

The O' Duinns Of Ui Riagain:

From Gaelic Chieftain at Tinnahinch To Feudal Landlord at Brittas

A brief overview of the family from their days as gaelic chieftains until the death of the last member of the family in 1958



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INTRODUCTION

The module HY225 is called Irish cultural history A. As part of that module it is required that the student do a study of a landed family and take an aspect of the house or family to study. I have chosen Brittas Castle in Clonaslee Co Laois where I live and where my father was born and raised, even though I was brought up in Co Offaly. I had hoped to study an aspect the house or family; however I could find frustratingly little primary sources relating to the family to help me in my study. Even a trip to the National Library proved fruitless. We were given ample time to prepare this project. I decided to put it to one side until I had all my other essays and assignments completed so that I could devote all my effort to it. However when I was free to pursue it the heavy snow and ice arrived, restricting my travel for three weeks. Then Christmas came, so it was after the holidays before I got a chance to pursue this in earnest. On New Year's Eve I went to library headquarters at County hall in Portlaoise to see what I could find regarding primary sources – newspaper articles on microfiche, etc, but I was not allowed access because of “skeletal staff”, and someone would ring me on Tuesday (Monday was a Bank Holiday). The phone call duly came informing me that it would be next week before I would be able to make an appointment to go there. What now? I had spoken to local people who had given me very good resource material and stories about the family, so I have decided to do an overall view of the family from Donal O'Duinn building Roskeen Castle in 1594 to the death of Kathleen Plunkett Dunne, last member of the family in 1958. I will also endeavour, as far as I can, to fit the members of the family into the political and historical landscape of their day.

I am very grateful especially to Mister Joe Young, local historian (also to Babs for the tea and hospitality!), to Mr Paddy Bates retired National School principal (driving force behind “Meadow by the Way, a collection of local historical facts by the boys in the local National School in 1986), to Mr Matt Barrett in the local heritage centre, and to Mr John Flynn, Mrs Kathleen McCann and Mr P.V. Dunne, all of whom provided written material or oral evidence, or both. All have been promised a copy of this project.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE REGION

Early Irish society was tribal and hierarchical in structure. There were no towns and the basic unit of society was a tuath, a kind of semi-autonomous petty kingdom or clan, each with an estimated population of c300 people. Each tuath had a king, a lord, a cleric and a poet, the *aos dana* (gentry) of the tuath. Some stronger kings were overlords of weaker kings, meaning that weaker tuaths owed loyalty and paid tribute to stronger tuaths. The lands that became the estate of the O'Duinn clan were located in the territory of Ui Riagain. Local lore tells us that the territory was named after a Celtic warrior called Riagain. It is claimed that Cathair Mor, king of Ireland in the second century AD was of the same ancestry as Riagain, and from here comes the claim by the O'Duinns that they were related to Cathair Mor, king of Ireland. They also claimed relationship to Saint Brigid and the first church in Ui Riagain, in Rosenallis, was dedicated to her. The territory of Ui Riagain stretched westwards from the Silver River near Cadamstown, eastwards to what is now the town of Mountmellick and from the Slieve Bloom Mountains to Kilcavan and towards Daingean in the north. The clan of Ui Riagain was subject to the overlordship of the larger Ui Failghe tuath of the O'Connors and was considered part of County Offaly up until the plantation of Laois and Offaly in the sixteenth century.¹

The Norman invasions from 1169 had upset the old order and the Gaelic clans attacked the invaders so that they had to live in fortified castles for their own safety. As the centuries progressed, however, things settled down and the newcomers were assimilated into society. Following the Plantations the climate was very volatile but things eventually settled down again. Towards the end of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century semi-fortified houses/castles were built. The main residence of the Dunne family was the castle at Tinnahinch (Tigg-na-hInse - "house of the island"), built in 1475 by chieftain Teigh Lynagh O'Duinn, a typically semi-fortified feudal mansion. In an account of the law suit between the brothers Teigh and Dr Charles when Ui Riagain was divided, there is a very detailed account of Tinnahinch Castle:

"The castle of Tenahensie, the hall, the chambers at the end of the hall, the stonewall of an hall which joineth to the castle, the kitchen, the brewhouse, the back-house, the stables, the porter's lodgings and all the houses within the Bawen; the two gardens, the four orchards, the park and the meddow on the south syde of the castle, the myll and all the houses on th' easte syde of the river of the Barow in the townland fields of Tenahinsie, in the territory of Iregan in the Queen's County."²

1 <http://www.clonaslee.net/local-history-page11954.html> [31/12/2010]

2 Feehan, Blackwater Press (1979) p.186

However Tinnahinch was not the only castle occupied by various branches of the family in Ui Riagain. Roskeen Castle was built by Donal O'Dunne in 1584 and destroyed in 1691. No trace of it remains. Clarahill Castle, the residence of a junior branch of the O'Duinns, was built in 1600 and demolished (for road material) in 1900. The O'Duinns also built a castle at Ballinahemmy. There is no visible trace of it, but it is marked on the Ordnance Survey map, near Carrigeen. Castle Cuffe is now in ruins. The original name of that towns land, close to the border with King's County, was Baile na Sagairt. The land was granted by Queen Elizabeth (having been forfeited from Teighe Og O'Duinn) to Charles Coote (also the owner of Ballyfin Mansion, Co Laois which was, until lately, a very famous secondary school for boys) who built the castle there in 1560 and named it in honour of his wife Dorothea, whose maiden name was Cuffe. It was situated on a very flat site, a large limestone house with no evidence of outer defences. It was rectangular in shape with Jacobean-style chimney stacks and fireplaces.³ Cannon had been used in Ireland for the first time in 1534 when the English used it to gain entry into Maynooth Castle. News of this must have spread far and wide, leading this author to suspect that an idea was sown in the head of Captain Daniel O'Duinn (Donal Og of Tinnahinch) to regain the family land at Castle Cuffe during the Cromwellian wars of 1641. He and his men burnt and blackened the stripped trunk of a pine tree, mounted it on a cart and had it moved towards Castle Cuffe. Coote saw them coming and, believing them to be coming with cannon to attack the castle he surrendered immediately, asking for nothing but safe passage for himself, his household and his soldiers to the garrison town of Birr. The O'Duinns plundered the castle and then destroyed it. Quite a large portion of the ruins remain, simply because they have proven almost impossible to demolish. The mortar was reputed to be made using oxen blood and set so firmly that it is virtually indestructible. To this day the towns land is known as Castlecuffe.

Captain Terence Dunne (who died following the Battle of Aughrim) had built Ballinakill Castle in 1680. It was a fortified house and it is now in ruins. Situated between the River Clodiagh and the River Gorrough it was a coursed rubble and limestone building, L-shaped with projections at three of its angles. No doorways or windows survive but Jacobean chimneys, similar to Castle Cuffe, do. Coolnamoney Lower was the site of yet another fortified house, thought to have been built by Teighe O'Duinn. Situated near the Glenlahan River, all that remains are the turrets and the west wall with part of a tower on its north end.⁴ Parts of its underground passages also exist.

UI RIAGAN IN THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURIES

³ <http://homepages.iol.ie/clonvs/Tywebsite/forthouses.html>

⁴ Ibid

Surnames did not occur in gaelic Ireland until after the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, the first being O'Brien from Brian Boru. The first O'Duinn is given as a great grandchild of Riagain, the name supposedly coming from the gaelic word *donn* meaning brown, probably referring to hair colour. When the English set up the Earldom of Kildare in the fourteenth century, the Anglo- Norman Fitzgerald clan came into conflict with the ancient gaelic clans, who felt threatened by their presence. Over time however, the Fitzgeralds became the most powerful family in Ireland. They became allies of the gaelic clans, intermarrying with them. By the early 1500s, the O'Duinns had become a powerful clan who ruled a large area of Ui Riagain. Their territory stretched to the edge of the Pale and they frequently conducted raids there, retreating afterwards into the mountains. As well as being related to the O'Connors, they had established strategic marriage alliances with the O'Moores, the O'Neills, the O'Molloys; even marrying into the Fitzgeralds themselves. All these alliances served them well in times of trouble.

In 1556, Queen Mary's government issued a decree for the plantation of Laois and the establishment of Queen's County. Land was confiscated from clans that had not surrendered their ancestral titles under the Surrender and Regrant scheme. These lands were given to English settlers who were resisted by the O'Moores, the O'Connors and other gaelic clans. Teighe O'Duinn, chieftain of the clan, had surrendered his ancestral lands to the Crown and had most of it regranted, so he was not dispossessed. However his men fought as allies of the dispossessed clans under Rory Og O'Moore and Owey Mac Rory O'Moore. As a result of the Surrender and Regrant scheme the clan was required to drop the gaelic O'Duinn title, the surname being anglicised and changed to Dunne. Also the gaelic system of succession through the *derbfine* (where every eligible male descendant of the same great grandfather had equal rights of succession) was replaced by the English system of primogeniture (succession by the eldest son).

The eldest of the four sons of Teighe O'Duinn, Teighe Og, married Margaret, daughter of Shane O'Neill. They had a son called Teighe Reagh. She left him and he later married a daughter of Thomas Fitzgerald, seventh earl of Kildare and the most powerful man in Ireland. In 1477 Garret Mor Fitzgerald succeeded his father and became the eighth earl, and also Lord Deputy of Ireland. Teighe Og O'Duinn, who built a castle at Tinnahinch which became the seat of the O'Duinn clan, was now brother-in-law of the Lord Deputy. A later Teighe married a daughter of Redmond Fitzgerald of Timahoe and Clonbullogue.⁵ There are a few marriages between members of the Dunne family and the Fitzgeralds. It can be very confusing. In 1533 Garret Og Fitzgerald, ninth

⁵ Dunne. Ballinakella Press (1996) p62

earl, was imprisoned in the Tower of London by Henry the Eighth. The subsequent rebellion by his son, Silken Thomas, led to the English subduing the Fitzgeralds, confiscating their lands and possessions, and killing their allies. It also gave them the excuse they needed to go after the troublesome O' Moores and O'Connors and to bring their territories into order. Again the O'Duinns were lucky enough not to lose their lands. "Through the troubled years of the sixteenth century the O'Duinns of Ui Riagain assiduously shunned rebellion and were subsequently rewarded by being confirmed in possession of their territories, remaining Catholic and more or less patiently paying the fines that resulted from this"⁶. In 1540 Teighe Og entered into a treaty with the English Lord Deputy, Anthony St. Ledger, in which he pledged loyalty to the English king, Henry the Eighth and not to the clan's Gaelic overlords, the O'Connors. It suited him to do so; in the old system he had to pay tributes and concede hostages to the O'Connors and he also had to pay what amounted to protection money to the Fitzgeralds. Henry was declared king of Ireland in 1541, thus ending the old system of Gaelic rule in Ireland, including the ancient celtic tuath of Ui Riagain.⁷

Teighe Og's three brothers were called Cormac, Barnaby (Brian Og) and Charles (Cahir). Charles was educated and graduated from Trinity College, a good scholar and a committed Protestant. He objected to the land passing to his oldest brother, Teighe Og. Apart from the obvious reason that he wanted a share of the lands of Ui Riagain, other reasons were that he did not believe that his brother was entitled to do so under the Penal Laws which prohibited Catholics from owning property; furthermore he declared his brother to be disloyal to the Crown as he was an ally of O'wney Mac Rory O'Moore and the O'Neills, and also he considered Teighe Og's son Teighe Reagh as an unfit future ruler over such a large area, the reason for his objection being that he considered Teighe Reagh to be illegitimate because his parents were divorced; "where as for these many hundred years no bastard atayned to the Chieferie of Iregaine."⁸ As a result Teighe Reagh was banned as a candidate for succession and Ui Riagain was divided between the brothers Teighe Og O'Duinn and Dr Charles Dunne. The third brother, Brian Og, obtained a patent from Charles I for a large estate in Tinnahinch "to be held in soccage to him and his heirs forever"⁹, on condition that he not take the name of Fox or O'Duinn. He changed his name from Brian O' Duinn to Barnaby Dunne and submitted to English authority. The term "Fox" may have been applied to this Dunne family through intermarriage with the Fox (O'Sionnaigh) family, lords of Westmeath.¹⁰ Some Dunne families in the Tinnahinch area are still known as Fox Dunnes, but there does not seem to be a direct

6 Feehan. Blackwater Press,(1979) p110

7 Project undertaken by TY students Clonaslee VS 2003

8 Dunne. Ballinakella Press (1996) p.63

9 Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

connection with the Dunnes of Brittas. Two brothers named Fox Dunne owned two inns in the area in the 1800s. One inn was called “The Fox” and was situated in Clonaslee village, beside the present barracks – the ruins were still there in the early 1900s.¹¹ The other was located at Tinnahinch Bridge. Barnaby died in 1661, leaving his Tinnahinch estate to his son Charles. Dr Charles (brother of Teighe Og and Barnaby) had no children, there is no record of descendants of the fourth brother Cormac and Barnaby's heir Charles also died childless. The lands of Ui Riagain were inherited by Edward Dunne (note the change of name), son of Teighe Reagh while Tinnahinch came to another of Barnaby's sons, another Teighe Og who was the ancestor of the Dunnes of Brittas.¹² Thus, the direct father to son line was broken after many generations.

The fact that the Dunnes adopted English ways and customs, and acknowledged the authority of the Crown, did not make them loyal subjects. Six Dunnes fought in the army of King James (Jacobites) against the army of King William (Williamites). Captain Terence Dunne received fatal injuries at the Battle of Aughrim in 1691. Local folklore has it that fellow soldiers, members of a family called O'Gorman helped him, weak and bleeding, on his way home. He made it as far as Killoughey, less than five miles from home before falling dead from the saddle. His horse, it is said, went the rest of the way and stopped outside the gates of Ballinakill Castle. He was buried in Killeigh graveyard. Many of the Dunnes were outlawed as a result of their activities on behalf of King James, a price set on their heads and their lands confiscated. “Fifty of the Dunnes appear in Williamite attainer lists; in Upper Ossory alone there were some 1,700 forfeitures.¹³ Captain Terence Dunne's wife, Margaret applied to the Commission of Forfeited Estates on behalf of herself and her four sons, was pardoned by King William in 1694 and had her husband's estate restored. Other lines of the family who had their lands forfeited by the Crown were not so fortunate. They had no option but to leave Ireland and some of them joined Sarsfield and the so called Wild Geese, fighting in the ranks of the Irish Brigade in France. “Many of them served with distinction in the regiments of O'Donnell, Lord Clare and Walshe up to the days of the French Revolution”¹⁴

The eldest of the four sons of Captain Terence and Margaret, Daniel, inherited the estate granted back to his mother by the Commission of Forfeited Estates. He married Margaret, daughter of Major-General the Honourable William Nugent, 6th son of Richard, 2nd earl of Westmeath, in

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <http://www.irishmidlandancestry.com/content/laois/community/parishhistories/clonaslee> [31/12/2010]

¹³ Feehan, Blackwater Press(1979) p.109

¹⁴ http://eastchicagodunns.blogspot.com/2010_04_01_archive.html [25/11/2010]

1703.¹⁵ His daughter, Alice married Nicholas Plunkett of Dunsoghly. He died in 1738. After his death, he was succeeded by his youngest brother, Edward who, in 1730 married Margaret, a daughter of one Francis Wyse of Waterford. They had two sons and four daughters. He died in July 1765. Edward's eldest son, Francis became the next heir. He married his cousin, Margaret, daughter and co-heiress of Nicholas Plunkett of Dunsoghly Castle, Co Dublin and they had three sons and three daughters. Francis succeeded to the Plunkett estate.¹⁶

When Francis died, in August 1771, he was succeeded by his eldest son, Edward, born in 1760. He married Lady Frances White, a sister of the Earl of Bantry in 1801: they had five sons and one daughter. When he died, in 1765, his five year old eldest son, Francis was his heir. Francis' guardians, the Earl of Clare and Lord Nugent had him brought up in the Protestant faith even though his father was Catholic. He was educated in England. On his return to Ireland he joined the Irish Volunteers. He later joined the army and, having served in a number of regiments, he was appointed to a post under the Marquess of Buckingham, then Viceroy of Ireland. In 1794 he became Lieutenant Colonel of the Seventh Dragons Guards. The 1,000 men under him were said to be some of the most disciplined in Ireland. He helped to quell the 1798 Rising and was responsible for saving many insurgents from the Midlands. He was elected as M.P. for Maryborough (Portlaoise) in a by-election in 1799; opposed by Sir Jonah Barrington he won by a slim majority. He voted for the Act of Union because he said he did not want Ireland to fall into anarchy, as France did during the Revolution in 1789. He was an advocate for Catholic Emancipation and hoped it would come about if the Union succeeded. He was also involved with the quelling of the Insurrection of Robert Emmett, for which he received the Freedom of the city of Dublin. He contested the election for Queen's County in July 1818 and again in May 1820 but failed to gain the seat.

NEW HOME AT BRITTAS

Tinnahinch Castle was blown up and destroyed in 1653 - the very little of it that remains can best be seen from Tinnahinch Bridge, about one mile south of the castle - so the Dunnes had to build a new main residence. At this time they had a low, thatched hunting lodge at Brittas, not far up the mountain road from the present village of Clonaslee. The Dunnes built a mansion at right angles to this lodge, facing north east.¹⁷ At the same time they heightened the thatched building to accommodate the servants. Brittas (from the French *bretache*, a Norman term meaning tower) was a very strategic location. Though private and surrounded by woodland, it was very close to the Slighe Mor Dhala, the ancient highway that linked Cashel and Tara. Clonaslee translates as *Cluain na*

¹⁵ Dunne Joe Ballinakella Press (1996) p.66

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ *Meadow by the Way*: History of Clonaslee, collected by Clonaslee Boys National School 1986

Slighe – “the meadow by the way” (referring to the *Slighe Dala*). Clonaslee probably owes its development in the eighteenth century to these two factors: firstly its situation on the increasingly important *Slighe Dala*, and secondly the movement of the seat of the Dunnes from Tinnahinch. The *Slighe Dala* crossed the River Barrow over a ford at Tinnahinch, but the movement of the family seat to Brittas resulted in a decline in importance of Tinnahinch in favour of Clonaslee – the family evolving from O'Duinn, native Irish chieftains to Dunne, master of the local 'big house'.

When General Edward Dunne died in 1844, his eldest son Francis succeeded him, the Right Honourable Francis Plunkett Dunne. Born in 1801, he was a privy councillor in Ireland, a Major General in the army and a private secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the year 1858-'59. He was M.P. for Portarlinton from 1847-'57 and for Queen's County from 1858-'68.¹⁸ Described as “a liberal Conservative Home Ruler”, his attempt to block the extension of income tax to Ireland was not very successful. Joe Dunne states in his book on page 34 that “the British Government allocated 10 million pounds for famine relief in 1847 and proposed to recover this money through taxation in Ireland. He fought until finally getting it reduced by four million pounds”. Does this mean that the famine stricken Irish received four million pounds less in aid because “The General”, as he was known, did not want to pay more tax? Maybe he is being harshly judged here. Perhaps he felt that it would be unfair on the Irish people to impose that level of debt on them? Or is it a badly phrased statement of fact that four million pounds less had to be paid back? General Dunne was very interested in the objects of the royal society of antiquarians of Ireland.¹⁹ He never married and at the time when he died (6 July 1874) he was collecting details of the history of the Dunne family. He was buried in the family vault in Kilmanman. In his obituary, the *Leinster Express* wrote: “The General was an Irishman in more senses than one. Throughout the many contests in which he took part he invariably manifested a magnanimity towards his opponents... A most notable instance of this forbearance was his conduct at the Portarlinton election of 1857, when he condemned the attacks of his supporters on Colonel Damer. General Dunne's dealings in private life were regulated by that generosity which characterized all his public actions” ... “The remains of the late General Dunne were interred on Friday morning, at 12 o'clock, in Kilmanman graveyard. As the grand jury was obliged to attend at the opening of the Commission on that morning, the attendance of country gentry was not so numerous as it would otherwise have been. The coffin was followed to the grave by a large number of the deceased gentleman's tenants, to whom General Dunne was an indulgent landlord”.

¹⁸ Meadow by the Way, History of Clonaslee collected by Clonaslee BNS 1986

¹⁹ Ibid

BRITTAS CASTLE

In 1869 General Dunne built a fine castellated house designed by architect John McCurdy. McCurdy was a Sligoman, an architect of repute; he also designed the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin. The house was neo-gothic in design which was fashionable at the time. It was extended ten years later by architects Millar and Symes. It is believed that General Dunne obtained loans from Germany to build the mansion which, on account of its castellated appearance is known to this day as Brittas Castle. It is widely believed that rental income from his tenants was used to repay the loan. From 'The Houses of Ireland' by Brian de Breffny and Rosemary Ffoliott: "Brittas House, Co. Leix, was designed by McCurdie in 1869 just after the Fenian Rising, and reflects the desire of its owner, General Francis Plunkett Dunne, for a stronghold. It is faced in punched sandstone with chiselled limestone dressings and has a solid, rather forbidding, castle-like aspect. Rather surprisingly, it was estimated to cost only £7000"²⁰ The road at the main gates of Brittas has particularly bad bends. Having been informed that it is called "The Major's Walk" in memory of Major General Francis Dunne, a visiting man was heard to observe that "when he walked it, he must have been drunk".

FAMINE RELIEF?

About the time of the Famine, the Dunnes established several routes, through a short distance of forestry that would bring them out on the highway (Slighe Dala) between Clonaslee and Kinnitty, where, it is said, they had allies in case of attack. This illustrates a sense of unease and the ever present threat, real or imagined, posed by their tenants. Their houses were no longer fortresses but they still did not feel completely safe where an environment of "Them and Us" prevailed. Surely the Famine heightened this sense of vulnerability; desperate people looking in at people living their lives with full and plenty. There is a road, referred to by John Feehan in his book ²¹ as a famine relief road - one of many such projects designed to give a little money to men to buy food for themselves and their families - "going across the side of the Wolftrap and Knockachorra mountains to nowhere". There is a beautiful man-made lake, approximately two miles in area, on Brittas estate. (A local man, John Flynn, remembers the last owners of Brittas, the two Miss Dunnes, out with friends on a small boat on the lake on summer days when he was a child.) It is said that Brittas Lake too was a famine relief project for which the workers received one old penny a day. However,

²⁰ Dunne. Ballinakella Press (1996) p.29

²¹ Feehan. Blackwater Press (1979) p.221

this author cannot find a single reference to this anywhere. In the author's own family there is a story of the brother of a great grandfather saving his penny a day received from digging out the lake which he used to pay for his passage to America. Once there he studied for the priesthood, ministered in New York, and aged forty one he had his fare booked to come home to see his mother. However, he never came as he died from pneumonia. "The Cut" is a famous pass in Slieve Bloom which was a famine relief project also. Men received their penny a day for cutting a road through the mountain. The building of the wall around Ballyfin demesne was another; however neither of these were in the territory of Ui Riagain. There seems to be little documentation on what, if any, relief the Dunnes of Brittas afforded their tenants during the Famine. To refer to John Feehan yet again, he claims that the parish of Kilmanman (includes a good deal of the lower lands of Ui Riagain) actually increased during the Famine but that "like most of Slieve Bloom, Glenkeen is very sparsely populated today. However before the Famine it was one of the most densely populated and intensively farmed areas in the mountains. The population of the upper Clodiagh valley – the towns lands of Glenkeen Upper, Glenkeen Lower and Barradoos – was nearly 300 in 1841 but, by the turn of the century, it had declined by exactly two thirds. The land was good and well cared for, only becoming neglected as the population declined."²² It is well known and documented that the Quakers in Rosenallis and Mountmellick charitably did what they could to relieve the plight of the hungry tenants. Less is known about the efforts by the landed gentry. It is however conceded by locals that the Dunnes would always give food to anyone who went to the kitchen door and asked for it so perhaps they too did what they could.

At this point we can bring in the next heir to Brittas, Edward Meadows Dunne, brother of the General, who was born on August 18, 1805 and received a BA and an MA from Trinity College before becoming a student at the King's Inns in 1825 and qualifying as a barrister in 1831. He married Marianne, daughter of Langford Rowley Heyland of Glendaragh, Co Antrim in 1835 and had three sons: Edward Eyre (died, aged 12 years in 1848), Alexander Dupre (died, aged 17 in 1875) and Francis Plunkett, his heir. His income from his estate was £9,000 but he was always in debt. We know that he was very unpopular with his tenants. To alleviate his financial difficulties he imposed rack rents on his tenants in the early 1800s which caused them much misery and poverty. He also sold out a considerable part of his estate to purchase the commission of general. Could there be any link between such actions and the dramatic decrease in populations of areas such as Glenkeen detailed above, one wonders? It is also said that he was court marshalled for failure to

²² Ibid

take up his commission at Waterloo. His defence was that his wife, not wishing him to go, intercepted the message and he was ignorant of the summons. This is not widely believed and led to the General being known to his neighbours as “Shun-Battle Ned”. There were even whispers of cowardice, strengthened in the minds of people by the fact that he allowed the rebels of Wicklow, under Garret Byrne and having laid down their arms, to be fired upon and killed on the Curragh in 1798. At the same time his own rebels of Ui Raigain were being mercifully received in Tullamore. General Edward Meadows Dunne died on September 19, 1875, his wife having predeceased him by fifteen years. They and their young sons are all buried in the family vault in Kilmanman. At the time of his death he had 9,215 acres of land - 16% of the whole territory of Ui Riagain, he was the eighth largest landlord in County Laois. The obituary in the Leinster Express of September 25, 1875 is most kind: “The deceased gentleman was a member of an old and respected Queen’s County family, and was brother to the late General Dunne, whose name is well known in connection with politics in the Queen’s County. He held for many years the important office of agent over the extensive estates of Sir Charles Coote, and it is no small tribute to his memory that though he discharged the onerous duties of the agency through times of intense excitement, he carried to his grave the respect and affection of the tenants over which he was placed.” On the other hand there is a story told locally that, following the death of one of the Dunne landlords at Brittas (the story does not specify which one), six horses were set to draw the carriage bearing his remains to the graveyard in Kilmanman. The people and the Protestant minister could not get the horses to move so, the story goes, the Catholic priest was sent for. He is reputed to have said some prayers at the back of the hearse, made the sign of the Cross with his foot in the soil front and back of the hearse and declared “Take the brute away.” The story goes that the horses proceeded at breakneck speed and never broke their speed until they reached the cemetery.

THE END OF THE LINE OF THE DUNNE FAMILY AT BRITTAS

Captain Francis Plunkett Dunne, namesake of his uncle and only surviving son of his father, was the last male in the lineage of the Dunnes of Brittas. He married his cousin Frances Jane, daughter of the Reverend Robert Plunkett Dunne, on October 22, 1873. They had a son, Francis Plunkett, who died young and two daughters Alice Maud and Kathleen Plunkett Dunne. Captain Francis was High Sheriff of Queen’s County in 1878, the year he died, on 2 October. The Leinster Express of October 5 carried the notice: “We regret to announce that Captain Francis Plunkett Dunne died on board his yacht, *The Musquito*, in Kingstown Harbour on Wednesday last, after a few days illness. The deceased gentleman will be regretted by everyone who knew him. He was a kind and indulgent

landlord, and his amiable disposition won for him a large circle of friends. Captain Dunne filled the office of High Sheriff for the Queen's County at the time of his death. Captain Dunne's remains will be interred at Kilmanman..." Francis left Brittas estate to his two daughters equally. They sold it to their uncle Robert Hedges Plunkett Dunne in 1898. When he died, in 1901, they regained the estate. Alice Maud married one Arthur D.A. Cottingham and lived with him in Essex, England until her death on March 14, 1946. They had no children. Her sister, Kathleen, never married. She was an artist living in the South of France at the time of her death in 1958.

In 1929 the Dunne sisters sold Brittas estate to the Land Commission. In 1936 the land was divided up into residential holdings of c19 acres each and the houses were occupied in 1938. On 24 June 1942 Brittas Castle was completely destroyed by fire. All that remained were the ruins of the house, including remains of the billiard room, the rent room and the ice room. The coach house and the stables, on the left hand side of the estate, were untouched by the fire. Local lore says that the caretaker, a Limerick man called Mr Nash set fire to the house because he had received word that the sisters were returning from England, and he had been stealing items from the house and selling them. Mr Nash was not liked by the locals, partly because he would lock the lodge gates and people would have to take a very long route round to access the village from the mountain, or vice versa. He and his wife, Claire left Clonaslee to go to Kilrush, her native place, and the allegations were never proven. All who saw the house in its glory days talk of the finery therein and of the magnificent furniture – oak tables, pine doors and floors. People have said they can still remember the smell of the wood burning, even after all these years. Joe Young is a local historian and he was a nine year old bystander when Brittas Castle went on fire. He remembers the local sergeant arranging for him to get a ride on the fire brigade back to the village. The Leinster Express carried the story in its edition of 4 July : "A fire which broke out in Brittas Castle, Clonaslee, on Thursday of last week, completely gutted the castle portion of the premises. The outbreak was discovered at 7.00am by caretaker, Mr Nash, who gave the alarm. When the Tullamore Fire Brigade reached the scene, men from the neighbourhood were engaged in a hopeless effort to check the flames. The Clonaslee Civic Guards, L.S.F. and L.D.F. promptly joined in the operations. Fanned by a fresh breeze, the fire soon spread with great rapidity, completely enveloping the whole mansion".

On 8 February 1943 James Daly bought Brittas House, gardens, yard and ram park (c6 acres) for £625. On 8 March 1943 James Dunne bought the lodge for £325. James Daly's son, Michael and his wife intended to refurbish and live in part of the house but sadly Michael was killed in a car crash. His wife moved back to her native America, from where she sold her Brittas property over the Internet to a Mr Glen Thomas, a landscaper by trade who hopes to eventually restore the house

and gardens to their former glory.

RELIGION CAUSED FRICTION

Squire Francis Dunne is said to have converted to the Protestant faith in before his death in 1771. Local lore says that he was given very short notice to choose between his religion and his lands (these being the days of the Penal Laws). He reasoned that it would be easier to regain his religion than his lands and this was reputed to be the reason for the change.

When he announced his change, the local priest condemned him from the altar stating “there goes the Dunnes, they’re done, damned and double-damned and in short, the crows will build in the ruins and the grass and weeds will grow at the door.”²³ It is believed that he only intended to conform for a short period; the fact that all his children were baptised Catholics was used to confirm this theory. However, Joe Dunne makes a very good point on page 95 of his book that “as Francis married in 1760 and died in 1771 ... his children had all been baptised before he became a Protestant, assuming that all the dates are correct. Whatever the truth of the matter, the denouncement of him from the altar by the priest, coupled with anger over the loss of a silver rapier, strengthened his resolve. The church at Kilmanman had been destroyed by Cromwellian forces in 1649. A large thatched chapel stood in the demesne of Brittas during penal days (mid 1600s to 1790s) and this was used by local Catholics until 1771. Following the Squire’s conversion, the practice of Roman Catholicism was forbidden on the demesne and he built a thatched chapel for them in the village, close to where the present church, St Manmans (built by Father Thaddeus Dunne) stands now. The church on the demesne was used for Protestant worship until the Dunnes built a new one in a very visible location in the village. This church was decommissioned in the last decade of the twentieth century and serves as a heritage centre today. Cenotaphs, tributes to members of the family can still be seen on the walls. Every trace of the old church has disappeared but there is a, now overgrown, railed off burial ground called Killyaun where a number of members of the family were buried, in ancient as well as in modern times.

There is a story told in the area about a priest from Killoughey called Fr Edward Molloy who was summoned on a sick call during the days of the Penal Laws. The Parson of Lynally is reputed to have reported Fr Molloy to the Protestant bishop of Meath for saying Mass in the church in Ballyboy. The owner of the house where he was staying – Mr Biddulph in Rathrobin - advised him against going, sensing a trap, but Fr Molloy felt duty-bound to go. There was no sick call at the house to which he had been summoned, only soldiers who arrested Fr Molloy and took him to

²³ Dunne Ballinakella Press (1996) p.95

Brittas where he was hanged on the orders of Colonel Dunne. His body was decapitated and buried under the hanging tree while his head was displayed on a pike at the gates of Brittas. During a thunder storm some nights later, some men from Killoughey dug up the body and buried it in Rathlion church. The priest's own sister recovered the head which was buried elsewhere.²⁴ This story was borne out when, in 1985, the skeletal remains of a headless man were discovered in a shallow grave in the vestry of Rathlion church. This incident did nothing to endear the Dunnes to their Catholic tenants. There is a further story that whenever a member of the family would walk under that tree, the tree would sigh; every time a member of the family died, a bough would fall from the tree; and when the last member of the family died, the tree died too.²⁵

CONCLUSION

This has been a long and confusing, but very interesting story. Just as the story of the Fitzgerald family was the story of Ireland in the sixteenth century, so was the story of the Dunne family, to a lesser extent, intertwined with the history of Clonaslee. We have examined the circumstances through which the O'Duinns of Tinnahinch became the Dunnes of Brittas and all that was entailed with that transition. An attempt was made to trace the various chieftains/heirs of the family line from the days of gaelic chieftdom to the present day. In a study like this it is very hard to keep personal bias at bay. This author tried and it is up to the reader to judge how successful or otherwise this attempt was. It is hoped that at least assessments of various events will be seen to be fair.

²⁴ Interview with Joe Young, 15 December 2010

²⁵ Ibid