

OLIVIA MARY TAAFFE - The Cloonrane Connection

When in Spring 1995, a branch of the Young Priests' Society was founded in Ballindine, a timespan of some seventy years was bridged, as the founder of that Society, Olivia Mary Taaffe, had connections with the village of Cloonrane.

Olivia Mary was born on 24th June, 1832, at Annagh House, Ballyglunin, about seven miles from Tuam, to John J. Blake and his wife, the former Elizabeth Bodkin. Her father, John J. Blake was the owner of large tracks of land in counties Galway and Offaly. The Blakes came into the property when, in 1803, John Blake, one of the fourteen tribes of Galway, married Olivia French, who was the only child of Christopher French of Brooklodge House, Ballyglunin. A year after the marriage of John J. Blake to Elizabeth Bodkin, a son, John St. George was born to them but he died the same year. In the following year, 1831, a daughter, Harriet was born. In June 1832, twins were born. Of those, Olivia Mary survived her twin brother and later that same year, John's wife, Elizabeth, also died. Following his wife's death, John J. Blake left Brooklodge House, a heartbroken man, and resided for the remainder of his life on his estate in Co. Offaly as a recluse.

Harriet and Olivia Mary were reared by their grandmother and they went to live in Dublin at the residence of their cousin, John James Bodkin, M.P. And now to the Cloonrane connection. Part of the massive Blake estate was the townland of Cloonrane, comprising, at the time, of 476 acres, 2 roods, 8 perches, close to Ballindine, at the county boundary. Like all of rural Ireland at the time of the famine, it was a densely populated village. See extract from *Griffith Valuations*. In the part of the village which farmed under the rundale system, i.e. from the stone wall to the Mayo border, the average size of a holding was approximately eight acres.

As Harriet Blake had entered the Presentation Convent in Middleton, Co. Cork, on 12th November, 1861, when John J. Blake died in 1865, Olivia Mary inherited all his estate and in the process, became the new landlady of Cloonrane which was very fortunate for the tenants of the village as she was to prove to be one of the most kind and generous land owners in Ireland.

Another Cloonrane connection was that Olivia Mary and her sister, Harriet, were instructed in religion, in Dublin, by Fr. Patrick Duggan, a native of Carnageehy, Milltown, later to become Dr. Duggan of Clonfert and staunch supporter of the Land League. He was grand uncle of Willie, Tommie and Mary Kate Rush of Cloonrane, all of whom died in the year 1960.

Olivia Mary Blake married John Taaffe of Smarmore House, Ardee, Co. Louth, on 22nd May, 1867, and went to live at his residence. They were both deeply religious; he having to leave the Jesuit Seminary owing to bad health, and before their marriage, they agreed if a son was born to them, he would be consecrated to God and would become a priest. Their son, George Robert, was born at Smarmore Castle in 1871 but he, like his father, was plagued by ill health. Fuelled by their deep religious belief, his parents took him to Rome to be blessed by the then Pope Pius IX. After his



education in Clongowes, he went to University College, Dublin, in 1890. In the following year, he was struck down with T.B. His mother contacted the Parish Priest of Milltown and asked for the prayers of the tenants of her estate. She took him to a winter resort high in the Swiss Alps in the hope that the clean fresh air might help his condition but all failed and he died in January 1894 at the age of twenty three. Olivia Mary was by now a widow as John Taaffe had died from T.B. in the previous year.

All through her life, Olivia Mary possessed a great belief in Catholicism and had a special devotion to St. Joseph. This can be traced back to 1867 when on a visit to France, she paid a visit to the shrine of the Confraternity of St. Joseph in Maranville, 160 miles from Paris. At the time, there was a movement there to establish a fund to educate young men for the priesthood who themselves or their parents did not have the means to do so. Some twenty eight years later, in 1895, she became aware of the plight of a postman's son from Limerick, who wished to become a priest but could not afford to do so. She enlisted the aid of the members of the Confraternity of St. Joseph and he went on to study at Mungret College. That was, in effect, the beginning of the Young Priests' Society.

Her great generosity did not end with the formation of the Young Priests' Society. Keenly aware of the poor living conditions of her tenants, she visited her estates and assured them that there would be no evictions for inability to pay rent. She made arrangements for children's clothes to be sent and distributed on the estate. The distribution point for this locality was Nell Brogan's house in Shantalla. This house still stands to-day and is owned by Tom McCormack of Farnhill.

After the death of her husband and only child, her home at Smarmore fell into poor repair. The family of her late husband brought successful court action against her and she was compelled to leave Smarmore Castle forever.

Much of the estate of Olivia Mary Taaffe was acquired by the Land Commission or its predecessor, the Congested District Board, established 1894. The townland of Cloonrane was no different. Three families - Mongans, Nevins and James Dennison, left and went to live in new holdings in the next village of Cloondroon, also on the former Taaffe estate. Their land was then allocated to the remaining tenants. Patrick Mannion from Artyflynn near Dunmore, was in possession of 122 acres, 2 roods, 13 perches of the Taaffe estate - from Pat Hopkins' house to the Cloondroon border and this was also acquired and re-distributed. The last link with the Mannion Family ended at Christmas 1994 when a daughter of Patrick Mannion died in a convent in South Africa in her seventy-fifth year in religion.

Olivia Mary Taaffe died, at her home in Eglinton Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin, in May 1918. She was buried with her late husband and son in the Taaffe burial ground at Smarmore Castle and there closed the final chapter in the life of one of the greatest ladies that Ireland has known.