

Senior Category

The Monument, Lixnaw

Eoin McElligott, Gaelcholáiste Chiarraí

The monument in Lixnaw has been a subject of fascination for years. In my lifetime it was featured on calendars and in stories. Built by the 20th Lord of Kerry and destroyed in the mid-20th century, it has been a source of controversy and preoccupation all through and after its lifetime.

The story behind the monument goes hand in hand with the story of the Fitzmaurice family. Once dubbed the Royal Family of Kerry, they were powerful landlords with a vast estate spanning 90,000 acres in Kerry. This is bigger than Dublin City's urban area. Over hundreds of years from the 13th to 16th centuries they maintained their colossal estate and power. The ancestral home of the family was in the Old Court in Lixnaw.

The story of the monument begins with William Fitzmaurice, the 20th Lord Kerry. He built the monument as a burial place for him and his descendants. Perched at the top of the hill near Lixnaw, the imposing fortress-like building was a stark reminder of the power the family wielded. William Fitzmaurice was buried in the monument and he was succeeded by his son Thomas. Thomas, a fiery character, came to be the pinnacle of the family's success. He served on the Privy Council in Ireland and was created Earl of Kerry on 17 January 1711. One of Thomas' grandsons (who went on to serve briefly as Prime Minister in England), didn't have a nice word to say about his grandfather. He noted that he was a "tyrant" and "inflexible". When Thomas died, he requested to be buried in the monument, but was instead interred in Kiltomey Cemetery.

Thomas' descendants left Lixnaw and the Old Court fell into disrepair. The 2nd Earl of Kerry was buried in the monument but slowly, over time the family's link with Kerry became more and more faint. Thomas' grandson, Francis Thomas, 3rd Earl of Kerry was an extravagant character and married an equally extravagant, much older woman. Their carelessness, along with the controversy of their marriage, was to blame when Francis sold off most of the estate in Kerry. He "sold every acre of land that had been in the hands of the family since Henry II". Only a few acres around the monument and the Old Court are all that remained. "The house of Lixnaw is no more."

Although the family quickly fell from dizzying heights of power in Kerry, the monument survived as a reminder of the family's past wealth. The tower was 40 foot tall and had four-foot-thick walls. The tomb was 15 foot in diameter.

The monument continued to overlook the village until the 1950s. The economy was not in good shape and many people lived in substandard conditions. Many people were forced to emigrate from Ireland, leaving behind their families forever. According to CSO statistics, Ireland's population fell in the 50s and 60s. The Irish population fell 26,000 from 1961 to 1971 through migration alone. The population of Ireland fell 142,252 between 1951 and 1961. Under Seán MacEntee, Minister for Finance, the Feale Drainage scheme came to fruition. From Dáil records, the minister was asked questions regarding how many men would be employed in the project. The project was created to employ people in North Kerry and to improve the land quality. The collateral damage of the project in Lixnaw was the unfortunate demise of the Monument. Under Sections 51 to 57 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, buildings and structures of special historical interest are protected against being destroyed or altered in any way without special permission. If the Monument survived to today it would almost certainly be part of the thousands of protected buildings in Ireland today. Unfortunately, during the 1950s none of these protections were in place, leaving the Monument vulnerable. The limestone quarry was blasted out of the limestone hill in 1958, and with it went almost over 250 years of history. Kerry County Council dynamited the Monument and Kilibanane Hill. The dynamite originally did not explode at first due to dampness, but new cables were sourced and the Monument fell in September of 1958. The project created long-term employment and a source of stone for road building for the North Kerry area but at the cost of a fantastic piece of well-preserved history.

In conversation with my grandparents, John and Mary McElligott (March 2021), I asked them about their memories of the Monument in its latter years. The memory of the monument is still ingrained in the minds of some residents of Lixnaw today. When the subject was brought up in the kitchen of their house the reaction was still one of anger and disgust. "It should never have happened", was the reaction of my grandmother referring to the demolition of the Monument. My grandfather who has lived within sight of the original site described in detail his memories of the Monument, saying there was an opening in the Monument's walls where sheep would get through for shelter. He said he used to travel to school by walking up the hill the Monument was built on. He also went through the gap in the walls and described a spacious chamber with "a place for a candlestick". He helped verify the identities of several written accounts I had come across during my research. He also verified that a family of Behans lived in a house near the Monument, possibly relatives of the inspiration behind the story of gold.

In the present day, the monument has continued to have an impact on people's fascination. The few photographs of the monument have appeared on calendars and books scattered in kitchens around Lixnaw. Locals have been pushing plans to rebuild and recreate the monument in the newly constructed park which has been

built as a part of an Irish Water project. This recreation of the Monument would be a reminder of Lixnaw's past as the seat of Kerry's aristocracy. 63 years on, there is still work to be done to remember this piece of Kerry's history that is rapidly fading from living memory.

References:

- Caball, K. (2020) *The Fall of the Fitzmaurices*, North Kerry: North Kerry Literary Trust.
- duchas.ie. (n.d.) *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0399, Page 212*. [online] Available at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4626325/4613566/4658746> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2021].
- duchas.ie. (n.d.) *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0411, Page 306*. [online] Available at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4666594/4665146/4667976> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2021].
- duchas.ie. (n.d.) *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0411, Page 030*. [online] Available at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4666593/4664869/4667036> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2021].
- duchas.ie. (n.d.) *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0411, Page 045*. [online] Available at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4666593/4664884/4667109> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2021].
- duchas.ie. (n.d.) *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0411, Page 028*. [online] Available at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4666593/4664867> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2021].
- duchas.ie. (n.d.) *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0410, Page 279*. [online] Available at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4626325/4613566/4658746> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2021].
- Historical Tralee and surrounding areas. (2020) *Historical Tralee and surrounding areas* [Facebook], 3 Feb 14:35, Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/HistoricalTralee/posts/2607180226195933> [accessed 6 March 2021]
- National Archives of Ireland (1901) *Census of Ireland 1901* [image online], Available at: www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/naio00879942/ [accessed 9 March 2021].
- Redmond, M. (2003) 'Ireland in the 1950s', *Irish Times* [online], July 28, Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/ireland-in-the-1950s-1.367718> [accessed 9 March 2021]
- Population change and historical perspective* (n.d.) cso.ie [online], Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/Chapter_1_Population_change_and_historical_perspective.pdf [accessed 9 March 2021]
- Tithe an Oireachtas (2021) *Dáil Éireann debate- Thursday, 26 June 1952 Oral Answers-Employment on Brick and Cashen Drainage Scheme* [online], Available at: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1952-06-26/19/> [accessed: 17 March 2021].
- Woulfe J. (2020) "Locals plan to rebuild 50ft monument near Kerry village", *Irish Examiner* [online], 14 July, Available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/munster/arid-40015436.html> [accessed: 17 March 2021]
- Planning and Development Act 2000*, No.30/2000, s.51-57, Dublin: Irish Statute Book.