

# THE ALEXANDER FAMILY OF ACTON HOUSE

BY BARBARA BEST

In 1847, Robert Quin Alexander of Acton House, Poyntzpass, received the following letter from John Temple Reilly of Scarvagh House, Chairman, on behalf of the members of Loughbrickland Famine Relief Committee.

*Sir,  
We cannot in justice to ourselves allow the Loughbrickland Relief Committee to be dissolved without conveying to you our strong feelings of gratitude for the untiring exertions with which you laboured among us during the last winter for the relief of the poor and afflicted in our Parish.  
Your property not lying in this neighbourhood must prevent our regarding as by any means a common case the kind feelings which urged you to such exertions at so great a cost of time and trouble – many under similar circumstances would have considered themselves quite exempted from such claims, while you on the contrary*

*devoted yourself with indefatigable energy to the providing of funds for the relief of the poor and destitute in searching out those whose wants were most urgent and often times to ministering with your own hands to their necessities.*

*We cannot by these or any other expressions which we can use attempt to recompense such services nor would you, we are sure, wish for any recompense, except that one which so far exceeds every other and which you may already enjoy - the blessing of an approving conscience, the prayers of the poor and needy and the favour of him who has said "It is more blessed to give than to receive."*

In a copy of Alexander's reply dated 31<sup>st</sup> August 1847 found among papers in Acton House, he refers to

*"the greatest cooperation of all, (on the committee) who, laying aside every difference of creed and politics, worked together cordially for the greater good..."*

The Relief Committee, of which John Temple Reilly was Chairman, had been set up in an effort to alleviate some of the hardships being suffered by the poor from the famine which was endemic in the area. The committee, which was drawn from all sections of the community, included William Fivey of Union Lodge and representatives of all the churches in the district. While one might think from reading the letter that the committee's work was done, this was not the case, for an outbreak of cholera in October that year led to the death,

among others of Rev Bernard Mooney Catholic Curate of Aghaderg one of the Relief Committee's members.

## **So who was this Robert Quin Alexander and how did he come to live in Acton House?**

The Alexander family, one branch of which made Acton House their home in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had their roots in Scotland and came to Ireland in around 1613 in the wake of the Plantation of Ulster. The family members, who were to gain such prominence nationally and internationally over the years, could trace their ancestry back to one 'John Alexander of Gunsland, Co. Donegal and Ballyclose, Co. Derry', who rented lands from Sir James Cunningham in 1613. Sir James, of Ayrshire, had acquired extensive lands in 1610 as part of the Plantation and, as an 'Undertaker' was made responsible for allocating the lands to chosen settlers who would work to make the Plantation a success.

In this case his judgement was vindicated for the

Alexanders were diligent and energetic. They prospered and branches of the family rose to prominence in all aspects of national life, particularly the Church, commerce, politics and military matters, in the course of the next century.

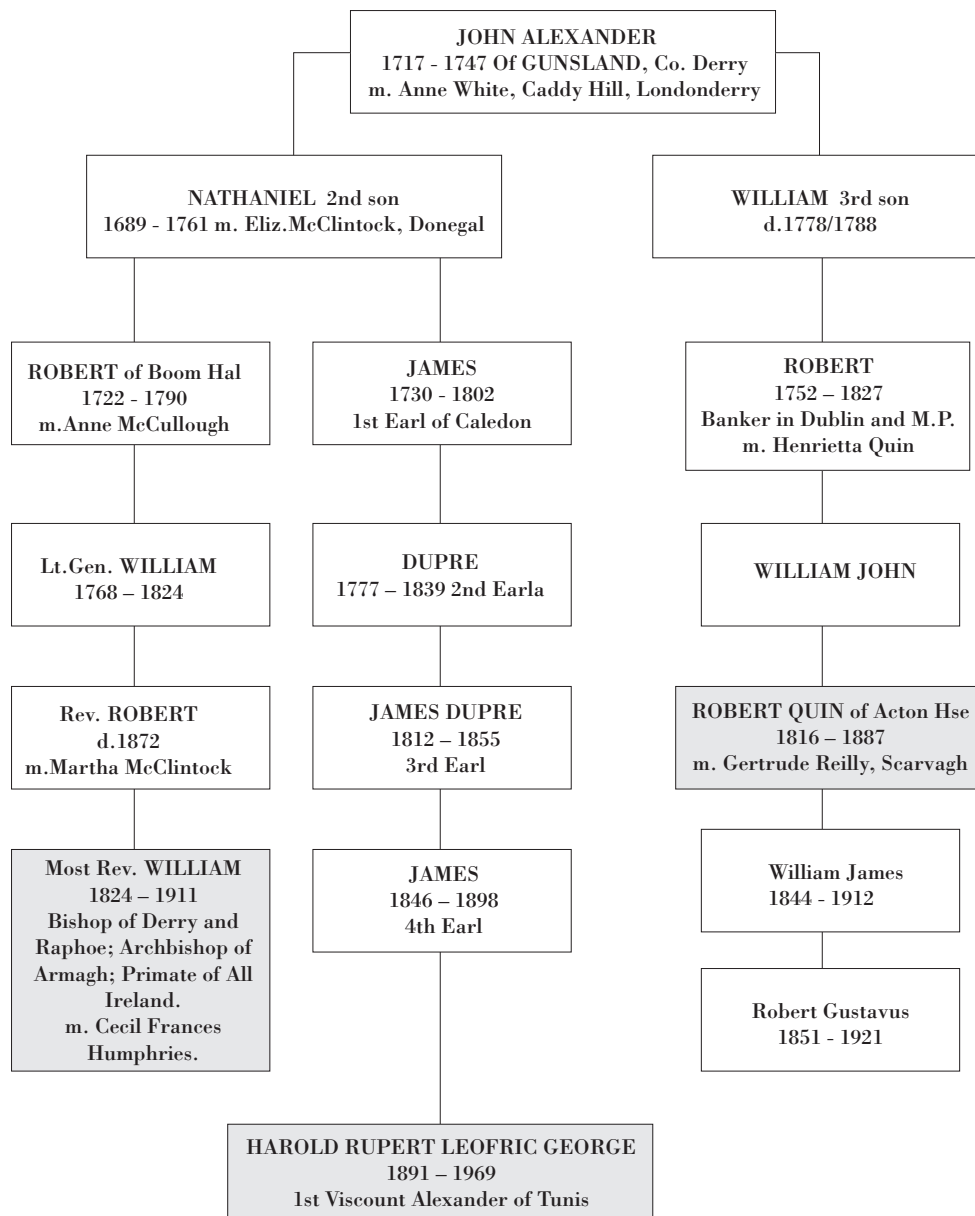
One descendant of John Alexander's was **James Alexander** (1730 -1802). He joined the East India Company in 1752 as a merchant and company official, and quickly amassed a fortune, which he himself estimated at £500,000. When he returned to Ireland from India in 1772, he bought an estate at Moville, Co. Donegal, and Boom Hall near Derry, which he re-built. In 1775/76 he bought the 9,000 acre Caledon Estate for around £90,000. Caledon in its turn was re-built and in 1800 he was created **1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Caledon**.

Other branches from the family tree include that of **Archbishop William Alexander** (1824-1911) who

married Cecil Frances Humphreys. While the Archbishop wrote and published poetry, it was the hymns written by his wife, including '*Once in royal David's city*', '*There is a green hill far away*' and '*All things bright and beautiful*', which have retained their place in public popularity.

Field Marshal Harold Rupert Leofric George Alexander, (1891-1969) appointed **1<sup>st</sup> Earl Alexander of Tunis** in 1952, was another scion from the same root. The 3<sup>rd</sup> son of the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Caledon, H.R.L. George Alexander managed the British 1<sup>st</sup> Army in North Africa and Italy after which he was created 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Alexander of Tunis in 1946. He was the last Governor-General in Canada during the years 1946 – 1952, and was appointed Minister of Defence in Churchill's last government 1952-1954.

## Extract From The Alexander Family Tree





*Archbishop William*

ROBERT QUIN ALEXANDER of Acton House was the son of Robert Alexander a wealthy banker with a large estate at Garristown Co Dublin. Robert had married Henrietta Quin the daughter of Henry Quin of Dublin, (from whom his son's middle name is derived). Robert Quin's grandfather was also called Robert, and he too was a banker in Dublin. He was MP for Dingle and later for Newtownards, and acquired an estate of over 2,000 acres at Garristown, Co Dublin, where he assumed the title "Lord of the Manor of Garristown."



*Alexander of Tunis*

In February 1840, in St. Nicholas' Church in Galway, Robert Quin Alexander married Gertrude Harriett

Reilly, daughter of John Lushington Reilly of Scarvagh House, Co Down, and Louisa Hancock Temple, daughter of Gustavus Hancock Temple of Watertown, Co. Westmeath. (Both the *Gustavus* and *Temple* names reappear in the next generation.)

Soon after their marriage, Robert Quin Alexander and Gertrude became tenants in Acton House. Both Robert Alexander and Maxwell Close (then owner of Acton House) were members of Dublin's Sackville Street Club, and their acquaintanceship there may have facilitated the arrangement.

The couple had seven children, five girls and two boys. While their eldest child Louisa Gertrude was born in Co Westmeath the other six were born in Co Down or Co Armagh, probably at either Scarvagh House or Acton House.

#### THE CHILDREN OF ROBERT QUIN AND GERTRUDE ALEXANDER

Louisa Gertrude	1841 – 1933
William James	c.1844 – 1912
Mary Temple (May)	1847 – 1937
Fanny	1850 – 1935
Robert Gustavus	1851 – 1921. Major.
Gertrude Isabella	1855 – 1930
Anne Elizabeth	1860 – 1901

Robert maintained a presence at Garristown. In Griffith's Valuation of 1846, he is listed as landlord of c.2,500 acres in Garristown and in 1850 he was appointed Sheriff of Co. Dublin, his address being given as Ashbourne, Garristown. He served as sheriff for one year, the sovereign's judicial representative in the county.

Griffith's Valuation of Co Armagh in 1855 shows that R. Q. Alexander was the tenant of a house and buildings in the townland of Brannock in the parish of Ballymore and that his landlord was Maxwell Close.

The present Acton House was built by Alexander Thomas Stewart somewhere between 1775 and 1790, to replace that built by his ancestors in the Poyntz family. For services rendered, Charles Poyntz had been granted 500 acres of land in Brannock in 1609 and there he built "a bawn one hundred feet square, a house of brick and lime for his own residence". He also built a village consisting of twenty four cottages for the English settlers he brought from his home village of Acton in Gloucestershire and in remembrance of his home he named this new village 'Acton'.

In the final decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as well as being occupied building Acton House, Alexander T. Stewart was responsible for the development of Poyntzpass as a village. He granted leases for the building of the new Acton Parish Church (replacing the original built at Acton by Sir Toby Poyntz) and for St Joseph's Catholic Church. He also obtained licences to hold fairs and markets in Poyntzpass. A.T. Stewart had inherited debt from his father's failed project to establish a colliery and quay in Ballintoy. Then, through his own involvement in the United Irishmen and other costly projects, Stewart ran into financial difficulties. He mortgaged his Acton property to Samuel Hanna, a Newry merchant, who



*Acton House*

provided a cash sum and the promise to pay an annuity of £2,000. The terms of the deal were very strictly drawn up so that if Hanna failed to pay the annuity within a certain time after the due date, the property reverted to A.T. Stewart. This arrangement worked well for a time, but in due course, Hanna himself met with financial difficulty. The payment day passed without cash being forthcoming, and had a few more weeks elapsed without payment, Stewart would have been fully reinstated.

Back living close to her mother and father, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, Gertrude Alexander seems to have had no difficulty settling into life in Acton. She was within walking distance of Scarvagh House and the two families made the journey back and forth several times a week, crossing the canal, to take tea, to meet a visitor or admire a new baby. Sometimes they travelled by pony and trap but mostly they went on foot. In the year 1870, they also walked, with great regularity, to Tandragee to visit the Moloneys, to Dromantine to the Inneses, Drumbanagher to the Closes, and to all parts of the neighbourhood.



*Scarvagh House*

However, Alexander Thomas Stewart succumbed to typhus fever, and the property remained with Samuel Hanna. On the death of Samuel Hanna, the property was inherited by his son William who sold it in due course to Colonel Close, Drumbanagher.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, Acton House was leased out, and it wasn't until the Alexander family arrived in the 1840's that the house provided a settled tenancy.

We know this from the 1870 diary of twenty-year-old Fanny Alexander, the middle child of the seven. That diary did not stay in Acton House but found its way back a few years ago.

Some things stand out from Fanny's record of life at Acton House.

One of the most striking things she records is how far the family members walked. *Every* day, unless the weather was *exceptionally* bad, they went for

lengthy walks. Even when the relations and friends visited Acton House they were induced to join in these outings. Indeed, as portrayed by young Fanny Alexander, there is much in their life-style and their polite society that is reminiscent of that described by Jane Austen and there was even a Mr D'Arcy from Wexford who visited Acton House regularly! Both at Acton House and at the Reilly's at Scarvagh House, there were almost always relations and friends visiting and staying. Gertrude's sister Frances lived with her at Acton, and as well as young Mr D'Arcy, there was

Charlie, a Reilly relative from Galway and another cousin, Arthur, who were very regular and popular visitors.

Much use was made of the railway. The relations and friends travelling from further afield came by train to

Poyntzpass or Scarva. For example, one day, Fanny records that “Bob (her younger brother Robert) went to Caledon by the two train. Arthur went with him as far as Scarva.”

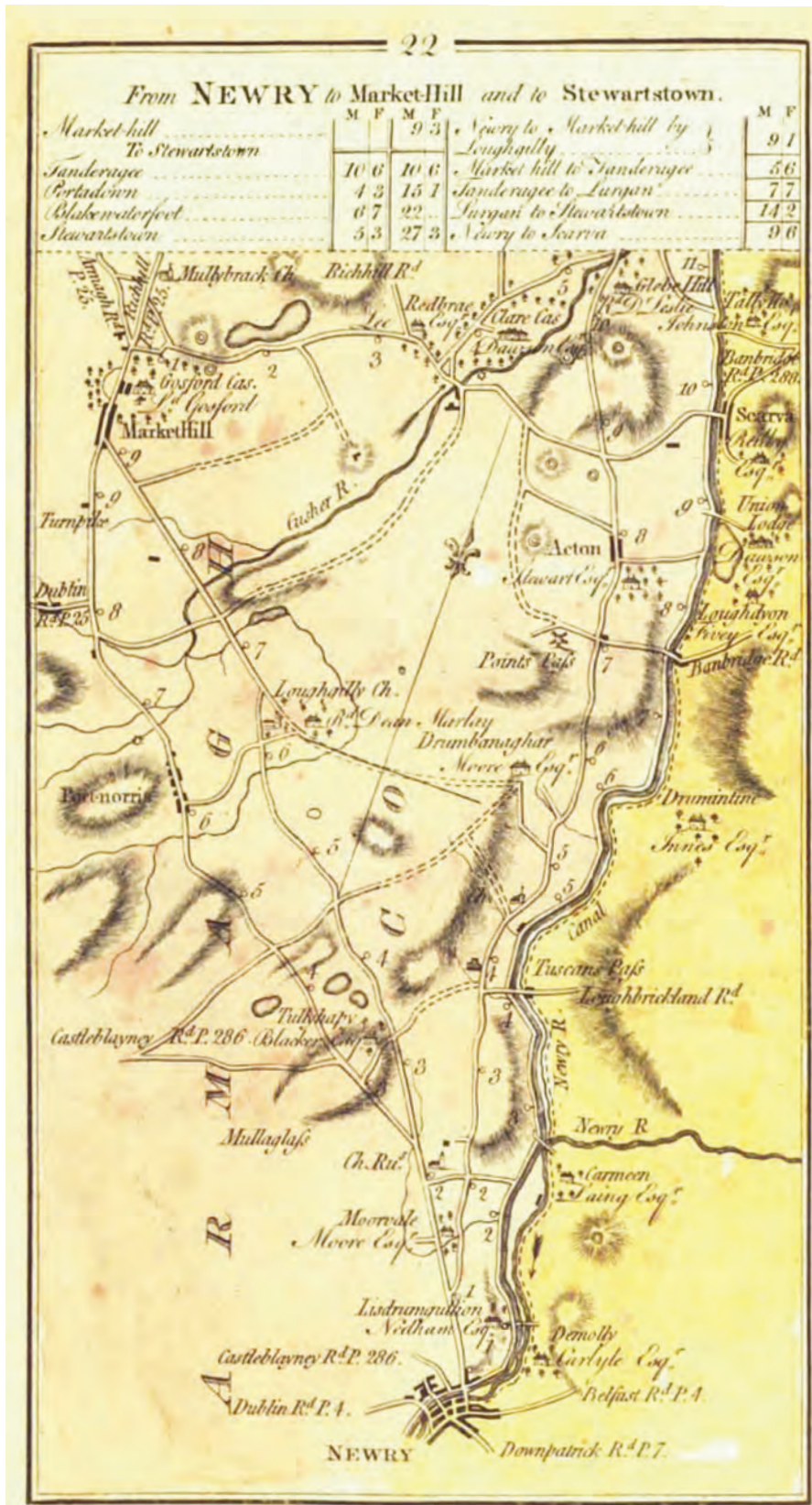
It is striking, in contrast to today, how much time the wider family circle spent together and how much of their time was spent visiting family, friends and neighbours. That was principally the ladies and girls of course. Fanny’s two brothers were busy preparing for successful military careers, while the older men-folk were seeing to business matters. Domestically, there were servants in the house, although from Fanny’s diary, it is sometimes difficult to tell who were servants and who were visitors.

Disappointingly for us, Fanny does not mention food, neither what they ate nor when. Chimney cleaning, however, was a big event. In February of 1870, “the sweeps were here. They swept the kitchen, the pantry, the library, the dining room and the schoolroom.” There were fireplaces in every room from cellar to attic. By way of recreation, ‘rattling’ was a favourite sport and probably a very necessary occupation, both at Acton House and at Scarvagh House. Fanny went ‘rattling’ with her brothers, cousins and sisters. Games featured too, including croquet, and on the same day that the chimneys were swept, Arthur was over from Scarvagh House, and he, May and Fanny “played hide and seek until dark”.

Robert, and his son William after him, served on the select vestry of Acton church, and the household went to church, often twice on a Sunday. Fanny and some of her sisters sang in the choir and attended “Practise” on Saturdays. She describes the singing in church variously as “pretty good”, “very good”, “not very good”... “very bad”.

An item in ‘The Ulster Gazette’ of 12<sup>th</sup> November 1869 reported: “CALEDON ESTATES – R. Q. Alexander Esq., J.P. of Acton, Poyntzpass, has been appointed agent to the extensive Caledon Estates in Counties Armagh and Tyrone.”

As part of his duties, Robert Q. travelled by train to Caledon almost every week, sometimes there and back in a day, more often going for two or three days.



Taylor and Skinner, Maps of the Roads of Ireland, 1777

He also travelled regularly to Dublin, by train from Poyntzpass, Dublin being the social, political and business capital. So, Robert Quin Alexander, former Sheriff of Dublin, Justice of the Peace, community man, took employment as a land agent in 1869 for his cousin in Caledon.

In March 1887 Robert Quin Alexander developed pneumonia and died at Acton House. He was 71. He left effects to the value of £12,884-4-1.

Following Robert Quin's death, his family, friends and relations had a chancel built onto the parish church, complete with large stained-glass window, in his memory. Another stained-glass window was commissioned for the side-aisle by the family when Gertrude died in March 1905 at the age of 89.



**Window in Acton Parish Church dedicated to Robert Quin Alexander**

After Robert's death, his eldest son, Lieut. Col. William James Alexander took on the lease of Acton House.

As the eldest son, William inherited more or less everything. Having achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, William died of heart-failure in 1912. In his will, written just a month before he died, almost everything in turn was left to his younger brother, Robert Gustavus – his sisters were a bit of an afterthought. Of the proceeds of the Garristown lands, mostly invested in Railway Stock, after his brother and sisters' days, the residue was to go to his "connection" Charles Alexander, son of Col. Alexander, late of the 20<sup>th</sup> Hussars. The lands and demesne of Acton were to be sold by public auction - the lease, stock, crops and household furniture and effects, and after debts etc., "share and share alike to his brother and sisters" – except for:-

- James Wilson, his faithful butler was to receive £75
- William John McCullagh £25
- The Reverend Johnston £100 for the use of the church
- his gold snuff box....to Lady Jane Van Koughnel
- and lastly, to the Earl of Caledon, the urn, large tray, four wine coolers and two silver salvers.

As his brother Robert Gustavus was at this time living at Newtown, Straffan, Co. Kildare it seems that William expected the family's time at Acton House to come to an end but however it was managed, Robert Gustavus bought Acton House from the Close Estate under the terms of the Irish Land Commission. With the rank of Major, Robert lived in Acton House with his wife Evelyn Sophia Dubourg for some years until she died in 1917. Robert Gustavus himself died in 1921, at the age of 70, leaving just under £14,000.

Robert Gustavus' executors were a Major Martin Alexander of Winchester, and the Honorable Herbrand Charles Alexander, brother of Alexander of Tunis. Of Robert and Gertrude's children, only two married – Robert Gustavus, as we have seen, and the youngest, Anne, who married the Reverend Charles Leslie Garnett, a widower, then living in Ardrea Rectory, Stewartstown. Anne was 41 when she married. Of Robert Gustavus and Evelyn Sophia, in the 1901 census, their son Robert N. was aged 11 and a pupil in Kildare.

Gradually, the sisters retired to live in Armitage House Newcastle, Co. Down, which was owned by the Annesleys, but all of them returned here at last to be buried in the family plot in Acton Parish churchyard.

In 1922, a year after Robert Gustavus's death, Acton House was sold, this time to my grandfather, Jack Best.



**The Alexander grave, Acton Parish churchyard.**