

# George Bernard Shaw's Connection with Kilkenny

By MR. W. J. PILSWORTH

**T**HE Shaws are a Scottish clan claiming descent from Macduff, the slayer of Macbeth. According to "Burke's Landed Gentry," the first member of the family with whom we are concerned was a certain William Shaw, who was born in Hampshire c. 1651 and got married in 1673. He settled in Ireland, presumably at Sandpits, near Piltown, Co. Kilkenny, on the Bessborough Estate (the exact date is not known), and served as a captain in Sir H. Ponsonby's regiment, taking part in the battle of the Boyne. An unconfirmed tradition relates that he saved General Ponsonby's life on that occasion.

Mr. G. B. Shaw himself is not quite satisfied as to the authenticity of this ancestor. He notes, "My people, it is claimed, were in Ireland before William was imported." But I don't think the two views are irreconcilable. William Shaw may well have settled in Ireland round about the time of his marriage in 1673, nearly twenty years before the battle of the Boyne. He died in 1734 at a ripe old age.

His eldest son, Richard, was born in 1673 and married in 1696 Judith, daughter of Edward Briscoe, of Tinnakilly, Co. Kilkenny. He lived at Ballinderry, Co. Tipperary, and died in 1729 (during his father's lifetime), leaving six sons and three daughters. His eldest son, Robert Shaw, of Sandpits, Co. Kilkenny, was born in 1698 and married in 1736 Mary, the daughter of his neighbour, Bernard Markham, of Fanningstown, Co. Kilkenny. Bernard Markham was the son of Edward Markham and Margaret Bernard, his wife, and was portrieve of Knocktopher in 1735-36 and 1737-40.

The Bernards were settled near Piltown in the 17th century; a tomb in Fiddown graveyard, dated 1707, commemorates some of the family, from whom the Christian name of Bernard was acquired by the Shaw family.

Robert Shaw died in 1758, leaving six sons and two daughters. His eldest son was William, with whom we will deal later on. Of his other sons, Robert went to Dublin, where he did well in

business and became father of Sir Robert Shaw, Bart., one of the founders of the Royal Bank and M.P. for Co. Dublin for a number of years. George lived at Blackwell, near Bennettsbridge, and married a Miss Prim in 1791. He became one of the proprietors of the Merino Woollen Mills at Ennisnag. John was a sailor and was for a number of years in command of the H.M. packet boat Hillborough. He died at Sandpits in 1795. Thomas settled in Clonmel. I think he was the father of Thomas Shaw, junr., who was associated with his uncle George in the management of the Merino Mills. The late Mr. Prim informed me that Thomas, junr., lived for a time at Kilree House, near Bennettsbridge, after the closing of the mills, but I have been unable to obtain confirmation of this. The daughters of Robert Shaw were Rebecca, who married William Briscoe in 1755, and Elizabeth, who married Garret Wall in 1762.

William, the eldest son of Robert Shaw and Mary Markham, married Esther English, of Waterford, in 1768. He was father of the Rev. Robert Shaw, Rector of St. John's, Kilkenny, 1804-29, and of Bernard Shaw, who went to Dublin and became a solicitor. He married Frances Carr in 1802 and died at his brother's house in Kilkenny in 1826. He had fifteen children, among them George Carr Shaw, who married Elizabeth Gurly in 1852 and became the father of George Bernard Shaw.

In Tighe's account of County Kilkenny, published in 1801, we are informed that a bleach yard was established about 1715 by Mr. Shaw (presumably Richard) near Bessborough, with a house, mill and all apparatus; he was one of the first that introduced anything better than bundle linen manufacture into the country. In 1754 there were bleached here 960 pieces, 125 of which were of his own manufacture. The bleach yard and manufacture have both been long abandoned.

From advertisements in Finn's "Leinster Journal" we know they were in existence until 1770, which year probably marked their closing down. The growing of flax in the county diminished greatly about that time.

The old home at Sandpits was occupied by the Shaw family at least as late as 1800. I have been unable to ascertain when or how it passed out of their hands. The place, presumably, got its name from large pits in the vicinity, the clay from which was largely made use of for manuring the hilly ground nearby.

The direct association of the Shaws with Co. Kilkenny, which lasted for five generations, would appear to have ceased before the middle of the last century.

But an indirect connection only came to an end much more recently with the passing of the Whitcroft family from Kilree (near Bennettsbridge). John Whitcroft, who was apparently a self-made man, acquired Kilree, probably in the 1830's. By his marriage with Lucinda Davis he had a son, John H., and a daughter, Lucinda. The latter married W. B. Gurly, and their daughter, Elizabeth, married George Carr Shaw and (as we have seen above) they were the parents of George Bernard Shaw.

John H. Whitcroft and his descendants lived in Kilree House until about thirty years ago.

The above account differs in some material respects from the lecture which the writer gave last spring. In particular, reference was made in the lecture to the supposed descent of G. B. Shaw from Cromwell. This was based on a note by Mr. Shaw himself in a book called "Bernard's Brethren," by the late Charles Shaw, to the effect that the Mary Markham who married Robert Shaw in 1736 was a great-grand-daughter of Bridget, Oliver Cromwell's daughter, and of General Fleetwood.

I ventured to send a copy of the lecture to Mr. Shaw and he was kind enough to return it to me with a number of holograph corrections and additions.

I have also had the pleasure of a considerable correspondence with Mr. F. E. Lowenstein (Mr. Shaw's secretary), and I am now satisfied that the Cromwellian legend must be abandoned. Without going into too much detail I may say that General Fleetwood was married twice and that it was a daughter of his by his first wife (and not by Bridget Cromwell) who married a Captain Fennell and from whom the Markhams were (erroneously) believed to descend.

I have made full use of other corrections by Messrs. Shaw and Lowenstein in preparing this paper.

I will conclude with Mr. Shaw's final comment: "Cromwell . . . must be crossed out of my pedigree; but I still hold to Macduff, Thane of Fife, and slayer of Macbeth for Shakespeare's sake."