

1.1 The Haunted House

*'Where we sported and played,
'Neath each green leafy shade,
On the banks of my own lovely Lee'*

(The Banks of my own Lovely Lee, Author unknown; Music composed by James Charles Shanahan, 1933; First performed in Cork Opera House December 1933 by Margaret Dempsey)¹

Back then in the fifties, when we were not to be found in our usual play areas, the 'line', the Glen, the 'Quarry', or indeed the Lower Road itself, chances were that my pals and I were 'on safari' in the grounds of the 'Haunted House'. Though situated barely a mile from my house on the Lower Glanmire Road, the considerably overgrown grounds of that once glorious Woodhill demesne were a wild and wonderful place to us, and another country entirely. It was our Valhalla.

*But now on a fine summer evening,
When you are in full leisure time,
Walk out the Lower Road from Cork city
And view the fine groves of Glanmire.*²

Although overgrown, the grounds still retained vestigial reminders of their former glory with their magnificent walks bordered by red and mauve rhododendron, laurel and yew running the full length of the boundary wall.

Here my pals and I were transformed into cowboys and Indians. Characters like Hopalong Cassidy with his sidekick Gabby Hayes, Roy Rodgers, Gene Autrey, The Lone Ranger and his faithful Tonto, the ferocious Geronimo and many others were resurrected, and scenes we had lately viewed at the cinema would be re-enacted. Here we sourced the raw materials for our catapults and our bows and arrows. Here we climbed the tallest trees and made tree houses for ourselves. And here, too, when we started taking an interest in girls, we courted.

Borrowing lines from Wordsworth I may truthfully say about this period of my life:

*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.*³

Woodhill occupied a magnificent site on the sloping and wooded north bank of the river Lee, just over a mile downstream from where the river divides to flow on either side of the city centre; famously described by the Elizabethan poet, Edmund Spenser: *"The spreading Lee that like an island fayre,
Encloseth Cork with his divided flood."*⁴

¹ Down through the years there have been many controversies about the origin of both the words and the music of this song. The music was composed by James Charles Shanahan at the request of Dick Forbes of Dublin.

In the Autumn of 1933 Dick Forbes, a Corkman then residing in Dublin, sent the verses of the song to J.C. Shanahan with a request that he set them to music. This poem had been included in a volume of verses, published after his death, by John Fitzgerald, the "Bard of the Lee". J.C. Shanahan contacted Miss Elizabeth Fitzgerald, daughter of John Fitzgerald, seeking her permission to set the words to music. She replied that the poem, in fact had not been written by her father at all and had been included in the published volume by error. It was written by a friend of her father's, whose name she could not then recall - she was in her seventies at that time. This gentleman had emigrated to the U.S.A. in the 1880's but continued to correspond with his friend John Fitzgerald; both of them exchanged their poems with each other from time to time. This explained how the verses were found among John Fitzgerald's papers after his death. The composition was first performed in December, 1933 at the Cork Opera House by Margaret Dempsey, who was taking part in a Dick Forbes production. It was published and on sale the following year. The first recording by Cliff Connelly was issued by the Decca Record Company in 1936. There have been many recordings issued since, in Ireland, England and America.

² Verse of a song, The Groves of Glanmire, reproduced in: Tomás O Canainn, *Down Erin's Lovely Lee - Songs of Cork*, Gilbert Dalton Ltd., Dublin, 1978, p.90

³ William Wordsworth, 1770-1850, *French Revolution, as it appeared to enthusiasts at its commencement*

A Quaker gentleman, Cooper Penrose, who had a thriving timber import and export business, and who had been High Sherriff of Cork, inherited the Woodhill estate from his father-in-law John Dennis, who died in 1773; Cooper's wife was Elizabeth Dennis. Penrose Quay and Penrose Wharf in Cork City were named for Cooper Penrose. An earlier Penrose Lane existed at Grattan Street up to the late 19th century but all traces of it have now been destroyed.⁵

In 1786 Cooper Penrose fell foul of his Quaker confraternity when he was reported as having been present at a horse race, as owning a billiard table, and keeping a musical instrument. This report was found to be true, and when the visiting Friends were received by Penrose, he explained that he had attended the horse race with his children to show them the folly of such sport, that the billiard table was for their exercise, and that the musical instrument was merely a toy!! Such solicitude for his children failed to impress the visiting Friends, and when it was also discovered that he allowed an armed servant to accompany him on some occasions, he was disowned.⁶

Within a year of succeeding his father-in-law, Cooper Penrose embarked on the building of a fine new house on the Woodhill grounds, which at the beginning of Cooper's 'reign' consisted of some 40 acres of garden, grounds and land. As architect, Cooper employed the services of his kinsman, Michael Penrose of Waterford, who had been responsible for the new Post Office building in Dublin, and the result was a fine, imposing mansion of classical proportions and with the interior fitted out in the Adam's style. It was completed about 1780 and served as the family home for Cooper Penrose and his family until his death in 1816. In all it was reputed to have cost £2000. The house was, in turn, inherited by Cooper's son James Penrose, who died in 1845. Cooper Penrose, eldest son of James then inherited the estate. Cooper never married and when he died in 1862 he was succeeded at Woodhill by his younger brother Revd. John Dennis Penrose, who lived with his wife and family at Woodhill until his death at the age of 90 in 1894, when Woodhill ceased to be the family home of the Penroses, as the house was let spasmodically until it was finally sold in the 1930's to art dealer Cecil Partridge, who had the house dismantled so as to resell the fireplaces, doors etc.

Only the shell of the once beautiful mansion remained with its elegant terazzo floor and bits of marble staircase serving as a reminder of its former glory during our trips there in the fifties, but we were imbued all the same with a sense of awe and fascination at what must surely once have been a place of elegance and grandeur.

Lewis Dillwyn, who visited Cork in 1809, described the Woodhill 'villa' as being: *Beautifully situated on the North bank of the City about 1½ miles from the City. He has a fine collection of pictures for which he has been building a Gallery as also five other Rooms for Statuary, & they are all very tastily lighted by Cupolas from the Ceiling.*⁷

The former splendour and ornamentation of the house and grounds were described in 1974 by Catherine Herbert.⁸

⁴ Edmund Spenser, author of the 'Faerie Queene' lived for a time off North Main Street and was married in Christ Church, South Main Street in 1594.

⁵ See Gina Johnson, *The Laneways of Mediaeval Cork*, Cork City Council, 2002, p.124-125.

⁶ See Richard S. Harrison, *Merchants, Mystics and Philanthropists-350 Years of Cork Quakers*, Religious Society of Friends, Cork, 2006, p.58

⁷ G.J.Lyne (1986) 'Lewis Dillwyn's visit to Waterford, Cork and Tipperary in 1809.' *JCHAS* 91, 85-104

⁸ Catherine M. Herbert, *Evening Echo*, Tuesday August 6th, 1974,p3.

The woodhill grounds were spacious and splendid. The beautifully- kept lawns were surrounded by trees and sculptures dispersed throughout. The 'Philosopher's Walk', which was bounded by a wall of red brick, was adorned with domes containing antique bronze busts. This walk ran from just inside the main entrance gate on what later became Lovers Walk to where the Penrose property met Belleview, the property of the Nicholsons.

Cooper Penrose had a passionate love of art, and he possessed such numerous pictures accommodated in a purpose-built wing of his home, that Woodhill became known as 'The Irish Vatican'.

The windows of this art gallery were made of pure Venetian stained glass. It is said that the special wing was intended for a consignment of sculpture from Italy, but the ship bearing it sank, and so the extension became a picture gallery. On the extensive grounds sloping down to the shore and the narrow roadway at Tivoli stood many statues, bronze and marble, which Cooper Penrose brought back from his European tours-----

The interior of Woodhill was a place of splendour. The staircase was of elaborate, intricately designed wrought iron, with marble steps and richly carpeted, being wide enough for a 'carriagen and pair' to mount.

The fireplaces had leaden surrounds and bronze ornamentations. Magnificent cut-glass chandeliers hung from the ceilings of Italian architecture in the ballroom and the drawingrooms.

The picture gallery, which Penrose had at Woodhill, contained many fine works of art: works by James Barry, including 'Venus Rising from the Sea', the allegorical 'Portrait of the Prince of Wales' (later King George iv), now in the Crawford Gallery in Cork; Angelica Kaufmann's 'The Return of Telemachus', and 'The Sacrifice of Gideon'. Cooper Penrose also had his own portrait painted in France by Jacques Louis David (This portrait is now in the San Diego Museum in California)

The artist, Nathaniel Grogan (1740-1807) depicted Woodhill House in a work entitled 'Landscape at Tivoli, Cork'. This painting now hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland.⁹

Cooper's son James Penrose had the family crest erected on marble pillars at the main entrance gate to Woodhill, and mounted on each pillar was a lion of stone holding the coat of arms with front paws. The family motto was: *Rosa Sine Spina (a rose without a thorn)*

Of course in those halcyon summer days of the fifties we kids did not bother our small heads about such historical matters, but we knew, all the same, that the house had some connection with Sarah Curran, the sweetheart of the insurgent Robert Emmet, whose memories were immortally enshrined in the romance of her country by Moore's pathetic lyric, set to an old Irish air:

*'She is far from the land, where her young hero sleeps,
And lovers around her are sighing,
But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps,
For her heart in his grave is lying.'*

We believed then that Robert Emmet used to have trysts here with Sarah Curran, that he hid here from time to time to escape the attentions of the Redcoats, entering and exiting Woodhill by means of a secret tunnel, and once had to swim the river Lee down to Blackrock to make good his escape, that Lovers Walk was so named because the pair used to walk hand in hand along its length, and that following his arrest and execution in 1803, poor Sarah pined away and died soon afterwards.

Her restless spirit now roamed about the house and grounds doomed for eternity to weeping for her lost lover. As a result of this, and the eerie feeling the place engendered in us, we knew the place as the 'Haunted House', a label handed down to

⁹ Cork Art History 1800-1825 On line, A Chronological History of Art and Architecture in 19th century Cork

us from older acquaintances, who also passed on the stories, embellished, no doubt, in the telling down through the years.

Inevitably some details of the story were factual, as I now know.¹⁰

Sarah Curran was the youngest daughter of John Philpot Curran, the famous Irish wit and advocate. The beginning of her acquaintance with Emmet is recorded in the biography of John Philpot Curran by his son, W.H. Curran (published 1809).

'The projector of the late insurrection, Mr Robert Emmet, who was a young gentleman of highly distinguished family, of very striking talent and interesting manners, was in the habit of visiting at Mr. Curran's house. Here he soon formed an attachment to his youngest daughter. Her father was in total ignorance of the motives of Emmet's visits, until subsequent events made it known to all. To a man of his celebrity and attractive conversation there seemed nothing singular in finding his society cultivated.'

Robert Emmet was the youngest son of Dr. Robert Emmet, a physician, who practised first in Cork and afterwards in Dublin. His son, Robert was born in Cork, March 6, 1778. Intended for the bar he was entered at Trinity College, but was expelled for his connection with the *United Irishmen Society*. He left Ireland and in his travels in Paris he met a circle of his exiled countrymen, who combined Irish patriotism with French republicanism. He returned to Ireland and in 1803 he took part in the failed Emmet insurrection on July 23rd. Betrayed and deserted by his followers, Emmet, aged 26, was executed in Dublin. He met his death with fortitude after delivering his famous speech from the dock on the eve of his execution:

---Let no man write my epitaph: for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them and me repose in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times and other men, can do justice to my character; when my country takes her place among the nations of the earth then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written. I have done.'

The poet Moore, who had been an intimate friend of Robert at College, wrote of him:

'Were I to number indeed the men among all I have ever known who appeared to me to combine in the greatest degree pure moral worth with intellectual powers, I should amongst the highest of the few place Robert Emmet.'

When he was arrested some papers were found on Robert's person, which showed that subsequent to the insurrection he had correspondence with a member of Mr. Curran's family. A search warrant followed, which allowed a search of Mr. Curran's house and this search revealed letters from Mr. Emmet, which were used at his trial.

In the interval between the Insurrection and his arrest, Emmet might easily have escaped to America, if his sweetheart, Sarah Curran, had consented to accompany him. She is said to have received a letter from him declaring that as she would not go with him to America, he would stay to meet his fate.

Sarah had tried earlier to dissuade Emmet from the Insurrection, but she could never forget him, for whose death she considered herself partly responsible by refusing to go with him to America. After his execution, she lost her reason for a time, and became seriously ill, during which time her father was most obdurate and refused to see her or acknowledge her presence in any way. Due to her father's harshness, Sarah quit her father's house and proceeded to Cork, accompanied by her sister, and sought

¹⁰ See for example: *The Penroses of Woodhill, Cork: An account of their property in the City in Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, Vol. LXXXV, Nos 241 and 242, Jan/Dec., 1980, Pages 79-98.*

Catherine M. Herbert, *Evening Echo*, p.3, August 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 1974;

G.M.Moore, *The Story of Sarah Curran, Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, Vol. Xxvii/xxviii, 1921/1922, pp 60-65*

the protection of Mr. Cooper Penrose, an old friend of the family, residing at Woodhill. During her residence there she met her future husband Captain R.H.Sturgeon. Her grief for Emmet's death having somewhat subsided, and after repeated solicitations, she consented to marry Captain Sturgeon. She was married by Rev. John Chetwood, Protestant Rector of Rathcooney for 25 years, who died in 1814. A headstone erected in his memory stands close to the northwall of the old church ruin at Rathcooney cemetery.

Sarah's marriage at the Anglican church, St. Mary's and All Saints in Glanmire Village, was announced in the '*Hibernian Magazine*':-

'November 24th, 1805, at Cork, Captain R.H.Sturgeon, of the Royal Staff Corps, and nephew of the late Marquis of Rockingham, to Miss Sarah Curran, daughter of J.P.Curran.'

Cooper Penrose gave the bride away.

The church, erected in 1786 and which still stands proud with its familiar steeple above the village of Glanmire, contained a stained glass window donated by Sarah Curran.¹¹

Soon after his marriage, Captain Sturgeon was ordered to Sicily, and his wife, it was thought, would probably benefit by this change of climate; but it was too late. In 1808 Sarah, heavily pregnant, set sail for England with her husband Henry,. The ship encountered appalling weather conditions in the English Channel and Sarah's seasickness turned to fever. She was delivered of a delicate and premature baby boy, who died shortly after their arrival in Portsmouth.

Sarah's state of mind at that sad time was revealed in a letter she wrote to Anne Penrose:

Portsmouth, January 10, 1808 to Anne Penrose. Dear Anne, My darling child is lying dead. My heart is bleeding and broken and I cannot pray to God for He has forgotten me. Henry will buy the coffin and shroud today for my dear Johnny. Oh Anne, heaven seemed to promise happiness. I had made clothes for my boy but a shroud will suffice now--- S.S.¹²

Sarah's mental and physical condition deteriorated swiftly thereafter and despite the attentions of eminent physicians, she failed to respond; her will to live was said to have forsaken her and she suffered many delusions. She died soon afterwards; perhaps of a broken heart?

Her death was recorded in the '*Gentleman's Magazine*':

May 5th, 1808, at Hythe, in Kent, of a rapid decline, aged 26, Sarah, wife of Captain Henry Sturgeon, and youngest daughter of the Right Hon. J.P. Curran, Master of the Rolls in Ireland.'

Before her death Sarah had expressed the wish to be interred with her twin sister Gertrude at the Priory, Rathfarnham in Dublin; her wish was denied by her father, however, who reportedly didn't want his grounds to be turned into a churchyard.

Sarah's body was brought to Newmarket, Co. Cork, the native place of the Currans, where a Celtic cross, erected in more recent times by the residents of Newmarket, marks her grave. A beautiful slab of Sicilian marble sent by her husband was

¹¹ The Church was in the news in May 2007 (See report in *Irish Examiner*, 3rd May 2007) when it was reported that controversial plans by Vodafone to erect a mobile phone mast in the spire of the historic church were shot down by Cork County Council planners. Local residents had earlier picketed outside a Sunday morning service at the church.

¹² *Catherine M. Herbert, op.cit, August 6th, 1974,p3*

accidentally delivered to Newberry, near Mallow, instead of Newmarket, and was never placed on the grave.

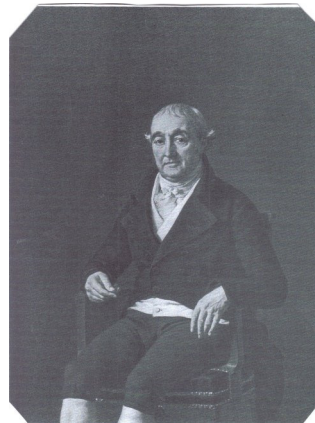
Sarah's husband Henry Sturgeon, was killed in 1814 in the Peninsular War, after a brave and honourable record, with high qualities as a soldier and a gentleman; in the last letter Sarah ever wrote, she spoke in the highest praise of his kindness to her, as he had been well aware of her sad position, and kindly respected all that was sacred in it.

Cooper Penrose died in 1815 at the age of 76. Exhaustive researches of extant records by historians have failed to uncover the burial place of Cooper; he was not, apparently, laid to rest in the Quaker burial place, nor at Christ Church, or Shandon, and his will gave no indication of his wishes in this matter.

Tradition has it, and oldtimers still alive are adamant of its veracity, that the remains of Cooper Penrose lie in a special 'vault', sufficiently deep to accommodate his casket in a perpendicular position beneath a strange-looking miniature tower about 3 metres high, which stands at the extreme South-Westerly end of the Woodhill estate, just inside the boundary wall running parallel with the Cork/Cobh railway line and almost in line with the gents public toilet, which used to stand on the Lower Glanmire Road side of the line. This toilet was removed many years ago, but the section, where the gap in the red-brick wall has been filled in with modern concrete blocks, is plainly visible. Incidentally, this part of the Woodhill boundary wall was a favourite point of entry to Woodhill demesne from the Lower Glanmire Road for my friends and me back then, and we regularly passed by the tower, without giving it a thought on our way to the mansion beyond.

To add further to the mystique and spookiness surrounding Woodhill demesne, oldtimers will quote you a statement attributed to the same Cooper Penrose:

'As long as a Penrose stands at Woodhill, nobody would build on the right of way'



A painting of Cooper Penrose by Jacques Louis David in the Tinken Museum of Art, San Diego.

On our way down the Lower Road we had to pass by Myrtle Hill Terrace on the far side of the railway line. The last house in this terrace, Number 22, *Belleview Lodge*, is a striking building with gothic style windows. We were always told that the people living in this house were related somehow to Abraham 'Bram' Stoker, author of *Dracula* (his best-known work, although he wrote 17 other books). Some few years ago I checked the 1901 and 1911 Census Returns for this dwelling. Sure enough a Mary Elizabeth Stoker, widow aged 62 years in 1901 and born in England was

resident there. The Cork Directory for the year 1946 showed that there had been a G.H. Stoker resident there at that time! I wonder. I must check this out more fully some time.

Did Robert Emmet ever set foot in Woodhill for secret trysts with Sarah Curran, as tradition would have had us youngsters believe back then?

Well, apparently, it's possible that Emmet did, indeed, meet Sarah at Woodhill during the period before the ill-fated uprising.

Sarah's father, John Philpot Curran was on friendly terms with the Penrose family and there is every possibility that she visited Woodhill with her father on occasion. Perhaps Emmet met her secretly there. It has been speculated that Emmet may well have made his way there, not for romance, but for political talks with United Irishmen leaders who regularly met at a grove known as the 'Robbers Den', where legend says the proceeds of a Cork 13th century robbery were buried. This area was situated in the grounds of a house, *St. Raphael's*, (later to become Queen of Angels School) in Montenotte, adjacent to Lovers Walk, built some years earlier by the then Lord Mayor of Cork, Thomas Lyons.

Legend has it that Emmet would cross, under cover of darkness, to Tivoli by row boat and make his way via a secret tunnel, which was reputed to have run from the shoreline at Tivoli to Lovers Walk at the point of entrance to Woodhill House, where a castle lodge stood; this lodge, or tower house still stands at the junction of Trafalger Hill and Lovers Walk, and is still in use today as a residence.

But, as for Lovers Walk deriving its name because of associations with Emmet and Curran, it seems unlikely to me. The more plausible derivation is as follows:

The name of Lovers Walk in Irish is 'Siúl na Lobhar' - Lepers Walk!

So how did it come by this name? Well, apparently it was connected with pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostella in Spain.¹³ In medieval times, Compostella, Rome and Jerusalem were great centres of pilgrimage with a reputation for curing leprosy or any skin ailment for which there was no known medical cure.

The feast of St. James is on the 25th July each year. Any year that this falls on a Sunday is designated a Holy Year in Spain and pilgrims flock to Copostella from all over Europe. A pilgrim ship from Ireland would berth initially at St. James' Gate, the home of Guinness' Brewery in Dublin and make a further port of call to Cork for passengers en route to Spain.

There was a leprosarium situated in the region of Glanmire- its exact location up to the present day remains uncertain- and a look-out would be posted, at a distance from the city, on the high ground above the River Lee to watch for the ship's arrival. The pilgrims would then walk to the ship using the road that still bears the name 'Siúl na Lobhar'-Lovers Walk, which was so called because of these poor unfortunates; the disease these victims had was known as German leprosy. According to O'Sullivan in his article '*Monastic Establishments of Medieval Cork*' they were forbidden to advance beyond Bothar na Lobhar (Siúl na Lobhar) leading from Mayfield (Baile na mBocht) to Glanmire (Glenaggyr). On other occasions the lepers-and in later times victims of fevers from the shipping trade of the city, who were housed in the fever hospital- used Lovers Walk to make their way down to the river Lee where they would bathe. They would meet at St. Luke's, which is still known in Irish as Crosaire na mBocht and follow the route of Lovers Walk..

The poet Greg Delanty wrote of Lovers Walk in his poem titled '*Lepers' Walk*':

¹³ See note on the background to this on St. Patrick's Church website

‘---Lovers’ Walk
*that’s the epitome of a lovers’ walk. This winding incline
skirts the city, Bordered with necking nooks and arbours----*
---- Lovers’ Walk
*was Siúl na Lobhar in the Gaelic days, but the Sasanach,
anglicizing street names, mistook the bh Irish v sound.
Then maybe cúpla jorums too many, feeling jilted
By our city that you still can’t let go, you turn inward.*

And in a reference to the passage along Lovers Walk of the poor afflicted lepers, he had this observation to make about the residents:

*You fume in a shamanistic fury about how lepers
Had to steal to the contagion hospital up this hill.
They bypassed locals, themselves infected
with the typical small town mycobacterium leprae,
the paralysis that no soul dare attempt anything
different, diagnosed as rising above one’s station----*¹⁴

When J. Stirling Coyne, the playwright and one of the first editors of Punch magazine, came on a tour of Ireland in the early 1840’s he became acquainted with Lovers Walk and had this to say about it:¹⁵

*A delightful walk open to the public and not unaptly termed the ‘Lovers Walk’,
adjoins the town on the Glanmire side. It runs parallel to the river amidst a
wilderness of trees and flowering shrubs-through whose interlacing branches
glimpses of the Lee with numerous white sails flitting over its bright waters, may be
occasionally caught. It is truly a place made for the heart’s sweet converse-and, to
use the language of the native bard,
“’Tis there the lover-may hear the dove or
The gentle plover-in the afternoon”*

One further oral tradition, which served to re-enforce the image of Woodhill as a haunted place, was also frequently repeated by oldtimers from the area. Catherine Herbert, who, incidentally, was born in the castle lodge at the original entrance to Woodhill House on Lovers Walk, wrote of the numerous occasions that the cry of the ‘bean sidhe’ was heard in the vicinity of Woodhill House. She, herself, she swears, at age 10 in 1950 also heard the horrifying wail, thus justifying in her mind, the assignation of the title ‘Haunted House’ to Woodhill. Her parents too, she avers, often heard the wail, and it was common knowledge around Tivoli that men coming from late work at the railway or Post Office had often run past the estate, their hair standing on end on hearing the sound.¹⁶

¹⁴ Greg Delanty, *Lepers’ Walk* in *The Blind Switch*, Carcanet Press Ltd., Manchester, 2001, p.51. Available at Cork City Library, Call No. 821 DEL

¹⁵ J. Stirling Coyne (1803-1868), *The Scenery and Antiquities of Ireland*, Mercury Books (London), 2003, p.238. Book originally published circa 1842 just before the Great Potato Famine of 1845-1850. It was published in London as two volumes, which are combined in the 2003 edition.

¹⁶ Catherine M. Herbert, *op.cit.*, August 9th, 1974, p.3

The circumstances in which the Currans became friendly with the Penrose family of Woodhill, in the first place, relate to another piece of social history- the spectacular abduction of an heiress- involving, among others, Cooper Penrose and Woodhill, which occurred in 1797, some few years before the events relating to Sarah Curran were to unfold. Perhaps it is worth recounting it here.¹⁷

Samuel Pike, a Quaker gentleman and a wealthy banker lived near the Mardyke in Cork with his wife, Catherine, and daughter, Mary Pike, who was born on March 9, 1776. When Samuel died in 1796 he bequeathed an estimated fortune of £55,000 to his daughter Mary, then nine months under age.

Mary was on poor terms with her mother and did not desire to continue residing with her at the Mardyke. Her uncle, Richard Pike had married Anne Penrose, a sister of Cooper Penrose of Woodhill. Mary begged to live with the Penrose family at Woodhill. Cooper Penrose, either out of genuine hospitality, or by a natural desire to secure such an heiress for one of his own sons, agreed to this arrangement. The widowed Mrs Pike remained in Cork, allegedly in a precarious state of health and under the care of her physician Dr. Robert Gibbings.

Meanwhile across town a certain Henry Brown Hayes, widower of two years, who was born in 1760, son of a rich brewer, Attiwell Hayes and Mary Brown, lived in a fine estate Vernon Mount at Frankfield, Douglas.

At age 22 Henry became a lieutenant in the South Cork militia and married Elizabeth Smyth of Youghal. She was said to have 'a considerable fortune' and they moved into Vernon Mount, where they had four children. That year, also, he was made a Freeman of the city of Cork. In 1790 he was made a Sheriff of Cork City and knighted after a dinner with the Lord Lieutenant; the meal and entertainment were kindly paid for by local taxpayers. According to Council book entry of October 14, 1790, it 'cost the Corporation 250 pounds', or closer to 10,000 pounds in today's figures.

Things were going well for Henry when his wife died in 1794. Henry was then on the look-out for another wealthy wife and in 1797, when Mary Pike came into her inheritance, she continued to live at Woodhill and came to the attention of Sir Henry Hayes. Now Sir Henry had not the pleasure of acquaintance with Cooper Penrose and apparently no mutual friends to effect an introduction, even though both he and Cooper Penrose were lapsed Quakers

Henry decided to take the house at Woodhill by storm. On July 2 of that year Cooper Penrose looked out his window and saw a man in his garden. Hayes explained his presence by saying he was planning improvements at Vernon Mount and wished to imitate the many features of Woodhill that he admired. No mention of why he hadn't first knocked!

Time passed by and Hayes showed no signs of leaving, until an embarrassed Penrose finally invited him to dine with them, and as planned, that's where he met Mary Pike. Three weeks later on July 21, after finding out the name of her mother's doctor and obtaining a sample of his handwriting, Hayes forged a note, addressed to Cooper Penrose as follows:

Dear Sir, Our friend Mrs Pike is suddenly taken ill: she wishes to see Miss Pike; we would recommend Dispatch as we think she has not many hours to live. Yours, Robt. Gibbings

That evening, Friday July 21 served Sir Henry's purpose admirably being a dark night with a downpour of thunder rain. The note reached Woodhill at one o'clock on

¹⁷ See, (a) Rosemary Ffolliott, *An 18th Century Abduction*, *Irish Ancestor*, No.2,1969, pp67-75; and (b) John Wright, *Sir Henry then Kidnapper*, www.crawfordartgallery.com Emigrant Online, john@emigrant.ie

Saturday morning and caused a wild flurry; most of the household was abed and the horses out at grass. Grooms were sent running for the horses and Mary was awoken from her slumber. Mary accompanied by Anne Penrose and Mrs Richard Pike were put into a chaise and two coachmen were assigned to deliver them to the Mardyke.

They were scarcely half way to Cork city when they were held up at pistol point by several armed men. Mary was seized and transferred to a second coach and four and was driven away at high speed. There was little chance of her companions chasing after Mary's abductors; one of the villains had cut the traces and the frightened horses, thus loosed, had disappeared into the darkness. The party had to make their way back to Woodhill by foot through the rain.

Mary Pike found a second female beside her in the second coach; this lady turned out to be Sir Henry's sister. Arriving at Vernon Mount, Mary was put in a room where a man later turned up 'attired somewhat like a priest'. After a mock ceremony, Hayes informed Mary that she was now his wife, but she demanded to contact her uncle.

Sir Henry and his sister then forced Mary upstairs, where Hayes tried to rape her. He behaved 'in the rudest manner', said Mary. Sir Henry was upset by her resistance, asking her several times: 'Do you not know who I am?' When the police and Mary's uncle arrived, Hayes and his sister had fled. Mary 'emerged begging to be taken home'

Richard Pike submitted a long advertisement in the Hibernian Chronicle giving details of the crime and offering a 500 guinea reward for capture of Sir Henry and 100 guineas for each of his accomplices. This item was reprinted in every issue of the Cork Hibernian Chronicle up to January 22, 1798. No one claimed the reward and Sir Henry evaded capture. Mary went to Bath and on October 21 made her will, a will which was never revoked and was proved thirtyfive years later. Whether Mary was actually raped was never made clear in court; there may even have been a child, which may have accounted for her uncle's continuing wrath.

After more than three years Henry Hayes wearied of his enforced retirement and he wrote a letter to Mary, indicating that his conduct towards her had always been 'honourable and delicate' adding that he now proposed to surrender himself for trial.

It was a capitol charge heard at the Cork Assizes on Monday April 13, 1801. The prosecution was led by John Philpot Curran, father of Sarah, and soon to become famous for his defence of Robert Emmet. Curran was a very popular advocate, and on his way to court the citizens cheered him, shouting 'Councillor, we hope you'll gain the day'. Curran quipped back, 'If I do, take care you don't lose the Knight.'

Sir Henry was found guilty, but he escaped execution, being sentenced to deportation instead, and was despatched to Botany Bay aboard the convict ship, *Atlas*.

During his term in Australia, Sir Henry purchased a property near Sydney, which he named *Vauclause*. In 1812 he received an unexpected pardon through the intercession of his daughter Mary, then the wife of Henry Jude, who had the good fortune to attract the notice of the Prince Regent at a Brighton ball.

Sir Henry arrived home to Ireland and joined his son Attiwell at Vernon Mount. In his absence, Attiwell had taken a degree at Trinity and in 1810 had married and settled at Vernon Mount.



Imposing entrance to Vernon Mount as it appeared circa 1910. The house is currently (2011) in foreign ownership and is very dilapidated. Given its historical significance and grand design, efforts are being made to have the house taken into public ownership in order to have it restored to its former glory.¹⁸

A local ballad singer composed a jingle to the tune of ‘Merrily danced the Quaker’, and thereby enriched his financial standing:

*‘Sir Henry kissed behind the bush
 Sir Henry kissed the Quaker
 And if he did the ugly thing
 I am sure he did not ate her’*

Sir Henry died on April 13, 1832 at Grattan Hill off the Lower Glanmire Road, where he had been living at that time, and was buried in his father’s vault at Christchurch.

Mary Pike continued to live in Cork. She never married. Eventually she became deranged and on April 22, 1826 her affairs passed into the care of the Court of Chancery. Mary died in Cork in 1832. Her estate of £55,000-an immense fortune at that time- was bequeathed to various cousins, the Penroses and her uncle Jonathan Hutchinson. Thus was dispersed the wealth Sir Henry Hayes had so frantically sought to acquire.

The story of the abduction of Mary Pike is recalled in the traditional lyric: ‘*Merrily kiss the Quaker*’.



A Penrose family group at Woodhill ca. 1885



The ruins of Woodhill House in the 1970’ s

¹⁸ See article in *Cork Independent*, 13th May, 2010, p.8 in which the above photo, with accompanying article appears.

By an order dated 18th May, 1989 Cork Corporation granted permission for the demolition of the remains of Woodhill House and the construction of a luxury dwelling on the original site. The planning schedule contained, *inter alia*, provision for detailed photographic and drawing surveys of the structure, to the satisfaction of the Planning Authority and the Irish Architecture Archives.

But, as Teddy Delaney, who wrote about his experiences of growing up on the Lower Road in the 1960's stated:

*'That's grand, but did anybody tell the new owners about the tower or Cooper Penrose's alleged statement.'*¹⁹

By the time construction of this house got under way, my family and I had moved to our new abode off Lovers Walk, just a mere hundred yards or so, distant from Woodhill, where many more modern housing developments have since taken place. Though my heart tells me that that the thwarted lovers Robert Emmet and Sarah Curran did indeed walk hand in hand, along this idyllic route just over 200 years ago, as generations of lovers have since, my mind tends to gravitate towards the Leper pilgrims story as ringing more true.

¹⁹ Teddy Delaney, *Where We Sported and Played*, Mercier Press, 1991, p.44