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The Strange Death of William John Scully

By Anthony McCan

On June 5th 1895, William John Scully, eldest son and heir of the notorious "Billy of Ballycohey", died at Ballinaclough, Co. Tipperary, aged 18. The following eye-witness account of his death is taken from an unpublished memoir by Ed. Fisher, written some fifty years after the events described, of his years as a tutor to the Scully boys. The memoirs were obviously written from memory alone, since two visits to Tipperary in 1894 and 1895 have been telescoped into one, and Dr. Russell becomes Dr. Sellet, but the vividness of the writing and the corroboration of the events described by the death certificate signed by Dr. Russell leave one in no doubt of the essential truth of the story.

Fisher was an Englishman whose family came from Devon and in the year 1892 was just down from Oxford and living in London, when he was tipped off by a friend that William Scully, by then a multi-millionaire with a house in Park Lane, was looking for a tutor for his three sons. He applied, and following a curious interview which convinced him that Scully was rather eccentric, he was accepted. The first two years of his new post were occupied by taking the eldest boy, then sixteen, on an extended tour of France, Spain and Morocco, the latter then an independent country .The details of his travels are outside the scope of this article; suffice to say that they show that he was a young man of initiative and spirit. He was also, of course, full of the prejudices of his class and time, totally convinced that the English Gentleman was God's finest creation. He had no knowledge of Ireland and when he does arrive there writes about the peasantry much as he would have written about the Zulus.

I shall give the story in Fisher's own words, merely inserting some explanations and comments as they seem necessary. He starts by setting out the legend of the Family Curse.

> The said Landlord – Dennis Patrick O'Scolaid- had goodly estates, and dwelled in the stone mansion known as Ballynaclagh.[1] In 1824 the said Dennis Patrick O'Scolaid was accused of some turpitude towards some tenant's family. Whatever it might have been, the girl's grandmother, who was locally recognised for her uncanny powers, came upon the said landlord and, with shrewish gestures is reported to have called down a curse on him and his family – for he had two sons Patrick and William. And the curse was pronounced as follows: "The Blessed Virgin will see that the eldest son of your family shall not live to inherit your estates." To us today, we might try to laugh it off, but in Tipperary County, where every self-respecting person confessed the Roman Catholic faith, it was like a thunderbolt. If you know Ballynaclagh and it's surroundings, you will remember how the Suir River runs through those green pastures, scarcely half a mile north of the Big House and how the bull-rush marshes make ideal cover when hunting ducks. In 1839, Patrick the elder son would come of age, an event of special ceremonial importance where the law of primogeniture and large estates are concerned. On this September afternoon the brothers had gone down to bag a few of those Mallards, which the tenants were forbidden to kill. Towards sundown, the brothers started for the house so as to be all ready for the evening meal. William strolled ahead, while Patrick went to look for a wounded duck which had fallen in the reedy swamp. When Patrick failed to arrive after the evening meal had been delayed for some fifteen minutes, William with a couple of servants tramped down to the river, only to find the older brother partially bogged down in the marsh, a duck in one hand and the accidentally discharged gun in the other, where he had apparently

> tripped and fallen. When his body was brought in to the house, the father in his grief (so it is related) cried out "Oh Mother of Jesus, the witch made good her curse." This left William as the future Landlord and Proprietor of the Estates at Ballynaclagh and Donneskee. There was no question of the accidental death, nor do we know what satisfaction was derived by the old grandmother Ryan, the so-called witch. But in due time, at the death of his father, William was proclaimed the successor and heir to the estates. He was married in the same year to the youngest daughter of the Earl of Leitrim, by whom he had three daughters, Elizabeth, Constance and Mary.

It is difficult to know what to make of this dramatic story since most of it is palpable nonsense. Was Fishers' memory playing tricks with a story he had heard fifty years before about events that had happened fifty years before that? Or was William himself, well into his seventies by the 1890's, spinning a yarn? In any case, most of the facts given are erroneous. William's father Dennis (he always spelt it Denys) did not have Patrick as a second name; he had five sons, not two, none of whom were called Patrick. It is difficult to imagine Denys, a distinguished barrister and friend and colleague of O'Connell, engaging in amorous adventures with the daughter of a tenant in 1824 when he was well into middle age and declining in health. Anything is possible, but there is no record of it. Denys died in 1830, so the story of his grief at the death of his son cannot be true. What is well documented is that on the afternoon of November 26 1842 two Scully brothers, James Vincent the eldest and William the youngest, did go out duck-shooting at Kilfeacle, not Ballinaclough, that William returned first and that a search party was sent out when James had not returned and found him as described. Of course, a Tipperary landlord found shot dead in 1842 was immediately assumed to have been murdered; there was a tremendous hue and cry, the usual suspects were rounded up but no one was ever charged. William himself at the time told a story of meeting two men in long frieze coats, whom he had never seen before, when returning to the house.

However, all accounts agree that the body was found lying face downwards at the edge of a pond with a dead mallard at the side, and with wounds in the back of the head and the back. The rings and watch on the body were untouched. James had been carrying a double-barrelled fowling piece and if he had stumbled when trying to retrieve a dead or wounded mallard from the water both barrels might have discharged. There is some confusion in the contemporary reports as to whether the gun was missing when the body was found, but the evidence does not seem to support the theory of an opportunistic assailant lying in wait to attack and disarm a strong able-bodied man and then shoot him with his own gun. At any rate, whether by design or accident, James was dead. The fact that he was aged 33 and had inherited his father's estate 12 years before makes nonsense of the Family Curse story, but somebody, presumably William, in telling it to Fisher had distorted the facts to make them fit. William, though he did not become the sole heir, did get the townlands of Ballinaclough and Doniskea in the family settlement which followed.[2]

The story of him marrying the Earl of Leitrim's daughter is total nonsense, but in the year 1851 William did marry Margaret Sweetman, daughter of a wealthy Dublin brewer and they did have three daughters as Fisher states, but their names were Gertrude, Julia and Katherine. How Fisher got the facts of this marriage so muddled up is impossible to guess, but after all he was writing some fifty years later of events of which he had no personal knowledge.

Fast-forward now to the year 1895. William is now a multi-millionaire with houses in Washington, London and Ballinaclough — where he had built himself a modest stuccoed dwelling with bay windows, for all the world like the suburban villa of a prosperous merchant. He owned some three thousand acres in Tipperary and Kilkenny but only visited Ireland on

occasion.[3] Fisher, with his pupil William John, had spent the Summer months of 1894 at Ballinaclough enjoying the strange sights at the fair of Tipperary and revelling in the country life, though he did find something very un-English in the house with it is steel shutters and guns and ammunition ready to hand in every room and he did notice that "underneath the pleasing courtesy of the natives there was a violent feeling between landlord and tenant." So now let us return to Fisher's own narrative.

It was late June when William Jun. and I set out for our return journey to Co. Tipperary (Ireland) via parts of Wales. Without especial incidents of note, we reached Ballynaclagh and soon settled down to our new responsibility of visiting the lands, seeing and meeting the various tenants, under the tutelage and guidance of the resident Agent. Central Ireland is at it's best at this time of the year. This time we had taken a fox-terrier and a wire-haired terrier with us, and even dogs appreciate the freedom of the countryside in contrast to London. Wm. Jun. and I enjoyed our experience of this rustic life, striving to do our part during the sheep-shearing and haymaking seasons, usually arising about 6 a.m. and having our breakfast brought in and then starting our active day about 8 o'clock. One morning in August he excused himself from getting up on account of biliousness and fatigue.[4] Returning at noon, I found him alarmingly sick with nausea, fever and general distress. Immediately foreman Fagan was dispatched to Cashel (seven miles away) to bring out Dr. Sellett. In diagnosing the case, he prescribed champagne and dry biscuits as a sure settling of the normal functions. The doctor then drove back to Cashel.

Staying in the boys room, he seemed to have no taste for his new diet, seemed to sleep restlessly, starting up occasionally and asking me to sit near him; his talk became aimless and at times wild and incoherent, until, becoming alarmed, I sent again for the doctor. He arrived about 8 o'clock that evening, assured me that he would give him something soothing, so that he might sleep and, at my request, promised to stay the night, sleeping on the couch at the foot of William Jun.'s bed. After a night of sound rest (for me), I was awakened at 6 a.m. by the doctor, standing beside my bed and saying "the young fellow's gone.". The shock was terrible. My varied experiences so far had never brought me in touch with death in a way that my responsibility was at stake. Dressing hurriedly and going in to the boy's room with the doctor, there was the lad, lying lifeless. It seemed that from sleep he had gone in to a coma and passed away without gaining consciousness. We went downstairs; there was no fire on the hearth (usually, it was burning when we came down); the room had not been cleaned up; there was no breakfast set. In response to my ring, the housekeeper came to the outside door and with all apologies said that none of the servants could enter until the priest had purified the house etc. Fuel was brought to the door, as also the breakfast, but they dared not bring it in. The doctor and I soon made such arrangements as we could and then discussed the next procedure. He had to go back to his practice.

When he reached Cashel he would wire the family "serious news of William Jr."; at his suggestion, I was to set out for the town, arrange for the undertaker, send a further message to the family in London "William Jr. passed away this morning at 6 o'clock, meet you tomorrow at Thurles with carriage." But before leaving the house, everything was to be tightly locked, to avoid the possibility of the body being stolen. Now, of course, a stranger like myself could not possibly realise the superstitions of the natives, whose point of view was totally foreign. They could not comprehend why the young Lord of the Manor had not received the ministrations of a priest; it was an insult to their pride and training; the whole community could suffer through this flagrant violation of Church regulations etc. All of this I learned from the doctor. Anyway, the jaunting car was made ready, and after shutting the dogs in the front hall and locking the entire house, I set off on my distracting mission, first to the Telegraph Office, then to the undertaker; then to the Lord Monkton Estate, where I hoped to secure a carriage suitable to bringing the boy's family from Thurles to the desolate home at Ballinaclagh. The Monktons were very sympathetic and helpful, insisting of my partaking of cake and wine, and offering every assistance in my hour of trial. They

endorsed everything the doctor had warned, which made me somewhat uneasy at the prospect of what might happen before the family could arrive the following day. Getting back to the house, everything seemed normal; the servants, very solicitous and respectful, assured me that no one had come in my absence. They had brought to the door all fuel and food carefully prepared, though they dared not enter, for had not the old Family Curse been revived? Had not the eldest son died before he was old enough to inherit? That curse had to be exorcised from the house by the priest before they dare cross the threshold — and they were sincere from their point of view. Finding everything just as it was left, I kindled a bright fire in the grate, made a good meal of the delicacies brought to the door, personally closed the steel window-shutters and doors and, being very tired and weary, sat and smoked my pipe in front of the fire, trying to see through my difficulties. From time to time, the dogs (apparently sleeping) would rise up and growl, as though someone from outside were trying to enter; the death-like stillness of the countryside made every sound seem ominous, more especially to one whose nervous system had been strained. Finally, however, selecting a loaded repeating rifle, I retired to my bedroom with the dogs. Throwing myself on the unmade bed after opening the windows, I allowed exhaustion to wrap me in deep sleep. Some hours later I was awakened by the dogs jumping from the bed and growling at the window; listening, I could hear men's voices outside, then, as alarm stirred me, I found myself, rifle in hand, standing at the window, below which I could dimly see two men in black capes, talking, alongside a jaunting- car from which they had evidently just alighted. In my half-wakened condition, and in the hazy impression that I alone must save and protect the house in which my pupil lay dead, the impulse to open fire on the apparent intruders made me raise the rifle; one of the dogs barked and someone called from below "Is that you, Fisher? this is Dr Sellet".[5] The rush of emotion at the thought of what might have happened, and the tremendous relief of knowing that it was a friend, was almost overpowering. Lighting a candle, I hurried downstairs, unbarred and opened the bullet-proof door. We built up the almost-extinguished fire, shared some refreshment and started in to discuss conditions. It was then about midnight. He told me how he felt about my staying alone, and the possible disturbances, and so he decided to hire a 'rig' and come to my rescue. I had to tell him how close I had come to losing my reason and using the rifle. Hour after hour passed as he told me of the existing feeling between landlord and tenant, and more definitely aimed at land-owners such as Mr Scully, who had in their eyes become a heretic in forsaking the form of religion to which the country at large professed allegiance.[6] He told me of the bitter struggles that had been waged some 10 years previously, when, on more than one occasion, Mr Scully had been the target of would-be assassins who in their ignorance thought they were justified in ridding the countryside of an "Undesirable" He also explained the local belief that an Evil Spirit haunted the Estate, and especially the House. He told how the original mansion had been burnt to the ground some 20 years before, in retaliation for imaginary grievances, while the owner was away.[7] Apparently, he was familiar with the family's earlier history, which dated back some hundreds of years to one of the five Kings of Cashel, dauntless and unafraid.

Fables, tales and tradition had made it difficult for the Natives to condone a change in religious allegiance.[8] And thus the night passed without actual sleep, except that restless slumber while reclining in our chairs. At 7 a.m. our fuel was replenished and breakfast delivered 'at the door'. At 8 o'clock, Lord Monkton's carriage arrived to take me to the station at Thurles, while the doctor remained to await our return. At the railway station, the boy's mother and her sister stepped from the train and were led to the carriage, and we drove the seven miles though pouring rain. It was my duty to tell the grief-stricken mother the meagre facts (as known to me) of her son's death.[9] Arriving at the house, we were met by Dr Sellett. After an informal lunch in picnic style, we completed arrangements to have the boy's remains prepared to be taken to London for burial. We were to leave on the midnight train for Dublin. The rainstorm was followed by the brightest and warm sunshine, and when evening came, we had dinner served out on one of the beautiful lawns, where the servants could give customary attention to the needs of the household.[10] While sitting out in the twilight, a blazing haystack was observed, we could see the outline of persons moving; then in

another direction a second stack was seen to be on fire, and then another, until five separate stacks were ablaze. Dr Sellett explained that this was only another effort on the part of the superstitious to destroy the dreaded Evil Spirit. All of this only made us all the more anxious to get away from such bigotry, intolerance and prejudice. How glad we were that Mr Scully did not have to be there! We reached London the next evening. A few days after the funeral, Mr Scully, referring to the death of his eldest son, said to me "Of course, it was a shock, though not altogether unexpected." Then he related to me the story of the curse laid upon his family generations before. It seemed to me very strange how his belief in an Evil Spirit was practically the same as that of the burners of his haystacks. How difficult it is to change the conceptions of one's childhood!!

And thus ends Ed. Fisher's story of the death of William John Scully. Soon afterwards, William Scully took him with him to Nebraska, where he was appointed an assistant to one of Scully's agents and spent the rest of his life in the States.

Footnotes

1. The Scullys always knew that the Irish version of their name was O Scolaidhe, so obviously Fisher picked the name up from his employer, though the aspirated 'd' was beyond him. There is no evidence that Denys Scully or William ever used it.
   Ballinaclagh, like many townland names, turns up in various spellings. Fisher himself spells it two ways. The standard version today is Ballinaclough. There was no stone mansion there. Denys lived at first in the old family home at Kilfeacle (where William was born in 1821) and in 1822 built a mansion at Mantle Hill near Golden, which could certainly be described as a "stone mansion"..
2. William had been apprenticed to his cousin Nicholas Sadleir in Dublin to become a solicitor but became a landowner himself in 1843 when he received Doniskeagh townland in the family settlement which followed the death of James Vincent (he had already received Ballinaclough in his father's will). It is a curious fact that the previous generation had witnessed the premature death of a son and heir when Roger Scully, eldest son of James Scully of Kilfeacle, aged 18, had been killed by a fall from a horse outside Thomastown Castle in March 1799, thus making Denys the new heir. Perhaps some memory of this event coloured the Family Curse story.
3. William had received a further accretion of land in 1857 when his brother Thomas had died suddenly in Cork, leaving him Rathmacan in Co. Kilkenny.
4. Fisher's memory is playing him false here. His memories of August must refer to the previous visit in 1894. The official death certificate makes it clear that William died on June 19 1895, so the second visit must have been very short.
5. The Death Certificate was signed by George Russell M.D. and this is confirmed by Guy's *Postal Directory of Munster* 1894, which lists him in Cashel.. There is no trace of any Dr Sellett, though the similarity of the names makes Fisher's lapse of memory understandable.
6. William Scully was, like all the Scullys, brought up as a Catholic; indeed he had two sisters who were nuns. He seems to have become a member of the Church of Ireland some time after the death of his first wife. Family tradition has it that one Sunday at Mass in Golden the priest criticised his conduct towards his tenants. The following Sunday he put all the family in a carriage and drove them to the Protestant church. He was a man of violent impulses.
7. The house at Ballinaclough looks as if it was built around 1860. The stone farm buildings nearby are obviously much older and belonged to whatever farmhouse stood there before. The site was previously occupied by a tenant farmer named Bergin, who had 65 acres I.P.M. in the Tithe Applotment book but only about half that in Griffith's Valuation. William Scully was charged with the attempted murder of the two Bergin sons in 1849, but acquitted. Whether the original Bergin farmhouse was burnt is impossible to say, but it is quite possible. Arson was a favourite weapon in rural Ireland.

8. There is no evidence whatever that the Scullys were ever Kings of Cashel, or indeed of anywhere else, and no record that the people around ever thought so. Fisher would seem to be repeating stories he had heard from his employer, rather than from the doctor himself. Certainly, William's father Denys made no such claims. Writing in 1806 about the arrival of the Scullys as tenant farmers to the new Cromwellian owners around 1660, he says; " Whether they had lost any estate, farm or other property in any other county at an earlier period, or whether they ever had any to lose, is more than I know, but such had been the convulsed state of Ireland, and such the spoliations of land, that the thing is possible enough, if of any credit or consequence now." William in America seems to have played the Ancient Milesian Family for all it was worth, being known to the newspapers, perhaps ironically, as 'Lord Scully'.
9. The death certificate signed by Dr George Russell gives the cause of death as "4 days serious gastric attack , 6 hours cardiac failure". This fits in well with Fisher's description, although the boy's illness may have lasted rather longer than he remembered.
10. It should be explained that the kitchen, as with many such houses, was situated in a service wing attached to the back of the house and not in the house itself. Hence, meals could be cooked and delivered to the back door of the house without actually entering.