

A Social History of Rural Ireland in the 1950s

A Social History of Rural Ireland in the 1950s:

Remembering Crotta

By

John Galvin

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For my father

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FOREWORD

Dr John Galvin has written a book that is both simple in its narrative unfolding and complex in its layering of remembrance and time. It appeals to the reader on many levels. Anyone interested in childhood and how childhood memories inform our adult view of the world will find this book of interest. Home – whatever and wherever that home may be – is where we start from. Our origins are grounded in a sense of home, from which we set our bearings, gain a tentative sense of direction and to which we keep returning in memory if not in lived reality. Whatever childhood means is entangled in our often complex, ambivalent and recurring feelings towards a place that we call home. His simplicity and eloquence of expression evoke not only his own remembered childhood home, but stir in the reader a recollection of childhood that resonates in the present and nudges us through into our uncertain futures

This is also a book that will be of interest to social historians, particularly those who have an interest in how the existing rural way of life adapted to the changes of modern Ireland. It is a book steeped in social history: how rurality was experienced, what community meant, how families survived, how ruined places were lost, found and lost again. It provides important clues as to how society worked, how it hung together, how it coped with its disparities and political legacy. It uses memory as a primary resource of social history and in doing so contributes to our understanding of how our social world is evolving and how the past is continually remaking the future through our understanding of it in the present.

It is a book that invites us to consider the significance of time and memory in how we understand the world and how we locate ourselves within it. The present is always at the crossroads of a remembered past and an unknowable future. From Aristotle onwards western philosophers have addressed the problem of how we live at this crossroads. Dr Galvin brings me back to where the roads meet: the present that is redolent of the past and resonates with intimations of the future. He does it not through any deep philosophising, but by drawing the reader into his story – a story which is told with irony, humour and quiet eloquence. It is a story that is personal in its distinctive voice and cadence, social in its detail and

contextualisation, and strangely philosophical in its reflections on how the past resonates in the present.

No one could fail to be moved by this evocative account of the ordinariness of a childhood spent in such extraordinary circumstances.

Jon Nixon
Honorary Professor, Centre for Lifelong Learning,
Research and Development, Education University of Hong Kong

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PROLOGUE

For years I had toyed with the idea of writing a book about Crotta and the old Great House. I wanted to record something of its history and also its legacy to us, the Galvin family, who grew up amidst its ruins and its folklore. Like the Great House, our way of life in rural Ireland of the mid nineteenth hundreds has largely disappeared but the memories live on and none remain so vivid as those of early childhood - those carefree times when wonder and awe were ever present and everyday was a surprise package to be opened and enjoyed, or sometimes just endured.

But my life was far too busy to ever get around to writing about such things until one day Fate played a hand and gave me all the time in the world. It was a lovely June afternoon when Death came a-calling but certain fortuitous circumstances prevented Death from taking me. Michael had come to help out 'his old man' on a job I was doing and afterwards enjoy a barbeque in the back garden. I was laying paving slabs underneath the clothes line, cutting them to shape with an angle-grinder. "Give me ten minutes" I shouted, "I'll finish this little bit and we'll have a beer". That 'little bit' was to have dramatic consequences and send my life, as I knew it, into a tail-spin.

As I was cutting the last slab, the disk shattered sending a piece of rotating shrapnel up along my arm, butchering it from wrist to shoulder. The rotating piece of metal waltzed its way through the flesh of my left arm severing nerves, tendons, muscle and arteries. I staggered towards the backdoor in shock and horror, blood spilling on the ground. Angela reacted quickly. Pale-faced and stunned she tightly wrapped a towel around the bloodied shirtsleeve and screamed at Michael to start the car. I knew it was bad. I had glanced in horror at the cut and the amount of blood on the ground told a frightening story.

Michael speeds off towards St. John's hospital like a bat out of hell. Somewhere along the way my vision begins to dim and then blanks out. I'm aware of the sound of the horn and Michael cursing profusely as he tries to make time through traffic lights and congested streets. We make it to St John's A & E in ten minutes and because I have fallen sideways on the back seat the blood loss is impeded and some vision has returned. The

sight of my blood-drenched clothes and bloodied car seat is more than I can handle. I feel sick. Michael helps me out of the car and in the midst of my horror and panic I hear myself saying "You're parked on double yellow lines", as he rushes me through the emergency door.

Luckily St. John's A & E was still open; it was now about 5.30 p.m. and the A & E service closes at 6.00. The only other hospital is situated at the other side of the city. I would not have made it across town, certainly not at rush hour. My candle would have gone out somewhere along O'Connell Avenue as the last few pints of blood drained out through my ruptured arm. So 'thank you God' and the forces that combined to have me on the emergency table at St. John's in the nick of time. An excellent emergency team kicked into action immediately.

As I lie there shuddering and groaning, I can hear the scissors cutting through my clothes and I'm acutely aware of the urgency in the voice of a male doctor who is barking out commands with a foreign accent. His instructions are clipped and precise, so many mils of this and that and he makes constant enquiry with regard to blood pressure. While some kind female nurse or doctor keeps saying to me, "You're okay pet, you're going to be alright", I can feel the strange discomfort of a catheter being inserted into my penis and like a small boy needing to be comforted I continue moaning and groaning long after they have stabilised my blood pressure and ended my pain.

St. John's emergency team had done their work well. My life was saved but my left arm was now without a blood supply so I was taken immediately by ambulance to the Mid-West Regional Hospital, as it was known then. Michael travelled with me in the ambulance, leaving his blood drenched car abandoned on the double yellow lines. I remember making vague bits of conversation with the accompanying nurse as frightening thoughts race through my mind. The world I loved so much was now falling apart. I had always been a DIY man – the garden was my playground, designed and re-designed to suit my fancy. What did the future hold for a one-armed DIY man? These were my worries. After what seemed like an endless wait in the Mid-West Regional Hospital, I was wheeled to the operating theatre. As I was being rolled in the anaesthetist whispered in my ear that I should be prepared for the worst; that the arm might be beyond saving. I quickly interjected saying, "Don't let my wife hear that," not knowing that Angela was right behind the trolley. In a little while a mask was put over my mouth and nose and 'the lights went out'.

Professor Grace saved my arm. During three hours of micro-surgery he removed three veins from my left thigh and patched up the lacerated arteries in my arm. The plumbing was then complete and the blood flow could circulate once more due to the wonders of medical science and the gifted hands of the surgeon and his team. But the wiring, the plastics, could not be done in Limerick so the following day I was taken to Cork University Hospital. It was six o'clock when we got through the entry procedure at CUH. They parked my trolley along the main corridor where I would remain for the night with my left arm suspended on a steel pole. My family gathered round me and we talked for a long time.

I'm trying to be upbeat and blasé, making jokes and wisecracks. I'm putting on some kind of show in response to Angela's drawn expression as she looks at me with frightened eyes. Eventually I insist they go home and I try to make the best of my situation. I have been told to remain fasting from midnight for tomorrow's operation but I haven't eaten in twenty four hours so I ask if I can have a cup of tea and two slices of bread. I wait patiently. I think they have forgotten. I can see that the nurses are run off their feet. Eventually a staff member places a tray on my lap, but is gone before I can ask her to butter the bread. I swallow the unbuttered bread along with my pride and frustration as I succumb to a growing sense of depression and despair. But sleep comes to the rescue. In spite of my arm being slung up on the steel pole and a drainage bag attached and the catheter causing great discomfort every time I move, I drift off to sleep.

Early the following morning I was wheeled into a vacant cubicle in Ward 3B. Mr. O Shaughnessy, the plastics consultant, and his team came to visit me and informed me that I would be going to surgery at two o'clock. I waited anxiously, my mind in a whirl. The time went by slowly and then I was wheeled along winding corridors to the operating theatre. The theatre staff were gentle and re-assuring and trying hard to be cheerful. The anaesthetist put a mask over my face. I smiled a goodbye and the lights went out again.

Three hours later they are trying to bring me around. I don't want to wake up. I feel so cosy and warm in my morphine haze. In my groggy state I'm taken to Ward 3B and later that evening Mr. O'Shaughnessy and his team come to see me again. They tell me that this part of the surgery has been successful. Tendons and muscles have been stitched back together but my median nerve is in a bad state and that it was difficult to say if anything worthwhile could be done. They explain that a nerve graft (taking nerve strands from my leg and grafting them into my arm) might be possible, but

don't hold out much hope. My heart sinks and I mutter something about being a good fighter and ready to do whatever it takes. Mr O'Shaughnessy smiles benignly and points out that nerve growth, for older people, is extremely slow. The team moves on to another patient. I lie there in a dazed state until the ringing of my mobile brings me back. It's Diarmuid, my eldest son, enquiring how I am. In a despairing tone I relay the doctor's report to him. His advice is instant and decisive; that having the nerve graft done would at least provide my arm with the 'hardware' for the body to work with over the coming years. He tells me I should demand that the third operation go ahead. This helps but I'm in such a depressed state that I request a sleeping tablet from the night nurse. The following day, Mr. Kelly, another hand specialist, comes to visit me. He's gentle and patient and a good listener. He offers further hope, suggesting that a nerve transfer onto the ulnar nerve line, which carries the nerve signal to the 'ring' and 'little' fingers, might be possible. He would have to confer with another plastics specialist in Dublin and would let me know on Monday. I spend the weekend in an agitated state, moving from prayer and hope to self-recrimination with a continuous litany of regretful 'if only'.

CUH is a training hospital so being a guinea pig is par for the course. Trainee nurses kept coming at frequent intervals to check my blood pressure, my temperature and the drainage bag on my arm. My arm was fixed in a 90 degree brace which had to remain upright at all times so the oozing could drip into the bag. The night nurse, Sara, was very gentle when administering the intra-venous antibiotic injections. Foregoing my embarrassment I asked if she could remove the catheter. Removing it was a bit painful but I was delighted with my new sense of freedom. I could now walk around more comfortably and explore my surroundings. I discovered a very pleasant coffee dock area - a high-roofed glass enclosure with potted trees and plants giving the impression of being outdoors. It didn't smell of hospital. This was where I would spend much of my time.

I had just got back to my bed on that Saturday evening when my mobile rang. It was my brother Diarmuid with the devastating news that my mother had died. She was ninety-six and had been growing steadily weaker in recent months. I had meant to get down to see her but now I would not even be at her funeral. She had slipped away quietly in her sleep; she was never one to make a fuss. The wake would be on Monday and the burial on Tuesday and I would not be there. The nurses and other patients were very sympathetic but my heart felt like a lump of lead in my chest. My mind kept wandering back to sunny afternoons as she and I strolled along Banna strand or Ballyheigue beach, her bony fingers

gripping my elbow like a vice-grip as she expressed her joy at the wonders of nature and the beauty of the world.

“Goodbye Mammy! May perpetual light shine upon you! You will live on in my memory. I will look for you around the walls and fields of Crotta. I will see you in the blossoming flowers of spring and in the ripening fruits of autumn. I will feel your presence in the warm glow of winter fires. I will hear your voice in the whispering trees, in the lowing of cows on summer evenings, in the chorus of birdsong at early dawn and in the rolling waves of Banna beach. Rest in peace! You were a good mother.”

The third operation took place on the day of the funeral. The surgery team removed three strands of sensation nerves from the calf of my right leg and grafted them on to the mangled median nerve in my arm. It was late in the evening when Angela, Michael and John visited me and even though I was still a bit groggy from the anaesthetic I was delighted to get a detailed account of the funeral events. Mammy had got ‘a great send-off’. I felt sure she enjoyed it from up above. She had always been a very sociable person and nothing pleased her so much as meeting friends and relations and updating her data base with all the events in their lives.

After they've gone I lapse into a dreamy nostalgia. Memories from the distant past come flooding in, images of childhood events when Mammy, as a vibrant young woman is going about her work in the house and in the farmyard. The memory of one particular day takes over, a summer's day when I'm hanging around her, following her here and there like a pet lamb. She asks if I have got anything better to do as my attempts at helping are slowing her down. She is singing softly to herself a verse from ‘Carrig Donn’:

“Soft April showers and bright May flowers will bring the summer back again, but will they bring me back the hours I spent with my brave Donal then.”

I ask her who ‘Donal’ was and she laughs and says just somebody in the song, but she likes that verse very much and keeps singing it over and over again.

My reverie was broken when the nurse on duty for the night came to check my temperature and blood pressure for the umpteenth time. My suspended left hand was filling up the fluid bag at an alarming rate and now, to add to my anxieties, my right leg was numb from the knee down since the last operation. But I was on a morphine drip which I could self-administer and

that took the edge off my worries. The nurse brought me two 'pigeons' for the night; that's what she called the disposable urine containers. Peeing from a horizontal position was new to me and my dead right leg was uncooperative, which made it more difficult.

When I awake the following morning my right leg is still totally numb. This worries me a little because it should have come right by now. It feels so strange. I rub it against my left foot and it feels heavy and awkward and foreign. It feels like my foot is wearing a cold marble cast. When I click both insteps together it feels like tapping on a heavy metal pipe. This was not in the plan. I was told to expect a lack of sensation in the calf of my leg where the nerve strands were removed but not total numbness from the knee down. A frightening thought runs through my mind; had they accidentally severed some vital connections in my leg? I banish that thought and console myself with the fact that all the operations are now over and that this is Day One of my recovery. Later that morning the surgery team, Drs. Shirley and Jeffrey, come to see how I am and inform me that the operation has been a success. I tell them about my dead leg and, quite casually, they inform me that there had been an 'incident' during the operation, which had to be reported to head office. The word 'incident' was a euphemism for 'cock-up'. In order to extract the nerve strands from the calf of my right leg, it was necessary to put on a tourniquet above the knee. The timer on the tourniquet was set to release pressure after two hours (maximum) and now they're informing me that the timer must have been faulty because it had stayed on, unchecked, for the full duration of my operation - well over four hours. No sympathy or word of sorrow is expressed - it being nobody's fault, the machine being faulty. I can feel my anger rising. I ask how long it will take for my leg to come right but they can't say as this has never happened before. When pushed for an answer Dr. Shirley says it could take one week or maybe ten weeks or maybe longer. They couldn't predict the outcome. And on that depressing note, they leave.

I lie there dumbfounded for a long time. In desperation I ring my son Michael who has been practising natural healing therapies for more than a decade. His speciality is cranio-sacral therapy, which assists and accelerates the body's healing processes. He is very confident that he can bring my leg back and his re-assurance calms me. He will come the following day and do a cranio-sacral session with me. As I lie there in my muddled state of mind, Angela arrives. She had taken the bus down and got a taxi to the hospital. I try to tell her to space out her visits but she makes little of the journey and the upset and disruption of the past week.

She reads the depression and anger on my face and offers whatever consolation she can muster. I'm now reduced to one arm and one leg. Bathroom functions have become a nightmare with serious loss of independence and dignity. On the bright side, I have a window cubicle with a pleasant view of green fields and a wooded hillside that reminds me of childhood days in Crotta. Scenes from boyhood years are filling my mind. I slip into reverie and it helps pass the time.

Mentally, I was surviving on a diet of DVDs. My little DVD player had become my cherished companion. My fellow patients must have thought me very unsociable and in truth I was. Much of my time was spent watching films within the confines of my curtained-off cubicle. In the adjacent cubicle, the tortured breathing of a very ill man kept me awake through nights of endless torture. My only refuge and comfort was to lose myself in the world of Hollywood make-believe. I watched the *Shawshank Redemption* two nights running and drew some solace from Andy Dufresne's ability to triumph over adversity. "Sweet are the uses of adversity" states the deposed duke in *As You Like It*, but I was at a loss to see any sweetness in my adversity. Was the life I loved so much now gone? The future looked bleak. I didn't want to think about the long journey back and whether or not I would get there.

The night nurse going off duty comes to administer another antibiotic injection. The access vein in my forearm collapsed yesterday and they had to put a new access aperture on the back of my hand. This hurts when they stick the syringe into it, except when Anne does it. Anne is very pretty and it's worth the pain just to have her hold my hand. I keep hoping she will remain on duty. Her positive attitude is giving me hope. She encourages me to stand on my dead leg and to keep moving it, while I hold on to the steel pole on which I hang my left arm. The hospital physiotherapist comes to have a look at me and suggests getting used to using the single crutch, which she places by my bedside. I ask her the same question I had asked the doctors. She gives the same answer; she couldn't be sure but felt it could take quite a long time. By now my entire focus is switched to my banjaxed leg. My poor traumatised arm now seems less urgent. It hangs in front of me, heavily bandaged and secured in a right-angle splint which seems to weigh a ton. My swollen fingers look like jumbo sausages and are sticking out but unable to move. Luckily, I can hobble to the bathroom because my cubicle is near the bathroom door but using the facilities is a nightmare.

So, encouraged by Anne, I stood by the steel pole next morning and counted out one hundred steps, moving my dead foot up and down. I found this exercise very therapeutic. The monotony brought a certain peace of mind. I was just back in bed when Michael and Colm arrived. They drew the curtains around my bed and after a brief conversation Michael began his magic. So I closed my eyes and gave myself up to cranio-sacral healing. He was very positive and re-assuring and explained that the healing processes would continue to integrate all through the night. I lay awake waiting for the miracle to happen, hoping for some small hint of feeling below the knee, some sensation of pain would be so welcome, but nothing happened. The consultant called in the following morning doing his rounds, accompanied by five interns. One of them changed the dressing on my leg where the nerve strands had been removed and said it was healing nicely, but I wasn't interested in the scar, I wanted to know when my leg was coming back to life. It was four days since the operation in which the malfunctioning tourniquet had killed my leg. I asked again how long it was going to take. I got an unsympathetic "We'll have to wait and see", from the surgeon.

Colm has given me a thick copybook and a good pen and because I have all the time in the world, I begin to write. I get hooked almost immediately. I can't seem to stop. My scribble is flowing freely across the pages. My brain is spilling out every event of the past week in minute detail. Not only is it a great pastime, it is also strangely energising and liberating. Eventually, I decide to take a break and do my hundred steps. I grip the steel pole with my good hand and start counting, right leg rising and falling with neither sensation nor control. I'm about halfway through when it happens. My right foot experiences an internal explosion of searing pain. I collapse in agony on the bed. The pain is excruciating as myriads of nerve ends re-awaken simultaneously but I know this is good pain. I can feel 'the red-hot pins and needles' throbbing and pulsating right down to my toes. Tears roll down my face, tears of joy coupled with tears of pain. Pain! Pain! Beautiful Pain! Thank you Pain! Thank you God! Thank you Michael! The miracle has happened. I lie on the bed for a long time afraid to put my leg to the test. Eventually I pluck up the courage to do another hundred steps. Luckily I'm facing the wall and nobody can see my face as I laugh and cry and bite on my lip to contain myself. My leg is at least 50% back, if not more. Now there's hope. I lose count of my stepping but I must have done at least a 1000 before sitting down. I draw the curtains around my bed as gratitude overwhelms me.

In the afternoon, Dr. Raz, a female Indian doctor, came to change the dressing on my arm. She opened up the layers of bandaging and there it was, my poor butchered arm, looking like a large stuffed pork steak that had been badly sown together. It was very swollen and the long snake-like cut looked red and raw. I turned my head away but she assured me it was healing nicely. She was very friendly and tried to comfort me, telling me that everything that happens to us has a purpose and that I would be better for it and that I must learn to be patient. I tried to take this on board and responded with the usual platitudes of 'that's life' and 'life has its ups and downs' but somehow, what she said registered with me. I began to see my pain as a turning point and, without realising it, the process of coming to terms with my situation had begun.

"Muileann muilté Dé go mall ach muileann siad go mion" (God's mills grind slowly but grind exceedingly fine).

On day fifteen, without a word of warning, the head nurse said I could be discharged just as soon as the occupational therapist fitted a new lightweight splint that would keep my elbow at a 90 degree angle to prevent rupturing the repair work. My brothers Tom, Diarmuid and Pat rang to say they were coming to visit me. I told them I was being discharged but they said they had everything planned and were looking forward to a 'day out', so I said we'd meet in the Wilton bar across from the hospital as soon as I was free. I rang home and Angela and Colm came to collect me, bringing a big loose-fitting jacket. This was my first attempt at getting into everyday clothes and it made me aware of how incapacitated I was. A whole range of little things were now beyond me, one being the tying of shoe laces. Colm went on ahead to bring the car to the hospital entrance. Angela packed my few belongings into a bag while I said goodbye to some nurses and patients; I had become more sociable towards the end. My walk was a bit unsteady so I proceeded slowly down the long corridor. My left arm was protruding out in front of me as if I were carrying a shotgun and my right leg was doing a drunken walk but in my head I was leaping and jumping for joy. I was on the mend and I was going home. We had a good laugh in the Wilton bar. It was so great to be there and hear their funny stories; stories about things that happened at the funeral and people who had asked about me. I would have loved to try a pint but I was still on an anti-biotic. As they left they told me we would be meeting again for our mother's 'month's mind' mass and we would have more time and I'd be in better shape. I finished my glass of orange and we headed for home.

A special homecoming dinner is prepared and Angela cuts the meat into bite-size portions. With a fork in my right hand, my left elbow resting on the table and my arm sticking up in the air, I wolf down the delicious roast beef and roast potatoes. I go to bed early; my energy and stamina levels are very low. I awake early next morning with the hospital routine still programmed in. In the bathroom, I set about re-learning how to wash and shave. It takes so long; everything now moves at a slower pace. I sit in the kitchen and sip a mug of tea, gazing out the window. The morning is bright and sunny so I decide to take a stroll around the back garden to see how the flowers and vegetables are doing and also to visit the scene of the accident. A shudder runs down my spine; there are still some dark patches on the pavement. I hurry back indoors and begin to set up a writing desk in a small spare room that catches the morning sun. I sit and gaze out the window as if seeing it for the first time. The array of flowers is a sight to behold; arranged by colour and height by my flower-obsessed wife. Angela spends her free time imposing her will on Nature and what a wonderful display she has produced. Beyond the flowers I can see the apple tree and the plum tree laden with new fruit and I say to myself: "This isn't too bad; things could be worse, things could easily be far worse". I know that now I have to play a waiting game. Nerve regeneration is extremely slow; the consultant said a millimetre a day. My median nerve has to regenerate down the full length of my arm so I calculate, optimistically, three years. In the meantime I'm conscious of having many months of painful rehabilitation and physiotherapy ahead but no matter, I'm on the way back. I open my copybook and start to write.



CHAPTER ONE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CROTTA GREAT HOUSE

I grew up in a three-hundred year old building that was once attached to the Great House at Crotta. The house was completed in 1669 and was the seat of the Ponsonby family for almost two hundred years. Later occupants included the Kitchener family from 1852 to 1863. Lord Kitchener, Britain's highly decorated military genius, spent his boyhood years in Crotta and in 1910 came back to see the place of his youth. Six years later, he would enter a watery grave in the North Sea when the HMS Hampshire struck a mine on its way to Russia. The story goes that an officer on board attempted to save him shouting: "*Make way for Lord Kitchener*". This story was relayed to us as children by Sara, a much loved widowed aunt who lived in the house with us. Sara used the phrase "*Make Way for Lord Kitchener*" whenever she was passing by and it became our catch-phrase when someone was blocking our way. As children, echoes of the past pervaded our everyday lives. We played hide-and-seek amidst the old ruined walls where seven generations of the Ponsonby family had enjoyed their privileged existence. While no sightings of any ghosts were ever recorded, the towering walls had a ghostly feeling about them and on dark winter nights were best avoided.

Our family home was that part of the old Great House that had survived after the rest of the building had been damaged by fire in 1920 and then slowly demolished over the coming decades. A story relates that the Black and Tans set fire to the house but on being told that they were burning Lord Kitchener's early home they immediately tried to put it out. But the roof had been seriously damaged and so bit by bit it was reduced down to a gaunt shell. Such was the ignominious end to this landmark building that had cast a giant shadow on the surrounding countryside for almost three hundred years. In my childhood day-dreams I would try to visualise this decaying ruin in its former glory and hoped that someday the remaining part might be restored, but the term 'preservation order' had not yet been coined and the last remnant of Crotta Great House slowly disappeared from the landscape.

Crotta is a small town-land in the parish of Kilflynn, about ten miles north of Tralee in county Kerry. The name Crotta comes from the Gaelic word *cruit* (the genitive case being *cruite*) meaning 'hump'. The 'hump' or hill in question is Neenan's Hill that lies at the southern side of what was once Crotta estate. Three Celtic ring forts in close proximity hold the secrets of its prehistoric past and its early Celtic inhabitants and tell us that this was a favoured dwelling place through the centuries. The estate at Crotta, in the barony of Clanmaurice, was granted to Captain Henry Ponsonby in 1666 under the Acts of Settlement as his reward for faithful service to Cromwell in the conquest of Ireland. It remained in Ponsonby hands until after the Great Famine when it was put up for sale by Thomas Carrique Ponsonby through the Encumbered Estates Act. The bankrupt estate was then held in lease from the Court of Chancery by Samuel Julian Esq. and occupied by his steward who leased it to Colonel H. Kitchener, a retired army officer of an Indian regiment. The Kitchener family lived there for twelve years or so before moving to Switzerland in 1863. The estate then came into the possession of the Browne family, who were also descendants of Cromwellian officers that had acquired large estates in Ventry, Kenmare and Tarbert. Some fourteen years later, Crotta was once again put up for sale by Thomas Beale Browne in 1877. At the end of the nineteenth century the estate was owned by Richard Savage and in 1925 it was bought by two Carmody brothers who divided the remaining part of the estate and the Great House into two family farms and dwellings. One of these farms and the remaining part of the 'old house' became the Galvin family home in 1940. This was where I grew up. This was 'our home' and remained so until our mother, its last occupant, moved into a 'granny flat' in 1991.

From an early age, I was fascinated by the history and stories of the old Great House. As children we played amidst its dilapidated walls and its ruined grandeur filled us with wonder and awe. It influenced our thinking and impacted on our lives down through the years as we tried to unlock its secrets and piece together its buried history. The house had been a fine Elizabethan mansion of two storeys with five tall chimneys. The front of the house had two projecting wings with high gables on which could be seen the Ponsonby coat of arms. Thirteen large windows and one lunette window over the entrance porch looked out onto green pasture land, which still carries the name 'the front lawn'. The rear view of the house was equally impressive with a magnificent arched entrance within which the staircase was housed. The big green field at the back of the house is still referred to as 'the back lawn'. Attached to the northern side of the house was a slightly lower building that housed the household staff and attached

onto this was a coach house and stables. At the back of the stables was the Pound in which the carriage horses were confined when transport was needed. Much of the estate was covered with great oak woods, the remnants of which remain on the hillside that gave Crotta its name.

Because of its direct link to Crotta, the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland was of special interest to me in history lessons at school. These lessons were implanted in our young minds with stirring accounts of the injustice done. Cromwell, the arch villain of the story, arrived in Ireland in 1649 with an army of 12,000 battle-hardened soldiers. They were fully equipped with the most advanced weaponry and well provided for with supplies from England. Cromwell, “Like a lightning passed through the land”. His campaign, which was accompanied by blood, carnage and destruction, had a triple purpose: Firstly, to avenge the reported massacre of the Ulster Protestant planters, secondly, to destroy Catholicism in Ireland and thirdly, to take over as much land as possible, in order to pay those who had advanced money to the English parliament in exchange for promises of land in Ireland and those who had volunteered to fight. Captain Henry Ponsonby, the future owner of Crotta estate, was one such adventurer. The previous owners, the deStack family of Norman descent, were forced out. During the conquest of north Kerry their residence at Crotta was used as a barracks by the Cromwellian army. After a campaign of barbaric cruelty, the defeated Irish and Anglo-Irish were forced to leave their lands and move west of the Shannon. This mass exodus is summed up in a saying that has lived on in folk memory: ‘*To Hell or to Connaught*’. While tens of thousands obeyed the order many more remained behind as Tories (outlaws), hiding out in remote regions, waiting for the opportunity to strike back.

By 1652 the Irish countryside was devastated. Famine and plague were widespread. The ‘New Model Army’, as Cromwell’s soldiers were called, had adopted a scorched earth policy, attacking the agricultural infrastructure and killing livestock. This was met by guerilla attacks from the Tories. In response, retribution was meted out to the civilian population in the form of terrible atrocities. History informs us that the wolf population in the country had thrived on the slaughter and devastation, so much so that a generous bounty was placed on the head of a wolf. This was followed by a similar bounty being placed on the head of a priest. Cromwell’s government believed that by getting rid of priests the Catholic religion would die out. Priests went into hiding and ministered to their flock incognito, using ‘Mass rocks’ in remote areas for Sunday worship. Because so many men had died in the war and so many soldiers had joined

the armies of France and Spain, large numbers of women and children were left defenseless and vulnerable. These were rounded up and sold as slaves to work in the sugar plantations of the West Indies. By the end of the war, estimates suggest that over 100,000 men, women and children were captured for sale as slaves to labour in England's expanding empire. Their descendants on the islands of Montserrat, St. Kitts, and Barbados have retained their Irish names and are proud of their Irish heritage. It is estimated that at one time seventy percent of the total population of Montserrat were Irish slaves.

Henry Ponsonby must have been relieved to hear that most of the potential troublemakers were shipped off to the Caribbean, so that his ill-gotten gains could be made secure with imported loyal English peasants. English opinion at the time was quite proud of these accomplishments as can be noted in Prendergast's, *Thurloe's State Papers* (published in London in 1742), "It was a measure beneficial to Ireland, which was thus relieved of a population that might trouble the planters; it was a benefit to the people removed, who might thus be made English and Christian, a great benefit to the West Indies sugar planters, who desired men and boys for their bondsmen, and the women and Irish girls to solace them". Such was the fate of Crotta's peasants; dispossessed and broken, rounded up and shipped abroad like cattle. With their lives torn apart, defenceless and vulnerable; we cannot begin to imagine their suffering and distress.

The country was now ready to be re-planted with Englishmen loyal to the Parliament, but first the land had to be surveyed and mapped. An army doctor named Sir William Petty and a group of surveyors, guarded by armed soldiers, completed a survey of the entire country in a little over a year. Cromwell's government was now ready to go ahead with Plantation. The Plantation resulted in a massive transfer of land ownership from old Irish and Anglo-Irish families to a new Ascendency of English Protestants. And so the old order changed in north Kerry: Cromwell's campaign brought an end to the Fitzmaurice dynasty of Lixnaw, who had been Barons of Kerry since the Norman conquest in the 13th century. The Anglo-Norman dynasty of deStack, who had built a castle at Crotta, would be replaced by a Ponsonby dynasty. Their Norman-style castle would be demolished and its stones recycled to build a new Elizabethan-style residence that became known as Crotta Great House. The descendants of Henry Ponsonby remained in residence there for almost two centuries. A new Ascendency was established throughout the country that would hold its privileged position until the nineteen twenties.

Two brothers, John and Henry Ponsonby were high ranking officers in the Cromwellian campaign and were both handsomely rewarded for their service. John was given a large estate in Tipperary and Henry at 'Crottoe', as listed in the Down Survey. A census of Ireland, circa 1659 of the barony of Clanmorice, registered the population of Crotta (Crottoe) as twenty-four people, eighteen Irish and six English. The census records only the name of the title holder: Henry Ponsonby Esq. Who the other five were we can only surmise; presumably men-at-arms who were willing to defend the 'new master' against Tory activity. History informs us that the activities of the Tories kept the counties of Tipperary, Cork and Kerry in terror for many decades. Despite this, a Ponsonby foothold was established in Crotta on a large tract of land. The Act of Settlement of 1666 confirmed by patent a grant of '2,100 acres of partially wooded land at Crottoe to Henry Ponsonby Esq'. In later times, much of the wooded land, the great oak woods of Crotta, fell victim to Britain's Industrial Revolution, making a great deal of money for the Ponsonby family. The construction of Crotta House was completed in 1669. It was a construction project of major proportions and given the prevailing conditions it is difficult to imagine how it was accomplished. Plantation policy demanded that the local workforce be supplanted by labourers and craftsmen from England. Many names of English origin in the locality suggest that 'planter families' came and settled and endured.

We read in the history books that Tory activity forced many of the adventurer landlords to return to England, leaving their estates in the hands of overseers. Henry Ponsonby, however, remained and established himself as the new lord and master. He married a lady from Athy, Co. Kildare, named Rose Weldon and so began a dynasty that would endure through seven generations. He died in 1681, some twelve years later. After his death his eldest son, Thomas, inherited the estate. He was married to a lady from Ballygahan, Co. Limerick named Susannah Grice and so with the passage of time the new masters became the accepted 'gentry' with power and influence over the lives of their tenants. A cobbled road was built from the Great House to Garrynagore to provide access for traders and workmen coming daily to the estate, while a large number of female staff 'lived in'. In order for Cromwell's plantation to be successful it was necessary to supplant, not just the land and the people but also the Catholic religion. There was a Catholic church in Kilflynn (Cill Flainn in Gaelic means Flynn's church) dating back to monastic times when a hermit monk came to live by the banks of the Shannow river. This was closed down and the Ponsonby family established a Protestant church nearby, which became the place of worship for future generations of Ponsonbys and other

Protestant families and, at a later stage, the Kitchener family. Close by this church, which is called St. Columba's Church, stands a large dilapidated tomb that carries the inscription 'W.P. 1795', in memory of a later Ponsonby heir, William Ponsonby. Each generation of the family were interred in this tomb.

Thomas Ponsonby and Susannah Grice were succeeded by their only son, Richard, who became a member of parliament for Kinsale and consequently was absent from his estate for much of the time. Nevertheless he ran a thriving cider industry on the estate, employing a large workforce in the orchards and at the cooperage. His name, 'R. Ponsonby 1760', is carved into the cider-press used for crushing the apples. The inscription on this enormous slab of smoothly carved rock is the only identifying mark of the Ponsonby family to be found in Crotta today. The walls of the orchard remain and stand as a monument to Richard Ponsonby. He was married to Arabella Blennerhassett but, having no heir, the estate passed on to his nephew, who was the son of Rose Ponsonby and John Carrique of Glendine near Camp. The Carriques, like the Ponsonbys, were also descended from adventurers who had come on the Cromwellian campaign and had been granted land in west Kerry. The estate at Crotta was willed to their eldest son William Carrique in February, 1762, who "thenceforth assumed the name and arms of Ponsonby of Crotto". William assumed the double-barrel name of Carrique Ponsonby and married a lady from Ballyheigue castle named Margaret Crosbie. In turn he was succeeded by their only son, James Carrique Ponsonby who married a lady from Sligo named Mary O'Hara in 1766. He was succeeded by his eldest son, another William Carrique Ponsonby, who was sent to Eton College for his education and later became a major in the Kerry Militia and served as High Sheriff for the county. He was married to Elizabeth Gunn of Rattoo whose lineage, it was claimed, could be traced to Edward III of England. The Ponsonby dynasty came to an end with their son Thomas Carrique Ponsonby, who was born in 1800 and spent some time in the Royal Navy. On the death of his father he took over the estate at Crotta as landlord and local magistrate. When he became insolvent in the late 1840s the estate and its debts were put into receivership, under the Encumbered Estates Act, to a Samuel Julien from London.

The Ponsonbys and their stories have passed away with only an echo of what once was reaching us across the centuries. Apart from names and dates, historical records on the seven generations are very sketchy. Local folklore tells nothing of what dramas and intrigues were played out within

these now-ruined walls, or whether or not they were caring landlords who were concerned about their tenants' welfare. But the last of the line, Thomas Carrique Ponsonby was remembered for his part in promoting faction fighting. In the early part of the nineteenth century faction fighting was a feature of rural life throughout Munster. Despite their strenuous efforts, the Catholic clergy were unable to prevent this from happening because many landlords actively encouraged it. One such landlord was Thomas Carrique Ponsonby who actively promoted a faction fighting group in the Crotta area and organised fights between opposing factions. Evidence recorded at the police investigation into the Ballyeagh incident of 1834 suggests that "Mr Ponsonby, a landlord and a magistrate was actively involved on the side of the Mulvihill faction". Fights usually took place at fairs or other convenient gatherings when drink was in abundance. The shillelagh was the chosen weapon. The establishment of the time tended to ignore faction fighting, believing that it was a safety valve for social stability. They were happy to see the Irish underclass fighting amongst themselves and not directing their anger at the system that kept them downtrodden. Some historians, however, believe that this did not have the desired effect as there were strong links between the organised faction fighters and the Whiteboys. The Whiteboys (Na Buachaillí Bána) were a notorious agrarian secret society who sought to address the oppressive practices of landlords in relation to rack-rents, evictions and the reviled tithes.

As well as paying very high rent to the Ponsonby family, all tenants of Crotta estate were obliged to submit approximately one-tenth of their annual produce to the Church of Ireland clergy in Kilflynn. In the absence of money, the tithes could be paid in the form of pigs, poultry or corn. The payment of tithes for the upkeep of Protestant clergy was one of the Penal Laws imposed on Catholics. It was a particularly odious law that created much ill-feeling. These were hard times for labourers and small farmers and consequently the tithe collectors were often targeted by the Whiteboys. Many atrocities took place and those who were suspected of being involved could expect neither mercy nor justice from the forces of law. A police barracks was located at Crotta cross for the protection of the Great House. Thomas Carrique Ponsonby was the local administrator of the law and as there was no right of appeal, tenants were at his mercy. Those who escaped the hangman's noose would face penal servitude for life in Van Dieman's land. But circumstances were about to change. In the wake of the Great Famine, as Thomas Carrique Ponsonby faced bankruptcy he was forced to put the estate into receivership. He and his family had to vacate their beautiful home. Their privileged position had

come to an end. The Ponsonby reign in Crotta was over. In 1852 the house and estate were bought by a retired army officer of an Indian regiment named Colonel Kitchener.

Colonel Henry Horatio Kitchener had made his fortune in India and took advantage of the property depression in Ireland due to the Great Famine. From 1846 to 1849 the population of Ireland had been reduced by fifty percent or more; millions emigrated and millions died of starvation and disease throughout the countryside. Rent from the tenant farmers dried up and many landed gentry were left without a source of income. The Encumbered Estates Act 1849 was put in place to facilitate the disposal of bankrupt estates. New owners took over, evicting tenants who were in arrears and clearing many of the smallholders off their land without compensation. The tenant farmers had no legal rights to the land they worked. It was bought and sold over their heads, without consultation. Any tenants that remained on Crotta estate after the famine were to suffer the same fate at the hands of Colonel Kitchener. The new landlord had very different ideas about farming and smallholders were an obstacle to his plans and had to be removed.

He had at first bought lands at Ballygoghlan in County Limerick and had been given the use of a hunting lodge at Gunsborough, near Listowel. His second son was born there and was named Horatio Herbert. He would become the icon of British military conquests over the coming half century and be revered as the great Lord Kitchener. The family moved to Crotta in 1852, where two other sons and a daughter were born. The new owner's policy was to convert, by fair means or foul, the clusters of small uneconomic smallholdings to large tracts of grazing land. Unlike the previous landlords who derived their income from rented holdings, Colonel Kitchener's ambition was to manage and exploit his large farm. Land that had supported hundreds of families was now to be cleared. Evictions were common and his unpopularity was widespread. Historians inform us that the crime rate increased alarmingly at this time throughout the country, with acts of violence becoming commonplace. But the new regime at Crotta succeeded and as time went by became accepted. The extremely large fields of grazing land that were part of my childhood experiences were the result of his policies of land clearance. He had a keen interest in agricultural science and ran his new estate with military efficiency. He took a personal interest in all aspects of the farm and spent most of his day in the saddle overseeing the work in progress. He improved the breeds of cattle, sheep and pigs and cleared and drained large tracts of what was seen as wasteland. The most unusual story that has