

*My native place lies about 8Kms from Louisburgh town and close to the half-parish church and graveyard of Killeen. Take a right turn off the Louisburgh road, adjacent to my childhood home, and you're onto a small road called The Colony Road. We will now walk that road. and tell the story of why it is called The Colony.*

### **The Colony.**

Many listeners will have heard of the Achill Colony. Edward Nangle, its founder, courted notoriety both by his words and deeds. But Achill was not the only Colony that arose during the years of the Gorta Mór; the Great Hunger. Another Colony between Daingean Uí Chúis/ Dingle and Ceann Trá or Ventry caused further controversy. Less well known was the Louisburgh Colony at Bunlehinch.

A brief revision at the outset, of the political, religious and social context that gave rise to the Colony movement should be helpful.

- Ireland was, of course, under British control.
- The late 1840's and through the 1850's saw a great wave of evangelical Protestant revivalism.
- People were starving and desperate parents will take desperate means to keep their children alive.
- The Protestant Church of Ireland was the 'established' church.

Because there is frequent mention of the term "established Church" in the articles I quote, I will briefly summarise its meaning, and some advantages accruing to Protestants from this arrangement.

From the sixteenth century a practice developed whereby the religion of the ruler became the religion of the state. It conferred the following main advantages:

1. The law of the church was the law of the land.
2. All of the people of the state were required to support the established church by tithes.

3. The bishops had membership of The House of Lords and could influence legislation.
4. The state church had a special place in education which bestowed further influence.

Let us look at this in an Irish context. The census of 1861 showed that only one eighth of the population were members of the established church. Not a single county had a majority. As an extreme example Catholic peasants, in some parishes were paying tithes to a church where the only member in the area was the local rector. Even Gladstone, who was a staunch supporter of the established church, saw the situation as untenable.

It would be reasonable to conclude that this background of evangelical zeal, an established church and British control, allied to a desperate people created the perfect storm for the rise of the Colony movement. To mimic the language of the proselytiser it was dedicated to converting the deluded peasantry from their Popish idolatry to the true faith of the established Protestant church.

Having described the macro picture of life at the time, let us turn to the plight of the starving peasant at the local level. It will help remove any potential charge of subjective analysis by using the words of a respected lady, described as an American evangelist, who was travelling Ireland at the time. Her name was Asenath Nicholson. She had previously visited the Colony in Achill and was not much taken with the approach and bigotry of the Rev. Edward Nangle. It would be fair to say that she subsequently became his nemesis.

I mention the Achill connection to establish Asenath Nicholson as a credible witness. The article quoted here was written just before the foundation stone was laid for the new Colony church in Louisburgh.

*Asenath Nicholson, Spring 1948.*

*“The little town of Louisburgh, two miles from Old Head, had suffered extremely. An active priest and faithful protestant curate were doing to their utmost to mitigate their suffering, which was like throwing dust to the wind; lost, lost forever – the work of death goes on and what is repaired today is*

*broken tomorrow. Many have fallen under their labours. The graves of the protestant curate and his wife were pointed out to me in the church-yard, who had fallen since the famine in the excess of their labour; and the present curate and his praiseworthy wife, unless they have supernatural strength, cannot long keep up the deadly struggle.....*

*The road (into the Killary mountains) was rough, and we constantly were meeting pale meagre looking men, who were on their way from the mountains to break stones, and pile them mountain high, for the paltry compensation of a pound of meal a day. These men had put all their seed into the ground, and if they gave up their cabins, they must leave the crop for the landlord to reap, while they must be in the poorhouse or open air. This appeared to be the last bitter drug in Ireland's cup of woe.*

*'Why?' a poor man was asked, whom we met dragging seaweed to put on his potato field, 'Why do you do this, when you tell us you expect to go to the poor house, and leave your crop to another?'*

*'I will put it on, hoping that God Almighty will send me the work to get a bit.'*

*We met flocks of wretched children going to school for the 'bit of bread', some crying with hunger, and some begging to get in without the penny which was required for tuition. The poor emaciated creatures went weeping away, one saying he had been 'looking for a penny all day yesterday, and could not get it.'*

*The doctor who accompanied us returned to report to the priest the cruelty of the teacher and the relieving officer, but this neither frightened nor softened their hard hearts.*

*These people are shut in by mountain and sea on one side and roads passable only on foot on the other, having no bridges, and the paths entirely lost in some places among the stones.... Though we met multitudes in the last stages of suffering, yet not one, through that day, asked for charity, and in one case the common hospitality showed itself, by offering us milk when we asked for water.*

*This day I saw enough, and my heart was sick- sick."*

*(From her book 'Lights and Shades of Ireland' (1850))*

It is easy to see why such desperate people would seek the sanctuary of a colony, for the sake of their children.

Walking down the Colony road today there is still another poignant reminder of the hardships suffered. Looking to your left you will see a road through the bog. It is still called Bóirín na Deirce – the road of the alms, because it is a famine relief road.

Meanwhile, in the parish of Louisburgh the Rev. Doctor P.J. Callinan was appointed as Church of Ireland Rector in 1847. While his predecessor Rev. Robert Proctor had a good working relationship with the local Catholic clergy, relations were more strained with Rev. Callinan. He seemed to be making great strides in adding Catholics to his Protestant flock. But already there were charges of proselytism. Fr. Pat Fitzgerald, the Catholic curate stated in a letter to "The Telegraph" criticising Rev. Callinan: "He would not give the charity placed in his hands to any person except on the condition of his attending his church."

However, his success led to Lord Sligo granting him an acre of ground at Bunleinch to start a new church and school. It was under the auspices of the 'Society for the protection of the Rights of Conscience'. Many would consider the title as grandiose as it was ironic. He received funding for a curate based at Bunleinch, by the name of Rev. Weldon Ashe. Rev. Ashe also served as the first teacher in the Reformed school, agus trí Gaeilge a raibh sé ag miúniú – he taught through Irish. A Miss McGreal was later appointed as teacher, and she was allowed to live on in the teacher's accommodation after the school closed.

There is on record a letter Rev. Callinan wrote to the "Evening Packet", newspaper on February 10th 1849 to say, "I am hourly beset with crawling skeletons begging for food". We can see he was well aware of the awful plight and suffering of the people around him. He was providing soup to his congregation before the start of the Colony.

The new church was consecrated in 1853. Agus rud siumiúl é, go seoladh said an eaglais nua trí Gaeilge. It is interesting to note that the dedication

ceremony for the new chapel was performed through Irish. It is further, of great interest to note that 300 people attended the consecration of the new church.

But who were the people in attendance? From what we know of church membership at the time they were not entirely a Church of Ireland congregation. In a letter to "The Telegraph" on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1850, the Rev. Myles Sheridan P.P. drew attention to the proselytising campaign and further stated, "There are, in the entire parish, (town and country) about 10 protestant families of old standing".

Were the new converts poached from the Roman religion? Perhaps some of them were the "crawling skeletons begging for food" referred to in his earlier letter?

A letter published in "The Telegraph", which was the leading Nationalist leaning paper in County Mayo at the time, brings further illumination. The article titled "Souperism in the West", not alone offers one explanation on the origins of the large congregation but it provides a vivid description of the Roman Catholic thinking at the time.

*"Our attention has been drawn to a glowing description recently published, of the consecration of a new church at Bunlehinch, about 5 miles west of Louisburgh, by the protestant bishop of Tuam. He was attended there by a large number of respectable Protestants from Westport and its neighbourhood.*

*We do not for a moment question their right to be there, for we believe (like the bishop who viewed the "borrowed congregation" once in the church of Louisburgh) he must have exclaimed:*

*"I have Not seen as respectable a congregation in any part of my diocese as that now before me".*

*No question of it, but had he been there on the following Sunday we have no doubt he would exhibit a face as woebegone as that of The Knight of the rueful countenance, in beholding a church whose family had dwindled*

*down to the minister's family, the scripture readers and about a dozen of those who had sold themselves for a time – and who are now waiting the hour when they shall throw off the hypocrites mask and become reunited with their neighbours in public worship at the altar of God.*

*The erection of the church at Bunlehinch reminds us of “the bridge where there was no water.” But jobbing in the English charity funds appears to be in those days, among the Protestant ministers, as profitable as jobbing in bridges proved to be in former days in Mayo.”*

Strong words indeed.

Whatever the truth, the secretary of the society, a man named Hogan, leased a further 193 acres from Lord Sligo who must have been convinced of the potential. Hogan built a dozen two bedroomed cottages for the converts, along with a school. There is further evidence of the optimism of the protestant clergy with regards to the anticipated influx of converts. Here is a short excerpt from another church news item published in ‘The Telegraph’:

*November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1849.*

*“On Sunday last the Lord Bishop of Tuam held an ordination at the Parish Church of Westport. Three clergymen received the order of Priesthood and three others were admitted to the order of Deacon, one of them, we understand, is for the parish of Kilgeever, west of the town of Louisburgh, where the increasing number of converts and the erection of a church, now raised above the foundation, renders assistance to the hard working rector, the Rev. Dr. Callinan absolutely necessary.”*

And so the colony appeared to grow. We note from the date of the above letter, November 1849 that the church was at foundation level. The letter describing the consecration of the church is dated September 1853. By that time we know that conditions had improved, and although there were intermittent crop failures for the rest of the century, the 1850's did not have wholesale blight destruction, or famine. There was more charitable assistance available, and relief work had improved. How did the reduction in hunger and slow improvement in conditions affect the Colony? Once again a third party

will provide an account, and once more “The Telegraph” regales us with their interpretation of subsequent events:

*“It cannot be forgotten by our readers that some time ago the Rev. Dr. Callinan, Minister of Louisburgh, asserted he had succeeded in gaining over to his fold no less than 800 Roman Catholic inhabitants of the district around Louisburgh. All of them were heavily fortified in their adopted faith, but in order to protect these converts and keep the new faith indelibly engraven (sic) in their hearts, funds should be supplied by the charitable English public, the disposal of which, the Rev Dr. desired should not be left to him.*

*Nor was he disappointed, we believe, in this area. Food, money, and clothes to a very large amount, from time to time, found their way to the soul trafficking emporium at Louisburgh, the Rev. Dr. being deputed to carry on the trade in the newly opened establishment. For a time ( particularly during the famine seasons, which sorely tried the hearts of the starving) the distributors of the English charity succeeded in persuading numbers of the hungered and famine stricken natives to attend Protestant worship. They resolved when better times came around, to rejoin that religion outwardly renounced by them, but inwardly adored.*

*The expected good time has come! God having blessed the labours of the industrious population – the land has yielded her rich stores of food, corn, potatoes, vegetables etc., for all the requirements of his people. In accordance with the time serving vow of Dr Callinan’s time serving protestants, they also deemed it prudent to stop inhaling the English doctrine, administered to them at stated periods, by the Evangelical Doctor. and a parade of quacks employed by him, whose prescriptions varied according to the strength and vice-versa of the patients.*

*Now the 800 rank and file have returned to their old and ancient fold, less seventy five, who watch from the fortress the retreat of their comrades, waiting a favourable opportunity to put down the drawbridge and follow in the footsteps of their friends, back to the fold they had strayed from.*

*We never could be persuaded that these poor people left the Roman Catholic Church from the conviction that the doctrine taught therein was erroneous or idolatrous – but from necessity – the dying necessity of food for their starving children. We state our firm conviction there is not one Protestant clergyman among the entire corps in the proselytising camp, will venture to place his hand upon his heart and declare in the presence of God, that those who had gone over to them had not done so from worldly motives, and not from the conviction of errors in that religion in which their parents had lived and died.*

*They cannot, they dare not do so!”*

End quote.

The Catholic deanery of Tuam was not just content with stirring up local feeling against the proselytising Protestant activity in Louisburgh. They also decided it was their duty to inform the charitable English people who subscribed to such organisations, as to how their money was spent. A letter to the “Northampton Mercury” newspaper dated November 1849 adds a further layer to the controversy:

*“At a meeting held in the deanery of Tuam, on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1849, the Very Rev. R Walsh being in the chair, the following resolution was proposed and unanimously approved.*

*“That while we gladly avail ourselves of this opportunity of returning our most signal gratitude and heartfelt acknowledgement of the many benevolent individuals, as well as charitable societies, whose liberal contributions have enabled us to mitigate the sufferings, and in many instances to save the lives of our famishing flocks, it is at the same time our spiritual duty to express our deep regret at the “unchristen ends” to which charity has sometimes been perverted, and our approbation at the “systematic proselytising” now carried on through the agency of such funds, by some cruel ministers of the Gospel, who refuse relief, unless on condition that the starving creatures shall renounce their religion.*



*Two disgraceful cases of proselytising, too long to be detailed – have no doubt called forth the indignant protest. One occurred last month in the west of Ireland in a place called Louisburgh. The gentleman who was accused before the magistrate was a Rev. Dr. Callinan, a protestant clergyman. He received the most severe castigation I ever heard from a magistrate.*

*And now sir I leave you and the public to decide the value of the evidence I have adduced. Alas for poor old Ireland that she should so often be converted into a battlefield, instead of being, as she ought to be, a land of peace and prosperity.*

*But how can this be when a huge established church with enormous revenues, is preying on her very souls and a milestone around her neck? While her poor starving sons are forced to uphold a church they do not believe in and never will. But yet in spite of all the resources of “The Irish protestant Church”, in spite of 300 years existence, during which every means were used, that power and cruelty could command or invent to pervert our Roman Catholic brethren, Ireland is still a pre- eminently Catholic country, sending forth her priests and bishops, and her devoted nuns to carry her faith to the most distant climes in the most savage lands.*

*But the day of retribution is not far distant. The “established church” must soon fall. Every session of parliament now debates the question.*

*“What is to be done with the established church in Ireland”.*

*An act of Parliament allowed her intrusion into Ireland, and I have no doubt that in the end an act of Parliament will sweep her away – to be numbered with the things that were.*

*I am extremely grateful to you, Mr. Editor, for your kindness and impartiality. Yours very sincerely, John Dalton, Northampton, Leicester Road, Nov. 12<sup>th</sup> 1849.*

In the earlier letters from the Catholic clergy, it is implied that returning to ‘the faith of their fathers’ was the only motivation for people leaving the Colony. But many emigrated and there is no record to state which faith they

took with them. There would have been peer pressure with the emotive terms of 'jumpers' and 'souters' preying on the minds of people that stayed. But how much influence did the Catholic priests bring to bear on their decision?

A further extract from the letter of Fr. Myles Sheridan P.P. to "The Telegraph" shows a determined clergy:

*"On Sunday last my curate and myself spoke at our respective chapels, warning the people to be on their guard against receiving such a seal of apostasy etc... many of the poor creatures came to us expressing their dire regret in ever having appeared among the jumpers and returned to their chapel and faith; and others went off to England and Scotland having received the recommendation of their Priests."*

There is widespread evidence, elsewhere, that the Catholic clergy in general did not take attempts at Protestant conversion lying down:

- 'The Prelate and the Preacher', by Patricia Byrne, shows the battle fought for souls in Achill.
- Gerard Moran's book on the so-called 'Patriot priest of Partry', Fr. Patrick Lavelle, shows similar power struggles.

I will also mention good local sources for anyone interested:

- "Louisburgh: History and People" by John Lyons.
- "Church and People: Centenary of Killeen Church." Local committee publication 1979.
- "An Coinneal" A parish magazine published biannually for over 50 years.

This author also conducted a recent revisit of "Twenty Years in the Wild West" to search for clues. The book was published in 1870 by Charlotte Matilda Houston. Along with her husband they rented an extensive sheep farm from Lord Sligo which stretched the length of the Killary fjord. She would have much in common with the Colony for the following reasons:

- Her twenty year stay coincided with the existence of the Colony.
- The Killary farm and the Colony were both rented from Lord Sligo.

- They had only a ‘mearning’ between them.( Mearning being the local word for a property boundary.)
- Religious difference is a constant theme of Mrs Houstoun. Indeed, it is a book that would be unpublishable today, such is her racism and bigotry.
- She mentions the Achill Mission, and other efforts to convert the ‘Popish peasants’.

On the other hand she is critical of the ‘injudicious zeal of the mission clergy’. Not out of Catholic sympathy but as a criticism of their strategy. The following short extract from her comment on the Achill Mission, will give insight into why she would not have held her silence if there had been a thriving Colony on her doorstep.

*“Loud and jubilant was the cry through Protestant England when the first results of the Achill Mission were proclaimed in glowing terms. Subscriptions for the building of Protestant schools and churches flowed in apace. Converts to the new faith were not allowed to starve... Whilst “their riv’rences”, the clergy, though supine in outward appearance and manners, kept their eyes wide open and*

*“piled on human heads the mountains of their curses.”*

*Taught by them to “lie with silence”, the pseudo converts, while not by a single hairs breath shaken from “the faith that was their father’s”, attended (their priest permitting) the service of the Reformed Church... as to any real or permanent conversion of the Irish peasants to Protestantism, the mission was wholly unsuccessful.”*

While her conviction around ‘pseudo conversions’ echoes earlier quotes from the Catholic side, one is drawn to her assertion that the priests are in complete control of their flock. There is no shortage of evidence relating to the power of the priests over their people. But does she underestimate the genuine devotion of the common people to their Catholic faith? Would this devotion have led them away from the Protestant Colony without priestly intervention? An account of the Catholic mission preached in Louisburgh in

June 1854 by Frs. Rinolfi and Villas gives perspective on the success, or otherwise of The Colony project.

*“On Wednesday last Fathers Rinolfi and Vilas, accompanied by the Rev. Michael Curley PP travelled from Westport to Louisburgh, and on Thursday – the feast of Corpus Christi – the mission opened there at twelve o’clock mass... The crowd at mass was very great, but so dense did it become at about twelve o’clock that neither the chapel nor the chapel yard could contain the multitude, so that a platform had to be erected in the market square, from which Fr. Rinolfi preached in his peculiarly powerful style.”*

Following a visit to Clare Island the Louisburgh mission mass for the following Thursday was re-scheduled to Gowlaun, which was the location of the half parish church before Killeen was built. Bearing in mind that this was a distance of about eight miles from Louisburgh town, it is interesting to note the large Louisburgh congregation that walked in procession to the distant site to hear the mission preachers. It is an understatement to say the large crowd gained the attention of the local constabulary. The Louisburgh police were joined by officers from Westport and Murrisk. They were also joined by a few heavy weights of the legal system:

1. Capt. Talbot, Resident Magistrate
2. Hugh Wilbraham, Justice of the Peace.
3. And police inspector Stewart.

On the return journey the procession stopped at Bunlehinch. Such was the crowd that they had to commandeer a field to accommodate the faithful. Despite the request of the Resident Magistrate, Fr. Rinolfi insisted on addressing the people. He differentiated between the “upright conscientious Protestant” and the “unprincipled hypocrites” of the Church Mission Society. He drew attention to a letter from Lord Sligo, in the “Times” newspaper in which he denounced the proselytising movements of the West. It was reported that ten of the “converts” immediately returned to the Catholic fold and were received with open arms.

Earlier, reference was made to Charlotte Houstoun's failure to mention the Bunleinch colony in her book, "Twenty Years in the Wild West". Bear in mind her house lay at a distance of only twelve miles from Killeen.

Taking her silence on the subject, the letters from the papers and other articles quoted, it seems fair to conclude that the colony had a very short lifecycle. Indeed, it never really took root. However, there was some presence in the colony for at least a decade, because a lengthy footbridge was erected by John Alexander, The new Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Rights of Conscience, and he was appointed in 1863. I will return to the bridge shortly.

Backing up the conclusion on the short life of the Colony is the following extract from "The Telegraph", dated November 1853:

*"And now we put it to Parson Dallas, the General-in Chief of the Jumper corps, would it not be a very laudable act on him (seeing as the fold has gone back to its former shepherd) to give the priest possession of the newly erected sheep fold? Otherwise it must remain the deserted monument to protestant folly, and misapplied English charity money, extorted under the false hope of converting Irish Roman Catholics from Romanism.*

*If the object of the subscribers was charity to the poor Irish, let them give up this place to them, where they may worship their God to their hearts desire. Surely it cannot be said we ask too much when it is recollected how many beautiful ancient Catholic Temples have been ruthlessly wrested from the Catholics of Ireland – for instance the church of St. Nicholas, Galway and that of St. John in Sligo, where to this day the Holy Water urns grace the several entrances."*

It is unlikely the local Catholic population would have wanted such a stark reminder of famine 'souperism' and 'jumpers'. (By the way: The term 'jumper' is believed to come from the Irish word 'iompaigh' meaning 'to turn'.) But the decision was also a pragmatic one given the tiny size of The Colony church. According to Fr. Myles Sheridan's letter to "The Telegraph", criticising

the Proselytising activity, *“the church is not equal in size to a porter’s lodge at any respectable gentleman’s gate.”*

Suffice to say, a new church was built in Killeen, less than half a mile from The Colony in 1879. The Colony church did stand, to quote: “a monument to protestant folly” until it was demolished in 1927. The stone pillars and steel gates are all that remain, along with the ruins of 3 houses.

We know a Richard King purchased the land in 1878 from Lord Sligo for a figure of £650.

Dr. Hilary Lyons, doctor and missionary nun, supplies the final chapter on The Colony from her autobiography titled: “Old Watering Holes”.

She stated:

*“The whole area belonged to Lord Sligo, and when the redistribution of the land occurred, due to the actions of the Land League, my grandfather bought the stewards house and the land where we lived”.*

She was born and reared on the farm and her descendants continue to live there, worthy custodians of The Colony Farm, and Clapper Bridge.

Listeners may have found the subject a melancholy one. So; to finish on a brighter note:

The most notable extant relic of the colony is the Clapper Bridge, built in 1863 by John Alexander, Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Rights of Conscience. It is one of a kind in our architectural heritage, with the origins of the design traced to the Cornwall area. This type of bridge has been used since prehistoric times. It is well maintained in near perfect condition to this day and well worth a visit. I will quote from Brian Hoban to provide a description:

*“It is a unique and interesting feature, with an interesting history. The bridge is a low, curving construction, 130ft long, formed of 38 boulders*

*spanned by slabs of stone, and takes walkers across a wide but shallow ford. This picturesque and remarkable Clapper Bridge takes its name from the word Clapper which is the plural for the Anglo-Saxon word 'Clam' and signifies a construction which is Roman in origin and consists of a row of two uprights crossed by a topping slab."*

Today, the bridge attracts many visitors, and is still the magic, safe place where I played as a child. But few visitors would know the sad history that played out in the fields around them. After this presentation, when you next visit, you will look wistfully beyond the Clapper Bridge, wishing the stones could give up their story.

Whatever about ghosts from the past, you will never hear local people call the area Bunlehinch. It will always be The Colony.

Take a moment to reflect on the events described, while I read my short poem, "**Bóirín na Deirce.**"

We will stroll a while, you and I,  
Down a long-forgotten, famine road,  
Back the way; the path our people came.  
Bóirín na Deirce, road of alms,  
Each side bound in by solid stone.

A uniform of moss and lichen,  
Will not hide a stone's sad scéal.

'In a place neither now nor then,  
Not so long ago; when stones could talk...'  
'Oh, seanacháí, let your story flow.'

Those solid stones, like skulls and bones,  
Large or small, round and square,  
Each a single sacred story.

Séamus McNally

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