

Coolacrease:
A Place with a Tragic History

By Paddy Heaney

Coolacrease is a border townland which extends from the village of Cadamstown to the county river which is the border between Laois and Offaly. This ancient boundary river had many names. The Annals refer to it as the “Abha Dine” or “Deep River”. It was also known by the beautiful name of “Glasheensheorna” – The Little Stram of the Barley. Coolacrease or Cúl a’ Chraois is thought to mean The Hill Back of the Gluttony. There are many Gaelic placenames in the townland: Knockroe, Glendolan, Ardora, Cushuaid, Cannora, and the old town of Baile Mac Adam was also situated there.

The area is also rich in archaeological remains, such as two souterrains, and there was a mass-rock situated near one of them which was perhaps used during Penal times.

Coolacrease townland was part of the lands of the O’Carrolls of Baile Mac Adam Castle. Domhnall O’Carroll settled in Leitir Lughna, Cadamstown, in 1227 according to O’Riordan, and was descended from Fionn O’Carroll, styled as the King of Ely in 1205. He was also tenth in descent from the O’Carroll who led the troops of Ely at the battle of Clontarf in 1014 according to Dr. Lanigan. The castle was situated half a mile west of Cadamstown village and is still known as Castlefield.

In the following centuries the area was steeped in history, with notable hostilities between the O’Carrolls and the Le Fays until the O’Carrolls were dispossessed of their entire lands in 1611. They refused to take an oath of allegiance or conform to the established church.

Baile Mac Adam Castle and 8,463 acres were regranted to Adam Loftus, the first Protestant Archbishop of Dublin. He never came to live there. Coolacrease changed hands several times, and the immediate area was the scene of several well-documented atrocities. In the 19th century some notable archaeological discoveries were made by the owner John Benwell who died around 1890.

His sister was left to run the farm. She eventually sold the farm to William Pearson who came from Queen’s County (now Laois). The Pearsons were good farmers and good neighbours. The Pearson children attended the local school in Cadamstown village. Dick Pearson was a member of the school hurling team during his schooldays.

When the War of Independence was in progress the second half-company of the Offaly Brigade [of the IRA] was formed. Twenty four men from Cadamstown joined, and they drilled and paraded openly. A branch of Cumann na mBan was also formed, comprising of twelve local girls.

It was during this period that the Pearsons of Coolacrease began to distance themselves from the local people. The people knew that they were in sympathy with the establishment. Prior to that the Pearson boys, Dick and Abe, attended house dances all over the area. In the early Spring of 1921 a young stranger came to live at

Pearsons, and he socialised with the locals. He introduced himself as Jimmy Bradley and was the Pearsons' workman.

During that time the local people noticed that the police from Birr often visited the Pearson house, as well as the military from Crinkle Army Barracks [a couple of miles south of Birr]. Three local men who were also frequent visitors to Coolacrease were warned by the local IRA: two heeded the warning, the third continued to visit the house.

In the Spring of 1921 the first confrontation took place between the local people and the Pearsons. A mass-path came down from the mountain to the local church, and it passes through part of Pearsons' land. This path had been used since 1842 when the local church was built in the village. On a Sunday morning as the people came to mass they found the mass-path closed. Trees had been felled across the stile, the path was completely blocked, and there were about twenty mass-goers present. The men returned to their homes and later returned to the site and began removing the obstacles. William Pearson arrived and accused the men of trespassing. Nobody replied to his remarks. He returned later with his three sons, and his workman Jimmy Bradley, and a stranger with an English accent. As the people were leaving the church after mass they heard of the incident, and one hundred men, women and children came to help clear the pathway. Words were exchanged between the two parties as the work progressed. At one stage Dick Pearson and John Dillon threatened one another with revolvers. Eventually peace was restored and a pathway was cleared and the Pearsons returned home. On the following day the police and army arrived in Cadamstown and arrested J.J. Horan of Coolacrease and John Dillon of Seskin. Both were conveyed under heavy armed escort to Tullamore jail.

A month later the local company of the IRA received orders to block the road between Cadamstown village and Coolacrease House. Six men arrived at the appointed place and they selected a beech tree near the roadway. At midnight they commenced operations. Mick Heaney and Tom Donnelly were armed with revolvers. They took up their positions on the roadway while Tom Horan, Joe Carroll, Joe Manifold and Jim English began the operation of cutting the tree. At half past twelve footsteps were heard approaching from the direction of Pearsons. Mick Heaney cried out "Halt, who goes there". Shots rang out from the direction of Pearsons, Mick Heaney was shot in the stomach, a rifle bullet passed through his left side, a shotgun was discharged at close range and he received pellets in the face and arms. He was wearing a heavy scarf around his neck and but for that the wounds would have been even more severe.

Tom Donnelly was on guard one hundred yards away on the Cadamstown side of the roadblock. He arrested Bert Hogg, who was on his way to Pearsons. [Bert Hogg's father was RIC Sergeant William Hogg.] The firing started as he marched him down the road to hand him over to Mick Heaney on the Coolacrease/Tullamore side. Hogg received gunshot wounds in the legs, from the direction of Pearsons, and also back wounds (from which he lost a lung) as he attempted to flee. Tom Donnelly fired towards the attackers and had the satisfaction of hearing somebody shout "I am hit". A bullet grazed Tom Donnelly's head as he went to the aid of Mick Heaney. The roadblock party departed, Mick was carried to a local house and was later brought by pony and trap to a secret ward in Tullamore hospital. After six months he recovered

and returned home. Bill Hogg also received medical attention. This incident, and many more, came to the attention of the O.C. of the Offaly Brigade, and action was taken against the Pearsons on 30th June 1921.

The Flying Column of the Offaly Brigade was in a training camp at Dowras in Eglishe parish near Birr. The O.C. selected nine men and told them to be ready in one hour. In the meantime two motor cars arrived. The men got on board and the O.C. rode in front on a motorcycle. On arriving in Kilcormac the men dismounted and some of them smoked or walked around. They then headed up the road for Lackaroe. John Grogan who was working on Cush Bog described to me what he saw, in the following terms: "At about 10.30 I saw a motor bike and two cars travelling up the road for Lackaroe just opposite where I was working. The convoy halted and the first car stalled. The men dismounted. After some time the second car hauled the first car away, with the motor bike positioned behind one of the cars. The men came across the bog. There were nine men and an officer in front. All the men had rifles slung over their shoulders. The officer carried a revolver. The officer was dressed in a green jacket, knee breeches and leggings, and all the men wore ordinary coats, collars and ties." John Grogan also said: "I knew the commanding officer and he spoke to me. I did not know any of the men. It was later on in the afternoon I saw smoke rising in the Coolacrease area, and I knew what had taken place."

In later years the commanding officer gave a full account to me of what happened on the day: "We were informed that the Pearsons were making hay in a field, not far from the house. We approached and observed two men making hay. They were Dick and Abe Pearson, and another man was working a horse. He was known locally as Jimmy Bradley." His real name was William Stanley, a relation of the Pearsons, and a native of Laois. When he saw the column entering the field he began running towards a stile, a hundred yards away. The CO fired as he ran in a stooped zigzag fashion, and he was shot in the arm. Several shots were fired at him as he ran. He escaped but was captured at Mountbolus where he was held overnight. He was released the following morning and made his way to the RIC Barracks in Tullamore.

The Column, consisting of nine men and their Commanding Officer, brought the Pearson brothers to Coolacrease House. A court martial verdict was read out to them and they were executed by firing squad. A further twenty local IRA members were deployed in the surrounding area to provide look-out and cover for the Flying Column operation, and these did not go onto the Pearson property.

The townland of Coolacrease is peaceful once more. The ruins of Coolacrease House stand on the hill of Knockroe, a symbol of years of oppression and hate. Now peace reigns supreme. Many young people are building houses and settling in the area. Tourists come to the area to take part in walks; as the Offaly Way and Slieve Bloom Way pass near the townland of Coolacrease. The tragic events of 30th June 1921 are now part of the history and folklore of bygone years.

But there is another version of this event, written by Alan Stanley and entitled "I Met Murder on the Way: the Story of the Pearsons of Coolacrease". In this book the author received his information from his late father William Stanley, who lived at Pearsons – under an assumed name – during the episode mentioned above. He was also related to

the Pearson family. I have met the author on several occasions during the past two years, and he informed me that he would like to write his version of the story. I have read his book which is well researched, but has, I feel, some notable inaccuracies. I have already published my version of the episode both here and in "At the Foot of Slieve Bloom".

My own information was gleaned from the men and women who took part in the War of Independence, and who gave their information willingly to me. Since the publication of the book "I Met Murder on the Way" I have received phone calls and letters from people all over Ireland and overseas whose fathers or grandfathers were involved during that period. I was fortunate to have met and interviewed many of the men and women before they passed away, including the OC of the Offaly Brigade on that day. Mr Jack Carter, who wrote the Foreword for the book, ends his column with the following: "We shall never recapture the past and it is not for the historian to invent. Alan has brought a mature desire to look into the truth of Coolacree and, before it faded into the mists of time, has revealed it as something far less than patriotic idealism. He may not win much affection – lack of reverence for sacred cows can cause resentment, and others may give a different and sanitised account of the same events. Yet Alan has deployed original material from those with intimate knowledge of the sordid episode in June 1921, and has written a balanced work of historical illumination."

The people of Cadamstown would not agree with Carter's idea that Alan Stanley wrote a balanced account of the events. They do not have a "sanitised account of the same events". They lived through that period, and they did not invent history as stated above. There were six Protestant families living in a two-mile radius of the village of Cadamstown during that period. Not one of them was ever molested; they were held in high esteem by everyone. The families were the Jacksons of Kilnaparson, McAllisters of Cadamstown village, Hoggs of Lackroe, Ashtons of Pigeonstown, Droughts of Lettybrook, and Biddulphs of Moneyguineen. I was asked by the people of Cadamstown to address some of the questionable parts of the book so that future generations will know a more complete version.

Here are some of the inaccuracies which deserve mention:

Page 12: "... a dispute with some neighbours who claimed a "mass-path" ... damage being caused to crops ...". There were no crops involved as the mass-path passed through shrubbery and uncultivated land.

Page 13: "... on 30th June 1921 a band of thirty, perhaps forty, armed and masked men descended on the house, torched it, then ... shot the two eldest sons ...". There were not thirty or forty armed and masked men involved in the actual executions. Nine men and the CO were involved.

Page 21: "... at 4 o'clock while the two men were making hay in a field ... they were surrounded by about forty armed and masked men ...". There were three men in the field: the Pearson brothers and William Stanley alias Jimmy Bradley. There were not thirty or forty masked men involved. There was no need for the men to be masked. They were mostly unknown to the Pearsons. Two of them were from the North Tipperary Brigade.

Page 33: “A variant of the myth suggests that they were actively engaged, on the side of the authorities ...”. The shooting of Mick Heaney and Tom Donnelly when the local battalion were cutting a tree to block the road could not have been a myth. Both men carried their wounds to their dying day.

Page 36: “My father said that Dick was somewhat hotheaded ...”. John Dillon warned Dick on two occasions in regard to his conduct. Dick threatened ... to burn his house. During that period there was IRA intelligence to the effect that six local houses were planned to be burned by the police and the military: Donnellys of Curragh, Nolans of Deerpark, Dillons, Ryans and Dalys of Seskin, Heaneys of Glenlitter.

Pages 36 and 53 (page 68 in 2nd edition): I have been approached by nephews and a niece of the late James Delahunty to state that James Delahunty was not a postman. He did not join the Postal Service until 1926 and he was a prisoner during the dates mentioned, and was also imprisoned during the Civil War.

As a matter of interest no postman ever delivered letters during those years – for certain reasons. [The Pearsons collected their own letters from the post office, so their mail was less likely to be intercepted. In fact their post was intercepted by the IRA and they were found to be passing information to the British authorities.] There was no official postman in Cadamstown at that period (cf. page 46). Pearsons collected their mail at McAllisters Post Office in the village. Bess Grennan, who was a young girl at the time, delivered the letters to various houses, although she was not officially sanctioned.

Page 46: Jim White was the son of an RIC sergeant. He was warned on several occasions to keep away from Pearsons. Also on page 46 the following appears: “At approximately 11 a.m. a man by the name of Hoban or Honen arrived in the hay paddock and asked us if we had seen his horses ...”. This statement is also inaccurate. J.J. Horan farmed land beside Pearsons. They were not on speaking terms. J.J. Horan and John Dillon were in Tullamore Jail during that period as they had been arrested by the Birr police after the mass-path incident. The information leading to these arrests can only have been provided by the Pearsons.

Page 47: “The Rebels came back back next day and stole cattle, horses and harness.” The afternoon of the incident the military arrived from Birr. They set up camp on the lawn and kept a round-the-clock guard on the property until the Pearsons returned some days later. After the surviving Pearsons returned to Coolcrease two pigs were stolen and sold in Roscrea and an iron gate was taken from the property. The man who stole the gate was made to leave it back; the two men who stole the pigs were brought before a Sinn Fein court and were made to compensate the Pearson family.

Page 48: “When Syd [Pearson] came back to the farm 12 months later and started ploughing, next morning he found a note on the plough advising him to stop or he would be shot. So it is evident their main object was to take over our land.” I have never heard of this incident. We have to understand that there were myths on both sides. It may or may not have happened.

Page 53 (67 in 2nd edition): The author mentions Tom Mitchell. Once more there are inaccuracies with regard to James Delahunty, attributed to Tom Mitchell. Tom Mitchell would have known that he was not a postman during that period. James Delahunty also held the rank of Quartermaster in the second half company of the Offaly Brigade.

I was a personal friend of Tom Mitchell and we often discussed the Pearson episode. He told me his father advised the Pearson family on many occasions to keep a low profile. Tom had a balanced view of the situation at the time. The Mitchells were Protestants, and his uncle, also Tom Mitchell – a soldier trained who served in the British army – trained the local IRA battalion during the War of Independence; and their house in Roscomroe was used as a safe house for men on the run.

Page 55 (69 in 2nd edition): I will not go into detail in regard to the author's comments regarding the felling of the tree. He might consider interviewing the people of Cadamstown and the surrounding areas, and they will provide the details. The day after the mass-path incident an Crossley Tender and two army lorries arrived in the village and proceeded to Pearsons that afternoon. J.J. Horan and John Dillon were arrested. It is reasonable to ask who was in a position to identify them and point out where they lived. Dillon's house was situated three miles up the mountainside.

Another element of the local intelligence struggle: Two RIC officers used to come on their bicycles from Birr on alternate Sundays, to attend mass in Cadamstown Church. After mass they proceeded to Pearsons. They received a warning that they would be shot. They never came afterwards.

Page 56 (71 in 2nd edition): The author claims the IRA used dum-dum bullets. The same accusation was falsely levelled at General Tom Barry, IRA commander in the ambush at Crossbarry where a whole English unit was wiped out.

Page 73: "Susan Pearson was brought to a house in Kinnitty where a number of men were paraded before her ... she failed to identify any of the men." This is not correct. After the Pearsons were executed, the police and military arrived in Cadamstown (not Kinnitty) at 7 o'clock in the morning. They arrested everyone in the village and placed them along the bridge in the village, where names were taken. The women were allowed to return home, and the men and boys as young as 10 years old were held until Mrs Pearson arrived from Birr. She failed to identify anybody.

That was the morning my late mother Bridget Dillon, aged 17 years, was fired on by British soldiers while she was bringing in cows to be milked. She carried a head wound till the day she died.

Page 85 (99 in 2nd edition): Tom Donnelly is mentioned as having been interviewed by Tom Mitchell in 1981. But Tom Mitchell passed away in 1976.

Page 86 (101 in 2nd edition): [A story of a lorry careering over a ditch at Coolacrease, the occupants –supposedly the Pearson execution party – all killed.] Those people were killed at Coolacrease in 1948, they were guests returning from a wedding and had nothing whatever to do with the execution of the Pearsons.

Page 90 (105 in 2nd edition): [The shooting at the police in Kinnitty. The attackers were said to have hidden behind the Catholic church building.] The police were ambushed from the ruins of the police barracks one hundred yards from Giltrap's public house, and from the corner of the grounds of the Catholic church building.

These are not all the errors I have been asked to correct by numerous people. Alan Stanley has written an account sympathetic to the Unionist views of that time, as well as a revisionist perspective. I have revealed and recorded the incident as told by those who actually participated in the events.

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