THE IRISH TIMES

Saturday, May 12,

1990

The Big House and the homestead

THE RUIN RECONCILED: A Memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959. By Joan de Vere. Lilliput Press. 110 pp. £11.95.

QUENCH THE LAMP. By Alice Taylor. Brandon. 173 pp. £4.95.

By Richard Roche

REMEMBRANCE of times past — though without any Proustian pretensions — forms the basis of both these books of reminiscence. There, however, the similarity ends.

One deals with life in a Big House, the other with humble existence on a small farm. In subject matter, and in style, the books are poles apart — as were the worlds inhabited by their respective authors. The single unifying theme of *"temps perdu"* is not sufficient to carry comparison any further.

The Big House of Joan de Vere's book was Curragh Chase, near Adare in Co Limerick, to which she, as an orphan, was brought by her adoptive parents in 1915. Here she lived a protected, cosseted existence for the next ten years before the family began a series of moves abroad as her father, a British Chief Justice, was posted to different stations. There were maids and governesses, dinners and tea-parties, hunts and drives in the family brougham.

Curragh Chase had been home to the de Veres since 1657 and remained so until its accidental destruction by fire in 1941 and its eventual sale to the Forestry Commission in 1957. As the last child to grow up there, Joan de Vere recalls its owners and inhabitants — Victorian writers and philanthropists among them — with loving accuracy.

There are clues to her background and attitudes in some of her references: to the shrinking world of the landed gentry, for example, when she remarks that the "old land-owners, who no longer commanded the respect they formerly had, faced increasing difficulties as smallholders sought to erode their property," or in her admission that her parents thought it was "infra dig" for a de Vere to be working as a doctor's assistant in London.

Yet for all the justification for it in her upbringing and environment, there is little regret in Joan de Vere's narrative. Her praise for what is lost, as Shakespeare wrote, makes the remembrance dear, but not sad. She clearly realised that the day of the landed gentry was waning. Her book is a valuable insight into those dying days and a fitting valedication to a family whose 300-year history is part of the tapestry of Ireland.

Alice Taylor

Neither does Alice Taylor "look mournfully into the past". Her sketches of a country childhood take us into a far different world from Joan de Vere's — a world of small farms and humble people, of the daily tasks like milking, shopping, going to school, and of the various "characters" who peopled that world in Co Cork. Hers is also the story of a changing time —"a time when rural Ireland quenched the oil lamp, removed the po from under the bed and threw the black pots and iron kettles under the hedge," as she herself writes.

As such it is a valuable record of change in an Irish farming community, though some may quibble at its roseate glow. Were there no thistles in those corn-sheaves at harvest-time? Did she never have to snag turnips on a cold, wet day in a windswept field? Or stand all day minding cattle at a rural fair? Surely there were some hateful moments amid all that rustic romance.

The author's obvious love of the countryside and her equally obvious delight in chronicling its moods, characters and events will probably please her many readers, as she did last year with her best-selling *To School Through The Fields.*

If there is to be a faint measure of comparison between these two books it lies in the fate of the Big House and the small farmstead. Mary Leland, in her foreword to *The Ruin Reconciled*, refers to "the frailty of these old great houses", a description that many might more readily apply to humble, thatched farmsteads. Yet it is Curragh Chase that today stands in ruins, while Alice Taylor's farmhouses, like so many of their kind throughout the country, remain sturdy and strong.

This seeming paradox could be regarded as an encapsulation of the story of Ireland — the symbols of the once-powerful Ascendancy falling into ruin while those of the once-landless survive and prosper. It is, of course, an accidental comparison and paradox but one which obtrudes in the reading of these two attractive books.

Enchanting memories of times past

IN RUIN RECONCILED, by Joan de Vere (Liliput Press) £11.95

THIS book is a memoir of a past age, of Anglo-Ireland between 1913 and 1959 written by a woman who was well known as a conservationist, long before that word became fashionable. Sadly, the author died on the 17 September 1989, but she had completed the manuscript and died in the knowledge of its impending publication.

In a foreword to the book Mary Leland describes Joan de Vere's optimism calling it a "kind of courage" and in what is a warm and perceptive overlook of the book itself, Mary sums up Joan de Vere's love and passion for Curragh Chase, her former home.

"The estate had been sold to the Forestry and Land Commission which quickly put an end to the lime avenue and engaged in what Joan describes here as wholesale tree-cutting. At least she lived to see this amazing policy reversed and to partake in the public enjoyment of the lands she had loved so dearly. She had never feared its ghosts, she had relished its legends and she has now written its chronicles. From now on those of us who walk beneath the trees of Curragh Chase, who stand at the headstones for Ranger the red setter or Hadji the Persian cat, and feel some curiosity about the people who made this place, can know that their history has been told and that, like the old estate itself, it is available to anyone who cares to seek it out."

Joan de Vere was an exceptionally lonely child - she describes herself as "solemn and thoughtful" and compensated for her lack of companionship by retreating into a world of make-belief and fantasy. She fell into the grouping of upper class children who were sometimes loved, often only tolerated but practically always kept out of sight and sound.

She describes the several changes of nursemaids in her earlier years and says she was a child thirsty for affection, of which there was not a great deal at that stage of her life.

A portrait of the author as a young woman in the thirties.

As the reader journeys through this memoir they quickly understand that while material benefits were fullsome, there was a total lack of companionship, of cuddling and it was this that directed Joan's energy into her lifelong compassion for animals and the bounty of nature because they were her friends.

She speaks of her beloved Curragh Chase, near Adare in County Limerick and contrary to popular opinion tells of good landlords, her forebears who were good and caring landlords who identified with those amongst whom they lived. She describes her relationship with her father "one of fondness rather than warmth" and the long period spent with Granny while her parents were on postings abroad.

She tells how one night from her upstairs bedroom she heard a commotion going on outside and looking out of the window saw a crowd gathered in altercation. "Some had with them tin cans of paraffin oil and were pointing at the house" she writes "I heard afterwards that the IRA had come to burn it down as they had done to so many other great houses, but the local people stopped them saying that the de Veres had always been good landlords. The crowd dispersed and the life of the farm and estate went on as usual."

She describes with gentle humour her life in Cyprus, the Seychelles and Kenya, of her introduction to London society in the mid-thirties and then Grenada where her father was Chief Justice and where romance entered her life in the form of a "bright young Welshman who was Director of Education on the island and also headmaster of the boys' secondary school."

In this revealing memoir Joan de Vere - better known to her readers as Joan Wynne Jones - introduces her readers to a world long since past - of below-stairs staff, massive banquets, far away tropical islands with a strict class regime and her substitute friends, - a pet monkey and a pair of armadillos to name just two!

It is a fascinating account of her earlier life which is intertwined with memories of Curragh Chase. One reaches the final chapter with a sense of sadness that a child should experience such isolation and relief that those earlier experiences did not rob the author of her love of life, her enthusiasm and perhaps, most important of all, her deep compassion for all who were lucky enough to cross her path.

MAUREEN FOX

Sorro of the settlers

Gillian Somerville-Lange

In Ruin Reconciled — A Memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959, by Joan de Vere, Lilliput, IR£11.95.

CURRAGH CHASE, a late Georgian house in Adare, Co. Limerick, was the home of the de Veres. Tennyson stayed there and ill rewarded hospitality by borrowing their name for his splendidly awful Lady Clara Vere de Vere.

Members of the family include the remarkable Stephen de Vere, who booked a steerage passage to Quebec in 1847 to discover what it was like to travel in a coffin ship; the Captain clapped him in irons. Another de Vere was Aubrey, the disciple of Wordsworth, and the title of one of his glum poems, a sadly apposite description of the current state of the Anglo Irish, provides the title for this memoir.

Joan Wynne-Jones, nee de Vere, was adopted by the de Veres and spent much of a lonely childhood at Curragh Chase. Her father and her husband were in the British colonial service, so that her memories include glimpses of the Seychelles and the Gold Coast and other parts of far-flung empire.

But the chief value of this charming book, completed just before the author died, lies in the recollection of the gaunt, granite mansion, looking east to the Galtees, the wonderful demesne, the bitter cold, the chilblains and chapped hands rubbed with onions, the maids, the English housekeeper, and the lack of electricity so that a solitary candle flame kept back the hordes of knocking, rattling ghosts who left their skeletons about.

The Troubles are recalled with a child's sharp eye. "Once . . . an open lorry came bumping down the ill-kept drive. It was full of noisy, shabby men who amused themselves by tossing hand-grenades up into the air and catching them again in what they hoped was an intimidating manner".

Similar men arrived with tins of fuel to burn the place: they were shooed off by a crowd of local people shouting that the de Veres were good landlords. But 20 years later on a December night in 1941 a candle or a cigarette end or a ghost ensured that Curragh Chase suffered the usual fate. Afterwards, the Forestry Commission cut down all the fine trees.

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

Recent books reviewed by BILL MAXWELL

In Ruin Reconciled, a memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959 by Joan de Vere
Lilliput Press £11.95

Skelligside by Michael Kirby
Lilliput Press £16.95

The Way That I Followed
by Frank Mitchell
Country House £14.95

Two recent memoirs convey the spirit of Ireland in a way that few historians could hope to capture. The first, *In Ruin Reconciled*, is about one of the Great Houses, Curragh Chase, owned by the De Vere family from 1657 until its destruction by fire in the 1940s and subsequent sale to the Forestry Commission. The author of this book, Joan de Vere, was not a member of the family; she was adopted by them and grew up in Curragh Chase in what she describes as a solitary childhood among her elders and betters in the 1920s. The only relief from this solitary existence was the occasional visit to her grandmother in Enniskerry and a brief schooling at Alexandra College in Dublin. Her father was a Chief Justice in the British colonies and she was taken on tours with him visiting the Seychelles, Cyprus, Kenya, Grenada and Africa's Gold Coast. After a spell studying domestic science in London she married and returned to Ireland. These memoirs are by way of wistful testimony to all who might look on the ruins of the old mansion and wonder what life was like within its walls.

Much of her childhood, she says, was spent in the great basement kitchen where she was looked after by Mrs. Egglestone, or Eggy as she called her. She had a daughter of the same age and the two children played with their toys or gave a hand with the wooden churn until the slap, slap of the forming butter could be heard. In the main part of the building as one wandered through the vast hall, large saloon or booklined library on a winter's evening, shadows leapt at one from every corner and the solitary flame of a candle did little to hasten their retreat. Ghosts were part of the folklore of the house. At night, recalls Joan, she would be kept awake by peremptory knocking at her door which ceased only when she sat up in bed saying "come in". The place was full of rooms that were only used from time to time when relatives came from England, mostly tall willowly women with imperial accents. One such room was where old Sir Stephen de Vere had died. Here it was where he had regularly slept and others creeping up late to bed would hear him groaning and talking in his sleep as he dreamt that someone was coming to kill him. From this room he had arisen one night and, still asleep and in his nightshirt, saddled his horse and ridden several miles to the home of his cousin, Lord Monteagle at Mount Trenchard, near Foynes.

The De Veres were good landlords and in those days the Big House fulfilled many of the social duties now done by the State. As a young girl Joan spent much of her time doing errands of mercy to the local cottages. She recalls her horror when the gardener swallowed a whole bottle of medicine at once saying that "this will do me good". He was none the worse for it.

Michael Kirby is in the tradition of Peg Sayers and Tomas Ó Suilleabháin in recording the traditional folk life of the Kerry Gaeltacht. His book, *Skelligside* chronicles a life style that is for the most part vanished. He was born in 1906 into what was then a completely Irish-speaking area of Ballinskelligs on the southern shore of the beautiful Iveragh peninsula. As a schoolboy he was required to learn English but it was not without an effort, as he puts it. He writes with a directness that comes from the heart, presenting the story of a people who were proud, self sufficient and who retained their own customs against all outside influences. He recalls the pride in craftsmanship, be it the baker, the basket maker, tailor or blacksmith: each had his own social importance within the community. Kirby gathers this one small area into his net and produces not only a valuable social document but a living testament to how things were.

Despite borrowing from the title of Lloyd Praeger's famous book *The Way That I Went*, Frank Mitchell's *The Way That I Followed* is not a substitute or updated version. It should be said that he makes no claim to that, but prospective readers might assume it was. Mitchell's book is a mixture of biography and scientific commentary which should serve to help students and the general reader interested in Irish geology and natural studies. It is not a systematic treatment, indeed much of it is a highly personalised view, and yet reading it helps us understand the achievements that have been made, notably in the study of Irish boglands, over the past fifty years. The book is also well illustrated with suitable maps. It is also a useful book for the traveller, easily tucked into a satchel for ready reference.

FLYING START

Dublin Airport: The History
by Hugh Oram
Aer Rianta £25

When passenger airlines started soon after World War One, the provision of airports was a low priority for the young enterprises and the cities they served. Most operators would hardly have known what the word meant – it was often rendered 'air port'.

What was needed was a large field, preferably near a prominent feature on a railway line or a river, so that the hard pressed pilots, whose most important navigation aid was a good pair of eyes, could find it. Also needed was a conical orange fabric sleeve atop a pole, the windsock, still in evidence. The presence of the windsock in a particular field indicated that that was the one at which the plane was actually expected – but any big field would do, and often did.

The Airport Manager (the Agent in the U.S.) would have arrived 10 minutes before flight time, the departing passengers possibly sharing the back seats of his station wagon with a few bags of mail, a Verey Pistol (for go/no go signals), an extra fire extinguisher or two and a small pump for transferring fuel from 40 gallon drums to the plane. The fuel drums might also be aboard the wagon – or they might be in the ditch at the field.

The wagon was the passenger terminal, operations office and stores. Office work was done on the Manager's knee. The weather forecast form and the manifest would have already been prepared for handing over to the pilot (in goggles and leather helmet) who would be on his way in half-an-hour. Thus the twenties.

In the 1930s, increasing passenger numbers and vastly expanded expectations for air transport meant that every