

An account of the burning of Ahascragh Church - by Ethel L. Dillon
July 20 - 24. 1922.

At breakfast at Clonbrock on Thursday morning, July 20th, Mama, Aunt Katie, Georgy and I were laughing about a letter which Aunt Katie was to write to "The Morning Post", describing all the local outrages she had heard of lately under the title of "A month's visit to the West of Ireland" when the door opened suddenly and Edie appeared, looking white and shocked.

Mama jumped up saying "What's the matter, what has happened?" "I am afraid a dreadful thing has happened, but no one is hurt. The Church has been burnt down." She went on to tell us, that she and Willy had been called as usual at 7.45. A few minutes afterwards the housemaid came back to tell them that O'Donnell, coming to work, had seen the Church was burning, the Vestry still smoking. In 20 minutes, without bath or breakfast, she and Willy were well on their way. The walls were still standing, but the roof and windows were gone; it was a question only whether the tower could be saved. O'Donnell had been sent back to tell the Rector, who with Smith, was there before them. Castles had hurried ahead on his bicycle with a minimax, but as the Church was far beyond the aid of minimaxes, he went back to Castlegar. The frame of the door between Tower and Nave was burning at the top corner. Willy filled the watering pot, which Edie keeps in the Churchyard, with water from the small tank and so put out the flames, saving them from spreading to the interior of the Tower. Smith produced a bucket and Mr. Townshend ran home for another. There was a good deal of smoke coming out from under the few slates which remained where the Nave joins the Tower. Willy, Mr. Townshend and Smith got the ladder from the back of the Church and Smith with a hoe pushed down the burning slates and poured the buckets of water with which Mr. T. and Willy supplied him. It was not very easy to get water, as hot slates were falling round the tank and onto the steps. Meantime, as Edie could not do anything further to help, she started to walk to Clonbrock, stopping to ask Elliot to go and see if he could help at the Church. No one in Ahascragh showed any interest or desire to help.

At 10.45 Edie, Robin and I went off to the Church. We found the Tower was safe, though still smoking at the angles, the walls scorched and blackened remain, with the stone work of the windows more or less intact. The roof had fallen in. Of the inside, so hot that one could hardly enter, there remains nothing. Only the lowest base of the pulpit and font remain, together with the inscription over the door of our transept and that over the Golden Wedding door, though in the latter the arms and one supporter have fallen. The inscription beneath the left Mosaic is there, that on the right is a good deal damaged, but all that is left of the beautiful Mosaics themselves, are some tiny fragments of coloured glass among the debris on the ground. The plaster and all the tablets

on the walls of the Nave are gone, of the reading desk and organ no trace remains. It was impossible to go inside as the debris on the ground was burning still and hot slates were still falling from the walls, so that one could look only through the doorways and apertures of the windows.

Willy, who had been to breakfast at Weston, told us that he had written a telegram to be signed by Mr. Townshend, to the Rep:Body, saying the Church had been burnt, and asking for instructions. (Later the answer came, to apply for compensation through the local Solicitor.) Allen and Luke came to the Church, the former bringing Edie and Willy the news that, during the night, the garden at Castlegar had been broken into, the greenhouse badly damaged, and the grapes cut down. Finding that there was nothing to be done Robin and I returned home. After Robin and I left, Willy thought, the smoke coming from the North junction of the Tower and Nave looked rather threatening, so Smith and Patterson, who had bicycled over, knocked off slates and threw water on it - as had been done on the South side. Patterson and Smith also put out smouldering fires on the eaves of the Transept Porch. Edie and Willy left about 1. o'clock, Smith stayed on guard all day, till about 8.30 and Patterson with him for a long time, to keep people away, who in spite of the pouring rain, attempted to come in,

The next day Edie sent a note asking Georgy and me to help her pick out anything from the remains that might be useful; so we spent the afternoon turning over the still hot slates, collecting bits of iron, nails and anything that we thought people might steal. At the same time we looked for the remains of the lectern and the brass erected to Charley's memory - but even digging down to the flooring there was no trace of either to be found. The floor of the Nave, having been flagged in the centre, appears about 1 foot higher than on either side - they had been boarded; the Chancel was about 2 feet higher still but the whole is covered with the remains of the fallen roof, broken slates, charred wood and portions of ridge tiles. Along the length of the Nave lie the two iron girders, which had supported the roof, still quite hot, and the bent and twisted circles of the Candelabras, and the metal foundation of the painted text from over the Chancel arch, complete the picture of ruin.

Edie told us of the fright she and Willy had had the night before. They had gone to bed early, tired from the day's work, when, just as they had put the light out, they heard the Church bell ringing. They at once thought that the Rectory had been set on fire and Smith was ringing for help. Listening at the window, they heard shouts and calls and drunken laughter. When after a few minutes the bell ceased altogether, they decided that it was not a call for assistance and by midnight all was quiet.

Next morning they heard that directly Smith had left, at 8.30, a crowd of people had gone to the ruins perpetrating fresh acts of desecration. To prevent this happening again, the bell rope was removed but still, that night the place was

invaded again, the remains of Pulpit and Font were knocked down and empty cigarette packets were found.

On Friday evening at Castlegar, Willy read out Mr. Mahon's list of the contents of the Church; the value of each item was discussed with Mr. Townshend. The whole claim for compensation amounted to £ 9500. It had been insured for £ 5400.

Father Shanagher called on Mr. Townshend on Thursday morning, as soon as he had heard of the destruction, and said all that any man could say. He, Mr. Conaughten, Mrs. Callaghan and others in the parish have written very nice letters to Mama. She has also received innumerable ones from people who have read of the outrage. Mr. Townshend said he had received the greatest respect and sympathy from the people of the village.

On the following Sunday, July 25th, the Service was held in the Weston School house. Mr. Townshend chose special Psalms 74.79.46 and for the Lessons, Isiah 40, 1-12 and John 14. We sang one Hymn unaccompanied, Hymn 504 "Lead us, Heavenly Father, lead us." He then gave the following address:

'I do not propose to preach a sermon this morning, but to voice a few of the thoughts which I am sure are in the minds of each one of us. I take as my text Ps. 26.8 "lord, I have loved Thy Habitation, and the place where Thine Honour dwelleth". We little thought when we read together the familiar prayers of our Church Service last Sunday, that this awful and overwhelming catastrophe would befall us, that in a few hours our beautiful Church, to which we were bound by so many ties of affection and memories, would be destroyed by a band of wicked men. It is, as I said before, an awful and overwhelming catastrophe, one which we never looked for or expected, though we knew for some time that the lives of some were in danger - there was no law, no order, no protection -, still, we never expected that it would come to this. We are as yet almost stunned by the blow and it is only as the days go by that we shall realize to the full, what we have lost. As the sense of shock lessens the sorrow will increase. Personally I know, I feel it more and more each day. It was a beautiful little Church, I suppose a gem among all the small Churches in the United Kingdom, filled with memorials to those who are no longer with us, who worshipped in it in the days that are past and who are dear to you all. We all know we have lost something, some more, some less, and our sympathy, I say, goes out to each other and especially to one whose name has been immediately on the lips of all who have spoken of it, one who for so many years worshipped there, who for so long has earnestly laboured for it's welfare, and who so generously beautified it. As to those who perpetrated this deed, they will in all probability never be brought to man's judgement, they will certainly never receive the punishment they deserve, but we know that God hates this sin even more than we do, and in His hands we may safely leave them. He will give us

His aid to raise ourselves through this calamity, if we do so, we shall be the victors, they the vanquished, we shall be stronger men and women and shall be enabled to face the future with clear confidence and serenity. One thing we know that wherever we worship God, whether by the roadside, or in this building, we have His Presence with us and that sense no one can take away from us, certainly not these men for they do not know that it even exists.

I hope that this terrible disaster will draw us together, that we shall stand together, that we shall meet here for services, with even greater regularity than we have sometimes in the past. I should just like to say this, that on both spiritual and on material grounds we should all say as little as possible about what has happened to those who differ from us. I hope that we shall all stand firmly together and so help each other to bear our overwhelming loss in confidence and serenity. I cannot say more - my heart is too full.'

After the address Mr. Townshend prayed that 'we all, our homes, and all that we love may be shielded from danger, that the remains of our Church may be kept from further desecration, and that this little building may be preserved for our use.'

On the following Sunday, July 30th, Mr. Townshend preached from the text "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you." John 14-18. He began his address by saying 'Last Sunday I spoke of what we had lost, to-day I propose to speak of what we have not lost.' After giving a short description of the three Temples at Jerusalem, each of which was destroyed, he explained how to the Jew his Temple was his faith, the centre of his life and hope, so when destruction came, it was to him, as if his nationality was also destroyed. It was the outward and visible sign of his faith. But as we look on it now, from this distance of time, we see how, though the symbol was destroyed, the reality remained. So now to-day, the lesson is clear to all of us. The symbol which was so dear to us, has been taken from us, but we still have that reality. Though the House of God has been destroyed, yet the Presence of God is with us still, a reality, which no man, however wicked, can take from us, if only we ourselves are ready to perceive it.'

On the morning of Saturday, August 1st, Edith, Ursula and George went to the ruins with Mr. Orpen, Architect, who had come to inspect them and to value the loss. On digging about among the debris near where the Chancel steps had stood, they found lumps of twisted brass and some of the ivy leaves, evident remains of the brass Lectern, near this they also found lumps of charred paper, parts of the Bible which had stood on it, they could read a few verses from 2. Kings, of course, on touching it, it all fell to pieces.

On September 29th, the case for compensation was heard at the Ballinasloe Quarter Sessions and subsequently the Recorder gave a decree for

The Building	£ 6.200
Fittings and Furniture	£ 1.950
Architect's Fees	<u>£ 510</u>
	£ 8.460

The Architects decided that the walls were not fit for building upon. The Recorder also awarded £ 70 for Mr. Orpen's expenses in preparing plans, etc. for the case and his journey to Ballinasloe.

Mr. Townshend asked the Bishop of Killaloe if he could get us a grant of £100 from the Beresford Fund in order to make the Weston School House more suitable and comfortable for our Services. The Bishop saw the Primate who said the Fund was closed for the year, but sat down and wrote a cheque for £ 100 and handed it to the Bishop. The announcement of this grant was made by Mr. Townshend, at the Morning Service of Sunday, October 22nd.

Appendix:

- Ethel Dillon = Youngest daughter of Lady Clonbrock
Mama = Lady Clonbrock, aged over 80
Aunt Katie = Hon. Katherine Dillon, aunt of Ethel
Georgy = Hon. Georgy Dillon, eldest daughter of Lady Clonb.
Edie = Hon. Lady Mahon, nee Dillon
Willy = Sir William Mahon, Bart. of Castlegar
O'Donnell = Yardman, Castlegar
Smith = Sexton of the church
Mr. Townshend = Rev. George Townshend, Rector of Ahascragh
Elliott = E.B. Elliot, The Mill, Ahascragh
Robin = Lord Clonbrock, Son of Lady C.
Allen = Nanny at Castlegar
Luke = Luke Mahon, aged 5
Patterson = Chauffeur at Clonbrock
"Charley" = Charley Dillon, 1st cousin of Georgy, Robin
and Ethel, killed in the South African War
Ursula = Ursula Mahon, aged 16
George = George Mahon, aged 11
Castles = John Castles, Butler at Castlegar
Father Shanagher = Parish Priest of Ahascragh -
When he heard the news, he is said to have
exclaimed "God may forgive them - I never can."
Mr. Mahon = George G. Mahon Esq., of Weston, Ahascragh,
1st cousin of Willy