

A visit to Limerick

Part three

The second Earl of Clare was a close friend of Byron's, indeed his closest friend. They were at Harrow together, and later, in his poem, **Childish Recollections** Byron wrote:

Friend of my heart, and foremost on the list
Of those with whom I lived supremely blest;
Oft have we drained deeply, thirsting still the more;
Yet when Confinement's lingering hour was done,
Our sports, our studies and our souls were one:
Together we impelled the flying ball,
Together waited in our tutor's hall;
Together joined in cricket's manly toil,
Or shared the produce of the river's spoil;
Or plunging from the green declining

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by Constantine FitzGibbon

shore,
Our pliant limbs the buoyant billows bore:
In every element, unchang'd, the same,
All, all that brothers should be, but the name.

During their last year at Harrow they became estranged, chiefly, it seems, owing to Byron's jealousy of Clare's friendship for another boy who was later to become famous, Lord John

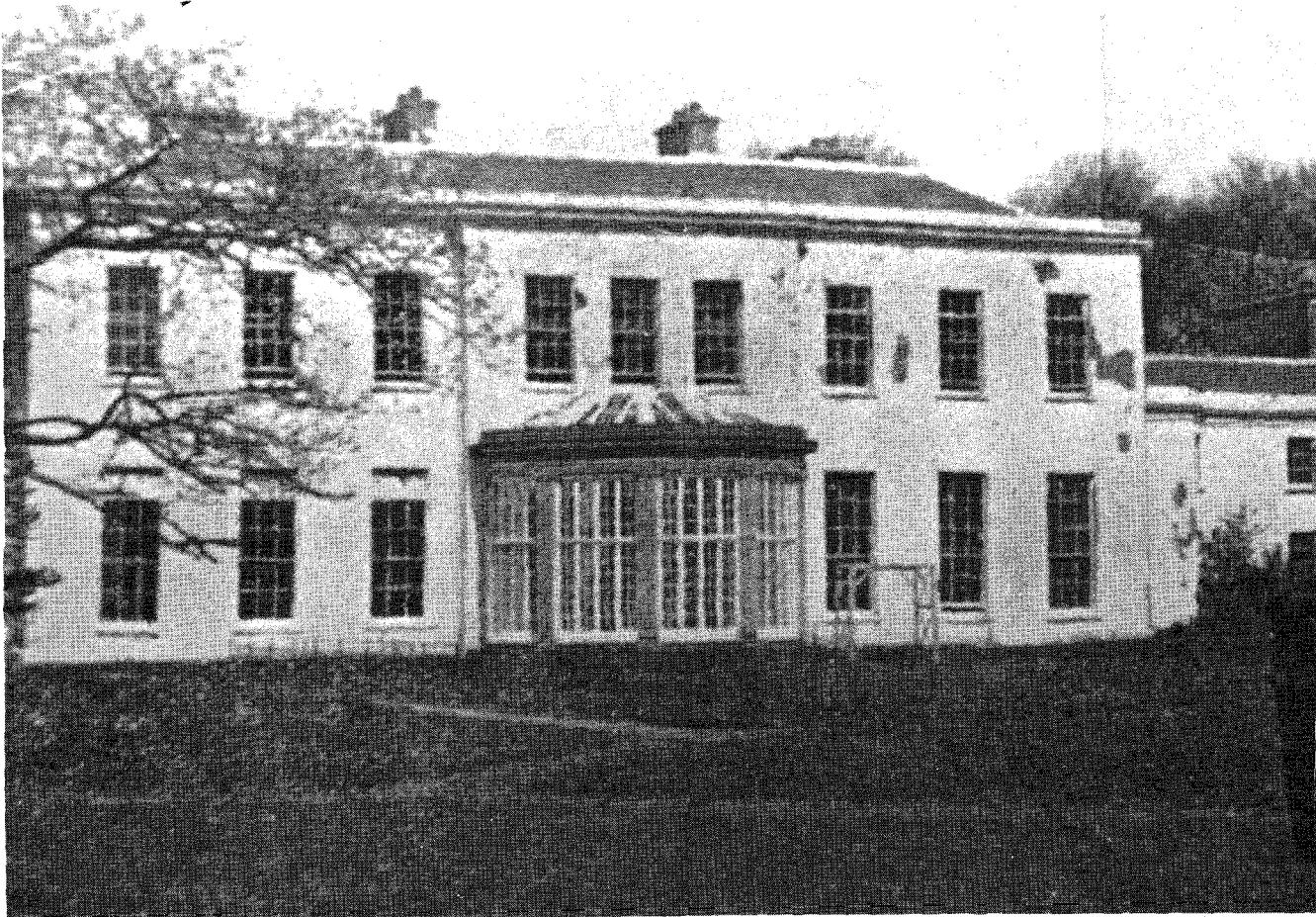
Russell. But Byron's affection remained. A poem of his written some years later to the Earl of Clare starts:

Friend of my youth! when young we roved,
Like striplings, mutually beloved.

With Friendship's purest glow;
The bliss which wing'd those rosy hours,
Was such a pleasure seldom showers

On mortals here below.

But they did not see a great deal of one another. From 1814 on, Clare was usually abroad when Byron was in England and vice versa. Perhaps it was this that kept their friendship green. Certainly on Byron's part at least it was a most ardent emotion. In October, 1821, they met accidentally on the Ravenna-Bologna road, and from then



A view of Mount Shannon House from the rear.



Edward Street in the 1950s.

on until his death Byron seems to have clung almost pathetically to that emotion, though apart from a couple more meetings during this and the next month they did not see one another again. In his letters and jottings Byron said: 'As to friendship, it is a propensity in which my genius is very limited. I do not know the **male** human being except Lord Clare, the friend of my infancy, for whom I feel anything that deserves the name. All my others are men-of-the-world friendships'. 'My earliest and dearest friend', he describes him, and adds: 'I have always loved him better than any **male** thing in the world'. Finally, in a letter written at Missolonghi on March 31st, 1824, that is to say some three weeks before his death, he wrote to Clare: 'I hope you do not forget that I always regard you as my dearest friend and love you as when we were Harrow boys together'. Then, in less emotional vein, he goes on to discuss the scandal of Clare's younger brother, Richard, and Mrs. Moore, a subject, one feels, after his own heart, though it must have seemed very remote, far away in Missolonghi. He says:

I was sorry to hear that Dick had exported a married woman from Ireland, not only on account of morals but monies. I trust the jury will be considerate. I thought that Richard

looked sentimental when I saw him at Genoa, but little expected what he was to land in. Pray who **is** the lady? The papers merely inform us by dint of asterisks that she is somebody's wife and has children, and that Dick (as usual) was the intimate friend of the confiding husband. It is to be hoped that the jury will be bachelors.

Pray take care of yourself, Clare, my dear, for in some of your letters I had a glimpse of a similar intrigue of yours. Have a care of an **eclat**. Your Irish juries lay it on heavy; and then besides you would be fixed for life with a **second-hand espouse** whereas I wish to see you lead a virgin heiress from Saville Row to Mount Shannon.

He closes this pleasant letter by remarking casually that the Turkish fleet has been sighted.

Now the story I heard in Limerick was as follows. Byron and Clare met on the road in some part of the Ottoman Empire. They drank a few bottles of wine together. Later they bribed a servant of the local Pasha or Bashaw and managed to gain entrance to that potentate's harem, and ambition, no doubt, of many a Harrovian. So far so good, but they were surprised by the Bashaw's retainers. Byron, despite his bad foot, got away. Perhaps he was the soberer of the two, or perhaps he was

less involved. At any rate, Clare was caught and given the invidious choice of losing his masculinity or his life. He chose the lesser of the two evils and in due course the title passed to his brother Dick.

So far as Byron is concerned, this story is obviously, completely fictitious. Apart from anything else, if Byron ever had made his way into a harem this would surely have replaced his Hellespont swim as a favourite topic of conversation. It is, of course, just possible that Clare became involved in some such deplorable incident with another companion, but on the face of it it seems highly unlikely. The story is one that was much in the air at this time and during the preceding century, with various central characters. Still, it might not be pure Limerick mythopoesis.

Be that as it may, he did marry an heiress, who was presumably a virgin, but he would have done better to ignore Byron's advice; his wife deserted him in 1829 after only a short spell of marriage. When this happened Lady Granville remarked, rather unkindly I think: 'How amiable of Lord Clare to be sorry, if he is! I should be so pleased never to see her again'. She probably never did. Lady Clare endowed a convent on the Isle of Wight where she died half a century later.

And that is almost all I know about him, except for what I could deduce from the catalogue of the library which Lady Louisa sold at Sotheby's in 1866. Among the books that then went under the hammer were a number of those items which the dealers describe as 'curious', all, I am glad to say, in a learned tongue. I imagine that these had been acquired by Byron's friend. More Harrovian day-dreams, perhaps ...

In any case I suppose it was he who first began making really serious inroads on the family finances. He travelled extensively and, like so many of his contemporaries, where he went he bought. Waggon loads of majolica and busts and bronzes and pictures and furniture and rare books and stuffs in due course arrived at Mount Shannon. Besides, one does not associate with people like Byron without spending considerable sums of money.

The old man told me the Bashaw story later. Meanwhile, at the hotel, his conversation was chiefly about Lady Louisa and her extravagance, a tale with which I was beginning to be slightly bored. 'Millions she spent', he said, with that typical exaggeration whenever money is mentioned: 'Millions! She spent more money in twenty years than Queen Victoria in her whole lifetime'. Which may well be true so far as personal expenditure went, for among all the nasty qualities that have truly or falsely been attributed to the great queen, extravagance was certainly not one. Though how this old man should think he knew about the queen's expenditure I cannot say. He did, however, know that the young Queen Victoria was supposed to have spent a few days at Mount Shannon during her first visit to Ireland, but that her advisers persuaded her not to do so in view of the execration in which the memory of the first Lord Clare was held. This was perhaps a relief to the old Harrovian.

The old man was determined that he should show me over Mount Shannon and though I felt that I had seen everything worth seeing in and about that ruin, we drove out there together. Passing Lisnagry he pointed out the blacksmith's forge and told me a story about the blacksmith's grandfather and the second Earl.

'That's one family that will always bless your name', he told me.

In 1830, wifeless once again, Lord Clare became Governor of Bombay, where he remained for four years. Those were the days when convicts were still transported and there were many at Bombay, working on the construction of a pier. One day the governor, going down to inspect the progress of the work, saw a face he recognized.

'Aren't you a Castleconnell man?' he asked.

'I'm from Lisnagry, your honour, and

many's the time I've shoed a horse for your honour'.

'How long have you been out here?'

'Five years, your honour, and please your honour, I'd like to go back home'.

'I dare say. So, in a way, would I. What were you transported for?'

'Murder, your honour. I'd had a drop of drink taken and as it happened I murdered a man'.

The governor knew the blacksmith's character and decided that five years in this hellish climate was quite enough punishment for an accident that might befall anyone. He arranged that the sentence be commuted and the man sent home. Such acts of kindness were no doubt easier in those days than they are today.

The story, needless to say, very soon got about among the other convicts and in due course one of them asked for and obtained an interview with the governor. It seems that he was an even closer neighbour of the governor's than the blacksmith, being actually a Castleconnell man. He had been in Bombay for seven years and he too would like to go home. The governor listened sympathetically.

'And why are you out here?'

'Oh nothing as bad as murder, your honour. Theft. What they call petty pilfering'.

'I'm sorry,' said the governor. 'If it had been the other I might have sent you home. Few men are likely to com-

he added by way of explanation. Now all that was left was one of those complicated, convoluted evergreens that they call monkey-puzzles. The rest, which must have been an interesting and perhaps valuable collection, had been chopped down indiscriminately for the timber they contained. We entered the farm track and the old man pointed out the cottage where he had been born. When we reached the ruined courtyard I asked for the farmer, but somewhat to my relief he was not there today. His wife said we might walk about the place.

Slowly we wandered, the old man stopping and clutching my sleeve when he remembered something that he wished to tell me. Often, he said, he would come here alone on a Sunday and spend the whole day by himself. He loved the place, he said, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. And yet there was one thing about the place he did not love, that he even despised as queer and barbaric.

After standing empty for some years the estate was bought, about fifty years ago, by a rich Irish-American gentleman called Nevin. I suppose he was disliked because he was a stranger. Certainly an offer which he made to repave part of the Limerick streets at his own expense - an offer that seems handsome enough on the face of it - was turned down, rather rudely I gather. The old man's dislike of



A 1950s picture of the Crescent.

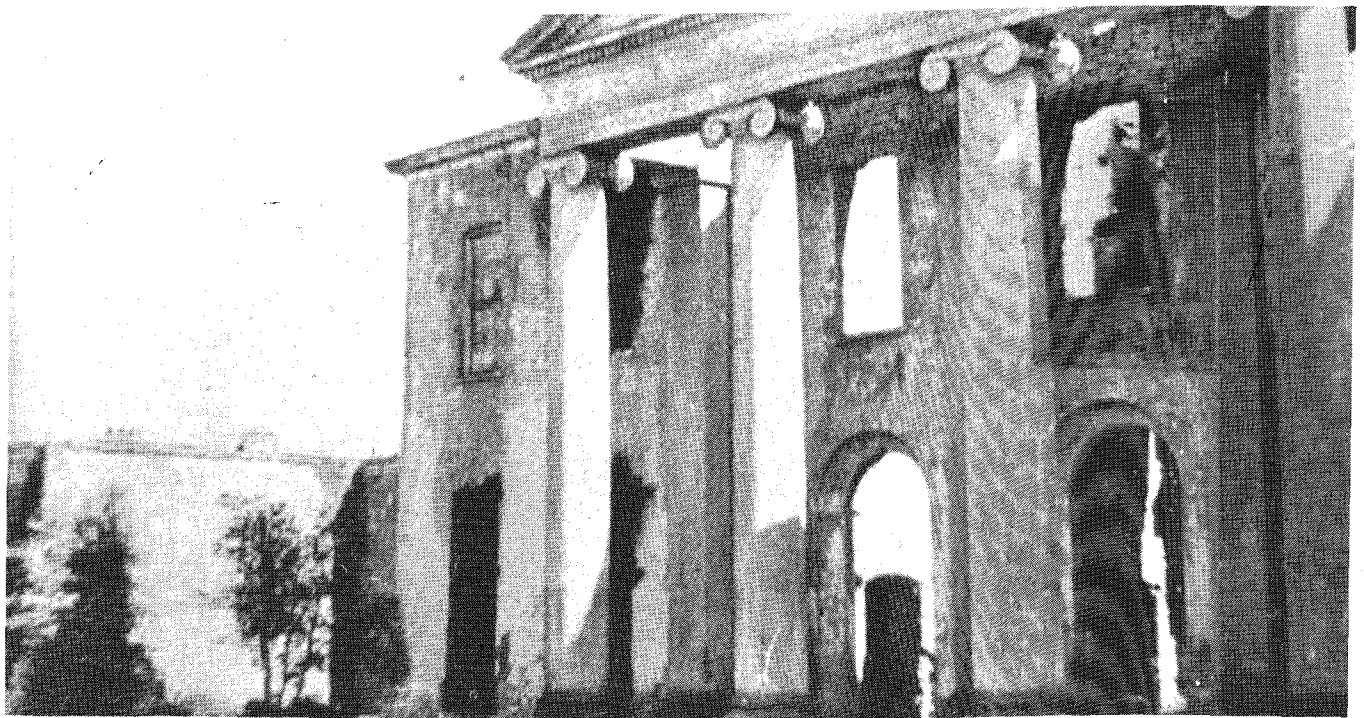
mit more than one murder in a lifetime. But theft is something else again. We don't want a lot of thieves running about in Castleconnell'.

An unfashionable point of view but a defensible one. At least the blacksmith never did commit another murder and his grandson still follows the same trade in the same smithy.

We drove on past the long, crumbling wall, and the old man grew increasingly excited.

'Thousands of trees from all over the world there used to be. Foreign trees,'

these long-vanished people was intense. They had not given the employment that there had been in Lady Louisa's time. (I imagine that the lady - 'she spent five times her own weight in gold' - had a job for any local man who wanted one, and for all his family as well. She employed forty gardeners here, according to the farmer, and according to the old man two hundred). But that was not the real reason for his contempt. He led me around to the back, to a big mound of earth in which, beneath the level of the ground, was



The ruin of Mount Shannon House.

what had been the ice-house. The gate was half off its hinges.

'Go in and have a look!' he urged me.

Inside were three coffins, three oak coffins on trestles. There were scars where brass plaques had been ripped off. On one of the coffins somebody had carved his initials and a recent date.

It was here, the old man explained as I emerged into the brilliant sunshine once again, that the Nevin family had seen fit to bury their dead, here in the ice-house. No wonder the peasantry regarded them as pagan barbarians. It does seem an odd way to dispose of one's relatives.

We walked on.

'That tree', he said, pointing to a pink double-may tree, now in gorgeous full blossom, 'was Lady Louisa's favourite tree. I remember once hearing her say to a gentleman: "That's my favourite tree".'

I knew why the big tree had not been cut down with the rest, and so of course did the old man, but those are matters one does not discuss. Was it really her favourite tree - it might well have been, it was a beauty - or was time long past becoming, as it must, magical?

'When the viscount was killed in Russia', said the old man, stopping and gripping my arm, 'his lordship said to my father: "The viscount fell today, Mount Shannon will fall tomorrow".'

Surely, I thought, the third Earl would have said no such thing to his gamekeeper on hearing of his son's death. The story must have had an older history than that. Yet it was a fine remark, and the old man obviously

thought so too, for he repeated the words: 'The viscount fell today, Mount Shannon will fall tomorrow'.

'He wanted him to leave the army when the great war started' - it took me a second or two before I realized he was still referring to the Crimean War - 'but the viscount said to his father: "If I leave the army now, father, they'll say I am a coward."'

There speaks the Victorian. Why should he have cared what 'they' said? But by eighteen-fifty, in Ireland, the aristocracy was no longer quite sure of itself. For fear of what 'they' might say the young man went off and was killed on one of the most spectacular pieces of idiocy that any modern war has produced. His sister, a pathological spendthrift, inherited and Mount Shannon was a ruin. Poor young man, he should have had more self-confidence.

We walked on through the big vegetable gardens, and I was shown the brick walls against which the peaches and the nectarines had grown. It was here, I was told, that Lady Louisa's Sicilian husband used to come and sit. For he was always cold in Ireland; even in mid-summer he would tremble and blow on his finger-nails. It is sad to think of him sitting among the peaches, dreaming perhaps of those so terribly encumbered estates far away in the burning south. I was shown the hot-water pipes that run a quarter mile underground to heat greenhouses which no longer existed. Perhaps in the winter time the poor, cold Italian would steal in there to warm his blue fingers.

We walked back to the front and I was shown, beneath the bumpy grass of the field, the rough outline of what

had been the carriage drive which had led up in a wide sweep to the front door and then turned away towards the coach houses.

'I remember as a boy, standing over here on the far side of the drive when Lady Louisa gave her last great ball. There were carriages driving up from all over the country, from all over Southern Ireland they came. And everyone of these windows was flaming with gas, flaming with the great gas bowls'.

I looked up at the windows. A jackdaw flew out of one and in through another. The sky behind was very blue.

'It was a gorgeous sight', he said, and we turned away to walk towards the car.

'Mr. Dillon, your great-grandfather, was a good gentleman to work for', he said. 'Whenever he met a man working on the estate he would say: "Give me your pipe!" and he'd fill it with his own tobacco from his own tobacco pouch'.

That is all I know of Mr. Dillon. Yet if I were to be remembered for as much eighty years hence I should not complain. His widow is at least well cared for after death. She is buried in St. Dominic's Priory on the Isle of Wight, that her aunt, Lady Clare, built. A sister of this order writes: 'We keep Lady Louisa's anniversary every year, and each evening after Angelus a Pater, Ave and Gloria are said for Lady Clare and Lady Louisa'.

The old man and I got into the car and drove away. The next day I left Limerick, probably for ever.