

Mount Trenchard

MARY DUANE

To tell the story of Mount Trenchard is to recount the history of those picturesque acres on the south bank of the Shannon at Foynes and for some miles west of the town. In the eastern part of that area stands the bleak hill of Fidne—now known as Knockpatrick—to which is attached the tradition that St. Patrick, pausing in his work of converting the Uí Fidgente, climbed to its summit and from it blessed the lands of the Corcu Baiscinn. To the west one comes upon the ruins of the humble church and quern-capped Holy Well of Tobarcolmoge of Loughill. These two places of Early Christian fame, Knockpatrick and Loughill, are connected by two roads. During the eighteenth century the older road which lies along the brow of the ridge carried the traveller from Limerick to Tralee, but it is now little used, its duty being done by the more recent coastal road—built in the middle of the nineteenth century—which skirts the base of the ridge through “The Rock of Foynes”. Between these two roads are fields of hill-bog, descending by forested land and pasture to the Shannon’s shore. Here, between the hill-top and the water, Mount Trenchard stands framed in trees, above it a terraced garden, and below it the great expanse of the broadening Shannon.

For our interest, the history of the family whose name this house bears begins in the sixteenth century when the name of William Trenchard appears in Elizabethan documents as an applicant for land in Ireland. After the tragic failure of the Desmond Rebellion, the vast estates of the sixteenth Earl were confiscated and put up for sale by Elizabeth on the London market. In 1587 the attractive coastal strip at Foynes fell to William Trenchard. This young gentleman from Wiltshire, who with £1,000 in his purse was chosen by Elizabeth to qualify as an Undertaker in her plantation, was given 14,000 acres of land in west Co. Limerick, at Robertstown, Shanagolden, Kilmoylan, Clounagh and Knockpatrick.¹ He was to retain 1,500 acres for himself and allot the rest to other Englishmen.² As an English planter sent to colonise the land of the much-loved Desmond earl, one cannot expect that he was received with enthusiasm by the Irish of the locality. Thomas Cam FitzGerald of Springfield, encouraged by the Act of Pardon which followed the capture of the sixteenth Earl of Desmond, petitioned Elizabeth for the restoration of some of the Trenchard estate, but in

¹J. Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Dublin 1927, p. 132.

²*Ibid.*, p. 195.

vain; William continued to occupy all of his Seignior, having many Irish tenants, but only fourteen English inhabitants on his land.³

The house in which he lived was known as Corrig Castle, a former stronghold of a constable of the Earl of Desmond.⁴ On returning from Glyn, Carew encamped there and described the castle as "belonging to Master Trenchard the Undertaker, and of strength sufficient to hold out against any force except the cannon. But the example of Glynne was so fearful unto the rebels, that upon the first summons they yielded the same, with safety of their lives."⁵ The remains of its massive structure and of its wall-faced moat may still be seen in the farmyard of the ancestral home of Gerald Griffin, now called Corrig House, at Foynes.

William Trenchard was succeeded in the Seignior by his son, Francis, who made no effort to gain the affections of his Irish neighbours and was guilty of evictions which enabled him to detain seventeen ploughlands in his own interest. To consolidate the Crown's position in that area he granted Old Abbey, the former Augustinian Priory, to Richard Gill in 1605 as a reward for services rendered his father, and he also granted Ballyclohie to Emmry Lee. He mustered for defence seven horse and twenty-three foot. In 1613 he took out a new patent for the Seignior and obtained a licence to hold a Friday market at Shanagolden and a fair on the feast of Corpus Christi and the day following. He established himself more securely at Corrig Castle by repairing it at a cost of £200, and increased the number of English planters on the estate. In 1622, after his death, there were three freeholders of English birth and descent in castles of good repair at Corrig.⁶

The Trenchard family continued in unpopular occupation at Corrig and later—when castles went out of fashion—in their Georgian house three miles west of Corrig and which is now known as Mount Trenchard. On the death of the last male heir, the 4,000 acre property passed to two daughters, and in 1777 the estate was divided between their two husbands, John Hipposly and William Long of Wiltshire. Hipposly's property was mortgaged and became the property of the Earl of Conyngham for £28,000.⁷ Long made a lease of his share to Thomas Rice of Kerry, a man who was married to a widow, Mary Collis, one of the Fitzgeralds, Knights of Kerry,⁸ and who agreed to purchase Conyngham's moiety for £38,000. This placed the whole estate in the possession of the Rice family.

The son of this marriage, Stephen Edward Rice, married Catherine, the only child and heiress of Thomas Spring of Castlemaine. Referring to Mrs. Collis and her second husband, Thomas Rice, Windle remarks: "They had a son, a tutor to whom a Miss Spring took a fancy and married him. Her mother Mrs. Spring gave her £50,000 on her marriage."

With the union of these two Kerry families, the Spring-Rice family line was firmly established. The remains of Stephen Edward Rice and Catherine Spring

now lie side by side with those of their son Thomas, first Baron of Monteagle of Brandon, and of his first wife Lady Theodosia Pery, daughter of Lord Limerick, and their son, Stephen Edmond, under a paved court which covers their graves beside the ruined Protestant belfry at Shanagolden.

With the dawn of the nineteenth century Mount Trenchard began to enjoy a period of well-being such as it had not known before. These were years when it began to have a flavour of patriotism and a purpose of justice under its new liberal owners who, with each succeeding generation were to become increasingly nationalistic.

In 1780 a son was born to Catherine, wife of Stephen Edward Rice, in Mungret Street, Limerick.⁹ This son, Thomas, grew up to be the most popular figure in Limerick of the early nineteenth century, and brought fame to the Spring-Rice family for his sense of justice, his humanity and his political ability. In 1817 Thomas Spring-Rice began to inquire into the conditions of the Limerick Asylum and condemned the abominable treatment of the mentally sick there. He drafted an Asylum Act which became law in that year. In 1819 Spring-Rice won popularity by taking it on himself to arrest Scanlan—the seducer of the Colleen Bawn—when the authorities had been remiss in bringing him to justice.¹⁰ It fell to the lot of Daniel O'Connell to defend Scanlan, and it was not to be the last time that Spring-Rice and O'Connell were to be found in opposition to one another.

Eighteenth century Limerick had been used to the advantage of a corrupt Corporation, headed first by an Orange family called the Roches and later by equally self-interested families of Smyths and Verekers. The merchants and traders of the city built the Georgian town of Newtown Pery—planned to extend from New Bridge to the Crescent—and here set up a Commission of Independent Citizens outside the walls of Englishtown, which thus would be exempt from the jurisdiction of the Corporation.¹¹ After two unsuccessful attempts to defeat Vereker in the parliamentary election, the Independent Citizens eventually succeeded in 1820, when, after the election of that year, the non-resident votes were disallowed, and Thomas Spring-Rice became Limerick City's representative in Parliament—a seat he was to hold for twelve years.

On Spring-Rice's return from Dublin in July 1820, he received a tumultuous reception from his constituents and was chaired through the City in a style not paralleled on any previous occasion¹²—a painting of "The Chairing of Spring-Rice" now hangs in the Chamber of Commerce, Limerick. His first two years as a Member of Parliament were so great a success that he was conferred with the Freedom of Dublin in 1822. There is evidence among the Parliamentary speeches of the time that he tried to persuade Parliament to remedy the miser-

³*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁴M. Moloney, *NMAJ*, 2(1940-41), 4.

⁵J. Dowd, *Round about the County of Limerick*, Limerick 1896, p. 204.

⁶J. Begley, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁷J. Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick from 1691 to the present time*, Dublin 1938, p. 35.

⁸*Burke's Peerage*, 103rd edition, London 1963, p. 926.

⁹M. Lenihan, *Limerick; its history, ecclesiastical, civil and military, from the earliest ages*, Dublin 1866, p. 760.

¹⁰N. W. Senior, *Journals, Conversations and Essays relating to Ireland*, vol. II, London 1868, pp. 173-177.

¹¹P. Fitzgerald and J. J. MacGregor, *History, topography and antiquities of the county and city of Limerick*, vol. II, Dublin 1827, p. 487.

¹²R. Herbert, "The Chairing of Thomas Spring Rice," *NMAJ*, 4(1944-45), 131-142, pl. IX.

able condition of the Irish people, and constantly besieged the authorities in the Viceregal Lodge to grant favours to his constituents. During his years of parliamentary representation for Limerick (1820-1832) he opened new railway communications, improved roads and bridges, and procured a better water supply for the City. He warmly supported O'Connell in his agitation for Catholic Emancipation and in general showed a genuine sympathy for the poor and downtrodden people of the country.

From 1832 to 1839 Spring-Rice represented Cambridge in Parliament,¹³ and his later career becomes difficult to reconcile with the earlier one.

In 1830 a tall column had been erected in Pery Square to honour him, but after his six-hour speech championing the cause of the opposition to Repeal of the Union, this column must have seemed excessively high to the followers of O'Connell. Spring-Rice, then Secretary of the Treasury, entered that debate equipped with statistics which could be made to show that the trade of the Shannon area had increased since the Act of Union.

Speaking to support Repeal, Lalor Shiel, with much wit and a great deal of truth, analysed the political schizophrenia of Spring-Rice: "He sees the poor laws from the Shannon as he sees Repeal from the Thames. He takes a Treasury view of the one, and a Mount Trenchard view of the other . . . He designates himself as a West-Briton [Spring-Rice is the originator of this term]. He does himself an injustice for he is more than English. All the mud of his native Shannon has not only been washed off by his ablutions in the Cam, but he comes more fresh and glossy from the academic water than those who at their birth were immersed in the classic stream."¹⁴

In his parliamentary career Thomas Spring-Rice showed himself to be a man of scholastic as well as political attainments, holding the academic distinctions of Master of Arts and Fellow of the Royal Society; he was also a member of the Queen's University, Dublin, and of London University. His educated and alert mind was receptive to the plight of the Irish Catholics. The mature man seems to have abandoned his early ideals of patriotism, and so he "turned his coat" to receive Victoria's decorations—Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1835, and a peerage (Lord Monteagle of Brandon) in 1839. He continued, however, to keep his principles of justice and humanity, and these were in evidence in his treatment of the Mount Trenchard tenants during the years of the Great Famine. As early as 1846 he realised the gravity of the growing crisis, and in October of that year "paid the men out of his own pocket" when the incompetence of the Board of Works caused the workers on the estate to be left without their wages.¹⁵ He believed that in emigration lay the solution of Ireland's population problem, and he helped to send some tenants in poor circumstances to Australia. When Queen Victoria visited Dublin, Lord Monteagle refused to have anything to do with the visit which was intended to give the lie to the appalling condition of the emaciated inhabitants of the country.

Lord Monteagle's sister, Mary, married Stephen de Vere of Curragh Chase, near Adare, and the son of this marriage, born in 1814 was to become the well-known poet Aubrey de Vere. When Tennyson and his son, Hallam, stayed at Curragh Chase in 1848, he visited his host's relatives at Mount Trenchard. He later travelled across the Shannon to Kilkee of which visit Alfred Percival Graves wrote: "But the proverbial ill-wind that had kept all close prisoners in the lodges of Kilkee had blown the storm-loving Tennyson over from Foynes." When in Kilkee, Tennyson wrote one of his most famous poems, "Break, break, break at the foot of thy crags, oh sea!"¹⁶ In trying to reconcile the sensitivity of a poet, which could ignore the frightful state of the famine-stricken population and search for the stimulation of an angry sea, one must recall the apparently comfortable detachment of the ascendancy classes of the nineteenth century from the hardship suffered by the poor.

Lord Monteagle's eldest son, Stephen Edmond Spring-Rice, never succeeded to the title and estates of his father, for he died at sea in 1865. His father died the following year and was succeeded by his grandson, Thomas, the second Lord Monteagle.¹⁷

While his father had been busy with his parliamentary career, Stephen Edmond had applied himself to the management of the estate at Mount Trenchard, and did much to alleviate the poverty of the Famine years for the tenantry. He was responsible for building the West Pier at Foynes as a Famine Relief Scheme in 1847, the Spring-Rice family and the Commissioners of Public Works paying the entire cost, £10,000, in equal share. It was during the lifetime of Stephen Edmond that the main street of Foynes was moved from the river's edge to its present more southerly position, to make way for the Limerick-Foynes railway line, and that the rocky cliff to the west of Foynes was blasted to allow the construction of the coast road. With the completion of this road the main entrance to Mount Trenchard was changed from the upper road to an approach from the new road, and the house lost an architectural advantage, as henceforward it faced back to front as it still does to this day.

The second Baron Monteagle—father of Mary Spring-Rice—devoted his life to furthering the interests of the rural population and the people of Foynes. He succeeded in having the Harbour Order passed in 1890 and so succeeded in keeping Foynes harbour independent of the Limerick Harbour Board. This second Lord Monteagle was a close friend of Sir Horace Plunkett, and is well remembered for his interest in the Co-operative Movement. It is interesting to remark here that the Co-operative Creamery established by him in the Main Street of Foynes was burned in 1921 by the Black and Tans as a reprisal for the killing of a policeman named Fahey in an ambush near Loughill.

Though fame and glory were won by the first Lord Monteagle, it was Mary, his great-granddaughter, more than he who was to win affection and respect from the Irish nation for the name Spring-Rice.

¹³M. Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 760.

¹⁴T. MacNevin (editor), *The Speeches of . . . R. L. Shiel*, Dublin 1845, p. 93.

¹⁵C. Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, London 1962, p. 128.

¹⁶R. Hartigan, "Literary Rambles Around Rathkeale," *Irish Travel*, 8(1932-33), 34.

¹⁷M. Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 760.

In 1875 Lord Monteagle married Elizabeth Butcher, daughter of the Bishop of Meath. It was their daughter, Mary, born in 1890, who was to change the liberal attitude of her family into active nationalism. Of retiring and serious disposition, she took little part in the gay social round of her contemporaries but set her mind to the national problems of her time. At first a strong supporter of Home Rule, later of Sinn Féin, she played a useful role in the activities of the branch of the Gaelic League founded, by her friend Douglas Hyde, at Foynes. In her enthusiasm to improve her own pronunciation of the Irish language she employed a native-speaking gardener at Mount Trenchard. When the Munster Feis was held at Foynes, it was on the lawns of her house that the musicians and dancers gathered to compete. In the basement of her house she constructed a hide-out which was constantly in use as a shelter for fugitive patriots in the years immediately following 1916.

Two years before the 1916 Insurrection Mary confided to Erskine Childers her plan to arm the Irish Volunteers. She suggested that guns be bought on the Continent and smuggled to Ireland in a fishing smack called the "Santa Cruz" which traded near Foynes. When Childers inspected the boat in Foynes harbour he saw that she could not be sufficiently altered to allow her to sail on the North Sea without arousing suspicion, and decided to venture the proposed gun-running in a yacht instead. And so, with a crew of five which included Mary Spring-Rice, Erskine Childers as captain, and his wife Mary, the "Asgard" set out on a hazardous nineteen days voyage through heavy seas, successfully collecting 900 rifles and 29,000 rounds of ammunition from a tug off the Belgian coast, procured—with the aid of Darrell Figgis and Roger Casement—from Hamburg, and landing them with great daring in broad daylight at Howth, on 26th July 1914. The mission accomplished, Mary wrote in her diaries: "I got ashore with my luggage and was warmly greeted by O'Rahilly, Eoin MacNeill, Dermot Coffey and Padraic Colum."

On the 1st of December, ten years later, Mary Spring-Rice died after a long illness in the Vale of Clwydd Sanatorium, in North Wales. Her courage and initiative which had armed the Volunteers and made possible the Insurrection of 1916 were not forgotten, for her funeral to the family graveyard below Mount Trenchard, on the river side of the Foynes-Loughill road, was given a Guard of Honour by the local I.R.A., the Gaelic League, and the Trade Unionists.¹⁸

Mary's brother, Thomas Aubrey, third Baron Monteagle, died the same year and was succeeded by his uncle, 80-year old Commander Francis, who died shortly after his succession. The Valentia branch of the Spring-Rice family continued in possession at Mount Trenchard until 1952 when Lady Holland, connected by marriage to the Butcher family, bought the house and added many attractive features to the interior which are much admired by visitors today. Outstandingly fine additions include a mahogany staircase, several Georgian doors and four hand-carved marble fireplaces of superb craftsmanship.

In 1957 the house was bought by the Sisters of Mercy who replaced the west wing by modern extensions to accommodate a boarding school for girls. Under

the care of the nuns the house and gardens are treated with the respect which is their due, remembering their historical and literary associations.

Several of the tenants of the estate are eager to point out the interesting details of the house and gardens: the path of the old main avenue laid down by the Trenchard family, the landscape garden to which each generation of the Spring-Rice family added a terrace, the favourite walk of Aubrey de Vere, the room where Tennyson dined, the giant yew tree under which Mary Spring-Rice hid her box of private papers during the Black and Tan raids; and in their library the pupils of the school keep a copy of Lennox Robinson's play, "The Big House", which was inspired by Mount Trenchard and the Spring-Rice family.

¹⁸F. X. Martin, *The Howth Gun Running*, Dublin 1964, p. 68.