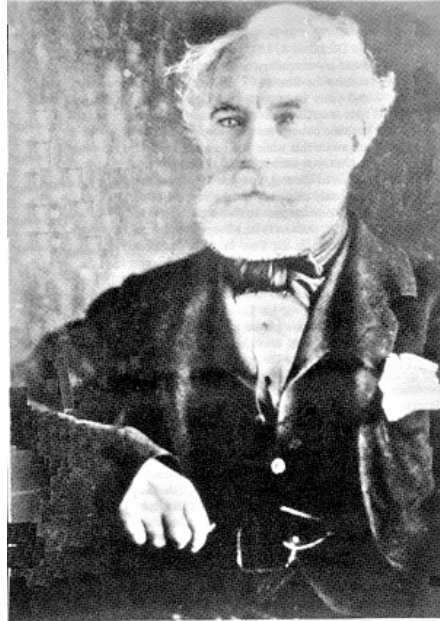


## William Sydney Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim (Lord Leitrim)



When Robert Clements died in 1839, management of the Estate (and the title of Viscount Clements) passed to his brother William Sydney Clements. Sydney took full ownership of the estate and became 3rd Earl of Leitrim, Lord Leitrim, on the death of his father in 1854.

Sydney is the most notorious of all the residents of Lough Rynn Castle and is remembered mostly for callous and merciless acts against tenants. But at the beginning he continued the work he and his brother had started and was perceived as 'a just and generous man and of benevolent disposition'. It was only later, after he became 3rd Earl that he began to earn his reputation as a ruthless landlord and pitiless evictor.

### **Sydney, the early years**

As a second son, Sydney had never expected to inherit the title or the lands. He was raised in a loving home by doting parents and participated in family activities with his seven siblings. But even as a child, he showed early signs of the man he would become. Unlike his brother Robert, Sydney was neither a dutiful son nor a model student. He quarreled with his brothers, ignored homework set for school holidays and his letters miss the affectionate informality and day-to-day trivia that characterize letters by his siblings and parents.

## **Taking over at Lough Rynn**

When in Ireland, Sydney worked with his brother at Lough Rynn and became a full partner in the management of the estates. His brother's early death was a blow to the whole family, but it paved the way for Sydney to take full control of the estate and impose his own personal management style.

At first he modeled himself on his brother and father and won admiration and respect from tenants and peers for his diligence and dedication to improving the estates. But as time went on, the daring, rash young soldier became a proud, imperious landlord with a hasty temper which he indulged more and more over the years. Few escaped being the object of vindictive action or petty retaliation and tenants, peers and the Administration in Dublin were held equally in contempt. Sydney seems to have lived exclusively for work: he never married and spent much of his time traveling around his estates keeping a close eye on tenants and on the minutiae of managing his estates. His journals, account books and rent ledgers are testimony to his obsessive attention to detail. While many of his ideas were far-sighted, his autocratic tendencies and his belief in his own omnipotence created antagonism and rancor among his tenants.

A stable boy for Lord Leitrim remembered Lord Leitrim as a very stubborn man who was hard on the tenant farmers. If he caught a man smoking at work, he would fine him a shilling - but once he had passed on the smoker usually took up where he had left off, 'as the Lord was never known to look back'. He inspected his workers' houses once a year and if any repairs or painting were needed, he would send tradesmen to effect the repairs immediately. As part of his inspection, he would also examine all the bed linen in the house. If he found that it had been well-repaired but worn, he would have his housekeeper replace it with new linen. But if he found worn linen which the neglectful housewife had made no attempt to repair, he would ignore the woman and walk out of the house leaving her to her worn linen for another year.

Essentially, as one contemporary writer observed, he 'was not a bad man - if he got his own way'. He was an active parliamentarian prior to the famine, sharing many of his father's views and taking a seat for the Whigs. In the early 1840s, he worked with William Smith O'Brien, a radical Catholic politician, to try to push through administrative



and agrarian reforms. But his antipathy towards authority of any kind led him to cross swords continuously with the Administration in Dublin Castle and with Parliament. Things eventually came to a head during the famine which he blamed on the bureaucratic bungling of the government. He lost faith and interest in constitutional politics and retired as an MP in 1847. His seat went to his brother Charles.

### **Letter to Sir Robert Peel, October 1844**

A letter from Sydney to the then British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel in October 1844 gives some insight into Sydney's attitude to the authorities. The letter describes a call by the police to Lough Rynn and other homes for the purpose of taking down the names of 'the inmates'. First, Sydney was outraged that the Police should be able to enter a house at will and ask for any information. He was positively apoplectic that the Inspector General of Police effectively dismissed his complaint and, far from apologizing, suggested that they would just be more covert about it in the future. This letter is quite typical of Sydney's style: it is long-winded, dramatic and sanctimonious and raises a rather mundane issue to the level of outrage. And it is written directly to the Prime Minister.

*I have been taught to believe that every Man's House, however humble is his Castle, and that no person has any right to enter it without a sufficient warrant for that purpose. I have also learned to have a lively horror of an Inquisition. My house has been entered by a Police Man, for the purpose of taking down and writing the names of the inmates.*

*I enquired from his Officer what Authority he had for such an Act, he informs me that he had a 'Confidential' communication from the Inspector General of Police, and declined to give me any further information but admitted that it was under his immediate orders that the sanctity of my roof has been violated. I have applied to the Inspector General of Police for his authority for this outrage and the only redress which he proposes to me is . . . that for the future his espionage shall not be conducted so openly, but in a more secret form . . . not by 'formal visits' but that the required information should be gathered incidentally.*

*I do not want to prejudge any case, but is it wonderful that such horrors should occur as are at present under investigation in Dublin . . . . Such a system is not only dangerous to individual Character, Happiness and Liberty, but subversive of the peace and well-being of the Country.*



Robert Peel acknowledged the letter, but suggested that Sydney take the issue elsewhere as it 'is one which might (be dealt with) with more propriety by one of the Representatives of the District from which it proceeds - than by a Minister of the Crown'. Sydney, typically, responds to Peel with barely restrained frustration.

Lord Clements regrets that his communication to Sir Robert Peel has been so fruitless. He did not write to Sir Robert Peel for the purpose of giving him trouble, but in the vain hope that . . . an act of abuse of power might be remedied.

The other thing that is notable about this correspondence is the speed at which it was managed. The letters had to go between Lough Rynn and London, and through whatever bureaucracy existed in both places. Yet Sydney's first letter, written on 5th October, was replied to by Peel three days later, and Sydney's response to Peel's letter was written on 14th October - less than a week later.

### **Improving Lough Rynn**

Sydney was obsessed with making Lough Rynn into a model estate. He started by adding more outbuildings, including a coach house, stables, dairy and stores. He had a flair for architecture - no doubt inherited from his great-grandfather - and many of the constructions were built to his own design by stone masons brought in especially from London.

He installed systems and contraptions to improve efficiency in various parts of the estate. The water system, for example, is representative of his modernization campaign. The water for the Castle was drawn from the river just below Red Bridge and was filtered as it flowed through a gravel-filled channel to a pump in the middle of the kitchen yard. The pump was operated by a horse led around a cobbled circle by a young boy. The boy also had the job of watching the pump until he saw a white marker attached to a ball cock appear, signaling that the huge tanks on the roof of the house were full.

Apart from the building work, Sydney undertook major land reclamation and outlawed the burning of land and the rundale system of farming. Under the rundale system, families pooled resources to rent land, and were each allocated a piece, proportional to their contribution to the pool. Over the years, the pieces of land became smaller and



smaller as each family continued to sub-divide their plot. Sydney rightly predicted that this would lead to major problems: the devastation of the famine was exacerbated by tenants left operating farms too small to sustain even one family. A letter written by Sydney to the editor of the Edinburgh Review in April 1836 provides evidence of Sydney's interest in agriculture. It also gives insights into his character. In his letter, Sydney takes the writer of an article in the January issue to task for making little reference to the state of agriculture in Ireland, in an otherwise excellent article. He writes to enquire whether there might be place in a future issue for short paper on the subject.

*Whether it is in my power to treat it in such a way as to merit a place in that journal, is a matter for your consideration, when the paper shall be finished, - but I have wished to inquire before I proceed to put my ideas together in that particular shape whether you think the question is too local to admit being made a matter of interest to your readers. . . . I should ask therefore to review the agricultural part of the Commissioner's appendix and show by a reference to it and to other facts, the great probability of an indefinite increase of exports from Ireland, by the extension of Mr. Black's system, which has gained ground successfully since the publication of his pamphlet and which indeed is nothing but the ordinary theory of farming, reduced to that small scale, which we in Ireland are so unfortunately brought to.*

### **South Leitrim Agricultural Society**

Given his interest in agricultural advances, it is not surprising that Sydney followed a national fashion and founded, in January 1844, the South Leitrim Agricultural Society. The aim of the Society was to improve agricultural practices and land management. It set out to *benefit the agricultural interests in this County and to ameliorate the condition of all classes of farmers or those interested in the increase of the produce of the soil by affording information, encouraging an improved system of husbandry and the introduction of a better description of stock and farming implements.*

The first Agricultural Show was held in the same year and prizes were given for crops and animals and produce from cottage gardens. The Society's annual dinner was held in the coach house.



Sydney's interest extended to horticulture. Throughout the estate he planted a range of trees, including many unusual ones imported from abroad. Around the house, he created tree-lined walks and pleasure gardens. And he was protective of his plantations: goats were banned because of the damage they did to trees and tenants needed his personal permission to cut any wood. He particularly forbade the retrieval of bog-oak or the cutting of ash on the estate.

### Life at Lough Rynn

Work at Lough Rynn Castle began every morning at 7:30 when the yardman rang the yard bell. He rang it again at midday for lunch and at 5:30 to mark the end of the workday. The workers were kept busy on jobs like planting or working in the stables or steaming potatoes for the pigs. Operators were also needed for farm machinery like the thresher and the steam engine used to power the sawmill. Each week, the workers took their place on the 'pay seat' under a porch opposite the offices to wait for their wages. They then stood in turn on a block of cut stone to receive their pay through a tiny window near the door of the coach house.



The rent window and bell tower at Lough Rynn

They were paid on a Wednesday to enable them to go to the market or fair day in Mohill on Thursday. A man earned 6d (2½p) for threshing and cleaning a barrel of oats (which later sold for up to 14 shillings (70p) at market); attending cattle or planting laurels would pay 10d (8½p) a day, while pulling turnips would get you only 6d. To put this in context, the entire wages for Lough Rynn estate amounted to about £240 a year; the local schoolmaster earned £30 a year (though the school mistress only got £20); the



master of Mohill workhouse was paid £50 plus rations and the nurse's salary was £8. In the shops in Mohill the locals paid 2d for a 1oz bottle of castor oil, a ½d to 3d for a lead pencil, 2sh/8d for a pound of tea, 1d for an egg (3½d for turkey eggs) and 8d for a four pound loaf of bread.

Much of the labourers' work was very seasonal, and some work was not paid at all but went towards the annual rent. From the work that did pay, a laborer would often not make enough to feed his family or pay the rent on his farm: his small, two- to five-acre holding would carry an annual rent of about £1 an acre. There were few ways to rise above this hand-to-mouth existence, except perhaps by doing well at migrant work in Northern Ireland or Scotland. And there was little solace at home: housing was poor, either small thatched cottages or one-roomed, window-less huts, barely twelve feet square, made of stone and turf and mud and roofed with branches and peat. The only furnishings inside were straw bedding and a pot over a fire for cooking potatoes, with a hole in the roof to let the smoke out. Treats were rare. At Christmas (in the early years at least), Sydney distributed meat amongst the families of the workers and held parties at the coach house for the children.



A cottage outside Mohill, 1889

Taken by Leland Duncan Lewis, this run-down cottage was a fairly typical Class 3 house

## Diet

While the labourer and small tenant families lived on a monotonous diet of potatoes and milk, relieved occasionally by a herring or bacon, life at the big house was different. The recipe books from the house show an interest in plain but varied food, with a decided preference for desserts and sweets. Oranges were particularly favoured, and were used



in everything from marmalade to various types of pudding. Most of the recipes would not be unusual today. They include Turnip and Carrot Soup, Fricassee of Chicken, Lobster Sauce, Mead, Almond Cheese Cakes, Apple Fritters, Waffles and Walnut 'Catchup'. The directions on 'How to Dress a Boar's Head' may, however, have less appeal. The housekeeper's book of cures, tinctures and remedies includes treatments for a wide range of ailments including asthma (hyssop and honey), coughs, headaches, heartburn, worms, wind, and indigestion (rhubarb and ginger with a glass of wine after dinner). Insects may have been a problem: there are detailed instructions on how to destroy all sorts of bugs. And the housekeeper (or Lord Leitrim) was obviously meticulous about the linen: there are careful notes on how to clean white cloth.

### **Visitors at Lough Rynn**

Sydney was not too fond of socialising. The only regular visitors to Lough Rynn Castle were his agent and occasionally the Croftons. Sir Morgan Crofton was a fellow card-player, and the two apparently played for high stakes. In one game, the Earl won Clooncahir House from Crofton - a substantial residence just south of Mohill. Few others of his peers paid a visit. One visit of note was by Lady Rossmore and her daughter, Norah who stayed awhile, apparently part of an attempt by Sydney to play matchmaker between his nephew Robert and Norah. It did not work, and is believed to have been one of the reasons for Sydney later disinheriting Robert.

### **Lord Leitrim: misogynist?**

Women and his treatment of them is one of the biggest controversies surrounding the Earl. His assassination in 1878 was largely a result of wholesale evictions on his Donegal estates. But in addition to this, the final straw that motivated the individuals involved was an accusation that Lord Leitrim had debauched a young servant girl - a daughter of one of the assassins.

There are conflicting stories of Lord Leitrim's treatment of women on his estates: some say that he repeatedly violated young girls and claimed droit de seigneur; others refute this, saying that he treated women with respect, but mostly ignored them. A stable boy employed by the Earl remembered him as a 'woman hater' and that he, Kane, 'never knew him to have anything to do with any of them'.



However, even some of his peers repeated accusations of his 'immorality towards daughters of tenants' in the House of Commons and named him 'the bad earl'. A journalist investigating his assassination wrote 'even among those who hold the strongest views upon Lord Leitrim's conduct as a landlord, the charge (of debauchery) is discredited and I did not meet a single person who regarded it as tenable'. The writer is a credible witness: his article is drawn from interviews held with tenants and others after the assassination, and he does not shy from reporting all the (true) callous and inclement acts perpetrated by the Earl. In any case, there is little proof of either side - and many locals in Mohill continue to tell stories and name individuals as descendants of the Earl.