

For our purpose, we shall opt for this third road.

It is a road that takes us through pleasant countryside where, in season, the elder blooms in profusion. Three miles on, we cross the Annagh Bridge over the Newport River, and a little over a mile further on we come to the small village of Ahane. In the Catholic church, at the left-hand side of the road, there are interesting carved Stations of the Cross. They came from New York and were, it seems, originally intended for some church in Germany.

* The name Ahane (from *Áthán*, Small Ford) is synonymous with all the glamour and glory of Limerick hurling at its magnificent best, for this small village supplied some of the finest hurlers of the wonderful Limerick County hurling teams of the 1930s and 1940s. Among them was the now legendary Mick Mackey, reckoned by many to be the greatest hurler of all time.

Less than a mile beyond Ahane we meet the Limerick-Newport road, where we turn left; then, having travelled about a quarter of a mile, we turn sharply right, onto the Limerick-Dublin road (N7), proceed for about 2½ miles and then turn left for Castleconnell. Close to here, in the townland of Mount Shannon, stood Mount Shannon House, once the residence of John Fitzgibbon – or 'Black Jack', as he was known – Earl of Clare. Fitzgibbon, who was born in 1748, was a member of Grattan's Irish Parliament and was made Lord Chancellor in 1789. It has been mildly said of him that he was a man with a remarkable facility for changing his convictions. This was nowhere better evidenced than in the unscrupulous manner in which he campaigned in support of the passage of the Act of Union. Wholesale bribery in terms of money and titles ensured that the measure would be passed. When Black Jack died in 1802, at his Dublin residence, his funeral was made the occasion of a most hostile demonstration, with the infuriated populace engaging in constant jeering and hooting. One demonstrator went so far as to throw a dead cat on the lid of the coffin.

The name Castleconnell is a corruption of *Caisleán Ó gConaing*, the Castle of the O Conaings. The O Conaings were an early Gaelic sept who occupied this northern part of County Limerick and whom we mentioned in connection with Carrigunnell (*Carraig Ó gConaing*) as we set out on our journey through the county.

After the Norman invasion William de Burgo obtained possession of an extensive area in north-east Limerick, including

Castleconnell. De Burgo married a daughter of Donal Mór O'Brien, King of Munster, thus greatly increasing his power and influence. It was either he or one of his descendants who erected the strong castle, the ruins of which still stand on a rock beside Castleconnell village. The de Burgos (Burkes) were a dominant force in north-east Limerick for almost five hundred years. The head of one branch of the family bore the title Baron of Castleconnell, the head of a second branch the title Baron of Brittas. The barony name Clanwilliam – i.e. *Clann Uilliam*, the Family of William – proclaims, in effect, that this is the territory of the descendants of that William de Burgo who settled here before the end of the twelfth century.

John Burke, the second Baron of Castleconnell, was in London in 1592, and some dispute took place between him and a Captain Arnold Cosby which led to the two arranging to fight a duel. Burke arrived at the appointed place on horseback, as was the Irish custom. Cosby asked that the duel be fought on foot. Burke agreed and dismounted, but as he bent down to undo his spurs Cosby ran him through with his sword and killed him. For this treacherous deed Cosby was tried, condemned and hanged. The event is recorded in a piece of ancient verse:

John Burke, Lord Castleconnell, was basely slain
By Captain Arnold Cosby, for they twain
Resolved to fight; but Cosby stops, demurs,
Prays Castleconnell to take off his spurs;
And as he stooped, yielding to his request,
Cosby most basely stabbed him in the breast,
Gave twenty-one all dreadful wounds – base act,
And Cosby only hanged for the horrid fact.⁶

In August 1640 a Mr Holmes from Limerick wrote to the Archbishop of Armagh about certain very strange happenings in the Burke castle at Castleconnell. In the course of his letter he said:

For news we have the strangest that ever was heard of, of enchantments in the Lord of Castleconnell's Castle, six miles from Limerick, and several sorts of noises, sometimes of drums, and trumpets, sometimes other curious music, with heavenly voices; then fearful screeches, and such outcries that the neighbours near it cannot sleep. Priests have adventured to be there, but have been cruelly beaten for their pains, and carried away they know not how – some two, some four miles. Sometimes minstrels, at other times armed