

Desart Court and Its Occupants

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My first meeting with Hamilton Agmondesham Cuffe, 5th and last Earl of Desart took place at Kilkenny Railway station; he was travelling to Dublin with Mr. Walter MacMorrough Kavanagh of Borris. Lord Desart's grandson Gerald Verney (later to become a Major-General in the Grenadier Guards) was coming to Ireland on a visit and as he was my age, my brother and I were invited to visit Desart.

The house was built in 1733 in the same style as Castletown, Co. Kildare, in that it had a central block connected to two flanking wings by curtain walls with colonades. There was a balustraded roof, having urns on the garden front, for the rear of the house gave onto a garden in the Dutch style with a design of box-edged bordered flower beds interspersed with Florencecourt yews. In the front of the house there was a square of formal lawn between the two wings. The plan of the house was somewhat like Cashel Palace.

There was a large central hall having a wooden dado, above which were panels in plaster, the whole painted to look like wood. On the left wall as you entered from the front door, were three full length portraits: the second Earl, painted by an Irish painter Clement Thompson and his wife Catherine flanking a portrait by Zoffany of the Hon'ble William Cuffe in uniform. On the left of the door leading to the drawing room, a central door, were portraits of Maurice O'Connor, of Mt Pleasant, Offaly and his wife, nee Burke of Marble Hill, Galway. On the left of the fireplace, above which hung the portrait of the 5th Earl in his coronation robes (George V) was the portrait of his father. I recall asking Lord Desart who all the subjects in the pictures were and when I came to the somewhat romantic looking portrait of a handsome young man, I praised it specially.

The only other picture I remember was a rather primitive representation of the original grantee of the estate, Captain Joseph Cuffe, dressed in a buffe jerkin and holding a pistol. There was also a reputed Kneller of the first Baron Desart, but I do not recall it. While on the subject of portraits, I remember visiting Lord Desart in London many years after I first met him, when he showed me two oval portraits of the second Baron and his wife. He had been given them by some remote kinsman then living in South Africa and they are now in the possession of Lord Desart's only surviving grandson, Colonel Ulick Verney. There was one other picture which I remember clearly: it was a very primitive hunting scene showing the 1st Baron, or possibly his father, riding with hounds. It escaped the subsequent destruction and I recall seeing it after the re-building of Desart.

The glory of Desart was the double staircase with its carved foliage in place of banisters; each stairway was reached through a door into a small back hall.

The drawingroom had been victorianised, except for the stucco ceiling which dated from about 1750; the library and dining room had no georgian features, but the boudoir kept its original mantel of Siena Marble. I do not remember the mantel in the hall.

Unfortunately either Kitty, Lady Desart (as Lord Desart called her) or her successor, his mother, had painted a lot of the mahogany furniture in black and gold, which not only ruined it artistically, but also reduced its value to a minimum : this made the bedrooms gloomy. A lovely set of Chinese Chippendale chairs, which I remember in the hall, escaped this treatment.

There was a haunted bedroom, the north east one, where occupants inexplicably spent troubled, sleepless nights. Among these was Lord Desart's brother, Otway Cuffe, who was interested in the occult, among his many occupations. When the house was unoccupied (he and his wife, a daughter of Lord St. Levan, lived at Sheestown) he drove over to Desart with friends and saw a light in the "haunted" bedroom and a shadowy figure also. He entered and questioned the servants who had not gone upstairs; they found the room locked, entered and found nothing unusual. One of Otway Cuffe's friends, remained alone in the room and rejoining the others, she concluded that there had once been an unhappy person in that room. Later on an explanation was given by Ellen, Lady Desart. . . of whom later. . . saying that she used to watch, lamp in hand, for her husband to return from hunting, always fearing a riding accident. "It may have been my unhappiness you felt in the room", she said.

I myself slept in the room next to this one and I recall that it had curtains and covers of chintz with a design of green ivy leaves.

There is another uncanny story connected with a former occupant of Desart. The first Baron married Dorothea Gorges, daughter of a General who came from Kilbrew, Co. Kildare. Her mother Nichola-Sophia had been married before to a Beresford; her childhood playmate was another Beresford, Lord Tyrone. The two children made a pact that whoever died first would come back from the grave and tell the survivor if there was indeed a life after death. At Gill Hall in Co. Tyrone, Nichola was duly visited by the dead Tyrone who assured her that life after death, according to revealed religion, was indeed true; he also added that she would bear a son. She asked for proof that this was just not a dream and the ghost touched her on the wrist, leaving a scar which she ever after covered with a black ribbon : for this reason, the story which can be found in various memoirs, has been called "The Black Ribbon Legend".

The origin of the name Desart is interesting. The Irish name of the estate is Lislonen : some 500 acres of this estate and another 700 of Tullaghanbro were confiscated from George St. Leger after the Rebellion of 1641 and granted by Cromwell to Joseph Cuffe, the grandfather of the 1st Baron Desart. The Cuffe family had come to Ireland from Somerset where they

were armigerous even in the 15th century. The first Irish Cuffe was secretary to the Earl of Essex, Queen Elizabeth's favourite and Lord Deputy of Ireland. Both Essex and Cuffe were executed for rebellion by the Queen.

The change of name from Lislonen to Desart was the subject of a special grant which renamed the property as "Cuffe's Desart", that is Cuffe's regard for military services rendered. Lord Desart himself told me this. There is an estate in England called Beaudesert, where Lord Desart's mother was staying at the same time as Napoleon III. The Emperor was asked by his host (whose name I cannot remember) how he liked the house and replied "T'aime beaucoup Beaudesert, mais encore plus la bell Desart":

I have remarked that I admired the picture of Lord Desart's father who was painted in the romantic fashion of the time (about 1820) with a cloak over his shoulder and a Byronic collar. He was the 3rd Earl and married a daughter of the Earl of Cawdor: she was appointed in 1845 a lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria. In this way 'my' Lord Desart found himself a playmate of the Queen's younger children including the Duke of Connaught and the grandmother of Earl Mountbatten, Princess Alice. In 1860 Lord Desart was prepared for the Royal Navy at Burney's academy Gosport, near Portsmouth, where the writer's father was also educated some 13 years later, and where Prince Louis of Battenburg, Earl Mountbatten's father was naturalised British.

For reasons of health, Lord Desart left the navy as a midshipman and adopted a legal career. As a young man, visiting such mansions as Belvoir (Duke of Rutland) and Chatsworth (Duke of Devonshire) he met prominent people like Lord Randolph Churchill, Winston's father, who accompanied him to Paris and invited him to Blenheim, where Disraeli, Queen Victoria's Prime Minister, whom he found somewhat alarming, who told him that his, Lord Desart's parents were 'the two most beautiful people I ever saw'. I little realised when I admired the portrait of the 3rd Earl that so distinguished a personality as Dizzy had shared my admiration for the subject of the portrait. Incidentally this Earl had a long minority as he was only two years old when his father died at the age of 32. During this period Kitty, Lady Desart ruled very strictly at Desart Court. I well remember Lord Desart telling me this when showing me the family portraits. She was the daughter of the O'Connors mentioned above. She re-married the son of a baronet called Price who died at 26. One of Lord Desart's great aunts married a Wemyss of Danesfort, a once lovely mansion now demolished with a more humble farmhouse on the site. Here Lord Desart used to visit frequently. He described Lady Elizabeth Wemyss as a Dickensian character, wearing a white cap and massive bunch of keys at her belt. She was very often carrying a basket of eggs or a jug of milk, a sort of cross between a housekeeper and a Grand Duchess.

Lord Desart had two brothers: William Ulick O'Connor, who succeeded in 1865 as 4th Earl, was M.F.H. and wrote some 15 novels and songs, and Otway Frederick Seymour. The latter has been well documented by Mr. McAdams in a booklet published by the K.A.S. He was a great lover of

Ireland, its language and its folklore.

The 4th Earl was twice married, first to Maria, daughter of Thomas Preston of Moreby Hall, Yorks : this marriage was not a success. The 4th Countess was divorced because of a liaison with a Mr. Charles Sugden, whom she re-married and in her turn divorced, according to the "Complete Peerage": The second marriage of the 4th Earl was to Ellen Odette, daughter of a London banker, a Jew whose father was jeweller to the Austrian court. She herself never relinquished her Jewish faith, but she lies to rest in a Christian cemetery at Falmouth where her husband is buried. He had died there on board his yacht. Her many acts of benevolence are set out in Mr. McAdam's paper. I myself knew her well, as she was very fond of young people and in the summer gave regular tennis parties at her home at Talbot's Inch. She always spoke with a slight guttural accent.

As she was always interested in Irish affairs, she was nominated a member of the first Senate of the Irish Free State. Thus she became the innocent cause of the burning of Desart. At this period the I.R.A., opposed to the setting up of the new state, had embarked on a policy of burning senator's homes; they mistook Desart Court for the home of the widowed dowager. According to the family, those who destroyed that beautiful house were not from County Kilkenny, nevertheless, according to a letter I received from the Countess herself (nee Lady Margaret Lascelles, of whom later) the tenantry were not above some looting and damaging of the dying house. On the other hand the servants themselves did all they could to save furniture, but spent valuable time over the grand piano and the modern portrait of Lord Desart. Such things as they saved were later conveyed by vans to Kilkenny and then attacked and burnt, so that little remained. This occurred in 1922. A year or two earlier I had suggested to Lord Desart that if he wished to send (as my own family had done) some portraits to England, I would gladly travel with them on one of my return journeys from leave, but he replied that they must take their chance.

I have said that Lord Desart had met the Prime Minister Disraeli at one of the great country houses. In 1878, the latter offered him the post of Assistant Solicitor to the Treasury; he got to know Edward Carson, Marshall Hall and many famous legal personalities. Later he became Director of Public Prosecutions and in this capacity he was concerned in the trial of Oscar Wilde. Only recently his grandson, Colonel Verney told me that he had tried to delay the warrant for the arrest of Wilde, to give him time to escape to France, a solution that Wilde refused. When Lord Desart became Queen's Proctor, he was much involved in divorce cases. Lady Sybil, his daughter once asked him if the Divorce Court was really dreadful. He replied. "Not dreadful at all, except of course when Carson is about. But dull, terribly dull. There's nothing so monotonous as adultery".

I must now say something about the last Countess of Desart, nee Lady Marharet Lascelles, daughter of the Earl of Harewood. She was still beautiful in old age, but her pictures show that she was lovely in youth. She started off married life poor, with no expectation that her husband would inherit; it was



an ideally happy marriage. I remember her at Desart saying "Be peaceful" to unruly grandchildren and I also recall that she used the old-fashioned mode of interrogation "Aint you?"; she always called her husband "Ham" and to others she would call him "Desart" in the style adopted by the nobility in the last century. The grandchildren called him "Gabba":

These children consisted of three sons and one daughter by Lady Joan, who was a Woman of the Bedchamber to H.M. Queen Mary, while her husband Sir Harry Verney, K.C.V.O. was the Queen's Secretary. He once took me all over Buckingham Palace and showed me some of the Queen's favourite antiques; he also took me to the Marlborough Club in London, where I met the explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton and sat alongside ex-King Manoel of Portugal. The other grandchild was Lady Sybil's only daughter by her first marriage to an American diplomat, Bayard Cutting; this was Iris Cutting who married an Anglo Italian marquis called Antonio Origo. She has written many learned books and her last one "Images and Shadows" is in the Kilkenny Library. There is a chapter on Desart.

While visiting Lord and Lady Desart in Rutland Gardens, London, I met her nephew, then Viscount Lascelles. He was afterwards to marry the Princess Royal. I found that though he had a rather unprepossessing face, he had a most melodious speaking voice. The conversation was all about his Galway property Portumna Castle. Next door lived the Verneys and here I was to have had tea with the future King George VI, then Prince Albert, but he sent a message to say he was detained.

Lady Sybil married twice after her American husband died: first to the man of letters Geoffrey Scott and then to another author Percy Lubbock, who survived her. She lived mostly in Italy and it was her beautiful Villa Medici at Fiesole that the Princess Royal and her husband spent their honeymoon.

I now conclude these recollections with the last days of Desart. It was handed over to Lady Kathleen Pilkington, the only daughter of the 4th Earl by his first (divorced) wife. She rebuilt it, aided by the grant obtainable, employing the architect brother of Sir William Orpen. I was invited to the re-opening of the house, which the architect had restored with taste and skill. The double staircase was replaced by a single flight of stairs having simple banisters, as the elaborate carving could not be replaced. Tea was served in the hall, now painted a light colour with a beautiful white and Connemara marble mantlepiece of the XVIII century, a present from Ellen, Lady Desart. Over it hung a portrait of a Cuffe of the same period which had escaped the fire, as it was being restored at the time.

Unfortunately as time went on, Lady Kathleen and her daughter Pamela Moorsom, who would have inherited, decided that they could not keep it going and, after a long time of standing empty and deserted it was sold and ultimately demolished.

I am told that there is not one stone on another, just mounds marking the site. Lord Desart himself shall have the last word: "I can't bear to think of Desart, he wrote, "it is sadness itself. All gone, all scattered and we were so happy there":