

Jessie James and Ned Kelly - a local connection

The Clowney Family of Acton, came originally from the Rathfriland-Drumballyrooney area sometime between 1880 and 1884. There are several mentions of the surname in the marriage records of the Rathfriland Presbyterian Congregation, the earliest being a 'Nevin' Clowney in 1771. A 'James Clooney' lived in the townland of Ballynamagna, in Drumballyrooney Parish in 1864. He had a farm of 24 acres and buildings with a rateable valuation of £2. The head of the Clowney family that moved to Acton was also called James but whether he was the 'James Clooney' of Ballynamagna or a relation is not known. A Joseph Clowney had a shop in Main Street, Rathfriland in 1886 where he was agent for Singer Sewing Machines.

A local tradition has it that the 'flitting of the Clowneys' to Acton was very impressive as it took 'more than a dozen carts' to shift their belongings. The family moved into a large two-storey house in Acton village that had formerly been owned by David McBride.

This was by far the most impressive house in Acton village for the original single-storey mud-wall house had, at some stage, been extended and renovated. David McBride was a substantial farmer by local standards of the time. Apart from his own impressive dwelling with its adjoining garden, he had land in the townlands of Ballinagreagh, Ballyreagh and Druminargal totalling over 45 acres. As well as that, he let 6 acres to Robert Liggett in Ballyreagh and rented two small houses in Acton village to Patrick Kenny and Julia Dillon.

James Clowney and his wife Sarah had two sons, James jnr., (who was born around 1866) and Joseph, and two daughters, Nancy and Sarah. James snr. died sometime in the 1890's.

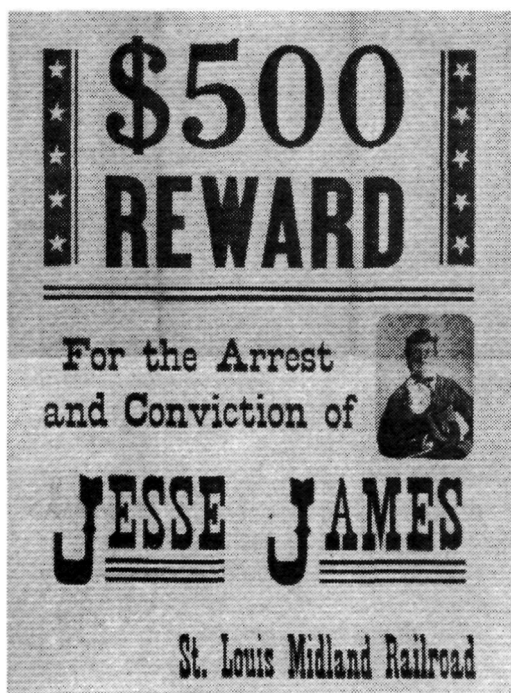
According to the 1901 census returns, James jnr., Joseph, Sarah and Nancy were all born in Co. Down. While he was still very young, and before the family came to Acton, James jnr. known locally as 'Jemmy' emigrated to America. Because of his age it is reasonable to



*James and Margaret Clowney at back with their children May and Jean.
also in the picture James Clowney's sister Nancy*



Joseph Clowney(Jnr), James(Jemmy) Clowney, Margaret Clowney with her daughter May on her knee, Sarah Clowney (Jnr), Sarah Clowney(Snr), and Nancy Clowney outside their home in Acton.



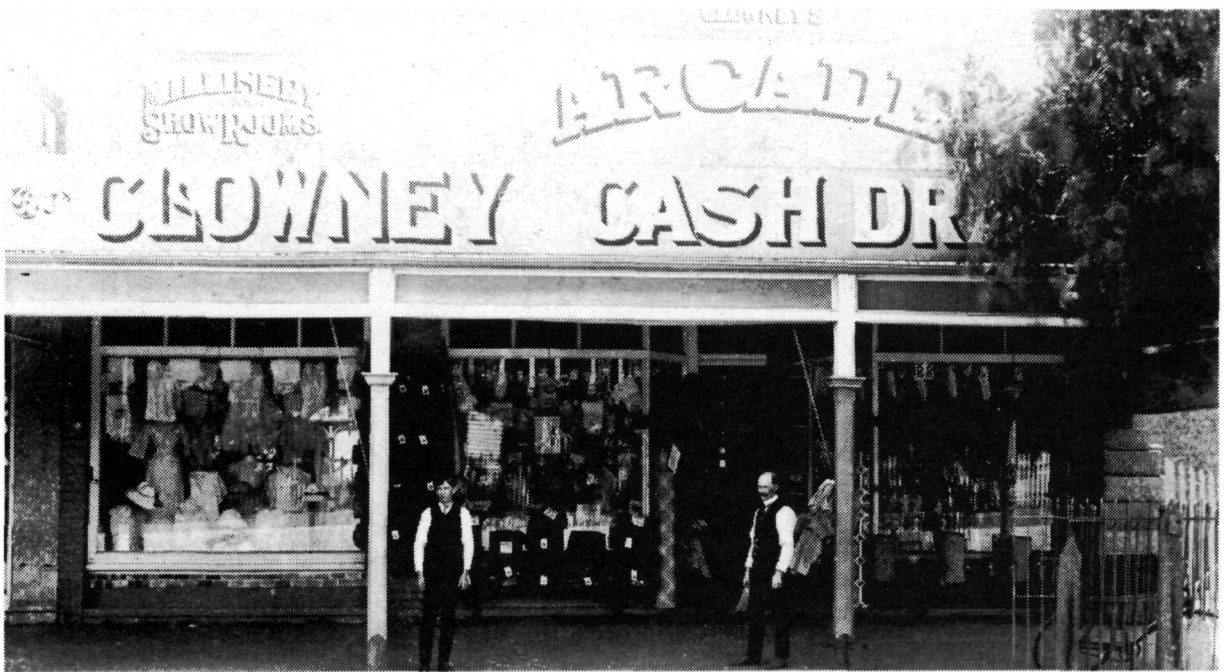
Jessie James Poster

assume that he travelled with some older person or persons or as part of a group. He worked at various jobs in America before he returned to Acton. He was back in Acton by 1896 as the letter below shows. It is said that he returned because of his father's illness or death. He married a Miss Margaret Boyd, probably around 1898-99. She was 35 years old in 1901.

Jemmy Clowney and his wife Margaret had four children, Joe (1900-1972), Annie (died 1998), May and Sarah-Jane (died 1985). Their daughter, May, married Hamilton Morrow of Poyntzpass.

In 1901 Jemmy and Margaret with their baby son Joe lived in Acton with Jemmy's widowed mother, Sarah, who described herself as '*Head of the family*'. She was aged 65.

Jemmy Clowney was regarded as being a very reliable and upright man. When he was around seventy years of age, he told Tommy Morrow and others the following: "*When I was a young*



Joe Clowney outside his shop in Australia

fellow I worked on building the railway across the prairie in the United States. We were sometimes hundreds of miles from the nearest settlement. We sometimes saw red Indians. Cowboys would sometimes call at the railway camp for there was always plenty of food to be had and they would have a feed and buy provisions before riding on. One morning as we were finishing breakfast, we noticed four riders approaching over the prairie. When they got nearer we saw that they were four cowboys. They came up to the field kitchen, talked to the foreman for a while. They had a meal. When they rode away the foreman told us that they were wanted men, and that they were Jesse James and his gang." Jesse James was killed a short time later, in 1882.

Meanwhile Jemmy's brother, Joseph, (possibly the Joseph who had owned the Sewing Machine shop in Rathfriland), emigrated to Australia. In Australia, Joe got together enough money to open successful drapery business in the town of Ballarat New South Wales. He told Tommy Morrow: "*When I was in Australia, I had a shop in Ballarat. One day, I heard shooting and a great commotion on the street, I ran to the door of my shop and was*

just in time to see a group of horsemen galloping off down the street. They were the famous 'bush-ranger' Ned Kelly and his gang." Ned Kelly was killed in 1891.

The following is a letter written by James Clowney, to his brother Joseph in Australia. The letter was, apparently, brought back to Acton by Joe when he later returned home.

Acton, October 26th, 1896.

Dear Joseph,

We received your very welcome letter a few days ago and it gave us very great consolation to hear that you and your Mrs were both well at that time and we hope that may long continue so as we are often thinking about you and still glad to hear of your welfare. We have grounds? of thankfulness to God to be enabled to say that we are all well at present and hope that these few lines will find you in the same.

There has been a good few deaths in this country lately but I need not mention any names as you might not know them. We have got this season's crops settled up with a great deal of

trouble.

We got the corn cut dry but before we got it in it came on very wet weather. There was scarcely one dry day for a very long time and people had a great deal of bother getting it in, in good order but I think our crop will be all right as we used our best endeavours to get it so and to work hard when the weather allowed us to do so. We had a very good crop of all kinds this season, of corn, potatoes and turnips but you will see by the paper that the prices of all crops is very low but cattle are selling fairly well –if we had them to sell but we hope to have a cow and heifer to sell about Christmas. We put them in the house to feed them this morning for the first. They are in fair good order at present.

I took a notion and went to Rathfriland on the last fair day as I had not been in that country for a very long time. I did not come home that night. I went to John Hawthorn's and stopped there that night and the next and on Friday I went to see Sarah-Jane Logan. Your aunt went with me. Then I thought that I would go to Moneysland (sic), which I did. They were all well there and since that your uncle Alexr. and your aunt and two of the children was up at our house. I came to John Logan's hoping to get home that day on the train but I was late for that, as they would not let me away in time. I stopped there that night and came home on Saturday.

There was a very large fair in Rathfriland that day that I was in it and I met with a good many old acquaintances and there was a great many of them asking when we got any word from you. Among them I met Mrs Heslet. She made a great deal of enquiries about you and your Mrs. I told her that you were well the last account I got from you. She seemed to be glad to hear it. I never think I saw her looking better or scarcely looking so well as she looked that day.

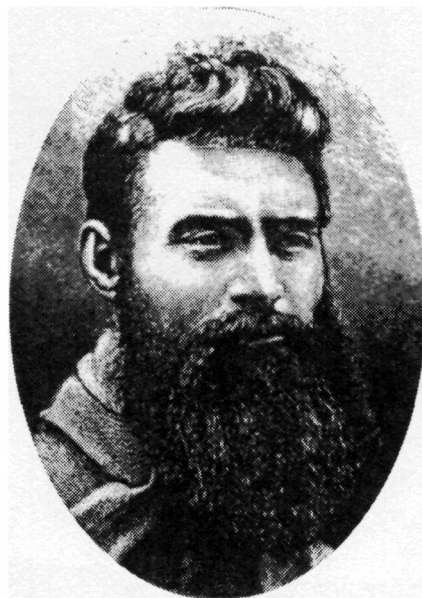
But I must close now for the present. We all join in sending you our love and best wishes to you and your Mrs.

I remain dear Joseph,

Your loving brother,

James Clowney.

It is possible that Margaret Boyd, Jemmy Clowney's wife, had also spent some time in North America, possibly Canada. The Boyd



Ned Kelly

family owned a farm in Druminargal (Where Mr. and Mrs. Donald live at present). In 1864 Boyds held 26 acres in Druminargal. Margaret Boyd's father drove the horse-drawn Royal Mail car from Newry to Portadown. He was involved in a fatal accident on one occasion when the shaft of the mail car struck a pedestrian in the chest and killed him. The Boyds of Druminargal were said to have had a run of very bad luck in their house in Druminargal, particularly after they built a new byre to the side of their house. The story was told that one night a tiny, little (fairy) woman came to their door and told them that the effluent from their byre was running into her house somewhere down the garden. The



Boyd's House, Druminargal



Boyd's House, (The built up byre door has been outlined)

Boyd's then built another byre at the other end of their house and from that time on their luck changed and they prospered in Druminargal. The future Mrs Margaret Clowney had a brother, James Boyd, who lived with her and her husband in Acton. James Boyd is remembered as a very easy-going man who knocked about Acton and rarely did anything - if he could avoid it. Once when asked to do some small chore on a Sunday, he declined, saying, "*I have to go to the Meeting, immediately - if not sooner!*"

In the early 1920's a group of young men in the Acton area became interested in amateur drama and produced various 'entertainments' in Acton Orange Hall. One of the most successful of these was a 'mock' trial, which lasted for several weeks. In the trial individuals took on various roles and James Boyd was cast as the accused. He was charged with murder. So seriously was the whole thing taken that, at the end of the trial, when the jury came back to announce their verdict of 'guilty' and the judge, played by Tom Morrow (Tommy Morrow's father), donned the black cap to pronounce the death sentence, James Boyd fainted in the dock!

Margaret Clowney died in 1937. Her husband

Jemmy died in 1956 aged 90

Sarah Clowney, sister of Jemmy and Joseph, married John Mc Keown of Brannock. He was a small farmer and according to the 1901 census returns was 25 years her senior (some local tradition suggests the age difference was even greater). His age then is given as 60, while she gives her age as 35 - the same age as her brother Jemmy. However as there is no suggestion that they were twins, either Sarah or Jemmy's ages or both, may not have been exactly accurate in 1901

McKeown's farmhouse and outbuildings had an unusual origin. In the 1840's, when Drumbanagher estate was being enclosed by a wall, the Close family re-located two tenants whose farmhouses were situated inside the new wall. For these two tenants they built two identical farmhouses complete with outhouses around a farmyard. One of these was McKeown's farm and the other was Calvert's (Halliday's). Both new farms were in Brannock townland. The field within the walled estate immediately south of the former Drumbanagher school is called '*Calvert's field*' on a map of the estate drawn in 1918 and another field behind the schoolhouse is called '*McKeown's Hill*'.

One displaced farmer was John McKeown. He died in 1848 and his wife Mary in 1884. In 1864 Mary McKeown held 12 acres in Brannock. It was her son, also called John, who married Sarah Clowney. They had no children.

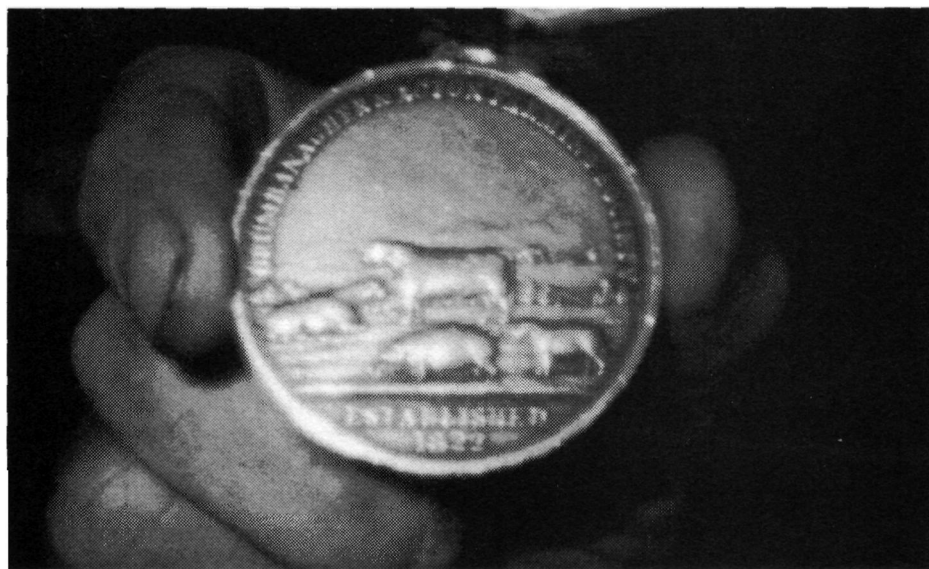
The second John McKeown was apparently a rather ugly man and was often cantankerous and unpleasant, so much so, that some locals are said to have believed him to be a 'changeling'. (This superstition was based on the belief that shortly after a baby is born the fairies might take it away and leave one of their own in its place. The latter is invariably ugly and bad-tempered.

Baby boys were thought to be particularly at risk so, to confuse the fairies, it was customary to dress young boys in petticoats and let their hair grow long.)

When John McKeown died, his widow, Sarah, *nee* Clowney, inherited the farm and her sister Nancy, born 1874, went to live with her. Joseph Clowney returned from Australia and lived for a time at Cregagh, Belfast. However, after the death of his wife he came to live with his two sisters in McKeown's in Brannock. On Sarah's death the farm was left to her nephew, Joe, the son of her brother Jemmy.



Calvert's house (later Billy Halliday's)



Medal won by William McKeown in 1830 for ploughing at Mullaglass (Drumbanagher & Acton Farmers Association Established in 1822)