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Turbulent Days Beneath Galteemore

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The townland of Skeheenarinka, some three miles north of Ballyporeen and bordering Co. Limerick, is as pleasant a place as one might ever wish to see. A lovely verdant vale forms its southern portion, while the northern half rises gently to meet the towering Galtee mountains. Bounded on the west by the river Funcheon, it boasts one of the oldest national schools in Ireland, built as long ago as 1858.

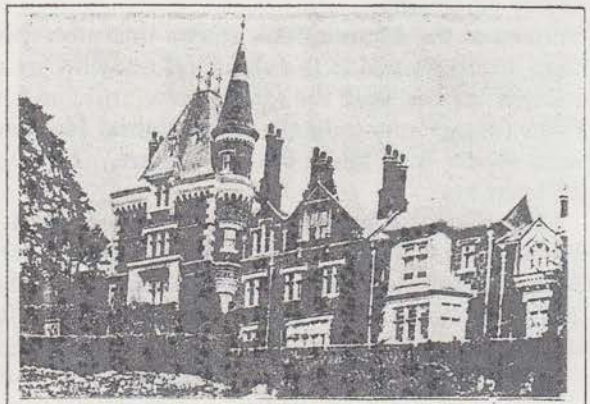
Nowadays a land of small and middle-sized farms, Skeheenarinka is a haven of modest comfort and security. In this respect it differs greatly from the Skeheenarinka of the late 19th century. The 1870s were a period of great poverty and depression in rural Ireland. Tipperary was no exception; the county suffered more than its share at the hands of rack-renting landlords.

Few farmers were, however, so sorely harassed as the tenants on the Buckley estate in Skeheenarinka; their story is one of the most engrossing episodes of the Land War. The Skeheenarinka lands had in earlier years formed part of the Kingston Estate. The Kingstons of Mitchelstown, entrenched unionists and bitterly hostile to national aspirations, had been little loved by the tenants in the three counties in which they held sway.

One of them, the infamous George (later to become the third Earl of Kingston) made himself particularly hateful in 1798. The inventor of the pitchcap, he was the founder and commander of the infamous North Cork Militia, whose outrages are still part of the folk memory, particularly in Wexford.¹ There are some fascinating sidelights on the Kingstons in James Maher's *Chief of the Comeraghs*. One story in this book, related by Canon Courtenay Moore (1840-1922), a patriotic Irish-speaking Church of Ireland clergyman who spent almost all his working life in Mitchelstown, recalls how a kind Protestant neighbour saved John O'Mahony, an uncle of John O'Mahony who founded the Fenian Brotherhood, from death at the hands of Big George Kingston in 1798.²

George Kingston was described by A. M. Sullivan (who should have known better!) as "a splendid type of an Irish country gentleman, brave, generous, hospitable, kindly to his tenantry, beloved by his dependants".³ However, a modern historian probably more familiar with the subject gave this description of the behaviour of the tenants towards Big George during the 1829 Catholic Emancipation election: "George and his tenants rode to Limerick and were the first to vote in the election. Big George was going forward. He ordered transport for all his tenants. He never thought they would vote against him, but to a man all voted for his rival."⁴

Thanks to Big George's extravagant life-style, his Kingston successors ran into serious financial difficulties. Matters reached crisis-point in the late 1840s, and by 1850 most of the estate was



Galtee Castle at the start of this century.

in receivership. Two years later the lands passed into the hands of a group called the Irish Land Company. This company, organised by the notorious Tipperary banker and swindler John Sadleir, M.P. and composed mainly of wealthy English businessmen, had one objective — to make a substantial profit.⁵

By 1873 one of this group, Nathaniel Buckley, had bought out all the others and became, in effect, master of over 20,000 acres of land, most of it in south-west Tipperary. He built a charming residence, which he called Galtee Castle, two miles north of Skeheenarinka cross-roads not far from the river Funcheon, at a point where the gentle uplands commence to merge with the mountain.

The Skeheenarinka tenant farmers now had a new landlord, and the change was not for the better. In the Kingston era rents, if not altogether equitable, were still within the financial reach of the tenants. The Irish Land Company, during its period of proprietorship, had made no attempt to alter the situation.

The arrival of Nathaniel Buckley changed life for the tenants. A millionaire cotton manufacturer from Lancashire, Buckley had sat as a Liberal M.P. in the British parliament. Of Jewish background, his family had long ceased to practice their ancestral religion, and like many non-conformists, Nathaniel Buckley was tolerant in religious matters.

But, although no religious bigot, Buckley worshipped Mammon. However, his plans to add to his wealth at the expense of his Tipperary tenantry might never have come to fruition were it not for his agent, Patten Smith Bridge.

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Bridge was a bigot and bully and hated the tenants. At the time of the collapse of Sadleir's Bank in 1856 he was the manager of the Thurles branch.⁶ A vindictive Anglo-Irishman from Roscrea, he never really got to know or understand the people among whom his days were spent. Like Buckley, he had scant regard for the rights of tenants. However, Bridge's hostility went further. His intense dislike of "the mere Irish" was not, like Buckley's, tempered by religious tolerance. Hating both their race and their religion, he was the worst possible man to whom Buckley could turn for advice. But listen to his advice Buckley did — with dire results for the tenants.

Following a detailed survey, rents were increased. The lowest increases were in the region of 20%. In some cases, where tenants by their own industry had changed tracts of bare mountainside and bogland into green fields, rents were trebled or quadrupled. A modern commentator states: "Some of the rents went up by as much as 300 per cent, on miserable patches made arable by the unfortunate cottiers themselves, many of whom over several years hauled small consignments of soil up the rugged foothill slopes of Skeheenarinka to cover the barren rocks around their cabins."⁷

Bridge demanded that the new rents be paid at once. Many tenants objected to paying the increases, some on principle, others because they were unable to pay. To this Buckley and Bridge responded with threats of eviction.

Not all the tenants were submissive. One, an articulate independent-minded man named John Ryan, emerged as a spokesman. In an attempt to rid the estate of a troublesome agitator, Bridge offered to buy out Ryan's interest in his holding for £200 — a considerable sum in those days — with the added offer of remission of all arrears.⁸ John Ryan refused and was evicted — the first of such evictions in 1876 and 1877.



Two unsuccessful attempts were made on the life of Patten Bridge early in 1876. The first occurred when John Ryan fired a shot at him while he was walking in the grounds of Galtee Castle, causing him considerable (but not fatal) injury. Ryan made good his escape. As Bridge failed to get a good view of his attacker he was unable to bring charges.

A few weeks later (in March 1876) a second attempt was made on Bridge's life. This event occurred at Garryleigh, about a mile from Kilbeheny on the road to Mitchelstown, and had tragic repercussions for two popular men. One was John Hyland, a member of a well-liked Skeheenarinka family, who was the Castle coachman.

It became known that Bridge intended to travel to Mitchelstown that day, and plans were laid to ambush him. Local tradition has it that the would-be assailants, realising the danger to Hyland, approached him on the eve of the projected attack and asked that he absent himself from the estate on the morrow, forcing Bridge to employ an English or Scottish employee as a coachman for the day.⁹ Hyland refused, and when the attack on Bridge took place the following day, he was driving the coach.

The attack was a tragic affair. The shots killed not Bridge but the unfortunate John Hyland. The attackers made good their escape, with the exception of one. This man, Thomas Crowe, was arrested, taken to Cork jail and charged with Hyland's murder.

Who was Thomas Crowe? At the time of the attack on Patten Bridge he was 60 years old, with a limp that greatly impeded his freedom of movement. He was not a tenant of the Buckley estate, nor even a native of the Skeheenarinka-Kilbeheny area. In fact, he hailed from Mount Bruis near Tipperary town.¹⁰

The plight of the Buckley tenants deeply moved him, and when asked to lend a hand in the task of dispatching Patten Bridge he did not hesitate. Sadly, he paid the price.

It seems that the bullet that killed John Hyland was not fired by Crowe. Tried at Cork Assizes for the killing, Crowe protested his innocence to the last. He displayed great dignity and courage, but to no avail. He was found guilty, sentenced to death and hanged in Cork Jail on 25 August, 1876. Today the name of this brave Tipperaryman is almost completely forgotten.

The Garryleigh "ambush" received wide publicity. A journalist in the London *Standard* commented that Hyland had met the fate intended for Patten Bridge because of "infamous bad shooting".

Nearer home a young Mitchelstown man was moved to action following the Garryleigh shooting. In the *Cork Examiner* in April 1876 a letter appeared which castigated Patten Bridge for his brutal treatment of the Skeheenarinka tenants.¹¹ The letter was published 13 days later in the *Freeman's Journal*. Its author was John Sarsfield Casey, better known as "the Galtee Boy".

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John Sarsfield Casey was born in Mitchelstown in 1846, the son of a prosperous merchant. While still in his teens he became a member of the Fenian organisation, the Irish Republic Brotherhood. A keen student of Irish history, he was sensitive to the wrongs inflicted on his people, although his father did not share his national outlook.

Young Casey wrote some letters to the Fenian paper the *Irish People*. One of these was the cause of his receiving in 1865 a sentence of penal servitude. His contributions to the *Irish People* appeared under the pseudonym "The Galtee Boy".

In 1865 Casey left Mitchelstown to take up employment in Geary's public house at 27 North Main Street, Cork. He was soon to the fore among Cork's Fenians. However, eventually the



Galtee's Boy's luck ran out. In the big round-up of Fenians in September 1865 he was arrested and taken to the Bridewell.¹² Two days later he was removed to the City Jail.

Following two months' imprisonment in Cork, Casey was brought to trial. The presiding judges were Lord Justice Fitzgerald and the notorious Judge Keogh.¹³ Casey was tried on December 29, charged with treason felony and sentenced to five years' penal servitude. Transferred to Mountjoy Jail, Dublin, in mid-January 1866, he was sent ten days later to England and lodged in Pentonville Prison, London. On May 14 he was transferred to Portland Prison, where he was to spend 17 months.

On October 8, 1867 Casey with other political and ordinary prisoners was placed on board the convict ship *The Hougoumont*, bound for the penal settlements in Australia.¹⁴ Casey's voyage on *The Hougoumont* must rate as one of the longest and most uncomfortable sea-journeys of all time. From England the slow-moving vessel sailed south-west by Madeira and the Cape Verde islands, then veered south-east by Tristan da Cunha and by the Indian ocean eastward to Freemantle in Western Australia.

A saying which persists in the Galtee countryside is the description of a very long or tiring journey — "almost as bad as what the poor Galtee Boy had to endure on his voyage to Australia." Conditions on the prison ship were even worse than those endured a generation earlier by John Mitchel. Luckily for posterity, John Casey kept a diary (now in the National Library of Ireland) in which he recalled some of the events of the voyage.¹⁵

From this we learn that breakfast consisted of 1 pint of tea and 12 ozs. of bread; dinner of 1 pint of beef tea and a spoonful of jelly; and supper of 1 pint of sag and a glass of wine! Each night when the prisoners' quarters were locked a concert was held. On 13 October the songs sung included (appropriately for Fenians) "The Rising of the Moon" and "Ned of the Hills"; the ballad "After the Battle" was sung in both Irish and English.

Here are two more extracts from the diary.

October 26th. A prisoner received 48 lashes from the boatswain today without wincing, for beating another prisoner most inhumanly — at conclusion cheered by his comrades — got cross irons on his feet.

December 16th. Morning dark and wet and cold, like a winter's morning in Ireland. First death on board, a poor Irishman. . . . Cannot think without emotion of dying in a far distant land, far far away from friends, home and kindred, without a single hand to soothe and comfort me in my last moments.

The progress of the ship was extremely slow. Christmas Day 1867, more than 70 days after the start of the voyage, found it still in the Indian Ocean, almost 2,000 miles from its destination. On 10 January 1868 Casey and his comrades landed at Freemantle, Western Australia. Conditions there were tolerable, and Casey and the others managed to cope.

On 12 November 1868, ten months after his arrival in Freemantle, he was granted a ticket-of-leave. In early December 1869 he joined a vessel at Queenscliffe harbour *en route* for England. Casey arrived home in Mitchelstown in February 1870.

Fenianism was now in decline; but Casey was not content to ignore injustice or remain a spectator on the sideline. At Skeheenarinka, only six or seven miles from his own town, a classic case of brutal injustice was evident. The plight of the Buckley tenants and the outrages perpetrated by Patten Bridge moved the Galtee Boy to anger.

In the wake of the attempted killing of Bridge and the arrest of Thomas Crowe, he was no longer able to remain silent. He wrote a scathing letter to the *Cork Examiner* which was published



on 13 April 1876. In it he strongly condemned Bridge, denounced his treatment of the Skeheenarinka tenants and gave details of the savage rent increases which had been levied.

Infuriated by the hostile publicity, Bridge responded by suing Casey for criminal libel. The case was not heard until late the following year. In the meantime there were demonstrations of support for the Galtee Boy in various parts of Ireland; Archbishop Croke of Cashel was among the first to subscribe to a Casey Defence Fund.¹⁶

Casey's trial took place in Dublin in the dying days of 1877, and lasted eight days. Casey was represented by Isaac Butt, who 12 years earlier had represented him in Cork. Several witnesses, Buckley tenants all, were called from Skeheenarinka. Some of those gave their evidence in Irish. The Irish language was then widely spoken in the southern Galtee countryside.

Following the conclusion of the evidence, the jury failed to reach a verdict. The Court had no option but to release Casey, who returned in triumph to Mitchelstown.

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But if John Sarsfield Casey had won a signal victory in court, there were little immediate signs of relief for the Skeheenarinka tenants. William O'Brien of Mallow, later to win fame as an M.P. and writer, was then a young reporter with the *Freeman's Journal*. Moved by the trial of Casey and the plight of Buckley's tenants, he visited the Galtees at Christmas 1877.

What he saw appalled him. He published his findings in a series of articles in the *Freeman's Journal*. These were published in 1878 as a booklet under the title *Christmas on the Galtees*.

Despite William O'Brien's writings, however, things changed very little for the better. Rents were still grossly exorbitant; farmers slaved to satisfy the landlord's demands. If Buckley had any wish to placate his tenants the vengeful Bridge was at hand to counter-advise him.

But Bridge's own days on the Galtee Estate were numbered. In March 1879 he resigned his position or, as has always been believed in the Galtee countryside, he was dismissed by Buckley, who may have realised that his agent was a liability.

At Patten Bridge's departure signs of elation were evident all over the south Galtee countryside. As the hated agent made his way out of the area, crowds gathered. Bonfires blazed on the hillsides and celebrations continued well into the night. The *Freeman's Journal* published a full account of these events.¹⁷

Bridget's departure marked the end of an era. Conditions gradually improved. Buckley now made some attempts at least to be seen to deal more humanely with his tenants. However, rents remained high. But the Ashbourne Land Act of 1885, limited though it was, gave some relief to tenant farmers.

Nathaniel Buckley may have mellowed somewhat; but his rents were still excessive. My own forebears (on both sides) were Buckley tenants. One of my grandfathers, born in 1863, recalled that he was once paying as much as £2 per acre on a holding of some 40 acres. Although the land was fertile, this was in those days an exorbitant rent.

Nathaniel Buckley died in 1892 and was succeeded by his younger brother Abel. A liberal M.P. in the British parliament and a supporter of Home rule, he was married to an actress. A horse-racing enthusiast, he owned some splendid animals during his period in Galtee Castle. Perhaps his best-known horse was Roman Law, which competed in three Aintree Grand Nationals and came third in 1911.

As Abel Buckley spent much of his time outside Ireland, most of the responsibility for running the estate fell on his agents. Fortunately, these were humane men who genuinely seemed to wish to get on with the people among whom they lived.

Abel Buckley occupies a much fonder place in folk-memory than his brother. A good landlord by the standards of the day, he had, within a few years of succeeding to the estate, sold back much of the lands to the tenants. When his son came of age in 1897, over 1,000 local people were entertained at Galtee Castle.

Abel Buckley was also an excellent employer. He expected good work, but paid fair wages in return. Many local people, men and women, found employment on the estate, in the Castle, the sawmills and the stables. Some foreign workers (mainly from Scotland) were also brought in. These people got on very well with the locals. Most of them left the area in 1920 and 1921.

Meanwhile, John Sarsfield Casey, who more than anybody had helped to highlight the plight of the Galtee tenants in the 1870s, prospered in Mitchelstown. He died in 1896 at the early age of 50 and is buried in the family plot beside the Catholic Church in Mitchelstown. His last surviving son, Dan, for half-a-century a dentist in his native town, died unmarried in 1964 at the age of 77.

Galtee Castle prospered for a while. Farmers and workers enjoyed a modest measure of comfort. In the early 1900s the Castle was still in its heyday. The decline of the family fortunes around the time of the outbreak of World War I was not immediately apparent to the local people.

Old people who were children then (my mother, still alive, among them) remembered the generosity of the Buckley family. Parties of local people and children were entertained at the Castle. All schoolbooks in Skeheenarinka school and also various school treats were paid for by the Buckleys.

A non-conformist who tolerated the religious views of all people, Abel Buckley was always on excellent terms with the Catholic priests and laity and is reputed to have offered around the turn of the century to provide the money to build a church at Skeheenarinka.¹⁸ If this story is true, the offer was not accepted.

As the century progressed, the fortunes of the once great Buckley family commenced to decline. Debts began to accrue. Following the end of World War I members of the Buckley family were rarely seen at the Castle. At this time the estate was administered by a very popular agent named Hick, who in 1921, a few weeks after the commencement of the Truce, had a hand in a little bit of national history.

In August he was approached by the famous republican officer Ernie O'Malley, and by my late father who was the local commanding officer of the I.R.A. They sought permission to use the Galtee Castle and grounds for a few weeks as a training-camp. Mr. Hick acceded to their request. An account of the training session is given by Ernie O'Malley in the opening chapter of his book on his Civil War experiences, *The Singing Flame*.

However, even while the Civil War still raged, the Buckley saga ended. The family never returned to Ireland. The many farms which comprised the old estate had long since passed into the hands of former tenants. The extensive area of land which had been in use by the Buckleys themselves, the woods and mountainside were sold to the Land Commission in 1922. Most of the lands were given to local people, some of them landless men.

The woods, mountain and marginal lands were handed over to the Forestry Division, which embarked on an extensive planting programme, creating much-needed employment. The lands immediately adjacent to the Castle were purchased by the Shannon family; one of this family, a Scotsman who had been for long a steward at the Castle, continued to live in the area to his death. The Castle stood until 1940, a scenic landmark in a lovely countryside. That year it was demolished and the stones used in the building of a new church at Glanworth, Co. Cork.



Today the wooded glade in the midst of which the Galtee Castle once stood is owned by *Coillte Teoranta*, the Irish Forestry Board, and is an amenity area open to the public. Set in delightful sylvan surroundings, above the gleaming river Funcheon, it is a place of great beauty, a little haven in the Galtees well worth visiting.

Acknowledgements

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FOOTNOTES

1. Nicholas Furlong: *Father John Murphy of Boolavogue*. (Dublin, 1991), pp. 38-40, 58.
2. Pp. 164-165.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
4. Peggy Quinlan: *Old Mitchelstown and the Kingston Family* (Mitchelstown, 1980), p. 15.
5. See note 3, p. 278.
6. *Ibid.*
7. See Walter McGrath, *Evening Echo*, 3.3.1976.
8. See Denis G. Marnane, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1988, p. 74.
9. Oral tradition in Skeheenarinka.
10. *Kilbeheny and Anglesboro Parish Magazine*, 1989, p. 3.
11. *Cork Examiner*, 13 April 1876; *Freeman's Journal*, 26 April 1876.
12. *Kilbeheny and Anglesboro Parish Magazine*, 1977, p. 6.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
15. NLI Acc. 4458A.
16. See Walter McGrath, *Evening Echo*, 4 June, 1976.
17. 24 March, 1879.
18. *Kilbeheny and Anglesboro Parish Magazine*, 1984, p. 8.
19. Dublin, 1978.

