

The Killegar Archive: a Leitrim treasure

Martin Morris

The Killegar Archive, comprising the papers of the Morgan and Godley families, of Killegar, Carrigallen, is now available to the public in Ballinamore Library following the completion of a major archival project. The papers are on loan to Leitrim County Library from the Killegar Estate and they constitute a most important collection of archives relating to the county.

The archives span a period of more than three hundred years, with the earliest items dating from the mid-seventeenth century. They document many aspects of the lives, properties and business interests of family members and include leases, deeds, wills, some

'Old John' Godley, c. 1860
COURTESY OF SUE, LADY KILBRACKEN



Illustration of Killegar House from the 1985 edition of The Leitrim Guardian by Des Braiden, a contributor to earlier editions of the Guardian

rent books and account books, and voluminous correspondence.

The collection had accumulated in Killegar House over successive generations of the family and in recent years some organisation of older papers had been undertaken by the Ballinamore-born academic Dr John Logan and Dr Anthony Malcomson, formerly of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. The work recently completed by Leitrim County Library, with part-funding from the Heritage Council, involved the arrangement, description and storage in archival-quality folders and boxes, of the whole collection, including the extensive papers of the late John Godley, 3rd Lord Kilbracken, who died in 2006. The project was possible because of the agreement and co-operation of the Godley family.

The Morgan & Godley families

The Killegar estate was originally the manor of Craigstown, which

consisted of 2,784 Irish acres. In 1734 it was bought by Richard Morgan, a successful Dublin merchant and land agent, for the sum of £5,626-8s-4d. A deed of 5 May 1734, prepared in connection with the sale, is amongst the papers. Another item in the collection is a rent book prepared by Morgan himself in about 1750, which includes details of his lands and tenants.

The male line of the Morgan family died out in due course and the estate passed to the family of Richard's only daughter Mary, who had married Rev Dr William Godley, rector of Mullabrack, Co Armagh. However, it took years of litigation before the Godley claim on the property was established, at which time John Godley (1775-1863), the grandson of William and Mary, took charge. Known in the family as 'Old John', it was he who built the present Killegar House, completed in 1813. In that

year he also married Catherine Daly, whose father Denis had been a leading Galway landowner and a member of Grattan's Parliament. 'Old John's' work on the estate was lasting: he planted trees and built the church, the school and school-house, two gate-lodges and some houses for tenants.

John's eldest son, John Robert (1814-1861) was an International statesman with an interest in colonisation of new territories. He went to New Zealand where he founded the province of Canterbury, with its capital city of Christchurch. However, he died two years before his father, leaving his young son John Arthur (1847-1932) as heir to his grandfather's property. In those circumstances, 'Old John' decided that a younger son, Archibald, should have a twenty-year lease of Killegar and its home farm, with rent going to Arthur. In the long term, Archibald's lease was renewed annually and it eventually passed to his daughter, Anna.

Arthur resented his grandfather's decision to lease Killegar and he never visited his ancestral home again. He developed a distinguished career in Britain, serving as private secretary to William E Gladstone, Liberal prime minister, and afterwards as permanent Under-Secretary of State for India for twenty-six years. On Arthur's retirement in 1909, he was elevated to the peerage and took the title Baron Kilbracken of Killegar.

Following Arthur's death, his son Hugh (1877-1950) succeeded as the 2nd Lord Kilbracken. Hugh's wife was Helen Monteith Hamilton (known as Betty a name she chose for herself), daughter of the artist

Vereker Hamilton and niece of General Sir Ian Hamilton. Hugh, Betty and their three children, John, Katharine and Wynne, visited Killegar in 1927 and thereafter, they went there regularly. 'Cousin Anna' (1865-1955) was then living in the house as a non-paying tenant, and in 1936 she and Hugh agreed that he would move in, while she took a smaller house on the estate. Anna was a traveller and a keen photographer. Many of her glass plate negatives were deposited in Leitrim County Library prior to the main collection of family papers.

Having tried to live at Killegar, Hugh decided there was no future in the property, so he went back to London and placed the house and 420 acres on the market. At the time of his death in 1950, his heir John Raymond Godley (1920-2006), who became the 3rd Lord Kilbracken, was travelling to New Zealand for the celebration of the centenary of Christchurch. He resolved to retain his ancestral

home and so began his commitment to Killegar, which ended only on his death in 2006.

The late Lord Kilbracken had a long, varied and at times colourful career during which he was a wartime pilot, journalist, author, adventurer, active member of the House of Lords and a farmer who tried to make Killegar a viable concern. He wrote for newspapers including the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express* and the *Sunday Express*. Amongst his many books were *Bring Back my Stringbag*, recounting his war service; *Van Meegeren: Master Forger*, a biography of Han van Meegeren, who forged Vermeer paintings; and *The Easy Way to Bird Recognition*, the first of a trilogy of books on birds, trees and wild flowers, published in many languages for which he received the *Times Educational Supplement Book Award*.

Kilbracken travelled widely and covered some major events, at times in dangerous conditions.

Lord Kilbracken interviewing Saddam Hussein in Baghdad on the day Iran invaded, July 1982 COURTESY OF SUE, LADY KILBRACKEN





Lord Kilbracken with his son Sean

PHOTO:

Accompanied by his son Christopher, he reported on the civil war in Yemen in 1962. In 1982, while in Baghdad to interview Saddam Hussein, a new phase of the Iran-Iraq War began, and he was able to send a

series of telexes to the London Times which recounted events as they unfolded and Saddam's own reaction to the situation.

Much closer to home, Kilbracken supported the campaign for civil rights in Northern Ireland and highlighted the position of Republican prisoners. Famously, he returned his medals to the British government in protest at Bloody Sunday in 1972 and at that time he also took Irish citizenship.

The Importance of the Killegar Archive

The Killegar Papers are significant on many levels. They are remarkable sources for the history of a landed family and document aspects of the history of the estate and

those who lived on it. Therefore, they are important to local and family historians. But they have much broader value: John Robert, his son Arthur and Arthur's grandson John Raymond, had lives with international dimensions. The larger part of the collection is composed of the papers of the late Lord Kilbracken, whose biography has yet to be written. The survival of so much documentation, especially correspondence, is a testament to his own meticulous approach to his affairs, and that care enables researchers now and in the future to examine the life of a remarkable man.

The Killegar Archive may be accessed via the local studies department of Leitrim Co Library, Ballinamore, Tel: 071-9645582. Rialtas na hÉireann

READ ABOUT LEITRIM & THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

Fergus Mulligan

Atlas of the Great Irish Famine

John Crowley, William J. Smyth, Mike Murphy (editors)

Cork University Press, 2012,

€59, available in all public libraries.



"The people of Connacht suffered most grievously during the Great Famine", says one of the contributors to Atlas of the Great Irish Famine. This magnificent publication, a large format 700 page hardback by a host of authors, covers every aspect of the Famine and includes a 10 page section by Gerard Mac Atasney on Leitrim: "In the Shadow of Sliabh an Iarainn" and "Mohill Union Workhouse".

It contains letters, reports of destitution and the humanitarian work of the Quakers, photos of Famine roads, maps of the Leitrim Poor Law Unions and a poster for Cloone Soup-Shop. Most chilling is a statistical table from Mohill Workhouse from April 1847 showing it held 659 inmates and of those 40 had died the previous week.

My great-great-great-great-grandfather, John Logan, was born in 1842, 3 years before the Famine began and lived at Tullywanna on the side of Sliabh an Iarainn. It occurs to me that if he had succumbed to starvation or dysentery as so many others did, I would not have been born, nor would my mother, nor my brother and sister, nor our Logan relations nor indeed my three children.