

ACTON

By **TERRY MURRAY**

THE Irish name for the Acton area is “Curriator” which has been translated as meaning “the tall rock of the swamp.” The village of Acton is situated in a townland of the same name, one of the smallest townlands in this locality.

In former times; the townland of Acton and much of the surrounding countryside, belonged to the O’Hanlon Clan. For over 1,000 years the O’Hanlon’s were lords of Orior with lands stretching from north of Tandragee to the vicinity of Dundalk. Their main stronghold was at Ballymore (Tandragee). Over the years the O’Hanlons had to fight hard to maintain their pre-eminence for there were regular challenges from neighbouring septs such as the McCanns, the O’Rogans and the McCartans. Then there was the increasing threat from the Anglo-Normans from the south.

There was occasional hostility also between the O’Neill clan and the O’Hanlons, particularly as the O’Neills regarded the O’Hanlons as subordinates while the O’Hanlons regarded themselves as autonomous. In 1244 Henry III invited the O’Hanlons to join his army against the Scots. This particularly annoyed the O’Neills and culminated in the assassination of the O’Hanlon Chief by the McCanns of North Armagh.

Throughout the 14th and 15th centuries the policy of the O’Hanlons seemed to be to change sides according to which was in the ascendancy — sometimes on the side of the English, sometimes supporting O’Neill. This was a dangerous policy and while it worked for a long time it meant that neither side trusted the O’Hanlons and the O’Hanlons were left with few loyal friends. At the end of the 16th century Sir Eochaidh O’Hanlon was fighting alongside Sir Henry Bagnal of Newry against O’Neill. Two of his sons however fought on the side of O’Neill at Kinsale, and were forced to flee the country after the battle. Following the “Flight of the Earls,” much of the land of Ulster was taken over for plantation and this included the O’Hanlon territory in Co. Armagh. The official explanation for this treatment of their former ally was that he had “harboured his rebellious son and his wife” for one night in the family castle at Tandragee. His territories were confiscated in 1608 by the Lord Deputy Chichester and in ‘compensation’ Sir Eochaidh was granted a pension of £80 per year for life. In the plantation which followed, the castle at Tandragee and surrounding lands were granted to the

St. John family of Wiltshire while in the Curriator area the lands were granted to Sir Charles Poyntz.

It is not surprising that the Irish resented the ‘planters’ as they were known, who had taken from them lands which their families had owned for countless generations and it is not surprising either that this resentment showed itself in the rebellion of 1641 and also in individual acts against the newly established landowners.

In the case of the O’Hanlons their resistance was closely identified with the famous Redmond O’Hanlon who for many years was the scourge of the rich farmers and landed gentry.

He was the son of Loughlin O’Hanlon. Born near Poyntzpass in 1630 he went as a boy to live with his uncle and half-brother at Terryhoogan near Scarva. It is suggested that he was educated on the continent where many members of his clan were exiled. On returning to Ireland he set about a career as a “raparee” — or highwayman. His activities soon earned him many followers and for many years he led the authorities a merry dance. He was eventually betrayed by his half brother, Art O’Hanlon who murdered him as he slept near Hilltown. He is buried in Ballinabeck churchyard between Poyntzpass and Tandragee.

In 1603 a skirmish known as the Battle of Fenwick’s Pass took place; Fenwick’s Pass being the then name for the area now known as Poyntzpass. The English forces which displayed great courage on this occasion, were commanded by Lieutenant Charles Poyntz. In gratitude Lieutenant Poyntz was awarded 200 acres in the townland of Brannock. Charles Poyntz was a native of Acton in Gloucestershire and when given this grant of land he quickly set about the task of securing it. He built himself a house and brought from his native Gloucestershire, eight families for whom he built eight cottages in the form of a small settlement. In memory of their home he and they called the settlement Acton and the house Acton House. According to a survey of 1611 the following were residents of Acton. (In each case their weapons, if any, are also given).

John Brown, Walter Scot, Thomas and William Wilson (sword only) Christopher Irwin (pike only); John Irwin, John Thompson, William and John Irwin (younger) (sword only); Robert Stevensonne, James Anderson, Roger Wilkinsone, Robert Fryer, John

Richardsonne, Archiball Richardsonne, Christopher Wilson, John Taylor, Richard Cooke, George Vincent, William Elliot and Rodger Williamson (no arms).

Charles Poyntz was High Sheriff of County Armagh in 1613 and was knighted in 1836. He married Christina Puleston sister-in-law of Sir Marmaduke Whitechurch of Loughbrickland and had two children, Toby and Mary. Mary married Francis Lucas of Castleshane, Co. Monaghan and in 1662 came to reside at Dromantine. Toby was High Sheriff of Co. Armagh on several occasions. He and his father were taken prisoner in Newry during the 1641 rebellion but freed when the General Monroe took the town. Toby was knighted in 1666. He built the first Church of Acton in 1684 in what is now known as 'Acton Graveyard.' No trace of this church now remains but in 1838 the Ordnance Survey states that the ruins of the church was built of whinstones and that there was a plaque with the inscription "This church was built at the sole expense of Sir Toby Poyntz, Knt. the son of Sir Charles Poyntz Knt. of Acton Anno. 1684, and dedicated to the Blessed and Undivided Trinity." Sir Toby and Lucas of Dromantine were much involved with the hunt to capture Redmond O'Hanlon and other raparees. Sir Toby died in 1685. He had three children — a son, Charles and two daughters, Sarah and Christina. Sarah married Charles Stewart of Ballintoy, Co. Antrim, while Christina married Roger Hall of Narrow-water Castle. Charles married Lucy Lucas and had a son

Lucas Poyntz who died without issue in 1707. The property was then divided between the sisters Mrs. Stewart and Mrs. Hall, the Acton portion going to Mrs. Stewart. In 1709 Archibald Stewart paid his aunt £4,000 for her interest in 12 townlands locally. The Stewart family remained as owners of the Acton estate until the end of the 18th century.

The last of the Stewarts of Acton was Alexander Thomas Stewart. He was responsible for the building of Poyntzpass village, for which he obtained licences for the holding of fairs and markets. In 1788 a new church for Acton Parish was built in Poyntzpass and in 1792 he gave lands for the building of the Catholic church. He became involved in the United Irishmen, being the Adjutant General for Co. Armagh. He was arrested before the '98 rebellion and took no part in it. In a very short time his estates were sold and he died in the early year of the new century. A portrait of himself and his sister are to be seen in Armagh Museum.

The estate was bought by a Mr. Hanna of Newry who carried out extensive renovations. A traveller recorded that Acton was "extremely neat, the houses all new and well-built with hewen stone window stools and capitally slated roofs; also a malt house and stores on the banks of the Newry Canal, very beautiful scenery an an excellent inn."



Ballinabeck Graveyard—site of Redmond O'Hanlon's grave.



Acton Village with Acton House in the background.

The population of Acton village in 1831 was 257, in 1841 210 (houses 47). Today Acton has a population of 75 (27 houses).

During the American War of Independence, a corps of Volunteers was formed in the area, known as "Acton and Tyrone's Ditches Volunteers." Their commander was Francis Dobbs. A silver medal for skill at arms which was presented to Patrick Kearney by Major Dobbs in 1781, is now in the County Museum, Armagh.

The construction of the Newry Canal which began in 1731 also caused some excitement in the Acton area. The following advertisement appeared in the 'Dublin Journal' for May 1733.

"Whereas the Rt. Hon. and Hon. the trustees of the Tillage Act have given me directions to proceed this summer upon the work of perfecting a navigable canal between Lough Neagh and Newry and have found it necessary to give the following encouragement to such labourers who shall offer themselves for that service. This is therefore to give notice that all such diligent and sufficient working men who shall present themselves at the village of Acton in the Co. Armagh on Monday 20th May provided with one good working tool such as spade, pick, stubbing axe or shovel will be there employed and receive into pay at the rate of seven pence per day, provided they enrol themselves to continue at the said work till the 10th August next, if

so long required and submit to such other regulations as shall be directed for the better carrying out on same, then to be at liberty to return to their respective homes except such labourers shall choose rather to be employed till the season is over.

Note that care will be taken to procure a cheap market at Acton.

Signed Richard Castle

The work on the Canal was hard, the hours were from dawn till dusk and while the pay may seem poor, it was attractive enough to many men who were glad of any job. The "navvies" lived in makeshift huts along the course of the Canal. Many of them gave in to the temptations of gambling or drink and many had little money left to show for their labours.

They worked in teams digging and clearing the channel, or building up the banks. Building and fitting the locks was much more skilled work and not left to the labourers.

Between Poyntzpass and Tandragee a "forest" of trees was discovered at a depth of about eight feet stretching for about a mile of the route. The trunks of many large trees were discovered. Some believed that they were a relic of 'Noah's Flood' but on some there were the marks of an axe and others appeared to have been burned. It was believed that the trees were felled by some earlier people and the bog had grown over them.

The building of the Canal also led to the expansion of Acton Lake (Lough Shark). The bog to the north was drained, as was Loughadian and Acton Lough became the main feeder for topping up the water level in the Canal. The Canal was completed in 1742 when the first barge passed through. The Canal played an important part in the building of the railway 100 years later. The first engine used in the area was transported in parts to the west shore of Acton Lake where a section of track was laid. There it was assembled on the track and used to extend the track to the north and to the south.

There was much woodland around Acton in the last century and some extensive orchards. The 'Soldiers Wood' was cut down during the First World War and the timber transported to Newry on the Canal. Many of the roads leading to the village were lined with trees. Unfortunately most have now gone.

The largest building in Acton village is the Mill. It was built around 1835 by an Englishman who became "financially embarrassed" before the work was complete, and the stone masons who did the building work — Conlons and McCourts from the Connawarry — were poorly paid for their labours. It has been used for various purposes over the years. At one time it was used for drying yarn.

Acton school dates from 1819. In 1835 there were 69 pupils on the roll of whom 35 were Protestants and 34 were Catholics. Colonel Close supported this school to the extent of £5 a year and so the children had to contribute towards the teacher's pay and the upkeep of the building. The original school-house later became the Orange Hall after a new school-house was built in 1843. When a new Orange Hall was built in 1988 the building became a Gospel Hall. During some renovations recently a slate used for the daily roll-call was found.

In 1838 J. Hill Williams in the Ordnance Survey memoirs described Action village as "a poor collection of 55 houses, 4 of which are of two-storeys, 50 cabins and 1 public house."

The public house was owned by John Bell. Another important local landmark was Conlon's blacksmith's forge. The village now has no shop, but over the years there were busy grocers in Acton. Some remembered are William Kelso (around 1880) McKelvey's (1900), James Mulligan (1930). There was also Wylie's and Cloney's and in later years Mrs. Croft and finally Bob Cobain.

Jim Rice the well-known Belfast bookmaker was a native of Acton as was the founder of the large

engineering firm "Tates of Leeds". In sports the Monaghan family brought great honour to the area. Frank was Ulster Shot Putt Champion throughout the 1950s while his brother Pat Monaghan was the first Ulster athlete to win the All-Ireland Decathlon Championship in 1950.



Druminargal House, birthplace of Charles Lucas, V.C.

**"Acton Street beneath your feet
Where the grass does proudly grow
My heart and will are in Acton still
No matter where I go."**

While many locals, will be familiar with the lines quoted above, few will know anything of the author John Quin or of his other works.

Indeed until recently very little was known about his work. By good fortune however a collection of his work was discovered in an old house in Acton village about 12 years ago and while much still remains to be discovered, we have at least some information about him.

He was a native of Acton village and his poems cover the period from about 1840 till 1870 approximately. He appears to have spent all his working life in the employment of a succession of owners of Acton House



Acton House.



Acton Graveyard, site of the first Acton Church.

— Richard Conway Dobbs, a Mr. Quinn of Newry and finally a Mr. Alexander. His employers appear to have valued his work and some of his poems are dedicated to them. When Mr. Dobbs left Acton to live at Castle Dobbs near Carrickfergus, John Quin accompanied him and stayed there for some time. He wrote several poems about his stay there. One note addressed to ‘‘C. R. Dobbs, Esquie,’’ reads:—

‘‘Sir,
I beg to dedicate to you the following sheets — the
artless jingle of a rustic bard — and am your most
obedient humble servant.’’

John Quin

Other poems were first recited at harvest dinners given by Mr. Alexander and the poet appears to have been given a place of honour and on occasion of proposing the harvest toast.

He was married but his marriage appears to have been an unhappy affair as his wife had deserted him taking their son with her. He wrote to her in 1858 begging her to return but seemed pessimistic and whether she returned or not, we do not know.

While he appears to have been an average hand writer and speller, it would appear from the manuscripts that at some time he employed a scribe to copy out and correct his works as some of the manuscripts are beautifully written. There is a local tradition that he was a pupil at the school in Acton village and that a lady teacher there (possibly a Miss Dick) took an interest in him and encouraged his poetical inclinations. It is suggested that she may have been responsible for rewriting the manuscripts for him. One beautifully handwritten cover bears the inscription "The Poetical works of John Quin — First Edition."

His poems are, at least, of considerable local interest and while he often sacrifices 'reason' for 'rhyme' some of his poems display considerable flair and ability. Some of the topics he chooses to write about may appear trivial — the finding of a lost hat, — the destruction of crops by the crows, — but the poet's treatment of his subject is not far removed from the works of Gaelic speaking poets in other areas. He chronicles events of local interest, — the renovation of a house, Mr. Alexander's Devonshire bull, the advent of the first steam thresher in the area — and events in his own life — his trip to Dublin to the Exhibition of 1851, the filling of the Police query form as to his crops and livestock — and his works contain the names of many local people at the time and the occasional informative comment about them.

Whoever reads these lines do not abuse
A countryman I pray excuse
Such joys to me great pleasure yields
I sing of Erin's blooming fields.



The Mill.

MY NAME

There are some curious readers
 Perhaps would wish to know
 I think it fit here to relate
 My name and place to show
 'Twixt Glassdrumman hills and Co. Down
 As you will plainly see
 But a mile from Poyntzpas village
 And three from Tandragee
 Put J to O and H to N
 Let Q and U combine
 And I to N will show the same
 In plain my name you'll find.

ACTON

Acton Street beneath your feet
 Where the grass does proudly grow
 Sure my heart and wil are in Acton still
 No matter where I go.
 Have you ever been to Acton
 That place of great renown?
 It isn't quite a city
 But it's nobler than a town:
 And still there's no Post Office
 And yet there's no police
 For the people live together there
 In harmony and peace.
 And if you want a good strong drink
 Call in with Johnny Bell
 You'll get it in it's purity
 It's taste I knew full well.
 Or if you're out for scenery
 What better could you find
 Than Acton Lough before your eyes
 And the Soldier's Wood behind?
 And if ever I return again
 'Tis to Acton I will go
 For my heart and will are in Acton still
 No matter where I go.

THE ROSE

Ah! blooming rose, how sweet thy scent!
 How tinged thy deeper red!
 How gay, how lovely dost thou deck
 The crimsoned flower bed.
 In spring thy buds are youthful fresh
 But soon they burst their tomb
 And show thy lovely form portrayed
 And leave the kindly womb.
 But thou, alas, full soon art gone
 And when we seek for thee,
 We find thee withered on the ground
 Spread o'er the grassy lea.
 Like thee we leave the kindly womb
 And live our little day;
 Like thee we pass on to the tomb
 and mingle with the clay.
 Oh! then let us our duty mind,
 Jehovah serve and love,
 That when we leave this earthly scene
 We may be found above.

EPITAPH

*These the remains of a brother dear
 That lately was entombed here.
 In mouldering heaps of earth and clay
 Is doomed to sleep till Judgement day.
 Till He above that rules the skies
 Will say, "Awake you dead, arise."*

JOHN QUIN

ON THE DEATH OF A FAVOURITE CHILD

Farewell dear father, for me don't mourn,
For in good time you must return
With fervent hope, send up your prayer
And then my tomb with you I'll share.

Adieu, dear Mother, since I can't dwell,
My sister and brothers, I bid farewell;
While on this stage her footsteps trod
Then with the angels and son of God.

Near younder gate then Martha's laid
Where grassy banks adorn her head;
A youthful child whose years were nine
Was called away, in slow decline.

Like Abraham your child bestow,
What God can do, no man can know,
These cheering hopes should bring relief,
So let my death cause you no grief.

"Go tell the news," the angel said,
"That he is risen from the dead,
And by his blood we have obtained
Paradise lost is now regained."

A HARVEST HYMN

Now Autumn strews on every plain
Her mellow fruit and golden grain
And laughing plenty crowned with sheaves
With purple grapes and spreading leaves

In rich profusion pours around
Her flowing treasures on the ground
Oh! mark the great, the liberal hand
That scatters blessings o'er the land
And to the God of Autumn raise
The grateful song — the hymn of praise.

The infant corn in vernal hours
He nurtured with his gentle showers
And bade the summer clouds diffuse
Their balmy store of genial dews.
He marked the tender stem arise
Till ripened by the glowing skies
And now matured his work behold
The cheering harvest weaves in gold.
To nature's God with joy we raise
The grateful song — the hymn of praise.

The valleys echo to the strains
Of blooming maids and village swains,
To him they turn the lay sincere
Whose bounty crowns the smiling year.
The sounds from every woodland borne,
The sighing winds that bend the corn,

The yellow fields around proclaim
His mighty everlasting name.
To Nature's God united raise
The grateful song — the hymn of praise.

THE CUCKOO

Sweet bird of the Spring, pray where is thy dwelling place?

Charmer of innocence where does thou dwell?
Dost thou lie torpid along with the sleepy race
Or in some dark island, of Spring loudly tell?

Thou art ever my charmer, I still love to hear thee
When April or May buds their blossoms unfold
Had I wings like the dove, I would ever be near thee
No more would I taste of the frost biting cold.

The people of Acton have always been known for their neighbourliness; they were kind to one another and helped out when needed. What I remember most was the cutting of the corn and the building of the stacks in the farmyard; and the evening tea in the fields and the coming of the steam threshing engine. The cart with the coal was left in the day before the thresher and the water in barrels to keep the steam pressure up. I remember the long summer evenings and the call of the corncrake — alas now gone — and the harvest moon when you could hear the rattle of the carts taking corn from the fields at night. I could tell from the direction the sound was coming from who was working late. Druminargal House was the home of the Lucas family for many years. One of them Charles Davis Lucas had the distinction of being the first winner of the Victoria Cross. As a young man aboard H.M.S. Hecla during the Crimean War he performed an act of gallantry which moved Queen Victoria to create the special medal for outstanding courage. A live shell from a Russian cannon landed on the deck of the Hecla. Lucas ran forward and lifting the heavy shell in his arms threw it overboard where it exploded. Charles Davis Lucas went on to reach the rank of Admiral.

Later Druminargal House became the home of the Gracey family.

As I walk up McCullough's Hill on the way to Poyntzpass and look through the trees at Acton Lough, I can imagine John Quin standing there 150 years ago and looking at the same view.

The hills of Co. Down form a background. Lisleard and Lisnegade forts are still in the horizon from where the Black Pig's Dyke begins on its way through Scarva Demesne before entering the lake; re-emerging again through Loughadian on its way to the hills of Donegal.

Perhaps John Quin was looking at this scene when a barge passed through the Canal, inspiring him to write the poem 'Acton Lake.'

ACTON LAKE

*Fair forest trees are great in number —
The stately elm and lofty pine —
The watchful plover that's chased from cover
In yonder green woods will shelter find.
With ash and oak there's lime and chestnut,
And spreading bushes that grow around;
The adjacent lake it yields its beauty,
Along the borders of Co. Down;
I've been on travel around Hibernia,
To equal it there are but few,
Across the lake is a pleasant prospect
Fivey and Reilly are both in view.
Down by the lake there's trade and commerce,
The sails are spreading with every blast
And barges pass through the navigation,
From the town of Newry to sweet Belfast.*



Acton Schoolhouse, to-day.



Acton Lake.



John Quin's house to-day.



Acton Village.