £100,000.

Mark Bence-Jones tells us that Lord Limerick was “extremely delighted” with his castle, and that Godwin himself said, “the silhouette was about as charming a thing as ever saw in his life.” Despite these sentiments, the castle was used only sporadically by the Earl and his family, as an occasional weekend retreat and a location for magnificent parties and balls, whilst the family was residing in Ireland, the family preferring, in the main, to stay at their town house in Henry Street in Limerick. Part of the reason for this was a severe problem with damp in the castle, which unfortunately had been present from the beginning, and was never cured.

Thus Dromore Castle remained a magnificent, but unfurnished possession of the Pery family until the year 1939, when the castle, together with much of the original beautiful furniture and fittings, all designed by Godwin for the Third Earl, and the entire estate were sold to Morgan McMahon & Co. Ltd. of Limerick. It is on that period, from 1939 to 1956, in the history of the castle that I wish to throw more light.

Mr. McMahon has mentioned the vend- or as an American lady, Mrs. Knox Brady, but was unsure if this lady was a descendent of the Pery family. On examining Burke’s Peerage & Baronetage, the name Knox entered the family in 1827 with Edmund Henry Cockayne Pery later Pery-

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View of Dromore Castle from the south-west, taken in the 1940s
Knox-Gore (roy licence 1891) sic., and
continues through at least until 1955. How-
ever, in 1914, Victoria May, daughter of the
Fourth Earl married James Cox Brady of
New York. Victoria May died in 1918,
leaving issue. It is possible that Victoria
May's descendents may have come into
possession of Dromore, as Victoria's only
brother was killed in action on 18 May
1918, during World War I, and her only
sister Imelda Sybil had died two days after
birth in 1891. The title passed to the
Fourth Earl's half-brother, Edmond Colquhoun Pery, who became the Fifth Earl.10

The purpose of Morgan McMahon &
Co. Ltd., in purchasing Dromore, had been
to gain possession of the timber, as World
War II had broken out, and Morgan Mc
Mahon, the managing director, envisaged
a difficulty in obtaining enought timber to
keep the business going. Thus, the entire
castle and estate was acquired by his com-
pany for the wartime value of the timber.
However, Morgan, on closer examination
of the castle, fell in love with it, and decided
to move there with his family, had some
necessary repairs carried out by the
Limerick builder, Patrick Molloy, and there-
after remained in residence in the castle
for eight years.

Brendan McMahon gives a fascinating
description of living in Dromore, and has a
detailed recall of the layout of the castle.
The main living quarters, which were on
the northwest side of the castle, included
a magnificent long gallery, a large and
beautifully furnished drawing room and a
large dining room which was home to two
very long refectory tables, about twenty
dining chairs and a magnificent carved oak
screen stretching across the entire width
of one end of the room. The purpose of the
screen was to hide the stairs, and also a lift from the lower floor, in which food was sent up from the kitchens. The ground floor contained a huge kitchen, a boiler room from which the castle was centrally heated by steam power, installed at the time of building, a pantry, dairy, housekeeper’s sitting room and, most intriguingly, a lamp room. In the time before the castle was electrified, the interior was lit by dozens of oil wall lamps. A lamp boy was employed, whose sole job was to take each lamp in its turn, trim it, clean it and re-fill it with oil ready for the evening. When the McMahon family went to live at the castle, Morgan bought an old generator from Glin, which had just received mains electricity supply, and installed it in the former bakery, on the ground floor of the east tower. The generator was powered by two hundred and fifty, one-watt batteries, and provided electricity for the castle.

Although living in such magnificent surroundings had a lot of advantages, Brendan recalls a certain feeling of isolation. The young McMahon family made arduous cycling trips to Limerick to dances and entertainments, returning home by moonlight. Brendan recalls the castle entrance being locked up on more than one occasion, and having to pull on the rope to ring the doorbell, a large brass bell which could be heard for miles around. Petrol was in short supply during the war years, and cars were not available to the younger members of the family.

The magnificent views, both of the castle and from the castle, are illustrated in contemporary photographs taken by Brendan, as in a view from his bedroom balcony out across Dromore Lake, the river Shannon beyond and the Clare Hills in the distance. There is a photograph of the front of the castle, with the family’s two wartime cars at the thirty foot wide entrance which was designed for horse-drawn carriages, although Godwin himself admitted that the entrance was too low for a four-in-hand with people on top to drive in. There are also photographs of the large drawing room, showing the original fireplace and Godwin designed furniture and carpets, and of the Long Gallery, again beautifully appointed, but clearly showing a patch of damp on the entrance archway. These, together with exterior photographs showing the castle in the distance, and closer up, of Morgan McMahon’s summer house and of Brendan’s mother relaxing in the garden add to a picture of their family life in the nineteen forties. Another photograph with their holiday caravan shows Mr. Brendan McMahon on the extreme left. These photographs, together with the interview with Brendan McMahon, constitute my primary sources.

When the McMahon family moved into Dromore, a raggedy area of land was planted by Morgan with ten thousand Sitka spruce trees, but unfortunately he had not reckoned with the rabbit population, which ate most of them. Attention was then turned to a wood planted by the Earl of Limerick, and this was thinned, enabling the remaining trees to develop properly. There was a much older, small stand of beautiful larch, oak and elm trees. These were felled by the timber company and were cut in its yard by a specially adapted sawmill into forty-three-foot lengths and sold to a County Cork shipbuilder, who used the planks for the making of trawlers, notably the trawler Ethos in 1853 of which Brendan McMahon has a fine photograph.

Although the family had moved out of the castle in 1947, Morgan lived on for some time in a bungalow he had built in the environs. Mrs. McMahon had died, and some time after, Morgan married for a second time to an American lady, and shortly afterwards moved with her to live in America.

In 1956 the directors of the timber
company, of whom Brendan was one, took the decision to sell the castle. None of the family wished to live there, as the upkeep of the castle was simply too expensive, and the problem with damp had only got steadily worse. The timber trade was going through a recession period and the cost of paying a caretaker, who lived in the Chaplin’s Tower, which was the south tower, was prohibitive.

The castle farm was sold to Mr. Ned Fitzgerald, the son of the former gardener. Louis de Courcy Ltd., a Limerick firm of auctioneers, auctioned off the furniture and fittings. The salvage of the castle building itself was sold to a salvage merchant, who stripped the interior and de-roofed the castle. Finally, the now ruined castle and the remainder of the estate was sold to Dr. Archer from Bavaria, who was instrumental in setting up a chipboard factory at that time in Scariff, County Clare.

The period during which the McMahon family occupied Dromore was the longest continuous period during which the castle was occupied. It is good to think that its walls, spacious central courtyard and battlements ring with the life of an exuberant family and their friends before finally settling into the mysterious and haunting ruin it has become today.

REFERENCES

1. I am greatly indebted to Brendan McMahon for so pleasantly allowing me to interview him at length about the period during which his family occupied Dromore Castle, and for providing me with access to his photographs, and other material concerning his former beloved home.


15. Interview with Brendan McMahon of Limerick City (21 March 2005).


