

Murder at Mountshannon



As the eighteenth century drew to a close and a new century beckoned, John Fitzgibbon (1748-1802), Earl of Clare and Lord High Chancellor of Ireland, was at the height of his power. The 1798 Rebellion had been ruthlessly suppressed and the Union of Great Britain and Ireland was about to be ushered into being, through the connivance and subterfuge of the Earl and some of his Parliamentary colleagues. One of the symbols of the Earl's newfound status was his large mansion, Mountshannon House and 900-acre demesne, situated adjacent to the Limerick to Dublin highway, a few miles outside Limerick close to the village of Castleconnell. Silver Oliver of Kilfinane, County Limerick, built the house and had occupied it by 1750. In the mid-1760s, the Fitzgibbon family of Ballysheedy, County Limerick, acquired it.¹ The imposing mansion and demesne was one of the finest in Limerick, if not in the whole of Ireland.

It was therefore all the more shocking for the local population to hear the news that James Allen, chief steward to the Earl of Clare, was murdered in his bed, at Mountshannon, on the night of Thursday, 20 October, 1799. The following day, the Mayor of Limerick, Frederick Lloyd, acting as coroner, visited Mountshannon with a jury to investigate the murder and survey the crime scene.

The Limerick Chronicle reported the attack on Allen in graphic detail. The attackers "got through the window of the deceased's bedroom by means of a ladder and after strangling him in bed with a cord and beating out his brains, threw him from the window into the shrubbery (where a quantity of blood was conspicuous) after which they tied him neck and heels with a hay rope and conveyed him to the river about a mile distant, where they deposited him and where he was discovered on Friday morning".²

The fact that Allen's employer was the Lord High Chancellor elevated the crime to national prominence and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland lost no time in issuing a proclamation offering a "reward of £200 for each and every of the first three persons, who should be discovered, apprehended and prosecuted to conviction".³ Eight days after this outrage, eleven servants and workers at Mountshannon were arrested and lodged in the City Gaol on information that some or all of them being accessory to the Allen murder.⁴ John Waters, the porter to the Earl of Clare, was arrested the following week by Hugh Dillon Massey and put in gaol on the same charge.⁵

At this stage a lot of arrests had been made but there was still nobody convicted, so the local gentry around Limerick and

Whereas James Allen, Land Steward to the Earl of Clare, was most barbarously murdered in his bed, at Mountshannon, on the night of Thursday last- with indignation and horror we have examined into the circumstances of this inhuman crime, and in hope that the perpetrators may be brought to punishment, we do offer to pay the respective sums annexed to our names, to any person who will come forward, and give such information, as will lead to the discovery and conviction of the murderers.

Saturday 22nd October 1799

	Guineas		Guineas
John P. Smith	50	Denis Kennedy	5
George E. Bruce	50	William Shea	5
Hugh D. Massy	50	Joseph Crips	10
William Odell	50	Michael Scanlan	10
David Dwyer	10	A.C. Stritch	2
Sam B. Green	10	H. Richardson	10
John Dwyer	50	P. C. O'Keefe	2
John Howly	50	Martin Arthur	5
William White	20	S. Grady, Grange	10
William O'Donnell	10	William Fosbery	2
George Maunsell	20	Pat Power	2
D. Lyons jnr	20	Edmond Bourke	5
Stephen Hastings	10	Charles Fitzgerald	5
Sam Dickson	25	Laurence Durack	5
D Lyons, Croom	25	Thomas O'Grady	10
George Parker	10		

Reward Notice published in *The Limerick Chronicle* 4 December 1799

by Tom Donovan

Castleconnell subscribed over £575⁶ to a fund which was intended to encourage the people to come forward with sufficient information to enable the perpetrators be charged to justice.⁷ The combined rewards offered had the desired effect, as a fortnight after the reward offered by the Earl's neighbours appeared in the newspapers, four men were arrested.

James Liston, John Noonan, James Noonan and Michael Vaughan were charged on oath with the murder of James Allen. George Evans Bruce and Joseph Crips lodged the men in gaol. The report of the arrests included a message of congratulations to the public as "the clearest evidence on oath was given against the four men".⁸

The trial of Michael Vaughan and the brothers James and John Noonan was held on 5 April, 1800. The three men confessed their guilt and the trial lasted four hours. The jury retired for two

minutes before returning a verdict of Guilty for all three prisoners. The men were then sentenced to be executed.⁹

Two days later on Monday, 7 April, the three condemned men were taken by Sheriff Lloyd and a detachment of the Lancashire Dragoons to the house of James Noonan on the high road near Mountshannon where a gallows was erected on which the three culprits made their exit into the hereafter. Their bodies were brought to the County Limerick Infirmary to be anatomised, as prescribed in their sentence.¹⁰ On this same day, the last day of the Limerick Assizes, the fourth prisoner, James Liston, was tried and convicted and subsequently executed at Gallows Green on Saturday, April 26th, 1800.¹¹

During the reporting of the murder of James Allen and the subsequent trials, there was no reference made as to why James Allen came to such an unfortunate and violent end. The motives of the men who were alleged to have confessed to the crime were not questioned or speculated on. When the news of the murder of his



The Earl of Clare after a painting by Hugh D. Hamilton in the National Gallery
(Limerick Museum)

steward reached the Earl of Clare, he and the Countess of Clare took leave of the king, in the drawing room of St. James's Palace in London and returned to Ireland on Thursday, 22 November, 1799.¹²

However, in a letter to Baron Auckland written from Dublin on 14 January, 1800, the Earl relates how anxious he is to investigate the murder of his steward and find out the cause of it, hoping to be successful in both. He explains that:-

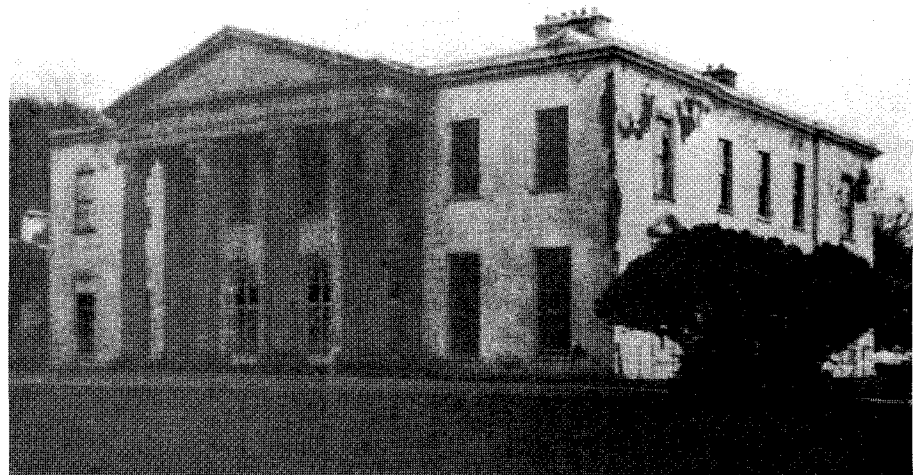
"A villain who had been a domestic servant in my father's house and mine for thirty years, a very few days after I left home in September last, headed a gang of rioters who attacked a farmer in my neighbourhood at midnight and scourged him with nettles and white-thorn bushes till he submitted to swear that he would sell them milk at a price which they chose to put upon it; and to enable them to carry

this exploit into execution, this savage stole two brass-barrelled blunderbusses from my house with which my steward met him and another of the gang, who was a tenant of mine and constantly employed as a labourer about my house, either going on the whipping expedition or returning from it; and well knowing that he would apprise me of this outrage and that they were the two parties concerned in it, on my return home, they determined to murder him. Two gentlemen, their friends, from pure love of blood agreed to assist them in it and I have the four now in custody I hope with evidence of their guilt sufficient to ensure their conviction."¹³

As soon as the four men were arrested and remanded for trial, the Earl and Countess of Clare left Mountshannon and did not return until 4 June, 1800, when the whole sordid business of exacting retribution for the murder of their servant was concluded.¹⁴

REFERENCES

1. Carroll, Joe and Tuohy, Pat: *Village by the Shannon; The story of Castleconnell and its hinterland*, Intype, Limerick, 1991.
2. *Limerick Chronicle*, 26 October, 1799.
3. *Ibid*, 30 October, 1799.
4. *Ibid*, 9 November, 1799.
5. *Ibid*, 2 November, 1799.
6. The total subscription was 548 guineas, which is the equivalent of £575 8s 0d.
7. *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 December, 1799.
8. *Ibid*, 18 December, 1799.
9. *Ibid*, 5 April, 1800.
10. *Ibid*, 9 April, 1800.
11. *Ibid*, 26 April, 1800. While it is not mentioned, it must be presumed that Liston's body was sent for anatomisation, as were the bodies of his three comrades.
12. *Ibid*, 30 November, 1799.
13. Fleming, D.A., & Malcomson, A.P.W. (Eds): *A Volley of Execrations: the letters and papers of John Fitzgibbon, earl of Clare, 1772-1802*, Dublin, 2005.
14. *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 June, 1800.



Mountshannon House, c.1910

(Limerick Museum)