

# **An unsuitable woman – Mary Hade and Ladytown**

**An Irishman's Diary, The Irish Times, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2002  
By Pádraig O'Morain**

It is a summer afternoon towards the end of the 19th century in the reign of Queen Victoria. My great grandmother, Mary Hade, stops on the road outside a farmhouse in a place called Ladytown in Co Kildare.

She stares over the gate at a girl playing in the little avenue that leads from the house down to the farmyard. The girl, Mary Elizabeth, notices what she will later recall as an old woman in black looking at her.

She has seen this woman there before but she does not know that the mysterious visitor, who never speaks, is her mother. The granduncles who are rearing her have told her that her mother, like her father, is dead.

At that time it took a great effort to journey the 20 miles from Dublin, where my great grandmother lived, to Ladytown. Where did she go after these visits to glimpse the daughter out of whose history she had been written?

She would not have been welcome in that house. She was a servant and had not been regarded as good enough by the family she married into. Nobody knows how Mary Hade's child came to be reared by her granduncles. As they were single men, they may have been glad to rear a child who was related to them and who would inherit the farm. At the time the concept of child support did not exist, so the widowed Mary Hade may have felt she should comply.

But the granduncles employed servants and workmen on their 130-acre farm. They would not have wanted it known that Mary Elizabeth, the future inheritor of the farm, was herself the daughter of a servant. This may explain the absence of any acknowledgement that the mother was alive.

Death certificate

I do not think Mary Elizabeth's mother knew anyone else in the district. After her visits, she probably walked the three miles to Naas and got the train back to Dublin and out of history except for a single clue: her death certificate, which shows she died in the "Workhouse, South Dublin Union" (where St James's Hospital is today) in 1917.

A sad end, then. I wonder if she knew that her daughter was living in luxury in Co Kildare.

Mary Elizabeth had married Patrick Morrin, whose own mother, Maria Flood, as it happens, had not been regarded as good enough by the Morrin family. Indeed, Maria's in-laws had put her new husband's belongings in a trunk and thrown them out of a window at him to underline their disapproval.

That story turned out differently, though: a relative who lived in Donore House, a decaying mansion, and who had a great deal of land offended against all reason (ask any farmer) by making a will shortly before he died leaving the lot to charity.

Maria got together with one of the Morrin in-laws who had rejected her. The two women challenged the will together and won. The in-law got £400 for her trouble and my paternal great grandmother, I am relieved to say, got the house and 500 acres and lived in luxury for the rest of her life.

She had a sense of humour too: she proudly displayed to her children the trunk in which her husband's clothes had been thrown out the window by her future in-laws.

And so, Mary Elizabeth, born to one not-good-enough woman, married the son of another not-good-enough woman and enjoyed land, servants and the trappings of wealth. She died just five years after her unknown and rejected mother, apparently from influenza.

Past the workhouse

Today, I discovered only recently, I live on the road in Dublin where the not-good-enough Mary Hade was

living when her daughter, my grandmother, was born. And I walked to work practically every day past the workhouse in which she died, which had been adapted as the Eastern Health Board headquarters. On many occasions I visited the building to interview officials, without realising I had a sort of a family connection with the premises. It has since been knocked down to make way for the Luas.

I know all this thanks to the work of my cousin, Tom Tierney of the Cock Bridge in Co Kildare. In every family there are people who are bitten by the history bug. They follow the labyrinthine stories through certificates of birth, baptism, marriage and death, deeds, maps, old letters and anything else they can lay their hands on.

Eventually they publish their work, either to the family or to the wider world (in Tom Tierney's case to the family, so this is not a shameless plug). Of course, they find they have not reached the end of the story at all and that there is yet another trail to follow.

A few years ago, for instance, I wrote here of research into the Robinsons of North Kildare by Jimmy Robinson - a cousin of mine in some complicated way - who published it in a book. I notice, however, that at family gatherings Jimmy still has a sort of a gleam in his eye - the gleam of one who is wondering if he can knock another reminiscence out of venerable relatives before they, as he puts it himself, "fall off the perch".

The history bug

I have a cousin in London who, I believe, has been bitten by the history bug on the other side of my family, the Murphys. My Murphy grandfather, Willy Murphy, was taken in by relatives, in the same parish as Ladytown, when his mother died in childbirth in North Dublin.

I am, it appears, the product on both sides of the family of people who were thrown around by life, who were taken in and reared by others. Now that may not matter to anyone else, but it matters to me; so when an uncle, aunt, cousin, child or parent develops an addiction to family history, don't regard them as mad. Encourage them: they may deepen your sense of who you are, more than you can imagine.

And the forgotten and disregarded, like Mary Hade looking over the gate in Ladytown at her lost child, deserve to be remembered because their pain shaped us too.