

Glencairn, “Boss” Croker and the Limerick Connection

Glencairn, the magnificent Victorian official residence of the British Ambassador to Ireland, situated at the foot of the Dublin Mountains at Sandyford, has strong Limerick connections through the ownership of Richard “Boss” Croker, grandson of John Croker of Ballinagarde, Ballyneety whose family in turn sold the house and estate to Inch St. Lawrence (Caherconlish) – native businessman Michael J. O’Neill (who was my uncle).

During Mr. O’Neill’s time as owner I sampled its splendour spending many school holidays there. I also hold happy memories of attending garden parties there in later years under different ambassadors.

by John Leonard

Glencairn is steeped in legal, political, diplomatic, artistic, cultural and equine history of this country and it has played host to many famous visitors from Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith – Fr. John Sullivan S.J. (as a young barrister before he joined the Jesuits), in the early days to Prince Charles, Tony Blair and Mo Mowlam in recent times.

Mr. O’Neill sold Glencairn to the British Government in 1953 and it has remained the Ambassador’s residence since the mid-1950’s. The present Ambassador, H.E. Dominick Chilcott is the nineteenth repres-

entative of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth to reside there.

Glencairn was built between 1840 and 1866 and designed by architect Benjamin Woodward for the first owner, wealthy, solicitor George Gresson. After Gresson’s death in 1881 the house and lands passed on to Mr. Justice James Murphy who lived there until his death in 1901. A frequent visitor to Glencairn at that time was a young barrister friend of the Judge, John Sullivan who later joined the Jesuits and because of his saintly life is now a strong candidate for Sainthood.

Originally designed in the mid-nineteenth century Glencairn has an eccentric Victorian ambience, once described by an out-going Ambassador, Dame Veronica



Glencairn House with author in foreground



Boss Croker

Sutherland, as a "rather quirky building with a rich history". She was fascinated by the notoriety of "Boss" Croker and maintained that his ghost still haunts the house exemplified by the eccentric, unreliable grandfather clock during her tenure.

Richard "Boss" Croker bought the house and estate in 1904 and completely refurbished and remodelled the house into a mixture of baronial and American colonial styles with a battlemented tower. He was born at Blackrock, a village outside Clonakilty in West Cork in 1841.

When he was about five years old, at the height of the famine, his parents brought him to New York. The young Croker was educated in public schools and worked at various jobs including barman and professional boxer. He entered local politics as a member of Tammany Hall – the organisation that controlled the Democratic party in New York. He worked his way up the ranks to become the head of Tammany Hall and he held power for seventeen years, amassing a vast fortune during that time. It was said that at one time the "Boss" took twenty-seven different salaries from the City of New York. Once asked to define an honest politician, he said: "A man who, when he's bought, stays bought!" The colourful "Boss" could show our current politicians a thing or two.

The quintessential politician – he was both charming and corrupt and manipulated all within his world of Tammany Hall.

In 1903 the "Boss" left America abruptly. He was forced to leave for tax reasons. He set up a horse-training establishment in Berkshire, England but the Jockey Club refused Croker permission to train in Newmarket and he then returned to the land of his birth and bought the Glencairn estate

SAORSTÁT ÉIREANN.

THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE.

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I Richard Broher of Glencairn Sandyford 6° Dublin declare this to be my last will. I hereby revoke all previous wills made by me. I hereby bequeath & devise to my dear wife ^{Bula R.B.} ~~Bendak~~ Broher all the property real & personal which I may die possessed of or over which I may have any power of appointment absolutely. I hereby appoint my said wife ^{Bula R.B.} ~~Bendak~~ Broher to be the sole Executor of this my will. In witness whereof I have hereunto signed my name this 12th day of October 1919

Richard Broher

Witness

John J Mc Donald
Solv
116 Grafton St, Dublin
Thomas J Fleming
13 Longford Terrace
Monkstown.

A copy of Richard "Boss" Croker's last Will

in Co. Dublin. Reputedly his wealth at that time was about £25 million sterling.

The former Tammany Hall Boss trained horses on the estate including Orby which won the Epsom and Irish Derbys in 1907. Big celebrations took place in Glencairn when Orby won the Blue Riband of racing at Epsom. The horse was paraded through the streets of the capital and the "Boss" was made a Freeman of Dublin.

I recall my uncle telling me that after Orby's famous victory an excited Irish lady rushed up to the "Boss's" assistant trainer Frank McCabe in the parade ring and exclaimed: "Thanks be to God and the Boss and yourself, Sir, I never thought that I would live to see the day that a Catholic horse would win the Derby".

King Edward VII refused to recognise Orby's victory and declined to entertain the winning owner after the race which

was a customary tradition. Orby is buried in the grounds of Glencairn side-by-side with his dam Rhoda B.

The Croker family coat-of-arms is still to be seen in Glencairn. It is engraved in a stained-glass window over the main stairway in the hall. It features three black ravens with a drinking cup as a back-drop and an inverted "V" for victory.

The Crokers were an old Devonshire family which emigrated to Ireland during Cromwellian times and settled in counties Cork and Limerick.

Boss Croker's ancestor John Croker of Ballinagarde uttered the famous words: "I doubt it..." when told on his death-bed that he was going to a better place. The phrase "I doubt it says Croker" is very much part of Irish folklore to this day.

The "Boss" made elaborate plans for his own funeral and when he died on 29 April,



The Croker coat of arms in Glencairn House

1922, his body was laid out in Evening Dress in the Chapel at Glencairn. Unusually Croker had requested a window at the side of his coffin and that the bones of Orby be buried beside him. Before the coffin was closed Mrs. Croker (the Boss's second wife, who was a Cherokee Indian princess, and about sixty years his junior) desired mourners to look at her husband's face for the last time. Some of Dublin's most eminent citizens attended the obsequies. After the requiem Mass in the oratory the "Boss" was buried in a granite mausoleum by the lake in the grounds of the estate. He was aged eighty-one years at his death.

The pall-bearers included Arthur Griffith, President of the Executive Council, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alderman Alfie Byrne and Oliver St. Gogarty (Surgeon, Poet, Author and Senator).

Michael Collins, chairman of the Provisional Government and Minister for Finance was represented by Mr. Kevin O'Shiel and the British Under-Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant, James MacMahon was also in attendance. Croker was a supporter of Collins in his fight for Irish freedom – they both came from neighbouring villages near Clonakilty in West Cork.

In 1939 Glencairn's link with the flamboyant "Boss" Croker was broken when his remains were removed from the mausoleum in the grounds and re-interred in the nearby Kilgobbin Cemetery with considerably less pomp than the original obsequies. The mausoleum was then demolished – apparently dumped into the lake.

In the interim Mr. O'Neill, a successful businessman, had bought the house and estate for £8,000 sterling and took up residence in 1939. He promptly sold off part of the lands and the gallops and stables to Mr. Joe McGrath for the same price of £8,000 sterling. Seamus McGrath (Mr. McGrath's son) trained horses there for many years afterwards.

The grounds at Glencairn are adorned with magnificent gardens and well-manicured lawns adjoining a large conservatory built by Croker. The gardens also include 200 year-old cupressus trees and exotic



Boss Croker leads Orby into the winner's enclosure at Epsom 1907

firs and there is the "lime-trees walk" leading down to Orby's grave.

Since the British Government acquired Glencairn many works of art have graced its walls illustrating the artistic and cultural links between the two countries.

An unusual portrait in oil on canvas of William Shakespeare by Louis Roubiliac hangs prominently in the hallway alongside a painting of Orby. The one I liked especially is an oil-on-canvas work by Sir John Lavery "The Coronation Procession, Piccadilly, 12 May, 1937" which depicts the procession of King George V, proclaimed King following the abdication of his brother Edward VII. It also hangs in the main reception area. The interior of the house incorporates richly carved mahogany and marble fireplaces and fine-plaster ceilings. One ceiling features a "circle of Birds"

which is beautiful and unique and encompasses every bird known in Japan. The oratory on the first floor is now used as an office.

The present ambassador, Dominick Chilcott has an interesting tale to tell. His previous-posting was in Tehran where he was forced to leave in a hurry after hundreds of protesters stormed the British Embassy and looted the Ambassador's residence in December, 2011. He had to leave without his dog "Pumpkin". The dog was later flown to Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport (in a crate) to be re-united with Jane Chilcott who collected the animal.

And so ends the fascinating story of Glencairn and its central character the notorious "Boss" Croker and my memories when my uncle Michael O'Neill was the owner.