

## The Witnesses of the Knock Apparition, 1879

Tom Neary has given us a vivid account of the socio-economic and political context in County Mayo in the 1870s, as background to what have been called the ‘strange occurrences in a small Irish village’ of 21 August 1879 – 140 years ago this evening. Now I will say something about the fifteen people living here in the village – or visiting – who were recognised as witnesses of the events of that evening. Events that would lead in time to two papal visits to this previously obscure village in east Mayo.

The people in question were quite ordinary folk – a fairly representative cross-section of the local population. Of the 15, no fewer than 8 belonged to branches of a local family, the Beirnes, and nine of the fifteen lived in two townlands (or, as they are more usually called, ‘villages’) situated at the very heart of this parish of Knock.

The first townland – the one we are standing in, and where the old parish church and the basilica are situated – is known officially as Drum (a name on record for more than seven centuries) but it is more usually called Wingfield by the natives. ‘Wingfield’ is derived from an old name in Irish, *Sciachán*, meaning ‘a whitethorn bush’, but it has been confused with a very similar name, *Sciathán*, meaning ‘a wing’. Wingfield, or Drum, with an area of about 430 acres, stretches along the eastern side of the main road or street running through Knock, from just above the Confessional Chapel and Knock Museum on the south, northwards past the roundabout near the Post Office and Garda station and a few hundred yards more along the old Kilkelly road, and eastwards along the Ballyhaunis road for half a mile or so. (I was born near the eastern end of Wingfield, a few hundred yards from here.)

The second townland, Carrowmore (An Cheathrú Mhór, ‘the big quarterland’), runs all along the western side of the main street, from the very top of the hill overlooking Knock down past the roundabout. Five of the witnesses, all named Beirne, lived in Wingfield, while another four – Mary McLoughlin, Pat Beirne, Bridget Trench and Judith Campbell – lived in Carrowmore. Of the remaining six, two – Pat Hill and Catherine Murray – were from outside the parish (but closely related to the Beirnes of Wingfield), two were from villages just west of Carrowmore – Bridget Murphy (alias Mrs Hugh Flatley) from Cloonlee and Johnny Curry from Lecarrow – and one, Patsy Walsh, from Ballinderris, south-east of Wingfield. The last of the 15, Jack Durkan, was apparently ‘of no fixed abode’.

I will now look in some detail at members of the Beirne family. The surname, incidentally, is spelt variously Beirne and Byrne; the former, historically, is the more correct. The name represents one of two Connacht surnames, written in Irish as Ó Beirn or Ó Birn – one located near Ballinrobe, south Mayo and the other in mid-Roscommon. By the mid-19th century the ‘Beirne’ was tending to be replaced by ‘Byrne’, the anglicised form of the important Leinster family of Ó Broin, the famous O Byrnes of Wicklow and south Co. Dublin. Here in Knock,

one branch of the family generally retained the form Beirne while the other opted for Byrne.

There were various Beirne families in Knock at the time of the Apparition – indeed, there were two quite separate families here in Wingfield. The one in question here was in two closely-related segments derived from two brothers, Dominick and Bryan Beirne, who came to Wingfield from the village of Ballyroe – about two miles east of here, on the Ballyhaunis road. The brothers married two sisters, daughters of Toby Burke of Wingfield, who had had come to Knock from Annaghdown, Co. Galway – on the shores of Lough Corrib. His uncle, Fr Henry Burke, was parish priest of the united parishes of Knock and Aghamore from 1787 until his death in 1822. Toby married a local woman, Betty Purcell, who had a substantial holding of land in Wingfield that came, in time, to be known as ‘The Chapel Farm’. When two daughters of Toby and Betty – one named Margaret and the other either Mary or Bridget – married the Beirne brothers, Dominick and Bryan, the farm was divided in three, furnishing dowries for the two daughters and leaving one-third to be inherited by Toby’s son, Henry.

Of course, Toby Burke and Betty and their offspring did not actually *own* the Chapel Farm – under the system of landlordism then in force, they held it as tenants of a certain Thomas Nowlan, apparently a middleman to the principal landowner in east Mayo, Lord Dillon. The latter, whose seat was at Loughglynn, Co. Roscommon, was considered a rather benevolent landlord (as was his agent, Charles Strickland). It seems that, so long as the rent was paid, tenants could more or less behave as if the land were their own.

**Margaret Beirne**, daughter of Toby Burke, was aged 68 and a widow at the time of the Apparition – her husband, Dominick, had died some time previously. She was living with two of her daughters, Mary and Maggie, and one of her sons, Dominick Jnr, in the family’s thatched cottage. (Her other son, Bryan – known as ‘Big Bryan’ – was working in England at the time.) The cottage survived until the early 1970s – I passed it regularly on my way to school sixty and more years ago, as I took a short cut up by John ‘Toby’ Burke’s house. At the time it was a pub known as ‘Harry Big Bryan’s’ – from the name of Margaret’s grandson, Harry Beirne. Later nicknamed (rather appropriately) ‘The Thatch’, it stood on part of the site now occupied by the Basilica.

Margaret in her Deposition [No. 6] about the Apparition – taken in early October (about seven weeks after the events of 21 August) – is quite brief (about 200 words) and to-the-point. She tells how she was called out by her daughter Maggie at 8.15 or 8.30, pm,

to see the vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and other saints ... at the gable of the chapel at Knock; it was just dark; it was raining; I came with others to the wall opposite the gable [*and*] saw distinctly the three images or likenesses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of St Joseph, and, as I thought or heard, of St John the Evangelist.

Margaret, it should be noted, has the distinction of being the most long-lived of all the Knock witnesses. Born apparently in 1811, she died aged 98 in 1909.

Margaret's Deposition is followed by that of her son, **Dominick Jnr** [No. 7]. The Depositions survive in two versions: one, edited by a journalist named Thomas Sexton and published in 1880 by T.D. Sullivan (author of the song 'God Save Ireland'), omits the accounts by Pat Hill, Bridget Murphy and Jack Durkan. The other, published by a Tuam newspaper editor, John MacPhilpin, covers all 15 witnesses, and most of its versions are somewhat more detailed than those printed by Sexton, but there is rarely any crucial or substantial divergence between the two.

Dominick Beirne Jnr gives his age as 20 and tells how his sister, Mary, called him 'at about eight o'clock on the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup> August', exclaiming 'Come, Dominick, and see the image of the Blessed Virgin, as she has appeared to us down at the chapel'. He goes on to declare:

I beheld the three statues or likenesses as now described – that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of St Joseph, and that which I thought, or heard from my sister, was the likeness of St John the Evangelist. I saw the altar and lamb too, but not the cross.

Having 'continued looking on for fully an hour', he says that he and his sister went across the road 'to visit Mrs Campbell [that is, Judy Campbell], who was in a dying state', and he concludes: 'When we returned, the Vision had disappeared'.

The Deposition [No. 13] of Dominick's sister, **Maggie**, a couple of years his senior, is quite fascinating, as there is a greater difference between the wording of the two versions than between any other two. The Sexton version begins:

I went to close the chapel door about 7.30 o'clock pm. On my return I saw something white at the south gable, but passed no notice at the time.

The corresponding passage in the MacPhilpin version runs:

I left my own house at half-past seven o'clock, and went to the chapel and locked it; I came out to return home; I saw something luminous or bright at the south gable, but it never entered my head that it was necessary to see or inquire what it was; I passed by and went home.

She then tells how her niece, Catherine Murray, about eight o'clock,

called me out to see the Blessed Virgin and the other saints that were standing at the south gable of the chapel.

Her description of the figures differs in the two versions. For example, in the Sexton version she states: 'There was a mitre on St John like what the bishop wears', also 'I remarked whiskers of a greyish colour on St Joseph', and 'The reason I knew St John was, I saw a statue of him at Lecanvey chapel' [that is, in west Mayo where she and her sister Mary had recently been on holiday]. MacPhilpin's version has nothing corresponding to any of these three statements.

Margaret Beirne's son and daughter did not long survive the events of 1879. Maggie died of consumption (tuberculosis) in June 1880, while Dominick Jnr died of the same dreaded disease in January 1885. Their older sister, **Mary**, long outlived them, and came to be considered the most impressive and credible of the witnesses. Three years after the Apparition, she married a man from the neighbouring parish of Began and lived to the age of 86. The couple lived on a small farm here in Wingfield. It had belonged to a granduncle of mine, Eddie Morley, but when he died in 1880, his widow, Mary Connell – as they had no children – invited her younger brother, James Connell, to come from Falmore in the neighbouring parish of Began and take over the place. In 1882 he married Mary Beirne. They lived just across the road from us, and I knew their son, also called James or Jim, who died in 1970, and their grandson, Jimmy, who died just over two years ago, in his early 90s.

I might mention here – as it was referred to in the film *Strange Occurrences in an Irish Village* – that my late father and a neighbour dug Mary Connell's grave in 1936, and just over 40 years later, he and another neighbour, Johnny Dolan, were called on to open the same grave for the burial of Mary's daughter-in-law, Mary Anne Johnston, the widow of Jim Connell. He told me how they came on the remains of Mary's coffin and saw that it had disintegrated. Then they uncovered the corpse and, to their astonishment, having expected to find nothing but bones, saw that Mary Connell's body was as perfect and as recognisable as the day she was buried. My father had known her for over thirty years, and indeed had seen her in the coffin, so he was very clear in his mind as to what he saw, and Johnny Dolan – a most level-headed man – corroborated his account. They were both rather shaken by their experience and decided to tell the then parish priest, the redoubtable Fr James Horan. Having listened carefully to their story, Fr Horan advised them that it would be better not to say anything about what had happened – he said he feared it would lead to sensationalism that would only distract from the main message of the shrine. My father and Johnny occasionally mentioned the matter discreetly within the family-circle, but did not speak about it generally. It appears that some (slightly inaccurate) hint of it gradually got out, but no fuss was ever made of it. Apparently also, Fr Horan raised the matter with the Connell family, and it was agreed that their grandmother should be allowed to rest in peace.

Some years before he died, I recorded some of my father's reminiscences, and he had this to say about Mary Beirne:

[She] was the mildest and nicest person that ever was. ... I remember one night in Connell's [they were criticising various people], and she said: 'Do you know, there's an awful lot of bad in the best of us, and there's a lot of good in the worst of us?'

**Mary Beirne's** Deposition [No. 3] runs to over 700 words and, because of its clarity and coherence, has been very influential. Moreover, when interviewed on her deathbed in 1936 by another, later, commission of inquiry, those who took her

evidence were impressed by the sheer consistency of her recall of the details of the Apparition.

Two of the youngest witnesses were close relations of Margaret Beirne. One of them, aged 11, was her nephew **Pat Hill**, from Claremorris, a son of one of Toby Burke's daughters – I have not found her first name. Pat later emigrated to the US where he married Annie McNabb, and they had five children. He died in Boston in 1927 at the age of 59, ten years after his wife. His Deposition [No. 1] is intriguing, being available in only one version – published by MacPhilpin. It is also by far the longest of all the Depositions, running to 1085 words, and has a great deal of unique, and often charming detail. It has been suggested that its composition and wording may have been influenced by Canon Ulick Bourke, the scholarly parish priest of Claremorris who was a member of the three-man commission of inquiry established in 1879 to investigate the Apparition.

The second-youngest witness, **Catherine Murray**, aged eight and a half, from Lissaniska in the parish of Began, was Margaret Beirne's grand-daughter. Her mother was Eliza, daughter of Margaret, and sister of Mary, Maggie, Dominick Jnr and Big Bryan. Both versions of her Deposition [No. 10] are very brief. The Sexton version runs to just 48 words:

I saw the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph and St John, or what was told me was the likeness of St John. I saw the altar; saw this for fully twenty minutes.

The MacPhilpin version has 80 words:

I am living at Knock; I was staying at my grandmother's. I followed my aunt and uncle to the chapel; I then saw the likeness of the Blessed Virgin Mary and that of St Joseph and St John, as I learned from those that were around about where I was. I saw them all for fully twenty minutes or thirty minutes.

Sadly, the young girl did not live long – dying in 1881 from jaundice.

Making sense of the story of the witnesses is made difficult by the number of people who bore the same name. For example, there were three named Dominick Beirne – (1) the deceased husband of Margaret, (2) their son who was designated Dominick Jnr and (3) Margaret's nephew who was called Dominick Senior (although he was only about ten years older than his cousin, Dominick Junior!). And Margaret Beirne had a daughter also called Margaret (whom – for the sake of clarity – I call Maggie). In addition, two other witnesses were known by alternative designations: Bridget Murphy is referred to in the Depositions as Mrs Hugh Flatley, while the oldest witness, Bridget Trench, was also known as Mrs Carney.

**Dominick Byrne Snr** was aged 36, having been born in 1843; his parents were Bryan Beirne, one of the two brothers who had come from Ballyroe, and a daughter of Toby Burke about whose name there is some uncertainty – she is referred to as Mary in some sources and as Bridget in others. In 1884 Dominick married Nora Murphy from Wingfield and they had nine children, one of whom was John Joe who died in 1984, having run a flourishing business right beside the

church. Dominick, who died in 1915, was a farmer who also developed a cattle-export business along with his brother Tom who was based in Birkenhead near Liverpool. The Sexton version of Dominick's Deposition [No. 14] has less than 150 words, but the MacPhilpin version is almost twice as long and includes the statement: 'There was a mitre on St John's head, nearly like to that which a bishop wears'. Dominick tells how his double first cousin, Dominick [Jnr], had 'called me to see the vision of the Blessed Virgin and other saints at the south gable of the chapel'.

The youngest of all the witnesses, **Johnny Curry**, aged five and a half, was born in Lecarrow, and was a nephew of Dominick Byrne Snr – his mother, Mary Ann, was Dominick's sister, and a daughter of Bryan Beirne and Mary (or Bridget?) Burke. His Deposition [No. 11] is extremely brief; the Sexton version simply states: 'He testifies to the same as the others', while the MacPhilpin version runs to about 40 words and reads in part: 'The child says he saw the images – beautiful images .... and [he] went upon the wall to see the nice things and the lights'. Johnny emigrated to England and then, in 1897, to the US, but he returned to England two years later. In 1910 he left again for America and remained there till he died in New York in 1943, aged 69.

When we move on from the two Beirne/Byrne families, one of the most interesting characters is **Mary McLoughlin**, the parish priest's housekeeper. Not a lot is known about her. She came to Knock from Westport with Archdeacon Cavanagh in 1867 – he was said to have rescued her from the workhouse. She seems to have been one of the first to notice the vision at the church gable while walking towards what she calls 'the house of Mrs Beirne, widow'. On her return about an hour later, she again saw the figures at the gable and describes them in considerable detail in her Deposition [No. 2]. Because she was known to be rather partial to alcoholic drink, some authorities were inclined to discount her testimony. In fact, her Deposition is vividly descriptive with a great deal of minute and persuasive detail.

Mention of Mary McLoughlin reminds us of the abiding value of the late Catherine Rynne's book *Knock 1879-1979*. When she came here to gather material for it in the late 1970s, I was introduced to her by my good friend, the late John Carty. We put her in touch with several elderly people in the parish, like Mick and Delia Kearns and John Flatley in Wingfield, Johnny Peter Flatley and Jim McGreal in Carrowmore, and various others who were personally acquainted with many of the Witnesses. Many of those people were dead a decade later.

Mary McLoughlin remained mysterious to the end – there appears to be no record of her death or where she is buried, although Eugene Hynes, author of an important study of Knock, told me of an indication that she lived until about 1905. This may be based on a remark by Fr Michael O'Connor, who was a curate in Knock from 1906 to 1920, that he 'met her casually a couple of times', but it is not clear if this was before or after he had been appointed to Knock. O'Connor, who apparently was hostile to the story of the Apparition, dismissed her as 'a pious old

creature'. On the other hand, my neighbour Tom (known as 'Mick') Kearns remembered her as 'a nice decent little woman, and kind'.

**Pat Beirne** – no relation of any of the other Beirnes/Byrnes – lived in Carrowmore and was aged 16 in 1879. He died in 1943, aged 80, five years before I was born, but I recall my parents speaking of the celebrated huckster's shop he ran on the side of the road where the Fairfield Restaurant now stands – my mother used to say you could get everything in it 'from a needle to an anchor'. He married Rose Curry, but she died long before him [in 1919] and they had no family, so he left the place to Rose's nephew, Ned, who later opened the Fairfield Restaurant as well as the International Hotel.

Pat had a bitter quarrel with a priest who accused him of being a 'false prophet' and alleged that he was selling pieces of plaster from the wall of the Apparition gable. Pat never went to Mass again, although he was said to have been reconciled with the Church on his death-bed. He had a particularly tempestuous relationship with Canon John Greally who was PP from 1932 to 1946 (and, in his later years at least, notably cantankerous – he was my maternal grandfather's first cousin). His Deposition [No. 5], which is quite brief, states that 'Dominick Beirne, Jun. ... came to my house and said that he had seen the biggest sight that ever he witnessed in his life'. Having said that 'I saw the figures clearly, fully and distinctly', he describes them briefly, and then adds: 'I remained only ten minutes, and then I went away.'

One of the briefest depositions [No. 8] from an adult witness was by **Bridget Murphy** of Cloonlee, who is usually referred to as 'Mrs Hugh Flatley' – although only 44 years of age, she was twice widowed, having been married first to John Leetch and then to Hugh Flatley (she lived on another 44 years until 1923). In relation to the Apparition, she was merely a passer-by, which is probably why her Deposition is omitted by Sexton. Her account, however, is worth quoting in full:

I was passing by the chapel of Knock on the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, about eight o'clock, and I beheld most clearly and distinctly the figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Joseph and that of St John the Evangelist, standing erect at the gable-end of the chapel, towards the south side; I thought that the parish priest had been ornamenting the church, and got some beautiful likenesses removed outside.

One of the most fascinating – and frustrating! – Depositions [No. 9] is that of **Bridget Trench**, also known as Mrs Carney (from her late husband). A native of Roundfort near Hollymount – about 12 miles south-west of Knock – Bridget was aged 74 and was living in what is known as 'Carty's Cottage' in Carrowmore – it still to be seen on the side of the Kiltamagh Road. She died seven years later, of bronchitis, leaving a daughter, Honora.

The reason I describe her deposition as 'frustrating' is explained by the following note in MacPhilpin's version:

The testimony of this witness was given in the Irish language. Her words were translated by Father Corbet into English while she spoke. The following is the version of what she said.

(Fr Corbet was curate in Claremorris at the time, and a noted supporter of the Land League.) From that note it is clear that Bridget was a monoglot Irish-speaker, that is, not fluent in English – according to the Census of 1891, there were 71 such people in the barony of Clanmorris and 113 in the barony of Costello. What a pity, what a missed opportunity, then, not to have recorded her account in the original language! Especially when at least three or four of the priests on the commission were fluent in Irish – Canon Ulick Bourke, in particular, was a recognised authority on the language, and was accordingly dubbed *Athair na hAthbheochana*, ‘the Father of the Irish Language Revival’. That is, perhaps, a modern viewpoint, but, had it been done, it would have furnished us with a fascinating example of the Mayo dialect of Irish. (I should mention that there is a version of Bridget’s Deposition in Irish – albeit in a modern translation from English – in a book called *I Saw Our Lady* by my fellow-speaker, Tom Neary, published in 1977.)

Bridget Trench’s account – the two versions of which are (with a couple of exceptions) quite close to one another – is characterised by its clarity and common-sense approach.

**Judith Campbell** of Carrowmore was apparently a grand-daughter of old Judy Campbell who was on her deathbed just across from the chapel-gate on the night of the Apparition. Mary Beirne and her brother Dominick Jnr broke off their viewing of the Apparition to go to see Mrs Campbell, and when they returned, the vision had disappeared, while Bridget Trench was in Campbell’s when Mary Beirne called and Bridget and Judith – then aged 22 – accompanied her to the gable of the church. In MacPhilpin’s version of her Deposition [No. 12], Judith says in relation to ‘the figures or likenesses that we saw’:

I went within a foot of them; none of us spoke to them; we believed they were St Joseph and St John the Evangelist, because some years ago statues of St Joseph and of the Evangelist were in the chapel at Knock.

Some months after the Apparition, Judith married Ned Salmon from Cloonernaun. They had six children before she died, aged 35, in early 1893. Ned later remarried, to a local woman, and they had four children, one of whom, Rose Salmon, married Charlie McLoughlin. When I was at school, Rose and Charlie and their three daughters, Kathleen, Peggy and Delia Mary, ran a sweet and paper-shop across from the chapel-gate, now sadly closed. It stood on the site of the house in which Judy Campbell died in 1879.

One of the most mysterious of the witnesses was **Jack Durkan** who is referred to by some of those who spoke to Catherine Rynne as ‘a man of the road’ – probably an itinerant labourer rather than a Traveller in the modern sense, that is, a tinsmith. He is also said to have been ‘from the North’, presumably the province of Ulster – even though Durkan is a surname whose roots are in north-east Mayo



and south Sligo, being an offshoot of the O Haras. In 1879 he was in his mid-20s and working as a servant-man for Dominick Byrne Snr. He appears to have stayed around Knock for almost 40 years after the Apparition, and is thought to have died around 1917. His Deposition [No. 15] is by far the shortest of any, and occurs only in MacPhilpin's version. Running to just 27 words – none of which are his own – it reads as follows:

The fifteenth witness is John Durkan, one of the three who accompanied young Hill. His testimony is the same as that given by each of the Beirnes.

The final witness, in alphabetical order, was **Patsy Walsh** who lived in Ballinderris – a subdivision of the townland named Carrownamallaght, but known locally as Carrownamannaght ('the quarterland of the blessings' instead of 'the quarterland of the curses'). From his brief Deposition [No. 4] we learn that he was the only witness who was not close to the church-gable. Instead, on the night of 21 August, which was 'very dark ... and raining very heavily', he states that at about 9 o'clock he went to a field of his that lay about half a mile from the chapel. (We know from later family-testimony that he had been haymaking earlier in the day and went up to the 'High Meadow' to collect some rakes and forks.) He tells us that he

saw a very bright light on the southern gable-end of the chapel ... a large globe of golden light ... high up in the air and around the chapel gable.

(Our house was about 250 yards from Patsy Walsh's, and my own grandfather, who was 11 at the time, told me when I was about nine or ten that he recalled seeing a strange crescent of light along the top of the small hill that lay between our house and the chapel – this was long before street-lighting came to Knock. He couldn't go to investigate as he was confined to the house for being 'bold' or naughty earlier that day – he had climbed on the dresser, fallen and hurt his knee.)

There is a discrepancy about his age between the two versions of Patsy's Deposition – Sexton gives it as 55 while MacPhilpin has 65. The fact that he had a son, Patrick, born in 1848, indicates that the latter has to be the correct age.

That, then, is a rather bare outline of the 15 witnesses and the evidence they gave to the commission of inquiry. As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, they were a group of quite ordinary people, a good cross-section of the local population. What they saw over there at the gable on that wet August evening, 140 years ago tonight, was to change Knock forever, but they never allowed themselves to be carried away by their own role in the drama.

[4820 words]

# PARISH OF KNOCK

