

## Ballynegal & The Smyths

My mother, nee Marjorie Hawkesworth Smyth, was the oldest child of Thomas Hawkesworth Smyth – who inherited Ballynegall House from his father. THS had married Constance Levinge – her family owned nearby Knockdrin Castle. She met my father on a skiing holiday after she had returned from Canada and following the death of her much loved sister Gwen – her uncle Ted (later Sir Edward Levinge) had taken her to Switzerland to help her get over this tragedy.

I first went to Ballynegal in 1938 for a family holiday. I was rising six. I remember feeling lost in the great house, and in awe of my severe elderly grandfather (Hawk), But he did take me round the greenhouses in the walled garden and picked a nectarine for me himself - the first I ever tasted and marvellous! He had retired from the army as a major when he inherited Ballynegall from his father - the Smyths had Yorkshire roots and he was in the East Yorkshire Regiment like his son and grandson after him.

The family were typical members of the ascendancy, still considered English by the Irish despite 200 years living off their Irish estates - they attended English public schools (my grandfather went to Harrow) and intermarried. During the troubles the house was on the IRA list for burning, but given low priority as my grandfather employed several IRA who wanted to keep their jobs and available petrol was always allocated elsewhere! Downstairs windows were lined with bullet-proof steel sheets! My grandmother was always working - mucking out and mixing mash for chickens and turkeys which she reared by the hundred in enormous incubators in the great basements - she was obsessive and very good at whatever she did, and spent much time in her underground empire - although she ran the house efficiently. She then had about 7 house servants, which was half the number of my mother's youth.

We went again for summer hols in 1939, spending most of the time in Connemara (Carna - Calafeenish and Dogs Bay) with spells before and after at Ballynegal. I remember being made to read to my grandmother in the drawing room, and her telling me how backward I was! She and my mother had read fluently at four, she said! During these holidays I caught some perch in the ornamental lake, crawfish from the stream in Ice House wood and trout in Lough Owell with my mother. In Connemara I caught my first prawns and ate one alive to general consternation. My parents left before Monica and I, catching the last car ferry back to UK (the war had started). We followed a month or two later with Nanny Bishop when the expected blitz failed to materialise.

I did not see either of my grandparents again until we went over there to live in late 1946 - I was just 14. The estate was mortgaged and run down, land was being sold, and there were only about four servants left. My grandfather was obsessed by death duties and by the need to keep the estate going. He appeared to have little time for his son Tommy or his daughter in law Mercie. My Uncle Tommy was two years younger than my ma, a shadowy figure who lives in my memories because of the stories - usually slightly malicious - that my mother told about him ("put your finger under the needle (of the sewing machine) Tommy" - and he did, and my mother spun the handle!) So Hawk decided that my father, just retired from the army, could help him run the estate and that I should inherit!

Although my mother always said she loathed her own father ("pater") who she described as vile (he had it in for her after she told her mother when she found him kissing one of the maids), she badgered my father against his better judgement ('we owe it to George') to sell their nice house at Bembridge in the Isle of Wight and move to Ballynegal with all their furniture. She always SAID she did it for me and when things did not work out I felt I'd let the side down! But I am sure that (despite her

---

antipathy for her father), she relished the idea of returning as the mistress (to be) of Ballynegall, and of doing down Tommy and son Michael! The arrangement was a disaster! Hawk treated my father like a lackey, and my parents increasingly kept to their own quarters (we had a suite on the first floor).

The final unravelling took place when I came home for the Xmas (?) holidays after my first year at Winchester - with my grandfather shouting at me (“damn cub - don’t speak until you are spoken to - Sir!”) - and my parents not prepared to hear me being abused. Actually I quite enjoyed the holidays. I had the run of a large estate. With my new air rifle I shot numerous blackbirds and starlings and - a great triumph - one rook. After I went back to school, my parents decided they could not stick it any more, went looking for houses in Ireland, and found Caragh Lodge on the shore of a beautiful lake in Co.Kerry, which was an inspired choice. When I came home for Easter hols in 1947 they were installed there, and told me I had lost my inheritance “and a good thing too”. I was never so sure!

I never went back to Ballynegall, although my mother (usually alone) went up on infrequent visits & for her parents’ funerals. Hawk died in 1953. I last saw my grandmother at Monica and Hugh’s 1956 wedding in Dublin, and she died in 1960. She was Constance Levinge, and my mother was fond of her brother Uncle Ted (Sir Edward Levinge of nearby Knockdrin Castle) and of her cousins Dick (later Sir Richard Levinge, who became MD of Guinness - another fine fisherman like herself), and Vera who married a German (Count Althaus). She also had a marvellous two years or so on Vancouver Island with her mother’s sister Florence (aunt Florrie) who had married an officer in the Indian Army and later retired as colonel (Eardley Wilmot) to Shawnigan Lake, not far from Victoria on Vancouver Island, where he built a fine house

now a well-known hotel. She loved Canada, and had a fund of stories about her aunt and uncle – the latter was apparently “a card”!

Constance was good-looking, charming and clever (wasted on Hawk, my mother always said). She had another son Dennis who died as a baby and a much younger daughter Gwendoline who everyone loved including my mother, who never got on with Tommy. When she was fourteen Gwen came in wet from riding one day, and within 48 hours was dead from pneumonia. I have a miniature of Constance as a child on the landing at Lawnswood.

Ballynegal went to my cousin Michael to save double death duties (Tommy missed out). He is three months younger than me; his wife Mary died 1991 and I believe he is now [1997] in a home at Woodbridge. I only met him once - at Ballynegal, when we were thirteen; and he came to stay with my parents once, when I was away. Michael joined the East Yorkshires like his father and grandfather, and retired I think as a captain. I think he then became a Fisheries Officer in the west of Ireland. Michael was still in the house in 1962 (see Irish Tatler) but sold up in 1963 - despite death duties he inherited land and antiques, but had problems due to the entailing of the estate and appalling local trustees who apparently ripped him off.

The photos don't show what a large house Ballynegal was. The top floor (third storey from front fourth from back) contained about 10 servants bedrooms already abandoned in 1945 and full of old hip baths catching drips - quite musical when it rained - the lead had already been taken off the roof and the house needed thousands spent on it then. My mother was saddened to read that the beautiful ornamental lake had been drained and displeased that De Valera's photo should hang in the library, but at least these abominations could not be laid at my door!

I last saw Ballynegall, or what was left of it in 1995 when Val and I went to Ireland. The hall was still standing but roofless and one can identify the plasterwork. The church in the grounds is closed and derelict, and I had no time to get through the barbed wire to look for family graves. I did not go to Knockdrin although Simon and Clare called not long ago and reported that the Levinge memorial tablets and headstones had been moved to Knockdrin by the current owner (Baron von Prondzynski) - but Smyth ones are presumably still in the church or grounds.

Dominic Sally and family went across to Ireland recently and looked at remains of Ballynegall. No change to the house ruins, but the church in the grounds is no longer derelict – it has been turned into an upmarket and apparently very successful restaurant – The Belfry (see Google –



Mullingar) There was no obvious sign of the Smyth headstones – but they did not go down in the crypt (sorry – wine cellar!)

*George Ferard, October 1997 updated January 2003 and July 2004*