

Acton of Kilmacurragh Co. Wicklow

By Turtle Bunbury

(Revised Edition 2013)

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Original illustrations/ Photographs

Acton of Kilmacurragh Co. Wicklow

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Acton of Kilmacurragh

“Adiuvante Deo” (With the help of God)



Kilmacurragh lies a few miles south of Glenealy, midway between Rathdrum and Brittas Bay. The property came to the Acton family during the 17th century at the end of which they built the original house of Kilmacurragh (or Westaston). During the 1850s, the forward thinking Tom Acton planted an arboretum that is now in peak condition with an exceptional array of crimson rhododendrons, Irish yews, giant shaggy podocarpus and exceptional pleasure grounds, carpeted in bluebells in the spring, birdsong echoing around the branches of trees from Peru, Tasmania, the Middle East and Indochina. Tom's brother William was a hero at the battle of Inkerman while another brother Charles Ball-Acton was prominent in India. The death of all three Acton brothers between the Boer War and the First World War spelled an end for the family although the last surviving member of the family, Charles Acton, distinguished himself as one of Ireland's greatest music critics in the 20th century.

Peace in Our Time

On 20th September 1697, the Treaty of Ryswick brought to an end the devastating nine year War of the Grand Alliance which has pitted the might of Louis XIV's French armies against the Grand Alliance of England, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire and the United Provinces. Colonies were exchanged, Duchys restored and Louis undertook to recognize William III as king of England. He further promised to give no further assistance to the deposed Catholic monarch, James II, who was then in exile at the French palace Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Ryswick was the most outstanding event in an otherwise quiet year, closely followed by the reopening of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and the departure of Peter the Great, or artilleryman "Pjotr Mikhailov", on his incognito tour of Europe.

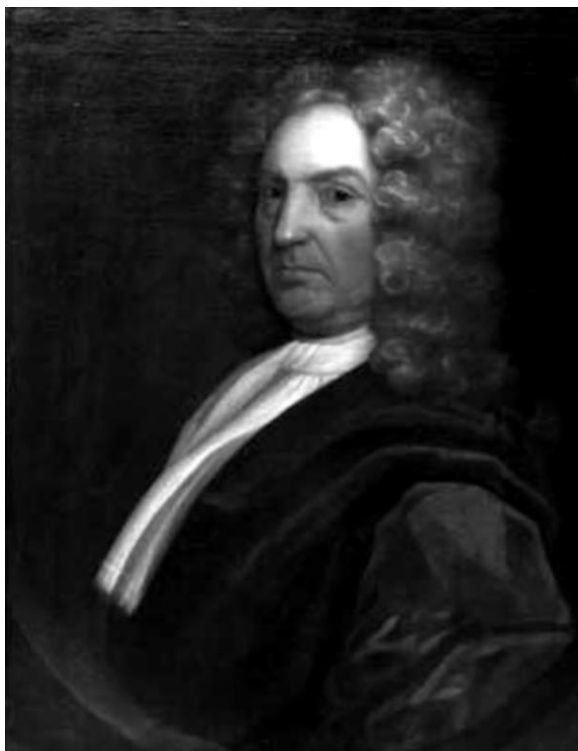
Arguably the most important consequence of Ryswick was the advent of peace. Indeed, for many in England and Ireland it must have seemed as though they had been at war all their lives. The elderly could still remember the horrors of the civil war in the 1640s while for younger generations the chaos that ensued during James's and William's struggle for the English throne was very fresh in their minds. But now at last there was peace. And with peace there is prosperity.

The New House at Kilmacurragh

The gentry and aristocracy of Ireland were not slow to capitalize on the end of the European war. Almost immediately they began recruiting former soldiers and engineers to reconstruct and start anew on grand country houses across the land. One such property was that of Kilmacurragh, a Queen Anne house just outside Glenealy on the east coast of County

Wicklow. Though now in an exceedingly ruinous condition, the gorgeous two-storey, five bay house is nonetheless one of the few remaining early panelled houses in Ireland. It comprised five reception rooms and eight bedrooms, and like many houses in the area built during this time, it was sited on a hill facing east, making it particularly cold in the winter months.

Kilmacurragh allegedly takes its name from an ancient church situated just east of the present house. An early seventeenth century map shows the estate as being divided into three holdings. Cromwell's army are said to have passed through on their way to Wexford, having already laid waste the Catholic church in nearby Glenealy.

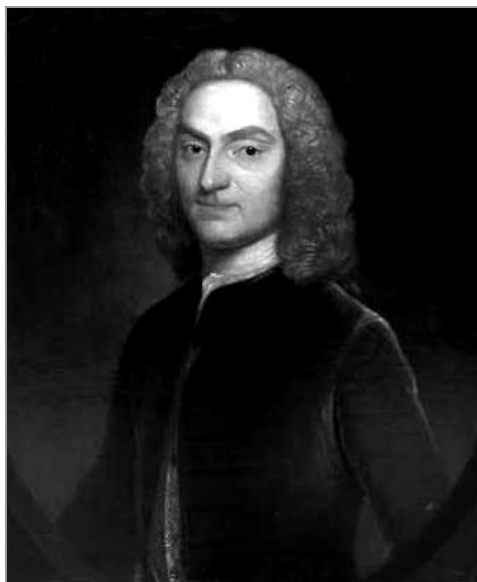


Thomas Acton (d. 1750) who married Elinor Kempston

At sometime before the outbreak of the 1641 rebellion, these lands had been leased to Thomas Acton of Bog Hall,

Ballygannonbeg, Glenealy by a Walter Byrne. However the lands were subsequently seized from Byrne and regranted to Hugh Montgomery and Sir Richard Parsons of Birr Castle, who became Viscount Rosse. According to the Hearth Roll of 1669, a Thomas Leigh paid hearth tax for Kilmacurragh while Thomas Acton continued to pay tax on Bog Hall, and on Kilcandra, a property on the edge of the Kilmacurragh estate. Records reveal that a Byrne again came into possession shortly after this but, by 1690, the Actons were living in Kilmacurragh.

Thomas Acton's grandson, another Thomas, secured the lease from the Parsons family in 1697. By deeds dated 13th February and May 10th 1716, he then obtained from Viscount Rosse "leases for lives renewable forever" for the same lands. Thomas's son William Acton subsequently married the Viscount's cousin, Jane Parsons.



William Acton (1711-1779) son of Thomas was Keeper of the Writs of the Court of Common Pleas.

Thomas Acton & Elinor Kempston

Work on Kilmacurragh House commenced at the close of the 17th century when Thomas Acton of Bog Hall leased the property from the Parsons family. He subsequently married Elinor Kempston. Her father, Colonel Nicholas Kempston of Dunmurray, Co. Cavan, was an officer in Cromwell's army. Her mother, Grace, was a daughter of Thomas Maule, Surveyor-General of the Customs of Ireland under Charles II.

Thomas was one of three Grand Jurors responsible for a new workhouse in the Borough of Wicklow, which opened in 1715. Designed to create work for the poor, the workhouse was specifically aimed at "*the encouragement of the Hempen and Flaxen Manufacture*".

Thomas and Elinor had a son, William, and three daughters. The eldest daughter Grace married Thomas Ball, a Co Wicklow barrister. The second daughter, Elinor married the Rev. John Blachford and was grandmother to the poetess, Mary Tighe. Family legend has it that Elinor was once reading aloud to her children when Jonathan Swift walked into the room. "*Is it a woman pretending to teach?*" remarked the Dean scornfully. "*Yes, Sir*", Mistress Blachford replied, "*'tis a very foolish book lately published called 'Gulliver's Travels'.*"

Thomas Acton was one of the first landowners in Ireland to plant trees in any great number. An account from 1730 details payment of £200 for "dibbing" trees. The same account shows he purchased foreign timber for building purposes. In 1750, a grant of £10, which he received from the Royal Dublin Society, was spent on planting "foreign" trees at the entrance to the Deer Park. Ordnance survey maps suggest that the bulk of this new plantation were common hardwoods with a nurse crop of conifers or alders and birch. Thomas died that same year and was succeeded by his 39-year-old son, William.



Grace Acton was the daughter of Thomas and Elinor Acton. She married the Co. Wicklow barrister, Thomas Ball. Jane Acton, right, was a sister of Sir Lawrence Parsons, 3rd Baronet, of Birr Castle.

William Acton & Jane Parsons of Birr Castle

William Acton was born in 1711, the twilight of Queen Anne and the Stuart dynasty. By the time he entered Trinity College Dublin in November 1726, the Hanoverian system was firmly in control. William became a barrister and rose to become Keeper of the Writs of the Court of Common Pleas. He was also a member, or Serjeant, of the exclusive Order of the Coif from which all judges of the Court of Common Pleas (or, later, King's Bench) were appointed until 1839.

On 4th March 1736 he married Jane Parsons, second daughter of William Parsons, only son of Sir William Parsons, 2nd Bart, of Birr Castle. Jane's mother Martha was a daughter of Thomas Piggot of Chetwynd, Co. Cork. In 1740, her brother succeeded as Sir Laurence Parsons, 3rd Bart. Sir Laurence was father to the 1st Earl of Rosse. William and Jane had two sons

and three daughters. The second son Thomas duly succeeded to Kilmacurragh.



Thomas Acton, who died in 1817, married Sidney Davis, daughter of the Dublin barrister, Joshua Davis.

Thomas Acton & Sidney Davis

Between about 1750 and 1850 Kilmacurragh was somewhat confusingly known as West Aston or Westaston. And it was to this property that William Acton's eldest surviving son Thomas succeeded. Little is known about Thomas save that, in 1780, he married Miss Sidney Davis, daughter of Dublin barrister Joshua Davis. Three years later, Thomas's sister Maria married Thomas Walker of Tykillen, Co. Wexford, sometime Master of the Chancery.

Thomas and Sidney Acton had two sons, William and Thomas, and two daughters, Anne Maria and Jane.¹ The eldest son William succeeded to West Aston on Thomas's death in 1817 and is treated anon. The younger son Thomas took up the cloth and became Rector of Dunganstown Glebe in Co. Wicklow. In the autumn of 1818, he married Miss Sidney Evans,

daughter of Hampden Evans of Portrane, Co. Dublin. The marriage produced two sons, Hampden and William, and two daughters, Margaret and Anna Sophia.ⁱⁱ Their eldest son, Hampden, became a Colonel in the Madras Staff Corps, married Lucy Ussher and settled in the Pyrenees.ⁱⁱⁱ The younger son William lived at Brookville in Co. Dublin, was High Sheriff in 1875 for Co. Leitrim and married Georgina Lowry, fourth daughter of James Lowry of Rockdale, Co. Tyrone.^{iv}



*Caroline Walker Acton, daughter of a Master of Chancery.
Kilmacurragh as it is today.*

William Acton, Caroline Walker & Fanny Alexander

Thomas and Sidney Acton's eldest son William Acton, MP, was born in Ireland just as the turmoil of the French Revolution of 1789 was starting to make an impact on Europe. By the time he succeeded his father at West Aston in 1817, the French had been defeated and the British Empire confirmed in superiority. William was appointed High Sheriff for County Wicklow three years later and went on to become Deputy Lieutenant, Vice-Lieutenant and Member of Parliament for the county. He was also Lieutenant Colonel of the Wicklow Militia. During the 1840s, William deftly added two single story wings

to the main house, which from about this time became known as Kilmacurragh rather than West Aston.

On 16th June 1818 William Acton married his first cousin, Caroline Walker. Her father Thomas Walker lived at Tykillen in Co. Wexford and was a Master of Chancery. Her mother Maria was William's aunt. She was a quiet, well-read lady with a terrific enthusiasm for the beauty of nature and the study of flowers, insects and the habits of the birds and other wild life. These passions she shared with her seven children, three boys and four girls. The three Acton boys, Tom, William and Charles, enjoyed an active childhood. As they entered their teenage years, their father gifted them with a small yacht, which promoted a useful understanding of navigation principles and nautical matters.

However, the kiss of death, which stalked the Acton family so persistently, began to bite now. Three of the four Acton girls perished before they reached maturity - Maria was sixteen, Sidney was twenty and Caroline just twelve. One of their few close childhood friends was Fanny Alexander, the hymn-writer, who later recalled the girls and her youthful days at Kilmacurragh in a poem called "*The Glistening Drops of Early Dew*":

The glistening drops of early dew
Lie late along the ancient park,
And down the stately avenue
The mingled shadows, long and dark
Of hoary beech and drooping lime,
Still linger as in olden time.

How strange that human hopes should be
More swiftly touched of sure decay;
The dewy mead, the shadowy tree
I greet again, but where are they
So fair of face, so blithe of cheer
In olden time that met me here?

I tread your glades as in a dream
Of gleesome mirth in childhood's day,
And thronging all around me seem
Departed forms, and voices gay,
With lovely chant of forest bee
And wild bird mingles joyously.

Maria, those full eyes of thine,
Sweet Sidney's pure and placid brow
Thy laugh, light-hearted Caroline
They rise, they ring to haunt me now;
'Twas but the tear that dimmed my eye,
The breeze that moaned, ye are not nigh.

When William died aged 65 in April 1854, he left three sons and one daughter, Irene. His widow, Caroline Acton, survived him for exactly quarter of a century and died on 11th April 1879.

Tom Acton & the Kilmacurragh Arboretum

The eldest son, Tom Acton, was born in 1826 and succeeded to the family estate at the age of 28. He remained a bachelor and served as DL, JP and High Sheriff (1857) for Co. Wicklow. Together with his sister Janet, Tom initiated the magnificent 52-acre arboretum at Kilmacurragh during the 1850s, a calcifuge collection of lime-hating plants such as Rhododendron, Pieris, Camellia and Erica arborea (a type of heather). This resulted in the largest collection of Himalayan Rhododendron species in Europe, all raised at Glasnevin and Kew from seeds collected by the great Victorian plant hunters like Lobb, Hooker and Wilson. As photographer Megan O'Beirne wrote in her story 'The Three Ginkgos', '*the giant Himalayan hemlock, the Kashmir cypress, the Chilean orange-bark myrtles, Pere David's maple and the remarkable New Zealand*

podocarpus totara are a token sample of the many exotic trees Tom and Janet planted in Kilmacurragh.

The new plantation actually commenced in 1850 with the assistance of David Moore and his son (Sir) Fredrick Moore, curators of the Botanical Gardens Glasnevin. Indeed the ore-rich soil and climatic conditions at Kilmacurragh resulted in many specimens succeeding at Kilmacurragh while struggling or failing at Glasnevin. Malins and Bowe have described the result succinctly. "*Its setting was that of a formal park of the early eighteenth century, with 'battalioned lines, its quaint Duck ponds and its heronry'. Three avenues lead to the house, from which the ground slopes gently away to the lake, stream and sea, and commands fine views, especially to the east, of the Welsh coast. By 1893 the entrance gate, by a lodge smothered in great rhododendrons, opened onto its avenue of great silver firs backed by a double avenue of monkey puzzles*".^v Like the Walpoles of Mount Usher, Tom enjoyed doing his own gardening though he still tended to prefer the long grass and wild flowers to the more formal rigidity of other gardens at this time. Tom Acton lived until 25th August 1908 whereupon his nephew, Charles, succeeded.

Colonel William Acton - The Hero of Inkerman

The second son, Colonel William Molesworth Cole Acton, was 26 years old when Britain went to war in the Crimea. He served with the 77th regiment at the battles of Sebastopol and the Alma. During the battle of Inkerman in November 1854, Lieutenant Acton led a company of the 77th in vital defence of a Barrier. In his 9-volume history of the Crimean War, AW Kinglake recounted the following epic tale:

"At the Barrier Acton's company remained till about mid-day, when the crisis of the battle was already past. Then Acton was ordered to go forward to a point, where he would find two companies of another regiment, and with them attack the westernmost of the Russian batteries on Shell Hill. Acton proposed to the officers of these companies that if they would attack on either flank, he would do so in front. This they refused in plain terms to do, saying that their force was not strong

enough. Then Acton: *"If you won't join me, I'll obey my orders and attack with the 77th"*. But his own men, seeing that the other companies did not move, hung back. Acton said: *"Then I'll go by myself"*, and moved forward some 30 yards. Whereon James Tyrell, a private of the 77th, ran out of the ranks, saying, "Sir, I'll stand by you". His example was followed by a man from another company, and these dauntless three went on alone.

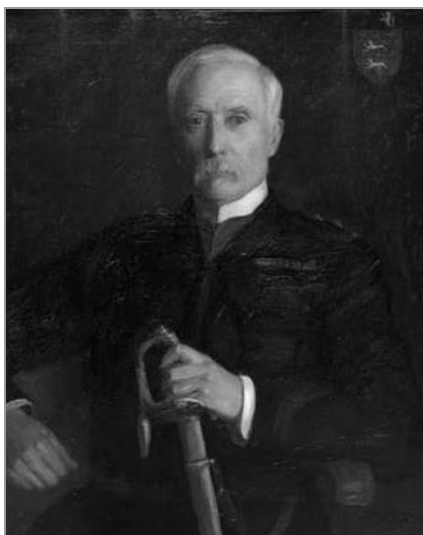
Upon this the men of the 77th would hesitate no longer, but rushing forward, formed up behind their captain. Then they all advanced at a run, and the two dissident companies likewise in the end moved forward on the flanks, as Acton had desired. The officers of the battery, which was without support, began in haste to remove their guns, and when Acton and his men came up they captured only one gun-carriage and two tumbrils. It was a fine feat, from the daring gallantry of which the merciless hammering by two English 18-pounders detracted nothing. The withdrawal of the batteries from Shell Hill, to which Acton's exploit put the finishing touch, marked the end of the battle. The Russians seemed to melt hopeless from the lost field, whilst the English were too exhausted and the French, under Canrobert, too little confident, to take up the pursuit."^{vi}

However the young officer was badly wounded during this encounter and invalided out of the army shortly afterwards. He retired with the rank of Colonel. In August 1861, five years after the war, he married Elizabeth Frances, only child of Captain Frederick Adolphus Robinson, 5th Fusiliers. There were no children and he died on 22nd April 1904. Elizabeth survived him until the summer of 1928.

Colonel Ball Acton & the Annesleys of Clifford Chambers

The third and youngest son, Colonel Charles Ball Acton, CB, was born on 17th December 1830. His sister described him as *"a healthy, happy, quiet little boy, very fond of reading and a favourite with the servants"* but he became increasingly withdrawn as he

grew up. Perhaps this had something to do with his having saved his sister's life with a remarkably speedy response for a seven year old. Her nightcap had caught fire and Charles was the only other person in the room. He had leapt from his cot, seized a jug of water and poured it over her head. Her neck was burned but she was otherwise unharmed. Charles was found back in his cot, soaking wet and sobbing. In due course he went to join his brothers under Dr. Arnold at Rugby School and Cheltenham College. In 1851, shortly before his 21st birthday, this stiff, shy and deeply religious young man was commissioned into the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.



Colonel Charles Ball-Acton enjoyed a distinguished military career, primarily in Afghanistan and India. His son, Captain Charles Annesley Acton, left, succeeded to Kilmacurragh in 1908 but was killed on the Western Front in 1915.

In 1853 he served with his regiment in Burma, and was with Brigadier-General Cheapens force during the successful campaign in the Donehaw, which ended with the capture of the Burmese chief, Myat Tun. He was subsequently stationed in

Malta and travelled extensively in Italy but seems to have regarded most of what he saw with disdain and dislike. Indeed, perhaps encouraged by a near fatal dose of rheumatic fever and very poor eyes, his diaries suggest an incredibly morose young man. He entered the Staff College at Sandhurst in 1861 and seems to have become increasingly content from this point. However, he was still incredibly useless with women and, whenever an opportunity to attend a ball arose, he was far more likely to high-tail it to Ireland and bury his head in books, playing chess or, at most, a game of croquet. In fact, he sounds like the sort of person who would have been extremely good at croquet. By 1864 he was back in India for a 3-year stint, learning Hindi and hunting wild bear in the Kashmir.

However, he gradually found his feet with the women and on 31st July 1869 he married Georgina Cecilia, youngest daughter of the Gloucestershire landowner, George Annesley of Clifford. The Annesleys were much associated with the British Museum at this time. Cecilia's father was a close friend of the Egyptologist Henry Salt and a Hereditary Family Trustee to the Museum's Cottonian Library. Her uncle, the Rev. Francis Annesley, Rector of Clifford Chambers, was also a trustee.^{vii} And so too was her brother, the Rev. Frank Annesley, Rector of Greete and Hope in Shropshire. Her only other brother, Reginald Annesley, was Lieutenant Colonel of the Cameron Highlanders.

The Actons spent a considerable time in India during this era. In 1878, Major Charles Ball-Acton of the King's Own donned his uniform once again and set forth to take part in the 2nd Afghan War. He won a medal and clasp, was mentioned in despatches and, like his brother William, retired with the rank of Colonel. By the end of the war in 1881, Charles was father to four sons and three daughters. Alas the tragedy of early death that was to stalk this next generation commenced all too soon when, in April 1883, his eldest boy William died of meningitis aged 12. ^{viii}

In 1895 Colonel Ball-Acton removed to Egginton House, Leighton Buzzard, where he soon became a vice-president of the Leighton centre of the South Beds Temperance Federation. In 1897, he passed away aged 61 as a result of bronchitis. A former comrade in arms was the army temperance pioneer, the Rev. J. Gelson Gregson. He later described the Colonel as *“one of a type of Christian soldiers who seem to have passed away with the last century. As soldiers they were exact and reliable in the discharge of their military duties, while at the same time they faithfully served their Lord and Master. When it was uncertain in the minds of some of Colonel Ball-Acton's friends whether he would receive the Order of the Bath for his services in Afghanistan, one of them said, “Why, he is a C.B. already – a Christian Brother.”* His widow settled at Brooklands, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire.

Captain Charles Annesley Acton of Kilmacurragh

In August 1908, Kilmacurragh passed directly from old Tom Acton to his 32-year-old nephew, Charles Annesley Acton. Charles was the second son of Colonel Ball-Acton and Georgina Annesley. He was born at Peshwar in India in 1876 where his father's regiment, the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, was then stationed. His father, then Major Acton, was in Amritsar at the time of his birth but returned to see him christened soon afterwards. A census from 1881 shows the five-year-old as resident of Combermere House, Tunbridge Wells. His elder brother William died in 1883 whereupon he abruptly became heir to the Kilmacurragh estate of his bachelor uncle Tom. He went on to Rugby, where his father had been schooled, along with seven of his uncles and great-uncles on both the Acton and Annesley side. Indeed, his grandfather, George Annesley, was at Rugby in 1819.

In 1895, Charles left Rugby and went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. The following year he was gazetted into the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. He

served with the regiment in Malta, Crete (1898), Hong Kong, India and Burma. His father died in 1897 and, on 18th February 1900, his youngest brother, 2nd Lieutenant Vere Annesley Acton, was killed in action while serving with the Oxford Light Infantry at Paardeburg in South Africa.

In June 1900, four months after Vere's death, an anti-foreign secret society in Peking (now Beijing) called the Boxers rose up and laid siege to the city for eight weeks. Charles was among those dispatched on the Chinese Expedition to suppress the uprising. The siege was lifted in August by an international force of British, French, Russian, American, German, and Japanese troops. After the conflict, Charles held an appointment as Staff Captain at Wei-hai-wei, a territory of some 740 square kilometres in Shandong Province leased by Great Britain from the Chinese between 1898 and 1930. For his contribution to the China Expedition, Charles was later promoted Captain.

When he succeeded to Kilmacurragh in 1908, Charles resigned his commission in the army and settled down to life as a gentleman magistrate, serving as both a JP and High Sheriff for Co. Wicklow immediately prior to the outbreak of World War One.

Upon the outbreak of war in August 1914, the sandy-haired bachelor immediately applied for a commission in his old regiment and was posted to France as a Captain in D-Company of the 9th Battalion. His fellow officers in the Royal Welch Fusiliers included Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves. By July 1915 Charles had been promoted Major.

In September 1915 the Welch were summoned to take part in Field Marshal Joffre's three-pronged offensive against the Germans. The subsequent battle of the Loos was a catastrophe. It began on 25th September following a four-day artillery bombardment of German lines in which over 250,000 shells and 140 tons of poisoned chlorine gas were fired by British artillery. This may have caused havoc amongst the Germans but much of the gas blew straight back into the faces of the advancing British soldiers. Over two thousand British

were taken ill, although only seven actually died. Furthermore, the German position, known as "Lone Pine", was far better defended than the British had anticipated.

During a break in this suicidal campaign, Charles bent down to assist a wounded man. There was an explosion nearby and Captain Charles Annesley Acton fell mortally wounded. He was 39. It was the first day of a battle that would rage for three days and culminate with 80,000 British and German casualties. A brother officer who later commanded the 2nd Battalion later wrote: *"I can honestly say that there is no man living for whom I held such feelings of respect. I honoured him more than I can say, and consider his life an example for all."*

Major Reginald Ball-Acton of Kilmacurragh

Kilmacurragh duly passed to his only surviving brother, Major Reginald Thomas Annesley Ball-Acton. Reginald, a veteran of the Boer War, was likewise educated at Rugby and Sandhurst. In April 1913 he married Isabel Richmond, second daughter of the Rev. William Richmond, Rector of Rockhampton, Gloucester. A son, Charles, was born twelve months later. On 22nd May 1916, barely eight months after his brother's death at the Loos, Reginald was killed in action at Ypres while serving with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

The Kilmacurragh Park Hotel

Kilmacurragh thus devolved upon the only remaining male Acton – Reginald's baby son, Charles. However, the house was abandoned during the 1920s and fell into disrepair until rented by a German, Charles Budina, who ran it as a hotel offering continental cuisine bed and breakfast and *"tea with meat delicacies"*. Indeed, from 1932 to 1952, the Kilmacurragh Park Hotel was one of the best known hotels in Ireland. All produce was grown on the estate and Kilmacurragh was esteemed in

medical circles for its healthy environment. A brochure promoting the hotel invited visitors to "*bring your children, leave them at Kilmacurragh Park Hotel for their annual holidays; they would be safely looked after, and will enjoy a perfectly healthy holiday amidst natural surroundings, and will be fed on the fat of the land, the purest and most wholesome food*".

The enterprising Herr Budina also erected a ballroom in the garden to the rear of the house. There are still many wise old souls in East Wicklow who recall dancing to the strains of the Shamrocks Céilí Band from Arklow. During the war years, guests arrived at Glenealy Railway Station and were collected in a pony and trap by Michael O'Connor. However, Budina was obliged to return to his native country during the war. On his return to Kilmacurragh in 1950 a dispute arose about the ownership of the hotel. After 300 years in the family, Charles Acton had sold the property in 1944. Shortly afterwards the hotel closed down. For a short period, in 1956 it opened as an Irish Summer School.

The Land Commission acquired the property in 1974 and presented 58 acres comprising the house, arboretum, walled garden and entrance drive-way to the Forest and Wildlife Service. Two devastating fires in 1978 and 1982 left the house derelict although the property now sustains an important tree breeding station for Coillte. As Tom Acton had always wished, the gardens have lately been adopted as an adjunct to the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin. It is reassuring to that this remarkable Arcadia is eventually being restored. Perhaps one day someone will take on the fenced off ruin of the Queen Anne chateau.

Charles Acton (1914-1999) – Music Critic for The Irish Times

The last Acton to own Kilmacurragh was Charles, the music critic, who was born in Bristol in April 1914.^{ix} He succeeded when his father, Reginald Acton, was killed on the

Western Front in 1916. Four years later, Charles's mother, Isabel Acton, married Hugh Norman Dignes La Touche, son of James Dignes La Touche. Amidst the uncertain economic climate of the Irish Free State, the La Touches removed to England. Like his father and grandfather, Charles was educated at Rugby, during which time he attended performances conducted by Sir Adrian Boult and Elgar. He went on to study natural science at Trinity College Cambridge but the subject bored him and he did not finish the course. He much preferred writing music reviews for the *Varsity Weekly*. His notices included the first performance of Vaughan Williams's opera, *The Poisoned Kiss*. Such a pastime became more serious after he heard Richard Strauss conduct *Salome* and *Elektra* in Munich. After Cambridge he worked for Thomas Cook and Son, first in London and then as an assistant manager in Haifa, Palestine.

He returned to Ireland in the late Thirties and, in 1939, he co-founded the Dublin Orchestral Players with Havelock Nelson and Constance Hardinge. Their aim was to train young players in the art of orchestral playing. Charles himself played the bassoon with the Players.

During the war years, Charles busied himself assisting Herr Budina at Kilmacurragh and trying his hand at a variety of ventures such as growing prize-winning apples, attempting to sell the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and managing a haymaking equipment company. Eventually the composer Joseph Grocock recommended him to Jack White, then Features Editor at *The Irish Times* as a potential music critic for the paper.

In 1955 he succeeded composer Archie (AJ) Potter as the paper's foremost music critic, a position he retained until his retirement over thirty years later. He was a famously cantankerous and difficult man, exacting sky-scraping standards from all performers. But those who knew him spoke kindly of him and he himself was generous in his praise when, in his opinion, brilliance was attained. He persistently campaigned for more funding for the music industry in Ireland, particularly in pursuit of a proper concert hall for Dublin.

On 6th March 1951 he married Carol Little, LRAM, daughter of Francis Thompson Little, JP, of Clabby, Co. Fermanagh. She was a violin and piano teacher at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. As Carol Acton, she was also to become a distinguished music critic and journalist.

Charles was Governor of the Royal Irish Academy of Music from 1954, being made a Fellow in 1990 and becoming Vice President in 1998. As a member of the Council of the Music Association of Ireland, he was instrumental in assisting Aloys Fleischmann to get Radio Eireann to establish a quartet in Cork. This was the first resident quartet of any broadcasting station in the world. He was awarded the inaugural Sean O' Boyle Award in 1980 for his services to Irish music which included more than 6000 reviews, articles and interviews. In 1988, he wrote a pioneering monograph on Irish pianists for the programme of the first GPA Dublin International Piano Competition. A selection of his reviews, "*Acton's Music*", edited by Gareth Cox, was published in 1996. In the forward to the anthology, Dr John O'Connor FRIAM summed up Charles's aims and achievements by writing: "*Of course, he could be infuriating and perplexing at times, but there is nobody who can match his experience, enthusiasm, compassion and exuberance.*"

Charles Acton died aged 84 on April 22nd 1999. Curiously for a man devoted to classical music all his life, Lyric FM, Ireland's first classically driven radio station was launched just ten days later. Kevin Myers noted the coincidence in a tribute to Charles Acton that appeared in *The Irishman's Diary* shortly afterwards. "*Charles was a deeply emotional man*", wrote Myers, "*and was not shy about his deep and passionate affections, the greatest of which was for his wife, his companion, his friend, and his love, Carol. Charles & Carol. A single and singular singularity. May God guard her in these days and hours and the darker watches of the night. But nearly as much as he loved Carol, he loved music. He wept with joy or with sadness when music moved his soul. He could so easily be sent into to great raptures by artistic beauty; and at the end of a concert his large form could often be seen overflowing in its seat, as he mopped the tears from his large round cheeks with an even larger*

white handkerchief. He was a perpetual little boy with all the expansive exuberance, mischievous joy and simple, unvarnished emotions of such a creature”.

With thanks to Seamus O'Brien, Megan O'Beirne, Fionnuala Dunne, Hilary Hamilton, Bryan Harty, William Acton and David Parsons.

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Endnotes

ⁱ On 6th July 1800, Anne Maria married Major George Warburton, Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary for Aughrim, Co. Galway. Her sister Jane married George Mears John Drought of the Whigsboro clan who lived at Glencarrig, Co. Wicklow.

ⁱⁱ The eldest daughter Margaret was married in December 1851 to Henry Lambert Bayly, HEICS, second son of the Rev. Henry Lambert Bayly of Ballyarthur and a kinsman of the Earl of Anglesey. She died in 1899, leaving issue. The younger daughter Anna Sophia, was married I 1861 to her first cousin Captain George Warburton Drought, JP, Yorkshire Light Infantry, of Cargins, Co. Roscommon. He was the youngest son of George Meares Drought of Glencarrig, Co. Wicklow. He died in 1880 and she in September 1911.

ⁱⁱⁱ Colonel Hampden Acton of Pau, France

The Reverend Thomas Acton's eldest son Hampden was born in the spring of 1822. He served as a Colonel with the Madras Staff Corps and, in January 1868, married Lucy Ussher. She was the widow of Henry Davis of Waterford and younger daughter of William Jackson Greer, JP, of Rhone Hill, Co. Tyrone. Shortly after their wedding, Hampden and Lucy moved to the Pyrenees south west France and settled at Chalet Lucia in Pau with their three sons and daughter Margaret. Their firstborn son Hampden died aged 18 in February 1888. When Colonel Acton passed away six years later, his eldest surviving son, 26-year-old Fitzmaurice, succeeded him. Captain Fitzmaurice Aston later served as Naval Attaché to Paris between 1915 and 1917 and to Tokyo from 1918 until his premature death two years later. He was made CMG in 1918 and the Order of the Rising Sun, as well as being made an Officer of the Legion of Honour. In May 1910 he married Ruby Crabtree, widow of Lieutenant Percy Crabtree, RN, and daughter of James Stevenson of Palace Gate, London. Their only child, Hampden Anthony Greer Acton, was born in 1913 and educated at Eton and Magdalene College, Cambridge. In November 1949, he married Rosemary Charlton, youngest daughter of Admiral Sir Edward Francis Benedict Charlton of

Hesleyside, KCB, KCMG. Their son Peter Hampden Acton was born on 23rd March 1952.

Colonel Acton's youngest son, Lieutenant Colonel William Maxwell Acton was born in July 1878 and educated at the Military College, Oxford. During the Boer War, he received both the Queen's medal (five clasps) and King's medal (two clasps). He served with the Royal Irish Regiment again in World War One, being mentioned in despatches and receiving the DSO in 1916. Shortly before the war, he married Elsie Heward Bell, daughter of William Heward Bell of Cleeve House, Seend in Wiltshire. Their only son Thomas served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Rifle Brigade during the Second World War and settled at Chudleigh in Devon. Their only daughter Barbara was married in July 1940 to Lieutenant Commander Arthur John Arundell Holdsworth, RN. The Holdsworths had a son Nicholas born in 1942 and daughter Penelope born in April 1945. He died in December 1939, leaving a son and a daughter. His only sister Margaret died unmarried in 1953 at the age of 84.

iv William Acton & the Lowrys of Tyrone

The Reverend Thomas and Sidney's second son William was born in 1824. He lived at Brookville in Co. Dublin and was JP and High Sheriff (1875) for Co. Leitrim. In 1862 he married Georgina Lowry, fourth daughter of James Lowry of Rockdale, Co. Tyrone. They had four sons - Thomas, James, William and Henry - and two daughters, Harriette and Georgina, who two died unmarried in 1931 and 1944 respectively.

The eldest son Lieutenant Colonel Thomas HE Acton served with the Royal Artillery during World War One and married, as his first wife, Olivia, daughter of the Rt Hon George Augustus Chichester May, PC, Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. Their only daughter Stella was married in 1917, aged 23, to John Reginald Homer Weaver, MA, President of Trinity College Oxford (1938 - 1954) and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Six months after the death of his wife Olivia in August 1921, Colonel Thomas HE Acton married secondly at Naples to Eva, daughter of Charles William Osborne of Rosnaree, Co. Meath. She died in May 1933 and Thomas in October of the following year.

Thomas and Olivia's eldest son Captain William Acton served with the Trinidad Light Horse aged 31 in April 1913. A second son Theodore John Chichester Acton served with the Indian Civil Service and married Margaret de Carteret, BEM, one of the mighty de Carteret family of Guernsey. Theodore and Margaret had two sons and two daughters. The eldest son Major Chichester Charles Hampden Acton of the Royal

Garhwal Rifles was born in 1916, educated at Shrewsbury and Queen's College, Oxford. In January 1949 he married Denise Bradfield, daughter of Canon William Bradfield, MA, of Munterconnaught Rectory, Virginia, Co. Cavan. The couple moved to Rhodesia shortly afterwards, settling at Kitwe. The younger son Lieutenant Thomas John Hampden Acton served with the 16th Cavalry of the Indian Army in World War Two, lived at Golden Furlong, Brackley, Northants and married Elizabeth Lambert in December 1953. The eldest daughter Margaret was born in 1913 and served as Junior Commander of the ATS in World War Two. In July 1943 she married Lt. Col. A. Henry Hawker of the Gordon Highlanders and Colonial Administrative Service. They had two sons, Christopher (b. 1945) and Nicholas (b. 1948) and lived for a while in Zanzibar. The younger daughter Silvia was married twice. By her first marriage (1938, diss by div 1947) to Flight Lieutenant MPC Corkery, RAF, she had a son Richard, born in 1943. In December 1950 she married secondly Major CA Mein, RA and Royal Sigs. They lived for a time at Lagos in Nigeria.

William and Georgina's second son Lt. Col. James Lowry Cole Acton, Connaught Rangers, was born on 6th November 1856 and lived at Killarney Hill in Bray. In April 1888 he married Matilda (d. 21st March 1938), youngest daughter of the barrister Henry Salisbury Milman, MA. She came from a prominent Devonshire family. Her great-grandfather Sir Francis Millman was personal physician to George III during his "madness". Her grandfather was Lieutenant General Francis Milman of the 82nd Foot. Her uncle Major General Egerton Milman commanded the forces at Mauritius. Another uncle, Sir Bryan Milman, served in the Indian Mutiny and was Major of the Tower of London. And another uncle Colonel Everard Stepney was Governor of the Prisons of Holloway and Newgate. Colonel JLC and Mrs. Acton had two sons and four daughters. The eldest son, the Rev. Armar Edward Acton was killed in action in November 1917 aged 28. The younger son Owen married Arabella Butler, daughter of James Edward Butler, JP, of Waterville House, Co. Kerry. The eldest daughter Sidney married Henry Newland Harman and settled in East London, South Africa. The second daughter Ruth married her first cousin, Lt. Co. Edward Lowry Acton, MC. The third daughter Bertha died unmarried in London. The youngest daughter Leonora married Julian Cresswell Carver and had a son, Raymond Carver, and two daughters, Stella and Rosemary.

William and Georgina's third son, William George Acton, was born in 1858 and educated at Uppingham. In 1885 he married Louisa Joice Leslie, ARRC, daughter of Henry Lowry Barnwell of Reading. He later settled in

Sarasota in Florida where he died in October 1891; his widow lived on until 14th July 1939. Their only son, Edward Leslie Lowry Acton, was born in 1889 and educated privately and at Sandhurst. In 1909, he joined the Prince of Wales' Leinster Regiment with whom he served in World War One, winning the MC. On the disbandment of the Leinsters in 1922, he transferred to the East Surrey Regiment which he effectively commanded from 1935 to 1939. During the Second World War, he was a staff officer in charge of instructing soldiers in the use of machine guns. From 1944 until his retirement with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel two years later he was in charge of the Detention Barracks in Aldershot. In April 1920 he married his first cousin, Ruth Acton. They had a son, Armar Henry Barnwell Acton, and three daughters, Joice, Harmony and Brigid. Lieutenant AHB Acton, died of wounds received at Ismailia in Egypt on 21st January 1952 while serving with the 2nd Parachute regiment.

William and Georgina's youngest son, Major Henry Lowry Barnwell, IA, was born in August 1861 and was sometime Judge Advocate General of India. By his first marriage in 1886 to Nora, daughter of General William Fuller of the Madras Staff Corps, he had a daughter, Ethel Jessie Muriel. Nora died in the summer of 1901 and the Major subsequently married secondly Louise Verker, daughter of Captain Philip Dickson, RA. Major Acton died on 16th June 1934.

^v Malins, Edward, Patrick Bowe. *Irish Gardens and Demesnes from 1830*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

^{vi} Kinglake, *The Invasion of the Crimea*, (nine volumes, London, 1863-87). Vol 6, p 431.

^{vii} Another of Cecilia Acton's uncles, William Annesley, was Vicar of Abbot's Leigh near Bristol, while her second cousin William Monckton Annesley ultimately succeeded as 13th Viscount Valentia in 1949.

^{viii} As to Charles and Georgina's daughters, the eldest, Evelyn, was born in 1873 and married in November 1898 to Edward Nixon Wynne, JP, of Wentowth House, Co. Wicklow. The second Grace died unmarried aged 49 in December 1923. The youngest Irene was born in 1883 and lived at Glencapple, Kilmacanogue, by Bray.

^{ix} He relinquished the prefix of Ball from his name by deed poll in 1939.