

THE BLUNDENS OF KILKENNY

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Between December 1789 and July 1798 a diary or daybook was kept by William Pitt Blunden of Birchfield, Co. Kilkenny.¹ Blunden, the twenty-eight year old younger brother of Sir John Blunden, 2nd Bart. of Castle Blunden, was fairly conscientious in making daily entries, but most were recorded hurriedly and none are lengthy. Blunden's diary, however, despite its brevity, provides a fascinating glimpse of Ascendancy society at the close of the eighteenth century. His social life and the management of Birchfield are, of course, the journal's principal themes, but references are also made to local and national politics, the Napoleonic War, and Blunden family matters. More importantly, the diary portrays Blunden and Birchfield as parts of a much larger, and yet very exclusive world, Kilkenny's Protestant Ascendancy.

Like the majority of Kilkenny's eighteenth-century Ascendancy families, the Blundens' connection with the county dates from the Cromwellian era. The founder of the family in Ireland, Overington Blunden (d. 1686), was an 'adventurer' who bought or exchanged lands for the estate of Clonmorán (to be called Castle Blunden), the forfeited property of Elias Shee, in the Liberties of Kilkenny City. Very little is known of Overington Blunden's career before or after his settlement in Kilkenny, but considering the close proximity of Castle Blunden to Kilkenny City, and Blunden's status as a Protestant landowner, it is interesting that he played no known role in the civic life of the city. Blunden's name does not appear on any of the lists of aldermen contained in the Kilkenny Corporation Minutes Book, 1656-'87², and he held no elective county office. Blunden's only public service may have been his appointment in April 1675 by the Overseers of Highways as one of two surveyors for St. Patrick's parish.³ Blunden's limited participation in local politics, however, was by no means atypical of Kilkenny's Cromwellian grantees. While many of Ireland's new Protestant settlers quickly became active in both local and national politics, as many seem to have preferred devoting

their energies to the management of their newly acquired estates. This appears to have been the case with Overington Blunden, and one must assume that he was successful in his endeavours. Though no copy of a will has survived, Blunden's legacy to his son and heir John may have been considerable. In a 1715 list of Protestants by parishes in Kilkenny, John Blunden, Esq. is listed as the foremost Protestant resident in St. Patrick's parish outgate.⁴ Unlike his father, John Blunden assumed civic responsibilities which befitted his standing in the community. He served as an alderman, and later as mayor of Kilkenny City, 1702-3.⁵

Available evidence suggests that it took at least two generations for the Blundens to establish themselves as one of Kilkenny's leading families. The first two Blundens were men of property and some local influence, but it was Overington Blunden's grandson John who raised the family into the highest ranks of county society. John was elected one of the Sheriffs of Kilkenny for 1716-17, an alderman in 1717, and mayor of Kilkenny City in 1719, 1720 and 1728. He represented the City in parliament from 1727 until 1751.⁶ Blunden's political career may have owed some of its success to his own talents and to his status as a landowner, but family connections are more likely to have been the deciding factor.

Blunden's wife, and the mother of his six children, was Martha Cuffe, eldest daughter of Agmondisham Cuffe, and the grand daughter of Capt. Joseph Cuffe of Castle Inch, Kilkenny. Joseph Cuffe was the recipient of one of the largest Cromwellian land grants in the county (over 3,500 acres), and upon his death these lands passed to his eldest son and heir, Agmondisham. Agmondisham Cuffe served as a captain in the Williamite army, and was attainted by the Jacobites in 1689. He was restored to his estate by William III "to whom he did great service in the Restoration of the Kingdom ...", ⁷ and in 1695 he entered parliament for the county. He held this seat until parliament was dissolved in 1699. Cuffe died in 1727 and the family estate, as well as the patronage of one of the City's seats, passed to his eldest son John Cuffe (M.P., Thomastown, 1715-'27), created Baron Desart in 1733, the brother-in-law of John Blunden.

Of John and Martha Blunden's six children, only a son and a daughter reached adulthood. Blunden's son and successor, John (d. 1783) entered the Middle Temple in November 1739, and was called to the Bar at King's Inns in Michaelmas Term, 1744. Like his father, John Blunden served as an alderman of Kilkenny City (1753-'54), as mayor, and as a Member of Parliament (City, 1761-'68 and 1768-'76). Unlike his father, however, John Blunden's personal achievements and the status of the Blunden family in Kilkenny were recognised in a formal manner. On 12 March 1766 he was created a Baronet of Ireland.⁸ The political and family alliance between the Cuffes (Barons Desart) and Blundens was further strengthened by Blunden's marriage in 1755 to his first cousin Lucinda Sarah Cuffe, second daughter of John, 1st Baron Desart. This marriage produced three sons (the second of which was William Pitt) and six daughters.



CASTLE BLUNDEN

Sir John Blunden died in 1783, but his death was mourned by neither the community nor his family. In 1780 he and the

newly raised Volunteers had a falling out, and the Volunteers burned him in effigy. Sir John, to show his contempt, warmed himself at the fire.⁹ This breach was not healed in Sir John's lifetime. In her *Retrospection*, Dorothea Herbert, the niece of Sir John's wife Lucinda, described her uncle as 'the greatest Oddity of his time . . .'.¹⁰ Sir John's eldest son and successor, on the other hand was well liked. The same cousin found him to be a very handsome man 'with a delightful flow of Spirits and . . . no fault but an overlove for the Fair Sex and the Bottle'.¹¹

The extent of the Blunden's property in Kilkenny in 1783 cannot be determined, but it is almost certain that parcels of land adjoining Castle Blunden were added to the original estate in the early and middle years of the eighteenth century. At the Restoration, holdings totalled 254 statute acres; in 1878 John Blunden, 3rd Bart. of Blunden's Castle (eldest son of William Pitt Blunden) was the proprietor of 1,846 statute acres in the county.¹² It is not known how much property Martha Cuffe or Lucinda Cuffe brought into their marriages, but Frances Robbins, daughter of John Robbins of Ballyduff, Kilkenny, who married Sir John Blunden 2nd Bart. in 1786 brought with her 'a delightful Estate in the Co. Kilkenny ... and several other articles amounting to a clear £8000 a Year'.¹³ Birchfield, the home of Sir John's younger brother William, was added to the family property in the Liberties of Kilkenny at sometime before 1789.

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Travellers to Kilkenny in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were generally impressed by the cathedrals and castle of Kilkenny City, but on the whole the county's principal residences are described as 'but ordinary'.¹⁴ By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, however, members of the county's Ascendency were growing increasingly interested in building homes that could stand as permanent monuments to their families' position in Irish society. The middle years of the century, in particular, witnessed a growing boom in construction.

One of Kilkenny's most magnificent residences was Bessborough House, the seat of the Earl of Bessborough.

This mansion and its enclosed park served as a model for other family seats in Kilkenny, and in a sense it was the yardstick against which the grandeur of other estates was measured. Desart, the home of the Cuffes, Barons Desart, was often likened to Bessborough House, but it is the smaller and less grand Castle Blunden that Dorothea Herbert, a relation and frequent visitor of both families, remembered more fondly in 1783.

We had charming Boating there as a large Lake ran just under the Windows and we could step from them into the pleasure Boat whilst six or seven fiddles serenaded us on the Water -- The gardens and immense Range of Hot Houses were fill'd with fruit -- The later were remarkably fine as the late Sir John (1st Bart.) piqued himself on their eclipsing the finest Hot Houses in the kingdom.¹⁵

William Pitt Blunden was twenty-two years old and still a resident of Castle Blunden when his father died in 1783. In the following year he was 'training himself to be a farmer'¹⁶ as he, his mother, and sister Araminta planned to live together when his brother John and sister Charlotte married. Sir John married in 1786. Although Birchfield was less than two miles from his family home, Blunden maintained a private residence there, and appears to have been proprietor of the estate in his own right, though this venture was probably financed by his mother. The journal, begun sometime after the move to Birchfield, reveals very clearly that Mrs. Blunden took more than maternal interest in the business of her younger son. On 15 July 1792 Blunden wrote, 'Settling various Accompts, my Mother and I have just paid in Sundry Debts £370.0.0., pd the Workmen in full'.¹⁷ In January of 1796 he wrote again, 'At Study, dreary day, My Mother and I have just paid near Four Hundd pounds in sundry Debts, have no dread now of being Dunn'd, (Thank God)'.¹⁸

Two or three milk cows were kept at Birchfield, as were horses for both work and sport, but with these exceptions, the estate's meadows were used primarily for grazing sheep. Arable farming was also important to Blunden, but it is difficult to determine from his diary how much of his income derived from this source. Oats, barley, and potatoes were

grown on a large scale, but of more interest to Blunden were crops that contributed little, if at all, to his annual income.

The hot houses, kitchen garden, and orchard at Birchfield contained an impressive variety of vegetables and fruits. In addition to potatoes and cabbages, Blunden sowed asparagus, peas, cauliflower, kidney beans, artichokes, turnips, parsnips, onions, melons, cucumbers, lettuce, carrots, radishes, broccoli, spinach, and celery. He cultivated raspberry, black currant, and gooseberry bushes, and grape vines. He also had a large strawberry patch. His orchard contained apple, peach, cherry, plum, nut, and apricot trees. Grape vines were the objects of much tender concern, though there is no mention made by Blunden of making wine. Raspberries and black currants, however, were put to good use: the making of raspberry and black currant whiskey. Blunden was relatively successful in most of his gardening ventures, but though repeated efforts were made to grow edible peaches, success was never achieved. Nor was Blunden ever satisfied with his cherries, most of which appear to have been eaten by birds.

The insularity of Kilkenny's Ascendancy society is made eminently clear in William Blunden's journal. Frequent references are made to dinner, house, and hunting parties, as well as informal visits, but these occasions were shared by remarkably few families. The boundaries of Blunden's world seem to have been determined largely by marriage ties. Blunden was one of eight children, and with the exception of himself, who married Harriet Pope of Popefield, Queens Co.¹⁹, his brother Gen. Overington Blunden, who did not marry, and his youngest sister Dorothea who married William Bolton of The Island, Wexford, all the children of John (1st Bart.) and Lucinda Cuffe Blunden married into prominent Kilkenny families. Outside various members of the Butler family, Lady Frances Flood of Castle Bamford, and Gervase Parker Bushe of Kilfane, Blunden's hosts, houseguests, and drinking and hunting cronies were almost all members of his own family or relations by marriage. His closest friend and frequent companion was Abraham Whyte Baker of Ballytobin, Kells, the husband of his sister Sophia. James Wemys of Danesfort, Samuel Waring of Springfield, and Samuel Matthews of Bonnettstown, who, with Baker,

made up Blunden's primary circle of companions, were all resident proprietors in Kilkenny, and all brothers-in-law.

The management of Birchfield was taken quite seriously by William Blunden, but journal entries after 1793 suggest that local and national politics, the Napoleonic War, and various social activities gradually took up more of his time and interest. Blunden's social life centered around Castle Blunden and his mother's family home, Desart, but frequent visits were made to neighbouring estates, especially to Ballytobin. Such visits were at times rather brief -- a day's hunting or dinner in the evening -- but Blunden was frequently absent from Birchfield for periods of one to four weeks. In January 1790 he spent the first week of the new year at Ballytobin hunting and snipe shooting.²⁰ He returned home on 6 January, but on the following day he went to Ballyduffe where he spent 'a most agreeable Fortnight' hunting, shooting, and coursing.²¹ On the twenty-second of the same month Blunden hunted for the day at Castle Blunden; the twenty-third was spent hunting at Desart; rain prevented his hunting on the twenty-fourth; and on the twenty-fifth he 'Had a good Fox hunt from Kilfane'.²² On the twenty-eight of January Blunden visited Ballytobin to celebrate the birthday of his sister Abby (Sophia). He remained four days, 'dancing ... Shooting, Foxhunting'.²³

In addition to the numerous house and hunting parties Blunden attended in Kilkenny, or hosted at Birchfield, he occasionally visited Dublin, and long visits were made to his youngest sister and her husband in Wexford. Augusts were often spent in the resort town of Tramore on the Waterford coast where Blunden 'Bath'd constantly, saw Boatracing, plays, etc.'.²⁴ The excursions to Dublin appear to have been made largely for pleasure, though annual purchases of wines, spirits, and household goods were also made.²⁵ Blunden's sister and mother often travelled with him to Dublin, but on other occasions the trip was made with a brother-in-law. In June of 1795 Abraham Baker accompanied him to Dublin. The two men spent a week enjoying the theatrical offerings of the capital, and then went on to Leixslip where Baker, who suffered from gout, 'drank the Lucan water Constantly . . .'.²⁶

As a new proprietor Blunden was neither involved in nor particularly interested in local politics. He attended the local assizes in the Spring of 1791, but his only comment relating to this was 'not much Business doing'.²⁷ His comments on the assizes of April 1792 and April 1793 were identical. Blunden was less than thirty years of age when he assumed proprietary duties at Birchfield, and his youth, new responsibilities, and the fact that he was a second son, may all account for his disinterest. This changed gradually as he matured, and as more of his time was spent outside the family circle and in the company of those men who controlled Kilkenny politics. Diary entries after 1794 show Blunden to be a frequent attendant at dinners sponsored by the Friendly Brothers Club, and to be a member of a group of local Protestant landholders who met regularly at the Sheaf Inn in Kilkenny City to dine, drink, and discuss politics. He was also a frequent diner at Kilkenny Castle. In the Spring assizes of 1794 and 1795 Blunden served on the Grand Jury of Kilkenny City, and in June 1796 he was made an Alderman.²⁸

Journal entries in the years 1796 through 1798 show Blunden's continued involvement in local politics, but of more concern to him and his Protestant neighbours was England's war with France. A brief mention of the war is made on 6 July 1794,²⁹ but it is the possibility of a French invasion of Ireland in early September that shocked the Ascendancy into action. By the 26th of that month Blunden reported that the 'Gentlemen very busy, about Raising yeomen Cavilry, I sign'd my Name to serve in Sir John's (Blunden) Troop'.³⁰ Three months later the presence of a French fleet off the coast of Cork sent Kilkenny into the throes of confusion. On the night of 28 December nearly 1,500 soldiers passed through Kilkenny City on their way to Cork. Twelve were billeted at Birchfield.³¹

The failure of the French invasion was followed by the restoration of outward calm in Kilkenny. Blunden continued to exercise with his brother John's troop throughout 1797, but these outings were neither frequent nor arduous, and they did not prevent his taking a holiday in Dublin and Lucan in the month of July. By November of this year,

however, the mood of the diary shifts from near normalcy to great seriousness: Defenders and United Irishmen were disturbing the peace in the county.

William Blunden's journal comes to an abrupt conclusion with a final entry dated 22 July 1798. 'On Duty, went Express to Thomastown, Attend parade every Morning, generally on Guard every Third Day'.³² Though journal entries were made regularly in the early months of this year, Blunden was frequently absent on military duties, and after 25 May his troop was 'oblig'd to remain in Kilkenny'.³³ He visited Birchfield whenever possible, but in general, he had little time for, or interest in, ordinary estate business. Few entries were made in the diary after May 25, and they, unfortunately, reveal disappointingly little of Protestant Kilkenny's reaction to the Rebellion of 1798, or the impact that the rebellion had on life and society in the county.

Of Blunden's life after 1798 little is known. He was elected mayor of Kilkenny City in 1799, and in 1813 he married Harriet Pope, niece of his brother-in-law James Wemys, and only child and heir of Thomas Pope of Popefield, Queens Co. Blunden, though almost fifty-two when he married, was by that time almost certain to succeed to his childless brother's estate and title. Upon his death in 1817 (his brother died in the following year) he was survived by three children: John, who succeeded his uncle as 3rd Bart., William Pitt, and a daughter.

The journal of William Pitt Blunden is rich in details relating to the social life of Kilkenny's Ascendancy, but while it chronicles the daily life of its author, it reveals little of his character, and even less of those attitudes towards Ireland and the Irish which were held by the country's Ascendancy. The world described in Blunden's journal is a Protestant one. Catholics were employed as labourers at Birchfield, and as servants (less than trustworthy³⁴), but their existence as a separate and much larger community in both the county and city of Kilkenny cannot be discerned from Blunden's writing.

The diary is the personal record of a young landed proprietor, and that most of the entries relate to Blunden and Birchfield is not surprising. What must be regarded as

somewhat odd, however, is Blunden's apparent disinterest in political issues and county happenings that do not affect him personally. With the exception of those disturbances that were a part of the Rebellion of 1798, the journal contains no evidence which would suggest that tensions of any sort existed between Catholics and Protestants in Kilkenny. This, however, was not the case. Whiteboy activities were rife throughout the 1770's and 1780's, and agrarian violence continued through the 1790's.

Blunden's political outlook is difficult to determine on the basis of journal entries. He became more involved in politics as time passed, but while elections and the names of successful candidates are noted, the political issues in question, and his particular stands on them are never discussed. The harshest provisions of the penal laws against Catholics were never enforced systematically during Blunden's lifetime, and by 1789, the opening year of the journal, those laws which had prohibited Catholics from purchasing lands, and restricted the disposal of Catholic property, had been repealed. A monumental Catholic Relief Act was passed in 1793 which gave Catholics the parliamentary and municipal franchises. They were still denied parliamentary membership, and were excluded from high offices of state, but the political monopoly long enjoyed by the nation's Protestant Ascendancy had been broken. On the Relief Act of 1793, however, the journal is curiously silent. Blunden made no personal observations, and no mention is made of county or city reactions. Such silence is difficult to interpret, but journal entries for this period suggest that the Act did not meet with any great alarm in Kilkenny. Relations between the Protestant community in, and in the vicinity of, Kilkenny City and the city's prominent Catholic families were cordial, if not intimate, at this time.³⁵ That such individuals were given civic privileges and the parliamentary franchise may not have been regarded as a serious threat to the Ascendancy's economic or political hold on the county. Catholic participation in local affairs gradually increased after 1793, but evidence of such changes can be found only in one diary entry. 'Came to Kilkenny, din'd at the Sheaf with Sir John, Who gave a publick Dinner

to a very Large party, yeomen cavilry, Infantry, &c. (Several paddys)'.³⁶

The political, economic, and social influence of Kilkenny's Ascendancy was at its height during the lifetime of William Blunden. The heyday, in retrospect, was also the twilight. Blunden's world weathered the twin storms of relief legislation and Catholic Emancipation, but its way of life and the very ideology which justified its existence became increasingly anachronistic as the nineteenth century progressed. It could not survive the political and economic realities of the modern era. William Blunden's eldest son John succeeded to his uncle's title and the family estate at Castle Blunden; the world to which he was heir, however, predeceased him.

NOTES

1. NLI. Diary of William Blunden of Birchfield, Co. Kilkenny. 1789-'98. Microfilm. N. 3618. P. 3236. 18 December 1789.
2. NLI. Kilkenny Corporation Minutes Book, 1656-'87. Microfilm. N. 3030. P. 5136.
3. PROI. Prim Collection. Haydocke Mss., PRI/3.
4. *Ibid.*, PRI/16.
5. George Dames Burtchaell, *Genealogical Memoirs of the Members of Parliament for the County and City of Kilkenny* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers and Walker, 1888), P. 130.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Quoted in Burtchaell, *M.P.'s for Kilkenny*, p. 90.
8. Burtchaell, *M.P.'s for Kilkenny*, p. 154.
9. Dorothea Herbert, *Retrospections of Dorothea Herbert*, (London: Gerald.Howe, 1929-'30), Vo. 1., p. 57.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
12. U. H. Hussey De Burgh, *The Landowners of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges, Foster, and Figgis, 1878), p. 41.
13. Herbert, *Retrospections*, Vol. 1, p. 139.
14. 'A Journey to Kilkenny in the Year 1709'. From Ms. notes of Dr. Thos. Molyneux. *JKSEIAS*, 2nd series, Vol. III, pt.2, p. 297.
15. Herbert, *Retrospections*, Vol. 1, pp. 69-70.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 107-8.
17. Diary of William Blunden, 15 July 1792.

18. *Ibid.*, 20 January 1796.
19. Blunden's wife, Harriet Pope, was the grand daughter of James Wemys of Danesfort, Kilkenny, and the niece of friend and brother-in-law James Wemys, jr. of Danesfort.
20. Diary of William Blunden, 1 January 1790.
21. *Ibid.*, 7 January 1790.
22. *Ibid.*, 25 January 1790.
23. *Ibid.*, 28 January 1790.
24. *Ibid.*, 31 July 1792.
25. *Ibid.*, 12 February 1793.
26. *Ibid.*, 27 June 1795.
27. *Ibid.*, 22 April 1791.
28. *Ibid.*, 10 June 1796.
29. *Ibid.*, 6 July 1794.
30. *Ibid.*, 26 September 1796.
31. *Ibid.*, 29 December 1796.
32. *Ibid.*, 22 July 1798.
33. *Ibid.*, 25 May 1798.
34. *Ibid.*, 20 March 1796.
35. Patrick J. Corish, *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin: Helicon Ltd., 1981), p. 74.
36. Diary of William Blunden, 10 October 1796.