

Sir William Butler and that Famine eviction

By Martin Ryan

One day I was taken by my father to the scene of an eviction on that road of which I have already spoken as being so full of the cottages and cabins of the people who were called cottiers – peasants with three or four acre plots of land. I have never forgotten the pity of that day. On one side of the road was a ruined church, the mounds of an old graveyard, and a few of those trees which never seemed to grow any larger but remained stunted and ragged deformities, nibbled at by goats below and warped by storms above, and left to find voice for the wind as it whistled through them; on the other side, and beyond the old church, stood some dozen houses which were to be pulled down on this day, and their denizens evicted. At this time the weakening effects of the famine were still painfully evident in the people, and the spirit of opposition which in after years was to become so strong was not in being. The sheriff, a strongforce of police, and above all the crowbar brigade – a body composed of the lowest and most debauched ruffians – were present.

At a signal from the sheriff the work began. The miserable inmates of the cabins were dragged out upon the road; the thatched roofs were torn down and the earthen walls battered in by crowbars (practice had made these scoundrels adepts at their trade); the screaming women, the half-naked children, the paralysed grandmother, and the tottering grandfather were hauled out. It was a sight I have never forgotten. I was twelve years old at the time; but I think if a loaded gun had been put into my hands I would have fired into that crowd of villains, as they plied their horrible trade by the ruined church of Tampul-da-voun ...¹

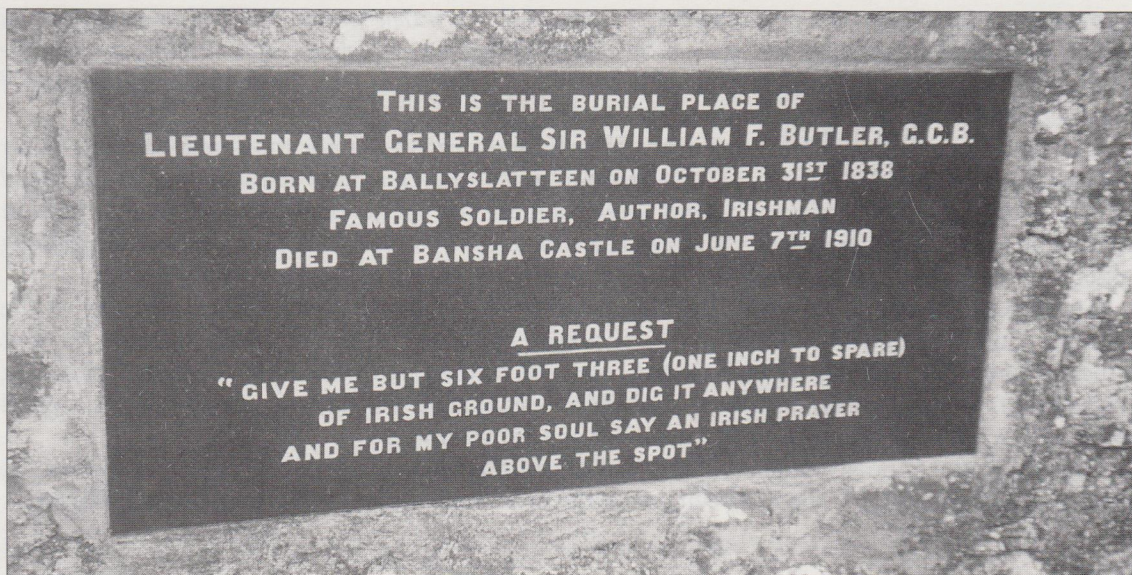
The above passage is from the autobiography of Lieutenant General Sir William F. Butler (1838-1910). As a boy he saw a mass eviction of twelve families, close by his home at Ballyslatteen near Golden. There is no doubt of the effect of this experience on him, as the passage, written when he was 70, testifies. However, Butler's presentation of the Famine and the eviction is unusual.

The Famine is a central experience of his childhood. The first reference to it is on the second page of his autobiography.

The early forties gave no warning word of what the decade would do in Ireland before it closed. I was about eight years old when the crash came. The country about where we lived in Tipperary was swarming with people. Along the road were cabins or little thatched mud-cottages at every hundred or hundred and fifty paces.²

Thirty lines later, describing his return in 1846 after four years in Dublin he writes:

When we were quite near home, my sister, who knew the road thoroughly, began to name the persons whose cottages we should have to pass before our gate [the Ballyslatteen estate] was reached. She repeated about a dozen names. I being terribly tired [he was seven years old, his sister Mary eleven], the list gave me the idea that we still had a long road to travel, and I heard it with dismay; but my alarm was needless, the distance was only a few hundred yards. I passed along that same road a few days ago: not one house, not even the site of a house, can now be discerned there. In that month of March 1846 the famine which was to sweep four millions of Irish peasants out of Ireland was about to begin its worst slaughter. The following winter brought "the black forty-seven". It was a terrible time. Everywhere the unfortunate people sickened, died, or fled. There was no preparation, no warning; the blow fell straight. The halting and creaking machinery of the state could not cope with this onslaught. A second or third rate despot could at least have parried the blow; but a constitutional government face to face with a sudden crisis is as helpless as a stranded whale in an ebb-tide.³



The Butler Society's plaque at the entrance to Killaldriffe cemetery, where Gen. Butler is buried. – Photo copyright Frank Burgess.

Butler then says that *my father and the better-endowed neighbours flung themselves bravely against famine and fever*, and goes on to quote from a record book giving examples of the weekly relief distributed up to July 1847. He next describes going to the Jesuit preparatory school in Tullabeg in September 1847, and tells of the death of his mother, and of being withdrawn from Tullabeg with two of his brothers to live at home. Then ...

Things had grown worse over the land. If actual famine had lessened, its after effects had spread and deepened ... It was at this time that my mind began to take impressions which time has not been able to impair, and to form thoughts which experience of life has only tended to deepen.

In what manner my father was able to weather the storm which had so suddenly broken, in which so many stronger craft had gone down, I do not know [author's emphasis], but he was a brave man. The strange part of it was that it was all new work to him. He had not fought these foes before, and he was at this time not far off his sixtieth year. This is where religion comes in. Gradually things grew better.⁴

Immediately following that last sentence Butler moves into a six-and-a-half page digression before returning to the famine and coming to describe the eviction scene of his boyhood. In summary the digression covers:

The Suir, Spenser, Cromwell, William of Orange.

17th century wars, Butler burial grounds, Butlers versus Desmonds.

Upbringing of Richard Butler (his father), anecdotes, Napoleon, George IV.

Fourteen Penal Laws – three of them detailed.

Difficulty of retaining one's land as a Catholic, family anecdotes.

Relaxation of the Penal Laws, family anecdotes.

School in Dublin *when things became financially safer* [author's emphasis].⁵

He then returns to the Famine.

I often wondered in after life how the balance of account lay, between the loss of school education caused by those famine years, and the gain of that other lesson in life – its necessities, its

sorrows, its hard bed-rock facts [author's emphasis] *which that terrible time had implanted in my mind. In particular there was one scene in the theatre of that time which did more, I think, to shape the course of thought than years of study could have done. One day I was taken by my father to the scene of an eviction on that road of which I have already spoken*⁶

The 29-line passage on the eviction is powerfully evocative. As for those responsible, Butler lashes out at the crowbar brigade – a body composed of the lowest and most debauched ruffians, a crowd of villains plying their horrible trade. But these men are the agents of the sheriff, who is present with a strong force of police. Butler's target is a soft one, at variance with his practice of pushing blame upwards instead of letting it fall on visible minor agents of disaster or corruption.⁷

The eviction scene is followed by the narrative of a Captain Arthur Kennedy, one of the Famine Commissioners for County Clare, whose experiences tempted him to *shoot the first landlord I met*.⁸ Richard Butler is, however, well out of the line of fire here. Over the preceding eight pages Butler has, in an act of filial piety, established his father's credentials as a good man, a staunch Catholic, the worthy inheritor of a proud lineage.

Richard Butler is no absentee landlord, but one of that class who are the natural leaders of the common Irish people. He too has been one of the historically oppressed because of his religion.

Mary Butler at eleven years of age knows the names of the cottiers whose cabins border the road leading to the entrance to Ballyslatteen.

Tampul-da-voun is less than a quarter mile from the entrance to Ballyslatteen. Is the land Butler property?

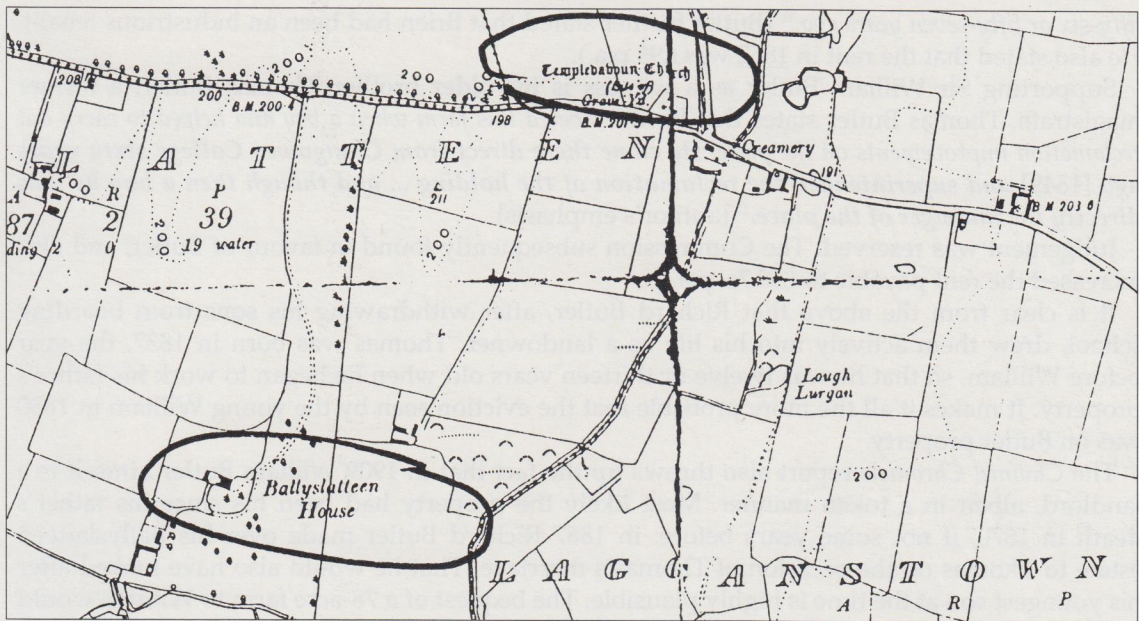
If the passages where Butler deals with the Famine and the eviction are juxtaposed, it becomes clear that his digressions have fractured a narrative to which his family is central.

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In recounting this seminal experience of his childhood Butler's dilemma is that his own family had not only survived the Famine years but prospered in the aftermath. *Things became financially safer* in the early 1850s, and William and his brothers were sent to boarding school. During the famine years Richard Butler's land resources had allowed him to pull through.

William Butler says: *In what manner my father was able to weather the storm, I do not know.* This is an evasion. If Richard Butler conformed to type as a resident landowner or landlord one of the hard choices he had to make was to evict small cottiers unable to pay their rent. One result of this would be to free up land for pasture, which was more profitable than tillage.

A small notebook from the 1840s, held in the Boole Library, University College Cork,



provides strong circumstantial evidence linking Richard Butler with the eviction scene of William's childhood.⁹ The notebook, in Richard Butler's handwriting, gives details of Butler tenants before the Famine and lists the cottiers who are subtenants of Richard Butler. The list includes 29 named cottiers who, with their families, are living in the area of Lagganstown.

In the centre of Lagganstown, about a quarter-mile from the gates of Ballyslatteen House, is the site of the ruined church of Templedavoun. This is the Tampul-da-voun described by William Butler, where he witnessed the mass eviction of twelve families in 1850. By that time Richard Butler may still have been subletting this land. Equally it may have reverted to him from the sub-landlord(s); in that case he would have had direct responsibility for the eviction. Either way he had a vested interest in it.

Richard Butler's interest in this land about Templedavoun explains why he would have inflicted on his twelve-year old son the sight of an eviction. As a member of the landowning gentry Butler senior was inducting his son into one of life's *hard, bed-rock facts*. The strongest corroboration of this is found in the *Clonmel Chronicle* of 21 April 1909. This carries a report of a sitting of the Land Commissioner, Mr. Justice Fitzgerald, in Clonmel on 20 April 1909. The cases before the Commission are rent disputes and one of them concerns the estate of Sir William Butler. The estate is a 78-acre farm on the west bank of the River Suir, above New Bridge.¹⁰

The tenant, a widow named Margaret Brien, claims that the judicial rent on the farm is too high at £51-18s p.a. She wants it reduced to £42-7s p.a. Her case is that the improvements on the farm were carried out by her late husband.

Butler gives evidence that the farm as it stands is substantially as it was before Daniel Brien, the deceased husband of the present tenant, took on the tenancy some sixty years previously. He states that *he had a vivid recollection of the farm in question between fifty and sixty years ago; his late father worked this place and it was in his hands for three or four years before it was let to the late Daniel Brien. Old Brien was in the capacity of ploughman to witness's father before he got the place*

fifty-six or fifty-seven years ago.¹¹ (Butler further stated that Brien had been an industrious tenant. He also stated that the rent in 1852 was £95 p.a.).

Supporting Sir William Butler as a witness is his older brother Thomas Butler, a former magistrate. Thomas Butler states that *he remembered this farm when a boy and helped to carry out reclamation improvements on the place. He came there direct from Clongowes College sixty years ago [1849] and superintended the reclamation of the holding ... and though then a boy he was directly the manager of the place.*¹² [author's emphasis]

Judgement was reserved. The Commission subsequently found in favour of Butler, and also increased the rent payable to £58.7s. p.a.¹³

It is clear from the above that Richard Butler, after withdrawing his sons from boarding school, drew them actively into his life as a landowner. Thomas was born in 1837, the year before William, so that he was twelve or thirteen years old when he began to work his father's property. It makes it all the more probable that the eviction seen by the young William in 1850 was on Butler property.

The *Clonmel Chronicle* report also throws up the fact that in 1909 William Butler himself is a landlord, albeit in a token manner. Most likely the property had been his since his father's death in 1870, if not some years before: in 1867 Richard Butler made over his Ballyslatteen estate to Thomas on the occasion of Thomas's marriage. That he would also have looked after his youngest son at the time is highly plausible. The bequest of a 78-acre farm to William would have been an insurance against the vicissitudes of fortune that might lie before his soldier son, who after ten years in the army was still only a lieutenant, with bleak promotion prospects.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sir William F. Butler, *Autobiography*. (London, 1911), pp. 11-12.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
6. See opening passage of this article.
7. See, for example, the death of the Prince Imperial in Zululand, on p. 204 of *Autobiography*, or the Butler Report of 1905 into the Army Stores Scandal, PRO, Kew, WO 32/922.
8. *Autobiography*, p. 12.
9. Mss. of Professor William F. Butler (1869-1930). U82/12/17, Boole Library, U.C.C. Professor Butler was a nephew of Lt.-General Sir William F. Butler. The notebook is one of two discovered among Professor Butler's papers by Sean O'Driscoll M.A. See article by Joe Walsh in *THJ* 1997, pp. 166-177.
10. Land Commission Archives, Record 2452.
11. *Clonmel Chronicle*, 21 April 1909.
12. *Loc. cit.*
13. Land Commission Archives, *op. cit.*