

FAMOUS WEST LIMERICK PEOPLE, NO. 3  
SOPHIE PEIRCE

By Robert J. Cussen

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Many golden years ago, I met Anna Maria Peirce, daughter of Dr. George Peirce and grand-daughter of Dr. John Peirce, in Ballybunion - the last survivor of the Peirces of Newcastle. She asked me to come to her house and our conversation was all about Newcastle town. She was particularly interested in the old surviving townspeople and I was equally interested in the old Peirces. I well remember asking her: "What favouring breeze wafted your grandfather, Dr. John Peirce, from his home in Tullamore, Co. Offaly, to Newcastle?". Without hesitation, she replied: "Oh! it was an advertisement in one of the Dublin newspapers, asking if a young doctor would come to Newcastle, Co. Limerick and set up practice there". I could get no more out of her about the advertisement, and how unusual it was, so I checked it out afterwards with one of our Town Fathers (no names! no pack drill!) and this is what he told me,

At the beginning of 1800 there was only one doctor in the town and district of Newcastle. McCarthy was his name and he lived in Maiden Street, where Michael Murphy has the drapers shop. There is a laneway running out by Murphy's into Maiden Street and it was known as The Brewery Lane. It got it's name from a brewery built there early in 1800 by a Cork brewer named Allen. The Brewery thrived but, after 15 years or so, Allen was getting tired of brewing and sold the brewery to Dr. McCarthy who was getting tired of doctoring. Now, brewing and medicine do not mix, hence the advertisement in the Dublin newspaper and the arrival in Newcastle of Dr. Peirce. Everyone was satisfied in the end - Allen for his money; Dr. McCarthy for his brewery; Peirce for his appointment and the good people of Newcastle for their brilliant doctor as he turned out to be.

On arrival, Dr. John Peirce took over a house in The Square (now occupied by Miss Helen Cronin) and built up a splendid medical practice. But it wasn't all medicine with him. Across The Square from his house lived Thomas Locke, a distant cousin of the Earl of Devon, and Agent of the Earl's estate in West Limerick. Thomas had a lovely young daughter living with him and it was a case of love at first sight when the young doctor paid his respects to the Lockes. In no time they were married and it was a most happy marriage.

They had many children - three sons who became doctors and any amount of daughters. George, the eldest son, read a brilliant course in medicine in Dublin, came home and joined his father's practice. John, the second son, practised in Liverpool and, by his last will and testament, left a considerable sum of money to the Liverpool hospital to set aside a bed for ever and free of charge to any Newcastle man or woman who happened to be entering the hospital as a patient. The third son emigrated to Australia and settled there and practised as a doctor. I do not know what became of the daughters. Old Dr. Peirce died sometime in the 1860's and his son, George, took over his house and his medical practice. His widow, Frances, stayed on with her son and died on 6th February, 1889 aged eighty four years.

Dr. George Peirce was as good a doctor as his father and he added considerably to the practice, not to mention his many appointments. He married twice, first to Thomasina D'Arcy Evans of Knockaderry and, secondly,

to Henrietta Georgina Hewson of Ballybunion. He had eight children, one boy and seven girls, by the first marriage and none by the second. Of the eight children, the eldest was John (otherwise Jackie) and the remaining children were all girls.

Dr. George may have been an excellent doctor but he was an abysmal father. His first wife died in 1889 and, after that, he tried for several years to rear the children himself. He wouldn't let his daughters meet or talk to anyone masculine. He wouldn't allow them to go to school - all the teaching had to be done at home. He was a fanatical disciplinarian and he treated all his children, especially the girls, like prisoners. They could not go out in the street but he had a private gate entrance leading into the Demesne at the back of his house and the children had to use this gate only and, when they got into the Demesne, they had to play together - no mixing with the hoi polloi! They had to wear what he considered were proper clothes, warm and comfortable, but entirely different to other children's clothes. And, oh! a pair of strong boots a year to each of them. He married again, not for love but to get a woman whom he thought would help him to look after the children; instead, it was the children who looked after her with the result that confusion was doubly confounded.

His only son, Jackie, was a holy terror, full of pranks and devilment and he had no authority whatever over Jackie. Jackie was the heir to the lands of Knockaderry, the property of his maternal grandfather Thomas D'Arcy Evans (Old Tom Evans as he was called). Jackie spent much of his time with Old Tom who had a drink problem and was poor company for Jackie. Eventually, Jackie's father, in an attempt to civilise him, got Jackie into the Provincial Bank and he was appointed to the Kilrush branch in County Clare. Jackie wasn't in the Bank when the most extraordinary things began to happen there.

The Kilrush Bank called in the Kilrush police to investigate one of Jackie's appalling pranks and the police put their finger on him! Jackie didn't like the intrusion of the police so he arranged a trap to baffle them and to make them look foolish in the eyes of the Kilrush people. After Bank hours he used to go down to the Pier and fool around there in a most suspicious way, looking here and there, and dodging every time he saw a policeman. This got on the policemen's nerves and they commenced shadowing him. Then, one evening, sure that he was being followed by a policeman, Jackie went to the Pier with a timber-shaped contraption on his back - for the world like a coffin. When he reached the Pier, he placed the contraption into a boat and rowed out into the centre of the wide Shannon River. By this time, all the police in Kilrush were centered on the Pier with field glasses directed at Jackie and his boat. The next thing they saw was Jackie tumbling the contraption into the water. When Jackie came back to the Pier they put him under arrest and rowed down river, bringing the contraption back to the Pier. Then they took Jackie and the contraption back to the police barrack, opened it and found only stones and timber shavings inside. All Kilrush were delighted at the occurrence.

At that particular time the weather was very warm and Jackie, more abrasive than ever, commenced going to work in the Bank with no tie and his shirt collar wide open. The Manager remonstrated with him but to no avail and then threatened to report him unless he buttoned up his shirt and put a tie on his collar. Jackie appeared next day with a chain carefully wrapped and fastened to a padlock which dangled in the place occupied by the knot of the tie. The Manager nearly got convulsions and the result was that Jackie was sent home.

When he came home he spent most of his time with his maternal grandfather, Old Tom Evans, out in Knockaderry House and its broad acres. Now, having a clear hand, he behaved like a jester and kept the Knockaderry people full of talk and enjoyment about his antics. Eventually, on the death of his grandfather, he succeeded to Knockaderry House and farm. He lived alone in the house and found he couldn't keep up with the work so he put an advertisement for a house-keeper in the local papers. A woman named Kate Teresa Doolan from Kerry answered the advertisement. She was a fine upstanding woman of 34 or 35 years and had no difficulty in getting the job. Things went alright in Knockaderry at the beginning but Jackie was a difficult man and was not on terms with a lot of his neighbours and was jealous if she mingled with them.

There was an extensive farmer, named William Power, living next to Jackie's house and lands at Knockaderry and they were black out with each other. Jackie got the notion that Power was courting Miss Doolan, his house-keeper, and he went around with the words and writing slandering Power. Power brought an action against him to recover damages laid at £1,000 for alleged slander and libel. Jackie defended the case, denied the slander and libel and pleaded that if the words were written or published the occasion was a privileged one. The action was held in the High Court, Dublin on Monday, 22nd April, 1895.

Jackie lost the action and had to pay a considerable sum of money to Power and, in addition, he had to pay all the costs - his own and Power's. It broke him and he was dodging debts and sheriffs and the devil know what and, in the height of it all, he married Miss Doolan on 29th May, 1895 in the Dublin Registry Office.

The next thing was a girl was born on 10th November, 1896 and christened Sophie Catherine Peirce. Shortly after the birth of the child, Mrs. Jackie Peirce was found dead in Knockaderry House and there was no trace either of Jackie or the child. Jackie went on the run but was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife. He was found to be insane and was put in a mental institution where he spent the rest of his life. Dr. George Peirce took charge of the infant Sophie and brought her to his home in Newcastle West where she was reared and looked after by her aunts. She went to St. Margaret's Hall School, Dublin and later became a student in the College of Science in Dublin and got a degree there in the early 1920's.

Shortly after the War, she met and fell in love with an English Army man named Elliott Lynn who was home on vacation from East Africa and visiting friends in Ireland. They were married and she threw everything to the winds and went to East Africa. Here, in her happiness, she turned poet and wrote many verses for the Press. But the happiness did not last and the marriage broke up. She published her poems in England in 1925 and here is her farewell to Elliott Lynn:

## D I V O R C E

We built a house with kisses,  
And we pull it down with tears,  
The mortar of our happy hopes  
Could not withstand the years.

We lit our hearth with laughter,  
And danced beside its pyre.  
Its ashes scatter to the winds  
And cold its sacred fire.

We dreamed of little children  
How children's voices thrill,  
Their wistful voices haunt me yet,  
Unborn and shapeless still.

He woo'd me in the courts of love  
And now that love must die;  
We wrangle in the courts of men..  
The courts that break the tie.

It's like a bunch of lilies  
You draggle in the slime,  
The love we lost - and only fears  
Are with us all the time.

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She got involved in athletics in England and on 6th August, 1923 she set up a world record for the high jump at a height of 4'11". She was also British Javelin Champion in 1923. She became Vice-President of the Womens Amateur Athletic Association and an advocate for athletics for women and girls - so much so that she wrote a book on the subject, published in 1925.

Returning from Prague by plane in May, 1925, where she had been attending an Olympic Conference and had delivered a paper on Women's Athletics, she was sitting beside an RAF man called Reid and, expressing an interest in flying, he promised to help her learn to fly. She joined the London Light Aeroplane Club immediately, being it's first woman member, and had her first flight in August, 1925. She showed an immediate appitude for flying and proceeded to involve herself in competitive flying. Over the next few years she broke many records and her solo flight from Cape Town to London (a distance of 10,000 miles) brought her world acclaim. She also held the world altitude record for light planes and was the first woman to make a parachute jump in April, 1926.

She married a wealthy English industrialist - Sir James Heath - about this time but this marriage also ended in lawsuits and notoriety. Sir James commenting "my wife has flown away in the clouds". She went to live in the United States in 1928 and continued her success as an aviator, flying



SOPHIE PEIRCE  
By Sir John Lavery

Circa 1919



SOPHIE PEIRCE

Shortly after her marriage  
to Elliot Lynn

Circa 1919



IN HER EARLY FLYING DAYS

Circa 1925



SOPHIE PEIRCE  
With her third husband,  
Williams, in Cork April 1933,  
shortly before her death.

demonstrations and giving lectures. In August 1929 she was involved in an air crash in Cleveland in which she suffered severe head injuries and, though she seemed to make an excellent recovery and flew again, she was never quite the same person and seems to have suffered a personality change.

She married for the third time, a coloured aviator named Reggie Williams, and they both continued to fly Exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic. However, she became increasingly unstable and developed a drink problem and her last years were sad ones. In May, 1934, she was fatally injured in a fall down the stairs of a tram car in London.

Now, to end on a characteristic note, typical of her late father, Sophie - about to die - arranged that her remains be cremated and the ashes taken by aeroplane over The Square in Newcastle. The plane was to arrive at 12 noon and the ashes were to be scattered out immediately over the ground adjoining the houses in the south western angle of The Square. At that time, the said south western angle of The Square was made up:

- (a) By Peirces house (where Sophie lived for many years). Newcastle West Branch of A.I.B. now stands on this site.
- (b) Next by the entrance to the house of Captain Richbel Curling (Agent of the Earl of Devon's Limerick lands). There had been deep hatred between Sophie and Richbell!
- (c) Next by the Church of Ireland, enclosed by a stone wall facing onto The Square. It was the Captain's habit to walk out at noon every day into The Square, back up against the Church wall and take in everything.

The aeroplane passed over and the Captain, as usual backing against the Church wall, couldn't escape inhaling the ashes. It kept him on the spot coughing for a considerable time. When he heard what it was all about, his dislike for Sophie grew more and more. For years thereafter, when the March winds raised the dust along The Square, the Captain at his usual stance, used salute passers-by saying "There's that Peirce lady at it again, will I ever be clear of her ? "

There was no answer. Peirce's house is gone. The Captain is gone and the Church is gone. All gone except the March winds. Sic transit gloria mundi.