

Some memories of Mary Hynes (nee O'Sullivan) Rathkeale

by May Sweetland

In writing this short little family history in 1935, I have one regret and that is I did not pay enough attention to names of places, dates etc. with which my grandmother, the late Mary Hynes (nee O'Sullivan) furnished, when narrating the following many years ago. She died on the 1 May 1908, aged 84 years, R.I.P. It goes back two hundred years and six generations from the children now growing up.

In the name of God, I begin. Jeremiah O'Sullivan came from Blennerville, County Kerry about the middle of the eighteenth century. He was of the O'Sullivan Beare clan, a man of good family and education and took the position of land steward and manager of the estate of Colonel Odell in the environs of Rathkeale. While there, he married Mary Hartigan, one of the seven daughters of a gentleman farmer in the district. His position of steward did not meet with the approval of her father, as her other sisters had married wealthier men: one was joined to an O'Brien of Ballybeg House,⁽¹⁾ another to a Dr McCarthy and a third to William Wallace, an architect in Limerick; and it was not until after the birth of her eldest son William, from whom we are descended, that she received her wedding dowry.⁽²⁾

It would seem likely that he had the fiery head of the O'Sullivans, as my grandmother and her brothers were auburn haired in their youth; but Jeremiah certainly had a fiery temper. He had another son besides William – (but) the latter, from his youth, was mischievous and daring but very brilliant, a great horseman and a great shot. When he was a young lad, he wagered with his brother that he would shoot the comb out of Miss Odell's hair, as she drove in state one Sunday morning to church. He did so, without injuring a hair of her head – but gave her the fright of her life.

His father intended buying a place of his own – negotiations were already afoot about it – and was resigning his position with Colonel Odell. But the shooting incident

brought things to a climax. The Colonel was infuriated and sent for Jeremiah to complain his son's conduct. He had to go through a glass door to where the Colonel was and as he approached, he heard the former roaring and swearing at what that young blackguard did. At the idea of his son being called a blackguard, his blood was up; taking off his buckled shoe, he put it through the glass door, shouting at the same time "No O'Sullivan ever bore that title and never will, with God's help!" When their tempers cooled, he tendered his resignation and they were always the best of friends. He settled down in his new home and the boys attended school. At that time, all the sons of the gentry went to a Mr Baggott,⁽³⁾ a very learned man of his time, called 'The star of Munster'. He was a cousin of the Hartigans and William and his brother were sent to him. The latter had not much taste for study but the other made up for him. He continued going to school until he was twenty one and the result was that he became a great classical scholar, an astronomer and fluent linguist and his native language came first. He left very valuable books, also writings and manuscripts in Irish of his own (which were afterwards given away to someone going to America). He was clever with his hands, being a splendid draughtsman and could do anything from making a pair of shoes to building a house. He always carried a piece of chalk in his pocket and if any problem arose, calculations or otherwise, he turned up the sole of his shoe and, there and then, solved it. A plan of a house was frequently done on it. Jeremiah and his wife died within a short time of each other and were buried either in Shanavoher (Shanavoher) or Roumasaor (Rathnaseer) churchyards in county Limerick.⁽⁴⁾

William came in for the place and, in 1813 or 1814, married a very beautiful girl named Mary Fitzgibbon, to whom he was very much attached. But he was as daring and adventurous as ever. The organisation called the 'Whiteboys' had started and he became a leader and captain of them. And he suffered for it, was an outlaw and (indecipherable – looks like 'on his keeping or on the keen'), as we know the phrase.

Before going further, I will relate a few incidents. One day, walking through a field, he saw the Process Server going towards the house of a poor widow. He followed, keeping inside the hedge, until he reached the house and entered by the back door before the server arrived. The woman was in a state, when she saw who was coming in the front. William told her not to worry – he would deal with the man. The knock on the door was answered by him and the following dialogue took place:

W. "What is your business?"

S. "I am to deliver this process."

W. "Well, we don't want either it or you here."

S. "You, sir, can't stop me from doing my duty."

W. "Oh, I don't intend to – you can serve it... on yourself!"

S. "What do you mean?"

W. "I mean to make you eat the process yourself."

S. "What!"

W. "Just what I said." (He caught him by the collar of his coat and made him eat every scrap of the paper.)

W. "Now, if you have digested that, go! You have done your duty."

Another time, W Going, a magistrate, who was very unpopular and had the yeos⁽⁵⁾ at his beck and call, used to boast that he was always ready for emergencies and never sat to table without two pistols, one each side of his knives and forks. A gentleman who was a friend of William's and knowing his daring, mentioned he was dining with Going on a certain night. William said: "I may pay him a surprise visit too. "What" said his friend "would you s...t the b...t...d? I wager you, (mentioning a sum of money) that you don't!" "Done!" said William.

On the appointed night, Going (and his two pistols) and guests sat over their wine, when the french window was thrown open



34, Collooney (Wolfe Tone) Street (courtesy of Tom O'Farrell)

and in sprang William, grabbed the pistols and covered them; (he) demanded their word of honour not to raise an alarm for ten minutes. Of course, they had no alternative but to obey. He got away before the hue and cry started, won his wager and Going was the laughing stock of the county.

William led the life of an outlaw for years. His home was made a Glebe house, or Rectory, for the Protestant minister of the district (one of Mrs Cole's daughters was governess there later) and all he possessed was confiscated. His wife and her two boys, Daniel and Jeremiah, had to go back to her mother's house and she eventually lost her farm through informers – when, under cover of night, he visited his wife and children – for harbouring him. They lived between Ballingarry and Croagh and a neighbour and supposed friend call Br...r was informer. My grandmother could not bear the name. If she heard it, I remember her to say: 'The breed of informers can't be good.'

One night, William was there and was making a pair of high-heeled shoes for his wife, when Br...r came in for a chat. He did not stop long; shortly afterwards the soldiers arrived. He got off some way and the officer said: "William O'Sullivan was here tonight, making a pair of shoes for his wife." While the soldiers searched, his eye caught sight of the tool box and he examined every article in it and exclaimed: "Damn it that such a genius of a man is such a fool!"

He was eventually caught and brought into Limerick to the County Gaol. He was not tried for a long time and they used every means of bribery to get three more names, then two and, finally, he would get back his place and stock and a large sum of money for one man's name. But he refused. At that time, his wife came into Limerick with her boys to be near him and took a house in 34, Collooney (Wolfe Tone) Street and now occupied by the Grant family.⁽⁶⁾ The governor of the prison took a great fancy to him and after a bit, used to let him home on parole from Saturday night to Monday morning. Finding bribery useless, he was tried and sentenced to death and during his weekends at home he wrote his own reprieve. Knowing the signatures of his schoolmates, the gentry of the county, he affixed them to the document and sent it to headquarters, was pardoned and released. He settled down after that and my grandmother was born at Wolfe Tone Street on 1 May 1824. About that time, St Michael's Protestant Church in Barrington Street was being built and his first cousin, William Wallace (who followed his father's profession) was architect. So he worked there in the vaults, as a kind of overseer and also at the bench and used to come across Vizes' Fields from his own house to work. He occupied that capacity in various jobs for Wallace.

When my grandmother was two-and-a-half years old, her mother died. At that time, Daniel would be eleven-and-a-half and Jerry two years younger. The boys continued to live with their father, but the girl was taken back to the country by her grandmother,

Mrs Fitzgibbon and stayed there until she was nineteen. William, finding it hard to manage for himself and the boys, married again, for which the boys never forgave him – as the boys, young though they were, loved their mother dearly and all she suffered through their father made her memory dearer to them. Daniel was apprenticed to Unthanks the Quakers – they had an oil and paint shop in William Street – and he became a glazier. Jerry went to America and fought in the civil war, was an ensign and despatch rider.⁽⁷⁾ For some reason I can't say but, so far, none of his descendants have been called after him (William). Perhaps at some future time, there may be a Liam O'Sullivan again. Whatever his failings were, he was honourable and true and injured none but himself and his family. He was buried, not with his kith and kin, but with a lifelong friend in Mungret churchyard, whose name is unknown. So there we leave him.

And may his soul and the souls of all our forbears, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

May Sweetland (1935)

References:

1. It is not clear where Ballybeg House was located. An O'Brien family lived in Ballybeg, Glin, County Limerick and it may be the family referred to here.
2. William Wallace, architect, was also employed nearby in the alteration of Saint Saviour's Dominican Church, Limerick in the 1860s. He added a clerestory and rose window and raised the exterior and interior of the church by 20 feet.
3. James Baggott was a mathematician, revolutionary and hedgeschool master in Ballingarry in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He was a member of the United Irishmen and his house in Ballingarry is still pointed out as the one in which Lord Edward Fitzgerald stayed during his tour of Ireland in 1798. Baggott died at Charleville on 31 August 1805 aged thirty five.
4. Shanavoher (Shanavoha) is a graveyard in Granagh, near Ballingarry. The parish of Rathkeale is made up of the old parishes of Rathnasaire and Kilcoleman. Rathnaseer churchyard is about two miles south of Rathkeale.
5. 'Yeos' is an abbreviation for the local yeomen, who volunteered to assist in upholding law and order.
6. The Grant family were at this address at time of writing this memoir in 1935.
7. Jerry O'Sullivan emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1851. He fought with the 8th Indiana Infantry and was an orderly to Major General Jefferson C. Davis during the American Civil War. He died in 1890, aged 79.

*This article was kindly submitted
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May Sweetland, the author of this memoir, was a member of the Old Limerick Society. She heard the story from her grandmother, who, in turn, was grand-daughter of the Whiteboy, William Sullivan, pupil of the 'Great O'Bagott'. May also provided much of the material for an article, written by her cousin Jack O'Sullivan, on the Windmill district of Limerick, where her family once lived. The article was published in the *Old Limerick Journal* Volume 15, Spring 1984.