

THE MURDER OF ALICE McCLORY

BY TIM FERRISS

On a Sunday morning in October 1928, pretty Mary Fontaine staggered from a house in Northbrook St, Liverpool, blood streaming from a number of neck wounds, crying, "Save me – save me!" She collapsed in the roadway as neighbours rushed to her assistance. Frantically she pointed in the direction of the modest house where she lived with her mother. On entering the house, a neighbour found Joseph Clark standing in front of a mirror calmly combing his hair in an upstairs room. In the sitting room upstairs lay the dead body of Mrs Fontaine, mother of the injured girl.



The McClory Family home in Drumsallagh.

"Never in all my three hundred-odd murder trials have I encountered so amazing a personality as this twenty one year old Don Juan. I have met many murderers before their arrest; I have talked with some of them in the death cell after conviction; but never have I happened upon one who displayed so uncanny a presence or so unusual a demeanour as that revealed by Joseph Clark throughout the police court proceedings and his subsequent trial – the shortest I have ever attended – which only lasted four and a half minutes from beginning to end." wrote an anonymous journalist present at Joseph Clark's trial for the murder of Mrs Alice Fontaine, mother of Mary, on October 28, 1928.

Mrs Fontaine had been born Alice McClory in June 1874, the third daughter and sixth child of Peter McClory and Mary Anne McClory who married on January 31, 1860. The McClorys were farmers at Drumsallagh as well as owning a public house in Loughbrickland on the site of what is now the Doctors' surgery on Main St. Alice's elder sister, Isabella became the third wife of Bernard Murphy of Killysavan, on September 15 1910, and stepmother to his four children Sarah Ann, Peter, Bernard (Barney) and Eugene. Barney Murphy Jnr. and his sister Sarah Ann feature later in this story, providing a home for Edward Fontaine, Larry Geary and Christopher Geary, all three being the children of Mary Agnes Fontaine, the

daughter of Alice McClory. (Barney Murphy, until his death in 1980 had worked as a farm labourer around the Fourtowns and was a notable character around Poyntzpass.)

Alice's older brother Peter lived in a house known as Iveagh Lodge in Loughbrickland on the site of what is now the NISA store. A holy water font in the porch of Loughbrickland chapel was dedicated to the memory of 'Peter McClory of Drumsallagh' in 1925 *'by his wife Maggie'*.

Alice herself was baptised on July 8 1874 (we do not have a record of her precise date of birth) and it appears that she left to go to Liverpool before the 1901 census, probably to work in a wholesale business which her brother ran in Liverpool. In 1904 she married Edward Alexander Prosper Fontaine, probably of Belgian extraction, who died in 1921. They had three children; Peter Charles born in 1905, Edward Louis in 1907 and Mary Agnes in 1909.

As the title indicates, Alice McClory Fontaine was murdered on Sunday, October 28 1928, aged 54 in her own home at 110 Northbrook Street, Liverpool where she was living with her daughter Mary Agnes, aged 19.

The other main character in this story is Joseph Reginald



Alice Fontaine at age 46 and daughter Mary aged 11 Years.



Mary Fontaine and Joseph Clark from newspaper coverage at the time of the murder.

Victor Clark born on February 6 1908 at Hilgay, Downham in Norfolk. His mother was Mary Riches and his father was Frederick Clark, a seaman. They separated soon after the birth of their son. The mother went to America where she settled in Virginia and took up with a new man, Harry Rosen. Joseph's grandmother, Susanna Clarke at King's Lynn, brought up Joseph who went to school at All Saints Elementary there. In the report of his schoolmaster he was described as "normal, of above average intelligence, especially in English and Science, and *'fond of discussing topics only expected from older boys.'*"

On leaving school Joseph was employed for a short time as an errand boy in King's Lynn. His mother sent him his fare to America so he travelled to join her in Virginia. At or about this time he appears to have attended Princeton University. He subsequently boasted that he had studied psychology and hypnotism at Princeton but given his age at the time which would have been approximately 15, and what we know of him subsequently, greater reliance can probably be placed on the alternative version which is that he was employed at Princeton University as a pantry boy but may well have taken part in experiments with hypnotism while employed there. We know that he had a row with Harry Rosen, his mother's new man, who predicted that he "*would come to a bad end.*"

In 1923, when aged 15, Joseph Clark returned to the UK. He set up as a partner in a wireless business in King's Lynn but soon engaged in his first criminal activity by causing a fire at the business premises and subsequently making a fraudulent claim on the insurance. He opened another business but later absconded after obtaining three pounds and five shillings on foot of a worthless cheque. He went to London where he again obtained money under false pretences, by advertising for sale wireless sets which did not exist.

On September 14 1926 he appeared at Wealdstone Petty Sessions under the name of Bertram Vincent where he was convicted of two charges of false pretences. Ten other similar offences were taken into account and he was sentenced to six months hard labour. On February 21 1927 he appeared at Marylebone Police Court under the

name of Reginald Victor Rosen and was fined 40 shillings for travelling on a train without a ticket. In April 1927 he moved to Southampton and was again in trouble with the police over selling wireless sets which did not exist, and was summoned for breach of the Business Names Act.

In Southampton he took up with a Miss Hilda O'Toole by purporting to be interested, as she was, in art and literature. He was at the same time associating with another girl in Southampton, a Miss Stella Brown. It appears that he continued to correspond with those girls and that one or both of them provided him with money.



The bedroom and sitting room of the house at 110, Northbrook Street, Liverpool, the site of the murder and attempted murder.

In late 1927 he transferred to Liverpool where he lodged with a Mrs Janet Behrman at 124 Chatham Street. She had four daughters and Joseph Clark excelled himself by courting all four daughters of the house simultaneously without apparently any one of them being aware of the attentions being paid to the others. He planned to marry Hilda, the youngest, who was however under age, but he sought to overcome that difficulty by stealing a birth certificate of one of the older girls. Thus armed, he gave notice of marriage to the Registrar at Birkenhead. Hilda's mother remarked on the ring Hilda was wearing, which Hilda declared

Joseph Clark had given her. However, her mother identified it as being a ring which had gone missing from her own jewellery box. The upshot was that Joseph Clark was given his marching orders.

However, he did not go quietly. He attempted to strangle Hilda when she was alone in her own home, saying "If I can't have you, then nobody else shall." The fortuitous arrival of a friend at the house saved Hilda. No report was made to the police at the time of any of these matters. The deal seems to have been that if he would go away and leave the Behrman family alone they would not make any complaint against him to the police.

It is appropriate to note here that Joseph Clark does appear to have had a way of charming the girls. A journalist at the time who had made his own investigations wrote:

"Many other girls in Liverpool and elsewhere also had good reason to regret their association with the debonair Clark, alias Kennedy. I managed to trace some of them and learned from their own lips how he seemed to exert a hypnotic influence over them once they came beneath his spell. "I used to find myself tired and sleepy when he looked into my eyes," one told me. "Somehow I could not resist him and would do anything he suggested. I gave him money whenever he wanted it and was on the point of leaving home to go off with him when he transferred his affections to another girl."

Had he hypnotic powers? I do not know for certain; I only know that he boasted of possessing them, declaring that he had studied hypnotism when he was a student at Princeton University in New Jersey... I have been able to give but a glimpse into the character and personality of 'the man with the hundred sweethearts.' Maybe that total is in excess of the actual number of girls Clarke duped, betrayed and robbed but that he courted them by the score and exercised a fascination over them which would seem to support his claim to hypnotic powers, cannot be denied. I talked with well over a score of girls and even middle-aged women who spoke of his irresistible charm."

On February 4 1928 Joseph Clark signed on with White Star Steamship Company in Liverpool for three months as an assistant pantry man on the SS. Regina. He wound up in Halifax, Nova Scotia where he fell in with another lady, Lillian Forewell, with whom he subsequently conducted correspondence as we shall read later.

On his return to Liverpool on June 6 1928 he again signed on as an assistant pantry man, this time on board the SS. Baltic. Three days before departure on this trip he met Mary Agnes Fontaine one afternoon when she was sheltering from the rain at the corner of Granby Street in Liverpool. By her account he passed by, stopped and came back, so as to seek shelter alongside her. At this time she was formally described as a "typist by occupation" and that she "belonged to a highly respectable family."

From this point we are following the story as told by Mary Agnes Fontaine in her subsequent statement of evidence made on November 13 1928. That statement begins:

"I am a shorthand typist and 19 years old. I live at 110 Northbrook Street, Liverpool." She went on to recite that she lived with her widowed mother who supported herself by letting out rooms in the house, and with the financial help of her eldest son, Peter Charles, Mary's eldest brother, an accountant in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. She says she first met the person known to us as Joseph Clark while sheltering from the rain; and that "He told me he went to sea and that before parting he asked me my name and address which I gave to him. He asked could he come and see me and I told him he could come and see my mother."

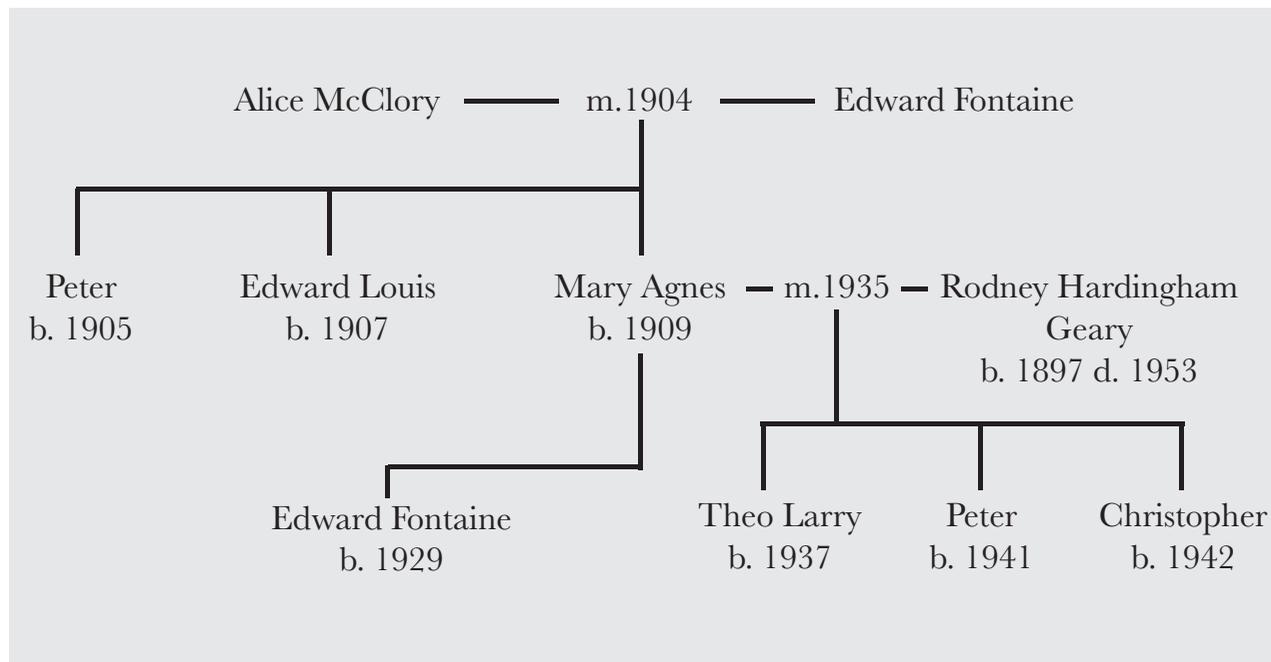
He came later that same day around 7.30 pm. She introduced him to her mother and he stayed about two hours. He said he was staying at the YMCA, and that his name was Reginald Kennedy – Mary said she never knew him by any other name. (In the interest of clarity, I will continue to refer to him as 'Clark'). He told them that he was a wireless operator on the SS. Baltic. He asked could he call again and was told he could. The following Friday he called and stayed till about 11.00 pm when he said he was sailing the next morning at 8.00am and had nowhere to stay. In consequence Mary's mother, Alice invited him to stay the night which he did.

The next day he left the house late with no luggage. At 5.30 pm he reappeared saying he had missed the ship. Because he said he had not much money he was allowed to stay on at the house over the weekend. One way or another he managed to get staying on in the front room at the house until September 27 1928 when Mary's second brother Edward arrived home from sea and needed the room. Despite securing a room at 106 Harrowby Street, Joseph called at the Fontaines every day.

Around this time he seems to have gone to Carnarvon in Wales, from where he wrote letters to Mary six or seven times a day, and she wrote back to him. She received communications purporting to be from a Dr. Scott indicating that 'Reginald Kennedy' was ill and needed Mary to come and look after him. However, Mary recognised the handwriting as that of Joseph Clark!

Clark had asked Mary to open any correspondence that came for him and so she read a letter from Lillian Forewell in Halifax, who clearly from the content of the letter, expected Clark to be returning to Halifax to marry her. Mary forwarded this to Clark together with her own letter telling him she wanted nothing more to do with him. Up to this stage it is clear that Mary had a fondness for Clark; he had told them that he was educated at Princeton University and that his mother was wealthy. He called Alice "Moma", Mary "Boofie" and they both called him "Teddy Bear." Mary had fallen in love with

Fontaine Family Tree



him and her mother had consented to their marriage “when he got a decent position.”

At this time Clark had been taking instruction in the Catholic faith from a Father Trainor at St Bernard’s Church in Liverpool. However, Fr. Trainor assessed him as “being an adventurer with no sincere religious intentions.” Clark owed Alice Fontaine rent and also owed money to Mary. Clark’s response to Mary’s letter telling him she wanted no more to do with him was to continue sending letters and to tell her he was returning to Liverpool whereupon, as she says, “My mother sent me to Belfast to try to get me away from him.” On her arrival there she came to the Killysavan/Poyntzpass area to her aunt’s people, the Murphy family.

On her return to Liverpool, however, Clark continued to focus his attentions on her. She and her mother met him outside the White Star office on October 8 1928 where he asked Mary to give him another chance. He continued to phone and call at the house though Alice asked him not to. Alice made a formal complaint against him to the police which led to a Det. Sgt. Tomlin coming to the house when Clark was present to give him a warning to stay away. The Det. Sgt. warned the Fontaines of the nature of Clark’s character. Clark interpreted all this as an attempt by Tomlin to supplant him in the affections of Mary Fontaine.

Clark announced that he was getting a ship on Friday October 26. He saw Mary every day for the previous week. However, he did not embark on a ship on the Friday, “They would not accept my discharge book.” On Saturday October 27 Mary wrote to Clark and received four letters at half hourly intervals from him which she

threw in the fire. However, she met him after midday and he declared he was embarking on a ship that night and that he would write.

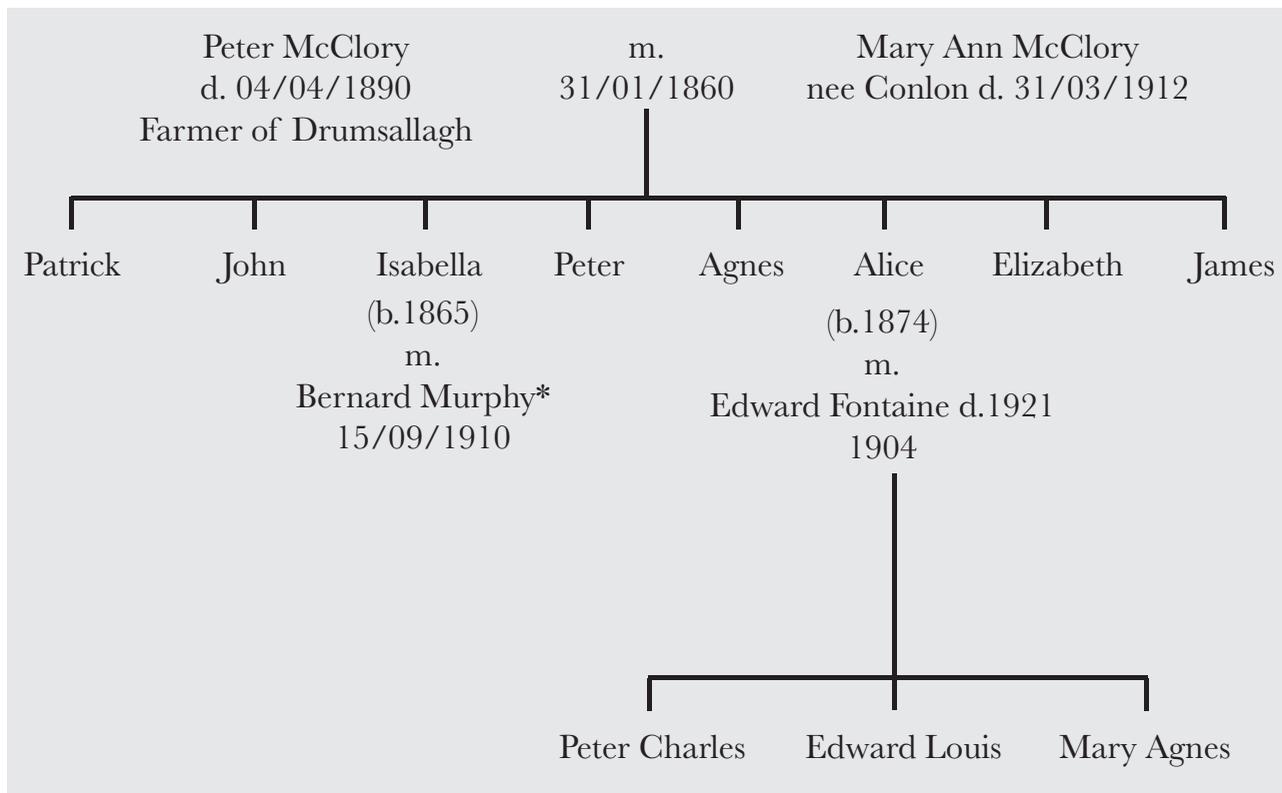
On the morning of Sunday October 28 Mary said that Clark came into the kitchen of their house, fell on the sofa and declared himself ill. Her mother told him to pull himself together or she would fetch the police. He requested that he speak privately to her and Alice took him upstairs to the sitting room. She came down a few minutes later, made a cup of tea and returned upstairs. Mary says that was the last time she saw her mother alive. She herself went upstairs to get ready for church. Someone, whom she thought was her mother but instead was Clark came to the bedroom door. “I want to speak with you”, he said, coming into the room and shutting the door. “You know how much I love you and that is why I am going to do this.” He put his hands to Mary’s throat – “I managed to call, “Mother, Mother” and he replied, “You need not call your mother because I have killed her.”

A violent struggle ensued. Mary passed out momentarily. When she came to she found a cord round her neck and Clark was pressing something like a blade to her neck. She wrenched it from him but he pulled it out of her right hand cutting her thumb. He pulled the blade across her throat.

What followed would sound funny were it not so serious. Mary said that they were both exhausted, that they sat upon the bed and Clark said, “Oh, what have I done to you?” “Oh you have not done anything, Teddy Bear. Let’s go and find Mother.” Clark replied “Oh, you must not go because I have killed her.”

Mary said she got up and made good her escape from the

McClory Family Tree



house to the street where passersby came to her rescue. Police and ambulance were summoned. Mary had stitches in her throat and thumb. Her son, Larry Geary, says that subsequently she explained the scars on her throat to the children by saying that she fell on the beach and a broken bottle cut her. Clark himself appeared in the street and remained on the scene. The police found him combing his hair in front of a mirror in the house.

Clark wrote to Mary while she was in hospital. It is the only first hand document we have from Clark and perhaps gives the closest indication of his character. It shows a man of intelligence, articulate, with the ability to express strong feelings. He had a realistic view of what had happened and the likely consequences for himself. The letter expressed his love for Mary, without the selfishness one might have expected from a man with his history of fraud and philandering. His plea for forgiveness might be interpreted as self centred but that would perhaps be unduly cynical. He seemed a man who craved love and affection, who could not deal with its loss. His reaction to losing Mary Fontaine’s affections was similar to his reaction at losing those of Hilda Behrman, one of the four sisters previously mentioned.

The police inquired before Clark’s trial about his sanity and received opinions from Mary Fontaine; Alfred and Clara Bayliss, his own aunt and uncle; Dr. Drummer from King’s Lynn; his old schoolmaster, Mr. Davison; and Drs. Douglas and Ahern from Bedford and Walton

prisons respectively. All considered him ‘normal’, ‘quite sane.’ Four persons from King’s Lynn described him as ‘abnormal but without being insane.’ When the police contacted his parents at this stage both of them declined to have anything to do with him.

Joseph Clark appeared at Liverpool Police Court on the charge of murder the following day, Monday October 29. In the statement he gave to the police an hour after the murder he explained...” (Mrs Fontaine) was saying *I should get a job and make a home for Mary. I can’t tell what happened but suddenly I put my hands on her throat and threw her over the arm of the chair. She screamed and I pressed her throat good and hard for about a minute. She stopped breathing...Mrs Fontaine and I had grown unfriendly because I could not pay my way. She had been good to me and had tried her best to help*



Barney Murphy and his sister Sarah Anne.

J.C. 18

NOTE. No payment in part satisfaction of the sum adjudged to be paid by a prisoner. In order to obtain the remission of a part of his imprisonment, can be made on a Sunday, or on a week-day, before 9 a. m. or after 4 p. m., but the total amount of fine fac. may be paid at any hour before the opening of the prison at 10 p. m. or on any day. No part payment can be accepted in the case of a prisoner committed by a County Court.

In reply to this letter, please write on the envelope:-
 Number 5945 Name L.R. Bleske
J.R.V. Clarke Prison
W. Va. Prison 1928
Livingston

Dearest Girl:
 I hardly know how to begin this and I hardly know what to say. Somehow I seem to be trampling on sacred ground in addressing you tho I have never ceased thinking of you. It would seem an empty mockery to say how utterly sorry I am, but even tho the words seem empty I am sorry. Oh my dear what have I done to you I love? Whatever drove me to such terrible things I cannot think I can give no reason. In your heart I suppose you judge me; and condemn me; how can I defend myself against

No. 24. (16436-25-5-25)

and when you come in contact with it be strong in your will and keep your soul unscathed by always thinking sweet things and having noble aspirations. Dearest woman, it is not for me to preach - but it will keep me happy to know that my Baby dear will always be the same sweet lovely girl. Perhaps I am no more your Teddy Bear, God knows I do not deserve to be, but I shall always think of you as I lie before: and it would make me very glad if you will write to me a little and let me know directly from your dear hands just how you are. If you will write to me, dear, I should be very happy and it would be good to know how my Baby dear is and if she could forgive Her Teddy Bear; and if she will utter a few prayers for him when she prays. This, it will help him to become a better

Teddy Bear

Part of the letter written from prison by Clark to Mary Fontaine.

me...I realised what I had done and tried my utmost to raise her and place her in a chair to help her recover...in my arms she murmured "Teddy Bear, I am dying. You must always take care of your Boofie."...My sole thought now was that I was done for and that I would never have Boofie and that rather than have her fall into the clutches of that hell fiend detective I would kill her...a sort of frenzy in my mind...I crept downstairs and took a knife ... slipped it in my overcoat pocket. In Miss Fontaine's bedroom I asked her if she still loved me. She replied, "You know me, I always will." I said to her, "I have killed Mother and because you turned me down I am going to kill you too." I gripped her by the throat; she screamed and struggled fiercely. I tied a piece of electric light cord round her throat and she began to gasp like her mother. Suddenly I realized I was killing her and tried to bring her to. She screamed and I cut her throat. She seemed to go under for a time but recovered and took my hand and said, "You know I love you. Why have you done all this?" I said, "I thought you meant to give me up." To which she replied "I love you still, let us go and see mother."



Edward Fontaine In 1970 (Approx.)



Mary Fontaine

At this Mary Fontaine managed to exit the bedroom and get to the street.

In the attacks upon both women Clark seemed to reach a point where he regretted what he had done and sought to retrieve the situation. His words to Mary Fontaine were similar to what he had said to Hilda Behrman in the previous year, *“If I can’t have you, no one else will.”*

Joseph Clark’s trial took place at Liverpool Assizes before Mr. Justice Finlay on February 3 1929. Clark refused to plead insanity or to have legal representation. He pleaded guilty to the murder of Alice Fontaine, an unusual course of action when the only possible sentence was execution. The entire proceedings lasted approximately four and a half minutes.

Despite his plea of guilty, an appeal was lodged and heard on February 25 1929 in which Clark withdrew his confession of guilt on the grounds that his reasons for such a confession rendered it invalid, namely that he did it to shield Mary Fontaine from enduring his trial, that he was not insane and that he had wanted to hasten the course of justice. The appeal failed. Joseph Clark was hanged at Walton Jail on March 12 1929 at 8.00 am.

Mary Fontaine gave birth to their son, Edward on or about July 1929. In 1935 she married Rodney Hardingham Geary who had been educated at Blackrock College, Dublin. They had three children; Theo Lawrence born in 1937, Peter in 1941 and Christopher in 1942. Larry and Christopher live in England.

Larry (Theo) has recalled that he and his older brother Edward were sent as war refugees to stay with Barney and Sarah Murphy (first cousins of their mother, Mary) in their cottage on the Fourtowns School Road, Killysavan. Edward went to the Abbey Grammar School in Newry and Larry, with his younger brother Christopher who must have come over later, went briefly to Fourtowns Primary and then to Poyntzpass school.



Peter McClory Memorial in St. Patrick’s Loughbrickland

Larry related that Edward had joined the RAF and subsequently ran hotels in Kenya and Australia, as well as being a press photographer. He died from a heart attack aged 44 in 1973 in Australia.

Mary Fontaine, now Geary, lived on in Liverpool. When her husband died in 1953 she bought a house in Warrenpoint but never lived there. She became a carer/companion working in different places including the Channel Islands, London and Kent. In the early 1970s she died from cancer.

Larry Geary has said that he had known nothing of the murder of his grandmother or the attempted murder of his mother until approximately ten years ago, when he was traced by somebody who was doing research into the murder.



Larry Geary (On Left) and his cousin John Murtagh.