

THE WHITES, THE McNEILLS AND CUSHENDUN STRAND

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The Early McNeills and Whites

In the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society's book on buildings in the Glens of Antrim, a house in Cushendun is described as "The Beach Cottage: In itself of no interest, but important to the environment since it lends human scale to the long sweep of the beach". This brief description overlooks the fact that the Strand House, as it is known locally had in fact an interesting and disputed history.

The Strand House is built on the area known as the Warren, which is that area along the sea between the river at Cushendun and the Milltown Burn, and in turn is part of what was known as the Ballyteerim estate. This estate had come into the possession of the White family of Whitehall, near Broughshane, in the year 1733, when the Rev. James White purchased the remainder of a 99 year lease from his brother-in-law, John McCollum, for the sum of £150. In the same year White made a fee farm grant of the lands of Cushendun to Lachlan McNeill of Ballyucan. It is from this year therefore, that we can date the connection of both of these families with this area. Interestingly enough, the grant to the McNeills from the Whites of the Cushendun townland did not include the Warren, and therein lay the seeds of many disputes and differences.

The grant from the Whites to the McNeills was renewed on different occasions. By one dated 1st March 1802 the Whites were entitled to take, if they wished into their possession, the Warren, provided that they enclosed it with a wall. They also reserved the right to take wrack and to make a road to the shore for this purpose. At this time the White estate was in the possession of John White, known in the Glens as the "Ould Captain." An account in the Public Record Office shows that in 1812 a sum of £2.7.3 was spent providing spirits for men making the Warren Wall. The fact that no wages for the work seem to have been paid out in this account, probably means that the men receiving a rebatement in their rent for their work. In the same account a sum of £4.00 is noted as having been received for grazing on the Warren.

Because the Whites were not resident landlords, residing mostly at Whitehall their affairs were managed by a succession of agents. For many years these agents were different members of the McNeill family, and in the early years of the last century the agent was Alexander McNeill of Collier's Hall, Ballycastle. Alexander McNeill had a fine farm at Collier's Hall, but he also combined a land agency business with the magistracy of the County and was a member of the Grand Jury. One of his daughters, Jane, married Alexander Millar of Dungannon, and it was Millar who carried on the land agency business after his father-in-law's death in 1839. Rose Millar, daughter of Alexander and Jane, in turn married her first cousin, another McNeill, Edmund from Cushendun, who continuing the pattern, also succeeded his father-in-law as a land agent, though not immediately as agent for the Whites.

"Long Eddy"

The memory of Edmund McNeill, and his term as a land agent is still well remembered in the Glens, and he was known locally as "Long Eddy", because of his great height. He stood 6'7½". As a young man Edmund had emigrated to Australia,

where he ran a sheep ranch. After ten years in Australia he returned to Ireland for a holiday, intending to return, but in his absence his partner in the ranch sold out and disappeared. With nothing to return to in Australia, Edmund decided to stay at home and get married.

Despite all the criticisms of him which remain, there is no doubt that Edmund made a great success of his land agency business. He managed many estates in County Antrim and elsewhere, and was prudent and conscientious in his work, so much so, that the owners left the most of the dealings with the tenants in his hands and rarely interfered. At first he carried on the business from Ballycastle, but finding that this was too far from most of his work he had a fine new house built at Craigs near Cullybackey in the early 1860's. Before this, however, and not long after he succeeded his father-in-law, Edmund became involved in a dispute with John White.

In 1854 John White, as he was entitled to do under the lease of 1802, had made a road to the shore at Cushendun, for the purpose of drawing wrack. When the road was completed White also put up a gate, but Edmund McNeill not wanting a gate in this place knocked it down and was promptly taken to court by John White. The dispute was complicated by the fact that McNeill had also been removing the stones from the wall enclosing the Warren, and using them to build houses on his own property. The initial round was lost by White, but when eventually settled the Whites were confirmed in possession of the Warren. By a lease dated 1858 James Robert White, who had succeeded to the property on the death of his brother Captain John in 1857, turned the lease for lives renewable of the McNeill Cushendun property dated 1802, into a fee farm grant subject to the restrictions of the old lease and noting that John White had availed himself of his power under the old lease to take the Rabbit Warren into occupation. It was noted that McNeill did not claim it and that James R. White did. In the meantime the Strand House had been built.

In 1848 the southern portion of Culfeightrin Catholic parish together with the Granges of Layde and Innispollen were formed into the new parish of Cushendun. There was no residence for the priest and Captain White had the house on the Warren built as a parochial house. Local tradition says that the builders were Dan and John McKillop of Brablough. As well as having the house, the priest had also the Warren from the river at Cushendun to the Milltown Burn including the old Hurling Field or as it is known Liganarigid, and part of the field along the lane at Rockport, in the townland of Ballycleagh.

Fr. McCartan

Fr. Garland, the second parish priest of Cushendun, seems to have been the first to occupy the Strand House and the Warren. In Griffith's valuation of 1859, he is listed as having House, Offices and Land of 9 acres, 2 roods and 35 perches. Fr. Garland was succeeded by Fr. Phelan in 1863 and by 1871 another new Parish Priest had been appointed in the person of Fr. Eugene McCartan.

Shortly after taking up duties in Cushendun, Fr. McCartan carried out a number of improvements to the Strand House. He built the wall around the house and yard, put a loft on the coach house, and constructed a shed "for the holding of a car". About the same time a new agent came on the scene, none other than "Long Eddy", who succeeded Mr. Moore of Moyarget as agent for the Whites. This must have seemed a strange choice in view of the Court Proceedings of a few years previously.

Fr. McCartan and Edmund McNeill were never to see eye to eye, Fr. McCartan being a champion of the tenants while McNeill acted like most agents of the time in being more unyielding and despotic than the landlords whom they served. Fr. McCartan resorted to the practice of appealing directly to the landlords, who were now in the Ballyteerim estate, Sir George White, the famous soldier, and in the Innispollen Estate, his brother, another John White. Fr. McCartan seemed to make some progress by this method. In the year 1879 the potato harvest failed, and this was followed by three years of extremely bad weather. Farmers in the Glens as in other parts of the country were suffering a time of hardship. Fr. McCartan had asked John White for a relief of rent for the tenants on his Innispollen Estate, and this was generously granted. Fr. McCartan had a letter published in the Belfast Newsletter referring to the "generosity of an Antrim Landlord". In the letter Fr. McCartan mentioned that when John White heard of the widespread distress in the Glens he returned to his tenants one third of their rents, all of which had been paid some months previously to his agent Mr. Edmund McNeill of Craigdunn, and in addition had supplied all his tenants with as much seed oats and potatoes as they needed.

In the meantime Edmund McNeill was writing to Sir George White warning him "to be careful what he says or writes to Priest McCartan". On the other hand when the possibility seemed to be arising of the tenants taking their case to the Land Court, as they were entitled to do under the new Land Act, Sir George wrote to his brother John, "I am inclined to hold my hand now. It is McNeill's infernal obstinacy that has prevented my doing it before it could appear as a buy-off. I don't know whether to believe that they are all in Court. Pleasant man to represent me!!!"

Fr. McCartan was aided in his fight for the reduction of the rents by the Presbyterian Minister in Cushendun, the Rev. Charles Gillis. The latter was a tenant on John White's estate at Clady, although he actually resided at Mullarts, where his church was situated. In January 1882 Rev. Gillis complained to Edmund McNeill that all the tenants on that estate except himself had received a reduction in their rent. Fr. McCartan reported in a letter to Sir George White what followed, "Mr. McNeill ordered Mr. Gillis to leave the office which Mr. Gillis said he declined to do till he had finished his business. Mr. McNeill after some insulting words from Mr. Gillis, as I am told, for I was not present, rushed at Mr. Gillis, caught him with both hands by the collar of the coat and thrust him towards the door and high wooden stairs leading down from it into the yard. Mr. Gillis in turn seized him by the throat and breast and pushed him as far back into the room again. Clutched thus with one another they struggled from some time near the head of the dangerous staircase, and God knows what might have happened, had not two Cushleake men, Robert and John McKay pulled them from each other."

Fr. McCartan in the matter of his own holding, the Strand House, The Warren and part of the field in Ballycleagh, felt that he was not getting satisfactory terms when he looked for a reduction. There was a long series of correspondence between himself and Sir George as the priest still preferred to bypass the agent. In a letter dated 8 January 1883 Sir George offered Fr. McCartan 25% reduction in the rent of his holding in Ballycleagh and 20% in Cushendun because he was anxious "to continue the friendly relations which existed between us, and which have been productive of good to so many". Three days later Fr. McCartan replied that he still considered the rent too high. As well Fr. McCartan asked for a lease since he thought that "the Parish

Priest on your estate should not be the only person that is to be in a precarious tenure". Continuing Fr. McCartan wrote, "I have no doubt that as long as you lived, his tenure would be sure enough, but if anything happened and the life of a military man, especially of one so daring as you is always more uncertain than of most others, I would not give much for the goodwill of the tenure of my holding with your present agent."

In reply Sir George said that he preferred not to give a lease because he wanted to retain the power of having the accommodation for the priest of the Parish. To be fair to Edmund McNeill, it is only right to state that Sir George White did make the point to Fr. McCartan that it was not easy for Edmund McNeill to give reductions or rebatements as after all he was only the agent and was unsure what the views of his employer would be.

In the midst of these negotiations Fr. McCartan was transferred to Antrim as Parish Priest, much to the undisguised relief of Edmund McNeill. On the 7th August 1883 he wrote to Sir George "Priest McCartan . . . has been removed to Antrim". He also complained that Fr. McCartan had sold his Holding to his successor, Fr. O'Malley, which McNeill believed "as the far as the house is concerned he has no right to do". It is obvious that at this stage McNeill was worried that he would lose control of all this property if the Parish Priests were to continue to hand it over from one to another, and by allowing such a transfer McNeill believed it would be an admission that the holding came under the Act, which he contended it did not. He still had a great desire to get hold of the Warren himself for he recognized that it could become very valuable. At this stage therefore, he decided to write to the bishop of the Diocese, Dr. Dorrian.

In his first letter McNeill offered a lease of the Strand House itself saying that it "was built as a residence for the Parish," and at the same time wrote to Sir George saying that "only a small portion of land around the house should be included in a lease, without at least the right of retaking it, if at some day the Warren may be valuable for building bathing villas". He said that he had written to Dr. Dorrian offering him a lease and a half acre of land for sixty years and an arrangement to be agreed on for the purchase at any time, during the lease and explaining that Sir George does not wish to part entirely with the rest of the land, but that the Parish Priest can hold it until required.

Dr. Dorrian accepted the offer, but asked for one acre of land. McNeill advised Sir George to accept this for he "could arrange the boundaries so as not to interfere much with future building land". This settlement lasted during the time of the new Parish Priest Fr. O'Malley.

Captain Dan

In 1879 the McNeill property in Cushendun had itself changed hands with the death at the age of 93 of Edmund's father, Edmund Alexander. Although the latter had spent much of his life abroad, mainly in Jersey, he had returned to live at Cushendun House ten years previously when his wife died. His property passed to his eldest son, Dan, a former captain in the Indian army. Like his brother Captain Dan was not popular with the people of the Glens. He served as a magistrate and dissatisfaction with his conduct even led to a question being asked in the House of

Commons in June 1882. The Chief Secretary to Ireland was asked "whether his attention had been called to the fact that the Rev. William Thompson, rector of the parish of Layde, Co. Antrim, the Rev. Eugene McCartan P.P. the Rev. P. Starkey P.P. the Dr. Robinson, the Rev. Charles Gillis, Presbyterian Minister and over 20 of the most respectable merchants and farmers in the town and neighbourhood of Cushendall, Co. Antrim lately presented a petition to the Lord Chancellor of Ireland requesting an investigation into the magisterial conduct of Captain Daniel McNeill J.P. against whom a strong feeling of dissatisfaction exists in the locality: that the Lord Chancellor declined to grant an investigation on the grounds that the matter complained of could be dealt with in a court of law; whether in the present condition of the county it is intended to permit this gentleman to retain the commission of the peace". In the event the Captain remained on the Bench.

After Fr. O'Malley, the next Parish Priest was the Rev. Bernard McCann, a native of Toomebridge. Fr. McCann had been curate in Armoy where his brother John had been the Parish Priest at the same time. Fr. John died in America in 1889 where he had gone to collect money to defray the Parish debts and although the parish was offered to Fr. Bernard he refused to accept it. He continued to serve in Armoy as a curate until transferred to Cushendun in 1893.

This eccentric streak in Fr. McCann's character was soon to show itself in Cushendun. For the first time 1894 the £15 rent due on the Strand House was not paid. Although it was paid off the following year, in 1896 it was again in arrears, and Edmund McNeill took the chance for which he had been waiting and evicted Fr. McCann. The Warren was given to Captain Dan on a yearly tenancy.

Edmund and Captain Dan having at last got the Warren into their possession were anxious to make a more permanent arrangement. In September 1899 Edmund wrote to Sir George suggesting "in view of the previous dispute about the boundaries, his brother should take a lease for 99 years of the whole Warren including the Boathouse. The Boathouse was situated near the river in front of what is now the Maud Cottages. This did not elicit any reply so in turn Captain Dan wrote to Sir George. "As perhaps you know I have been for a few years the occupying tenant of your "warren" here, but this year I gave it up as I found I could not in any way utilize it not even for grazing of cows only it is so entirely open to all and every trespasser. To fence it, such a long narrow strip would be far too costly; I did fence about one third of it and that piece I would like to retain, but my brother objects to the separation. In talking it over with him he asked me if you were inclined to give it up adding "think it over and if it would suit you write to White about it yourself as I would not be negotiator between him and you". What do you think about it? It might suit us both very well. I would like such an arrangement very well, but of course the decision rests with you and I would be glad to know your mind about it, as to the lease of the strip in perpetuity or as to separating the third I have fenced and letting it apart from the rest".

Sir George was not going to be caught on this new approach. One week later he replied, "I cannot enter into negotiations as I would not know what I was doing from my ignorance of the Warren".

Captain Dan having given up his yearly tenancy, the Strand House and Warren were let to the Protestant Rector in Cushendun, the Rev. Arthur Brennan. The rent was £14 and this included the Warren as far the Coastguard Station. Rev. Brennan was

not satisfied with the bargain he was getting, so like Fr. McCartan before him he wrote directly to Sir George complaining that "Captain Dan's men were removing scraws from the front of the Strand House and that the Warren was covered with a thick thicket of whins which will cost £5 or £6 to eradicate. Mr. McNeill is insisting that I have to put everything in repair though it is nearly 3 years since the R.C. priest left and no fire has been lit, the ceiling is tumbling down, slates off and in fact the house was left to take care of itself".

Captain Dan died in 1902 and his property passed to his only daughter, Ada. Miss Ada took little interest in the management of the property, and a member of the Dobbs' family, St. Clair Dobbs, acted as her agent. Miss Ada, unlike the other members of the McNeill family, was a strong supporter of the Gaelic League, the Irish Language and was a member of the first Feis Committee. She was also a close friend of Roger Casement and he used to stay with her during his visits to the Glens.

Miss Ada

Apparently the situation regarding the Strand House and Warren now was that, Miss Ada held the property on lease from Sir George, but that she in turn had sub-let it to the Rev. Brennan. This complicated situation certainly confused the latter when he was summoned by Miss Ada in 1906 for non-payment of his rent. An indignant Mr. Brennan wrote to Sir George saying that he had always paid his rent regularly and on time to Edmund McNeill and that he was never notified of the change of ownership to Miss Ada and he had no way of knowing who was his real Landlord. He now intended to leave the Strand House as he purchased another small freehold at Agola. "I was dragged into court without rhyme or reason" he wrote and his letter concluded with a request that Sir George let him know who was the landlord when he took possession in 1901, and whether there was a change subsequently. Sir George replied that he did not know the details of the transaction. Mr. Brennan left the Strand House and did move to Agola, where he contented himself with his favourite pastime of shooting. (Local people were not impressed with his skill as a marksman, and they used to say that one jack snipe and an acre of meadow did him the whole season.) After his departure from the Strand House, the house and a small garden were let to Johnny Hamilton, a lighthouse keeper, and this family occupied it for the next sixty years, and were in fact the last tenants.

Lord Cushendun

With the passing of the Land Act in 1903, the whole relationship between landlord and tenant was completely altered. This act known as the Land Purchase Act, was by far the most thorough attempt to solve the Land problem. Under it the Government put up a sum of money to enable all tenant farmers to purchase their farms. In six years a quarter of a million tenants took up the scheme. As in all other parts of the country the tenants on the White estates became involved in negotiations. Meetings were held in different parts of the Glens, but the Whites found that one of the biggest stumbling blocks to successful negotiations was as John Young of Galgorm put in a letter to Sir George in 1907. "Edmund's unpopularity in the Glens". He was now eighty six years old, so it was no surprise when in the following year he was replaced by Travers King, a Ballymena solicitor. Edmund's only son, Ronald, who in later life became Lord Cushendun, preferred to concentrate on the law, journalism and political affairs. Nevertheless he continued the family obsession with getting

complete ownership of the Warren into his own hands. In a letter to Sir George in January 1909, Ronald McNeill wrote, "I would be glad to know whether you would be inclined to consider a proposal from me to purchase from you the Head Rent which my cousin, Ada pays for her small property at Cushendun together with the strip of Warren between the County road and the foreshore. If you come to sell these two things and we could agree on a price, it would have the advantage of being a cash transaction without all the tiresome delays and formalities of sale under the Purchase Act".

Sir George's thoughts on this new proposal are shown in a letter to his brother, John, "the only doubt in my mind as to further correspondence with Ronald is to whether, if I agree to sell to him outright the plots he wants to buy, I might in any way prejudicially affect any neighbouring lands of mine, viz. by separation or isolation, or deprive other tenants of the right of entry or other privilege that my ownership secured to them". A letter to Ronald McNeill then followed in which Sir George said that "I know so little about my Cushendun property that I had to look up old deeds and post myself as far as I could before giving a reply. When your father managed for me, I left everything in his hands and am correspondingly ignorant when forced to act for myself". He advised McNeill to write to Travers King about the matter, but before anything had been decided, Sir George died, in 1912.

Jack White

This part of the White estate was left in trust for Sir George's two daughters and one son, Captain James Robert, better known as Jack. Of all the White family Jack was the most colourful. An eccentric character, he was aptly named by himself in his autobiography as "The Misfit". After an eventful period of Public School and a short military career during which he won the D.S.O., the one achievement he had which delighted his father, Jack arrived in the Glens about 1912. He threw himself with vigour into the struggle for Home Rule, organising and speaking at meetings and training the local volunteers. He moved to Dublin where he trained the Irish Citizen Army and succeeding in making it an effective fighting force. His reckless and varied career was probably the reason why his father did not leave all the estate to him. During his time in the Glens he resided in a house belonging to Ronald McNeill, at Rockport, Cushendun, with his wife Mercedes Mosley.

Acting on the advice he had been given by the late Sir George, Ronald McNeill wrote to Travers King in 1913 offering £250 for the Warren and also offering to buy Craigagh Wood, formerly the property of Sir George's brother, the late John White. King suggested if £500 was got for the Warren and £250 for the Wood, they should be sold. An inventory of the Wood was taken at this time by Andrew McClintock, the estate's gamekeeper, and it showed that the Wood contained 71 acres and the principal trees were Scotch fir 152, Oak 64, Spruce 151 and Ash 75. The family decided not to sell the Wood, and in fact their descendants hold it to the present day.

In 1919 Jack White expressed an interest in getting the Warren. He wanted tenant right, that is he wanted to be in such a position that he could not be put out of possession and that he could sell his interest if he so desired. The family agreed to this latest proposal and in May 1920 it was sold to him by private treaty for £500, although it is doubtful if any money actually changed hands.

With Jack now in possession of the Warren, Ronald McNeill renewed his attempts to get hold of it. He soon found that Jack was more unstable and consequently easier to deal with than his father had been. The story goes that one night Jack was invited to a dinner party in Glenmona, Ronald McNeill's residence in Cushendun and agreed before the night was over, to exchange the Warren for ownership of the house which he occupied at Rockport.

So, after trying for many years, the McNeills finally got possession of the Warren. No bathing villas were ever built after all, and with the present planning controls, it is certain that they never will. Ronald McNeill became Lord Cushendun in 1927. After his death in 1934 his property passed to his daughter, Esther Rose, who had married for the second time Major Geoffrey Moss. It was Mrs. Moss who sold the Warren along with the village of Cushendun and the lands around it, to the National Trust in 1954.*

* Most of the information contained in this article, comes from the White Papers P.R.O.N.I. D2861. I am most grateful to Dr. Brian Trainor for making them available to me.

PLACES OF INTEREST

Willie Stewart

On examination of a map by John Bleau 1654, showing castles and other structures of importance in Ulster of that period, I find three buildings located in the Carnlough area, Ourndirgh, Drmemar, Anedone, of particular interest. Two of them appear to be in the Carnlough Bay and the third farther round the coast. Two other marked buildings that we can still account for are Glenarm Castle and Red Bay Castle, these two buildings we know held recognised importance at that date. Of the other three we can not be sure of their location, structural importance or if they had been fortified as little trace of them remaining. Some early surveyors made reference in their writings to possible castles and important buildings in the area. One of these writers, H.C. Lawlor, mentions a castle at the Bay Farm and states "One of the outhouses beside a farm house at Bay occupies the site of a castle built by John Donaldson about the year 1633. It was probably a structure somewhat similar to that of the Shaws at Ballygally, though not quite so large. It cost £500 to build, a considerable sum in those days." The old rectory at Dromourne could be another possible site because of remains found in the grounds which gave rise to local belief in a building of some importance. It is also an ideal location. In the Ordnance Survey of 1830 two other possible sites arise. It states "In the townland of Highlandtown situated on the brow of the hill can be traced the remains of a square building at present called Castle Hill, it is said to have been a fortress, its date has not been ascertained. the remains of a firelock was found in the last twenty years but nearly decomposed." The second site it refers to is Drumnasole "Drumnasole school is said to have been erected on the site of a fortification of some note called Castle Hill." These are just some of the interesting buildings marked on the map.