Senior Category The Monument, Lixnaw

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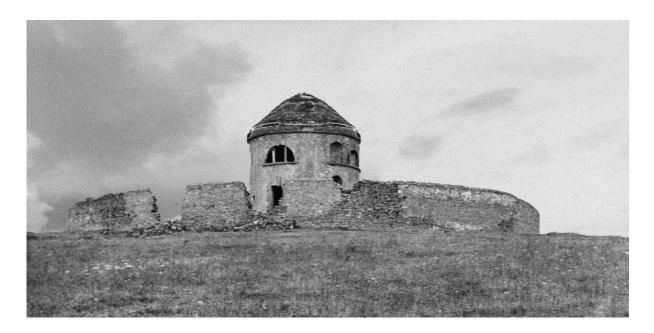
The monument in Lixnaw has been a subject of fascination for years. In my lifetime it was featured on calendars and in stories. Built by the 20th Lord of Kerry and destroyed in the mid-20th century, it has been a source of controversy and preoccupation all through and after its lifetime.

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, Lixnaw, with thanks to John Knightley.

The monument stood on a hill 70 feet above the rest of the fields in the area. While it stood it became the subject of many stories and folk tales. The story that became a fascination was a rumour of gold in the monument. There are written accounts of several men telling a story of gold in the monument. All the stories are variations of the same folktale. The story goes that one of the Fitzmaurice lords left a crock of gold buried in the monument, supposedly for safety. Another version states that robbers were being pursued and buried the treasure in haste. The various accounts all allege that two men called Tom and Michael Behan went in search of this treasure. It is said that they were chased away by a big black bull. There is a census form from 1901 with a Michael and Tom Behane mentioned from the townland of Monument, who may be the inspiration behind this story. Another account states that the family persisted in looking for this treasure and that one man even died trying. Some suspect the family did find the treasure as they were an extremely wealthy family and that the wealth they had was from this treasure. The treasure was said to be 5,000 gold pieces in a box. There is very little evidence that these stories are true, but it highlights how central to community life and storytelling it was.

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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.

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