

The Story of Bantry House

By Geoffrey Shelswell-White (Father of the current owner Egerton Shelswell-White)

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Formerly the principal seats of the Earls of Bantry, and now owned by Mrs Clodagh Shelswell-White, great granddaughter of the 3rd Earl of Bantry. Bantry House stands in surroundings, which have aroused the admiration of many writers. For it is set on the southern shores of Bantry Bay, long renowned for its beauty, and commands magnificent views over the Bay as far as the Caha mountains in the distance.

The house was originally a typical example of a mid 18th century Georgian country residence and it was not until about the middle of the 19th century, when extensive alterations and additions were made by the 2nd Lord Bantry, that it assumed its present size and character. New blocks and wings were added: interior levels were changed; outbuildings of marked architectural appeal were erected: and the grounds, laid out afresh, were adorned with terraces and statuary in the Italian style. In 1840 J Windele in the Historical and Descriptive Notices of the City of Cork and its Vicinity described the house as a 'plain, large and substantial building with little of aristocratic or architectural pretensions', some twenty years later it had become a mansion worthy of accommodating the furniture and art treasures collected by Lord Bantry during his travels in Europe.

But the house has further interest for, on more than one occasion, it has played a notable part in the history of the locality. In December 1796, when the French fleet under Admiral Hoche appeared in the Bay and troops were rushed from Cork in the expectation that a landing would be made, it became the headquarters of the General and his Staff.

One hundred and twenty five years later, during the troubled times, it was placed at the disposal of the Sisters of Mercy for use as a hospital. In the recent war (WW2) it gave shelter to the troops of the Bantry Garrison.

Blackrock, Seafield House, or Bantry House, as it is has variously been called during its history, has been the home for two centuries of the family of White of Bantry. Who, though stated by 18th and 19th Century writers to have settled in Ireland in Cromwell's time, almost certainly sprang from the family of the same name, which had for long before settled in Limerick, and had provided that city with many of its Mayors and other civic notables.

The first representative of the family of whom there is any record at Bantry was Captain Richard White, son of Simon White of Knockentry, near Limerick, who settled on Whiddy Island in Bantry Bay towards the close of the 17th Century. He subsequently acquired property from the Earl of Anglesey to whom extensive grants of land in the area had been made under the Acts of Settlement.

Captain White's son, who was born on Whiddy in 1701 and, having been called to the Irish Bar, was generally referred to as Counsellor White. It is said he made a considerable fortune at the practice of the law and towards the end of his life, probably about 1765, moved to Bantry House, at that time called Blackrock.

Of Counsellor White's son, Simon, there is little on record: but it is worth mentioning that in 1766 he married Frances Jane Hedges Eyre, daughter of Richard Hedges Eyre of Mount Hedges and Macroom Castle, who being descended from the O'Sullivan Beares, the Earls of Desmond, the McCarthy's (Lord Muskerry) and the Brownes (Viscount Kenmare), brought into the family a further measure of Irish blood. Simon's sister, Margaret, wife of Richard Longfield of Longueville, Mallow (later Lord Longueville) played a leading part in the social life in Cork and left behind her a series of letters which throw a most interesting light on Cork life and personalities of the day.

By the end of the now 18th Century the Whites who now held most of the land in the neighbourhood of Bantry and much along the Berehaven Peninsular had become the largest landowners in the area. But they had hitherto passed their lives in comparative obscurity. At the turn of the century, however, they were brought into greater prominence.

When the French Fleet anchored in the Bay in 1796, Richard White, the grandson of Counsellor White, and then a young man of 30, showed great energy and initiative in obtaining intelligence of the enemy's movements, organising the local preparations for resistance and generally assisting the troops, which had been sent from Cork. At the same time, he placed Bantry House, called Seafield, at the disposal of the General and the Headquarters Staff. It will be recalled that, in the event, the French failed to make a landing, but White's services did not go unrewarded. He was created Lord Bantry and a few years later was promoted successively Viscount and then Earl.

By nature a lover of country life, Lord Bantry was well content to live among his tenantry in the remoteness of SouthWest Cork. His eldest son, born in 1800 and later the second Earl, had entirely different tastes, for his interest laid in the arts and not in country pursuits.

As a young man, and later in the company with his wife, (née Lady Mary O'Brien, daughter of the second Marquis of Thomond), he travelled extensively in Europe. Visiting countries as far distant as Russia and Poland and seeking out the pieces which were to form his remarkable collection of furniture, tapestries and other works of art.

When Lord Bantry died in 1868 he had indeed left his mark on Bantry House. But he left no children. The title and estate therefore passed to his brother, William, who until then had lived at Macroom Castle, an inheritance from his great uncle, Robert Hedges-Eyre. By his wife (Jane Herbert of Muckcross), William, 3rd Lord of Bantry, had five daughters and an only son who became the 4th and last Lord Bantry. On his death the title became extinct and the property passed through his eldest sister Elizabeth Leigh, who assumed the additional name White. Mr Leigh-White, who had married Arethusa Hawker, died in 1920 and was succeeded by his daughter, Clodagh now Mrs Shelswell-White.

The more recent history of Bantry House and its owners is so closely linked with the art treasures in the house that it is well to mention a few of the items included in Lord Bantry's collection. Most of the pieces he brought there are still at Bantry. Stephen Gwynne has said that they gain piquancy by contrast with the rugged beauty which surrounds the house and has referred to them as 'the Wallace Collection of Ireland.'

Undoubtedly the oldest item is some tiling from Pompeii bearing the inscriptions Cave Canem and Salve. Italy of much later times is represented by stained glass, ceiling paintings from a Venetian Palace, and plaster-work executed by Italian craftsmen said to have been brought to Bantry expressly for the purpose.

A Russian household shrine contains 15th and 16th Century icons. There is stained and painted glass from Switzerland and France, Germany and Flanders, and specimens of Cork, Waterford and ruby-coloured Bohemian glass. Among the French pieces, which are the most numerous, those having special interest are a pair of bookcases and a work table reputed to have been the property of Marie-Antoinette, and fireplaces which are thought to have come from the Petit Trianon at Versailles.

Lord Bantry's outstanding contribution, however, was unquestionably the collection of tapestries that adorn the walls of several of the rooms. With the exception of a set, 17th Century Dutch in origin, the panels are French having come from the workshops of Gobelins, Beauvais and Aubusson in the late 18th Century. One Gobelins panel is said to have hung in the Palace of Versailles and there is a particularly beautiful rose-coloured set of Aubusson which is said to have been made by order of Louis XV for Marie Antoinette on her marriage to the Dauphin of France. Two other panels formed part of the Royal Garde Meuble of the Tuileries.

Lord Bantry's collection has long been recognised as having great artistic and historical interest and arrangements have accordingly been made in the past for the public to view it during the summer months. The enthusiasm of connoisseurs and others who have visited the house in recent years seems to justify the continuance of these arrangements, whenever possible, notwithstanding staff and other present day difficulties which are apt to arise from time to time.