

# A VICTIM OF THE TROUBLES

**Frank Brooke (1851-1920)**

**Stephen Cooper**

People of my generation were horrified by 'the Troubles' which afflicted the North of Ireland during the years prior to Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and fear their return. We know much less about the Troubles which affected the whole of Ireland between 1919 and 1922, and which led to the Partition of the country.

One of the victims of these earlier Troubles was Frank Brooke. I first came across him when I was working on a book entitled *Earl Fitzwilliam's Treasure Island*, which told the little-known story of how the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl Fitzwilliam took a party of friends and associates on a treasure-hunt in the Pacific Ocean in 1904-5. Brooke was Fitzwilliam's Irish land agent and a resident and magistrate in the village of Shillelagh, County Wicklow, where the Earl had a large estate, and a magnificent mansion - Coolattin House, designed by John Carr of York in the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

We know about the expedition of 1904-5 because two of those present wrote accounts of it, the most informative being the Journal written by George Eustace Cooke-Yarborough, who also took numerous photographs of their great adventure. This is how we know that Brooke was amongst the most adventurous of the adventurers, despite his being (at 54) somewhat older than several of them. For example, he was one of only five who travelled up to San José, the capital of Costa Rica, by rail and by mule, when doubt was thrown on the validity of Fitzwilliam's permission to excavate on Cocos Island. The journey inland and across the mountains must have been both dangerous and hair-raising. Likewise, when Fitzwilliam's party first landed on the Island, which was mountainous, entirely overgrown with jungle, surrounded by sharks and practically uninhabitable, Brooke was one of only three who went ahead, to spy out the land.

The adventurers spent five days on the Island, and found no treasure. Instead, the miners attempted to dynamite a rockfall, but succeeded only in blowing themselves up. Brooke was injured in the process, though not seriously; and they all had to be evacuated to Panama.

There are two photographs in Cooke-Yarborough's album, each of which suggests that Brooke may have had adventures of another kind. The first shows him in Panama with a glum-looking woman and a child, the second shows him in Barbados with a jolly-looking female street-vendor. In the first, Brooke has his hand on the child's arm, and is looking rather seriously at his companion. In the second he is sheltering the woman with a parasol, while she is smiling, if not laughing. These are mysterious images and nothing in the Journal throws any light on the circumstances; but our suspicions are aroused by the caption 'Brooke and his Panama family'. The nature of the relationships is left obscure.

And so, when I wrote the book, I had a picture of a group of young men, who (courtesy of Fitzwilliam's enormous wealth) were able to go on what was probably the adventure of their lives, at no expense, at a time when the British ruled over the largest sea-based Empire the world had ever seen, when Ireland was an integral part of that Empire. They certainly seemed to have had 'a rattling good time' - a phrase Eustace used for one day's hunting, but which might have applied to the whole four months tour, except for a few days following the accident.

But the life of an Irish land agent, working for a prominent member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, was never entirely secure. Land agents became the subject of widespread resistance during the Irish Land War of the 1870s, 1880s, and '90s - one thinks of the technique used against the notorious Captain Boycott, for example, but the Land War was also sustained by widespread intimidation.<sup>1</sup> Further, by the time the Irish War of Independence broke out in 1919, Frank Brooke was much more than a mere land agent. He was an important member of the British Establishment: a cousin of Basil Brooke, 1st Viscount Brookeborough, the future Prime Minister of Northern Ireland; Deputy Lieutenant of County Wicklow and County Fermanagh, a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, a Justice of the Peace for County Fermanagh and a Privy Councillor of Ireland, he was also a Director of Great Southern and Eastern Railway, and a friend and adviser of the head of the British Home Army, Sir John French.

In short, Brooke was an obvious target for the men of violence; but it still comes as a shock to read that he was assassinated by the I.R.A. in 1920. The *Wicklow People* for Saturday 7 August 1920 carried the news:

#### SHOT DEAD IN DUBLIN MR. FRANK BROOKE KILLED.

Dublin was startled shortly before one o'clock on Friday of last week by the news of a sensational tragedy. Mr Frank Brooke, P.C., D.L., Chairman of the Dublin and South Eastern Railway Company, was shot dead in his own private room at Westland Row station some time after noon. It appears that he was chatting with Mr. A. T. Cotton, Irish traffic manager of the London and North Western Railway Company, when a party of undisguised men -

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<sup>1</sup> *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923* by Charles Townshend (Penguin, 2014)

three according to some accounts, between six and eight according to others— entered and fired at him. He died almost immediately.

Even more chilling, perhaps, is another report which appeared in the *Belfast News-Letter* on Saturday 13 November 1920, concerning Brooke's will. This document contained a direction to his beneficiaries 'If I am killed by any of these blackguards, I want George and Dermie to get as much as possible out of the Government.' So, he had known in advance that his life was in danger, because the IRA were coming after him. If Brooke knew that, surely others did too. Yet the assassins did not even bother to disguise their identity, and they struck in broad daylight.

The most moving tribute to Frank Brooke was paid in the context of the claim for compensation which was duly made by his widow. In a report which speaks volumes about the breakdown of law and order in 1920. The *Wicklow People* for Saturday 6 November 1920 reported as follows:

#### COMPENSATION FOR HIS DEATH.

Everyone knew Mr. Frank Brooke, and everyone who knew him liked him. He had, as far as his family and friends knew, no private enemy. He was one of the most popular of men: but he took a prominent part in public affairs in this country, and he was associated with matters which brought him into conflict with the forces of disorder in this country.

On the question of the amount of compensation to be awarded, he left a widow, a son (Colonel George Brooke), who was now in South Africa, and a daughter, who was married to Mr. Doyne, and who succeeded to the agency held by Mr. Brooke, of the Fitawilliam estate. He received a salary from the Fitwilliam estate of £900 a year, and, in addition had the use of a very beautiful house free of rent, all repairs and upkeep being done by the estate, while free fuel and free lighting, as well as some grazing land. These were put at a sum of £292. As Chairman of the Dublin and South-Eastern Railway he had a salary of £900 a year, as director of the National Bank £500, and as the of the Irish Committee of the Norwich Union he had fees which depended on his attendance at meetings of the Board, and last year these amounted to £87 4s.

In addition he acted as agent for the company and he was entitled to the ordinary agency commission. Deducting Mr. Brooke own personal expenditure at £500n the net income was £2,2488. Counsel asked his lordship to deal with the case liberally.

Mr. Brown handed in the verdict of the coroner's jury, which stated that Mr. Brooke died from shock and hemorrhage caused by bullets fired from revolvers by persons unknown. He mentioned that the only witness examined at the inquest, who was present at the crime was absolutely

unprocurable. It was impossible to get any other evidence of anyone who saw these men going in or out the station premises.

Who was responsible? *Wikipedia* tells us Brooke was killed by I.R.A. members Paddy Daly and Jim Slattery. There can be no proof, of course; but these men were certainly prominent members of Michael Collins's 'Squad', also known as the Dublin Guards, who were charged with assassinating members of the police and security forces, and spent much time reconnoitring railway stations.<sup>2</sup> Paddy Daly (1888–1957) was a young man who led this unit, and subsequently held the rank of major-general in the Irish National Army from 1922 to 1924. He and his henchmen were also responsible for killing many British intelligence officers, in particular District Inspector Redmond.

On a personal level, the assassination of Frank Brooke was undoubtedly a tragedy, especially when we know, from the Cooke-Yarborough Journal and photographs, how full of life he had been, only fifteen years previously. Does the episode have something to tell us about British rule in Ireland, or the management of the Fitzwilliam estates in Wicklow?

The question arises because the Fitzwilliam family have long enjoyed a reputation as benevolent landlords, and progressive politicians, both in England and Ireland. In 2016, I wrote this about England:

The Fitzwilliam family had a solid reputation for hospitality and philanthropy. Despite their enormous wealth and power, successive owners of Wentworth Woodhouse enjoyed a reputation as being on the reformist wing of British politics. They were Whigs and then Liberals. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Marquis of Rockingham opposed George III, supported American demands during the War of Independence (1776-1783), and was Prime Minister twice.

As for Ireland, I wrote this:

[Rockingham's] nephew, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl Fitzwilliam, inherited his uncle's estates and assumed his position in the Whig party, resigning as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1795, when George III refused to countenance any measure of relief for Roman Catholics, from their civil disabilities. The Whig and Liberal tradition survived until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it foundered on the rock of Gladstone's advocacy of Home Rule for Ireland. The 7<sup>th</sup> Earl became a Conservative<sup>3</sup> and was M.P. for Wakefield between 1895 and 1902, when he took his seat in the House of Lords.

Finally,

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<sup>2</sup> Townshend

<sup>3</sup> Actually, he became a Liberal Unionist.

The Fitzwilliam family continued to enjoy its favourable reputation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, despite the radical changes in master-servant relationships brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the advent of democracy. Indeed, they were regarded with respect and affection even in the South of Ireland, where hatred of the Protestant Ascendancy ran deep. Many country houses belonging to the British aristocracy went up in flames during the Irish War of Independence of 1919-21; but Coolattin House and Carnew Castle still stand.

I might have added that in 1948, more than 20 years after Irish independence, the 8<sup>th</sup> Earl Fitzwilliam still owned Coolattin; and that his widow Olive, Countess Fitzwilliam (née Plunket) lived on in Coolattin until her death in 1975, though the Coolattin estate and the contents of the house were subsequently sold, and today, Coolattin House is owned by Coolattin Golf Club.<sup>4</sup>

I am not the only one to think well of the Fitzwilliams. There is an interesting blog to be found on the County Wicklow heritage website, which summarises the findings of Jim Rees, author of *Surplus People* (The Collins Press, 2014), which is a history of the Fitzwilliam 'Clearance' of their Wicklow estates after the Great Famine of 1846-9. The Famine marked the great crisis point of Irish history, which led to the rise of the modern revolutionary tradition in Irish Republicanism, and created great blocks of support for it amongst the Irish diaspora in America and Australia. Yet overall, Jim Rees takes a relatively favourable view of Fitzwilliam stewardship in Wicklow, even when its bungling led to intense suffering amongst those who emigrated to St Andrews in Canada.

Most telling is Rees's reply to this criticism by Phelim Brady, on 6 June 2014:

It is interesting how you mention that the "Fitzwilliams were regarded as "liberal landlords" who believed in the welfare of the tenants. This is either a joke or a delusion. Obviously, they were not. This is reinforced in the following paragraphs which mention the less than liberal Fitzwilliam clearances. I am sure the tenants didn't view these Anglo Norman landlords as being too "liberal" when that was happening. As was succinctly stated by a Gaelic scholar; this landlord class were "thugs masquerading as gentlemen".

Rees replied

Hi Phelim, when I started researching the Fitzwilliam clearances I had the same opinion as you (still do to a great extent) but five years' research showed them to be - as I often describe them in my talks - 'among the best of a bad bunch'. As regards being 'liberal', they were liberal both in their politics and

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<sup>4</sup> See the Club's website.

in the way they worked with their tenants - poor shop, deals on tenement improvements, scholarships, agricultural training and a host of other things that most landlords did not do. I fully agree that they were landlords who I believe had no right to the lands that had been taken from the native people, but anyone who has carried out even minimal research into the Fitzwilliams will see that they treated their tenants far more fairly than the rest of the landlords.

There was a lapse of more than half a century between the Fitzwilliam Clearances and the assassination of Frank Brooke in 1920 - years which saw the foundation of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (1858); the Fenian Rising of 1867; the rise and fall of Parnell's Irish Party at Westminster, and the foundation of *Sinn Fein*; the disendowment of the Church of Ireland, but also the foundation of the Gaelic League; the Land War and various measures of land reform; Gladstone's unsuccessful attempts to introduce Home Rule, and the enactment of a Home Rule Act, but also Balfour's policy of coercion; the Easter Rising of 1916 and the victory of *Sinn Fein* in the General Election of 1918; and finally the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence.

We shall never know whether things would have turned out differently, if Gladstone's policy of Home Rule had been more swiftly enacted, or if the First World War had not led the British Government to try to introduce conscription in Ireland, or if it had treated the rebels of 1916 more tactfully. These are counterfactual questions. What we do know is that the favourable opinions of British and Irish historians alike, as to the relatively benign nature of the Fitzwilliam family's stewardship of the Wicklow estate, did their agent no good in 1920. When the gunmen decided to strike at one of the pillars of the British state, they cared nothing for his management of Coolattin, any more than they did for his reputation as a popular man, with no 'private' enemies, and doubtless many friends, of the kind who had accompanied him to Cocos Island.

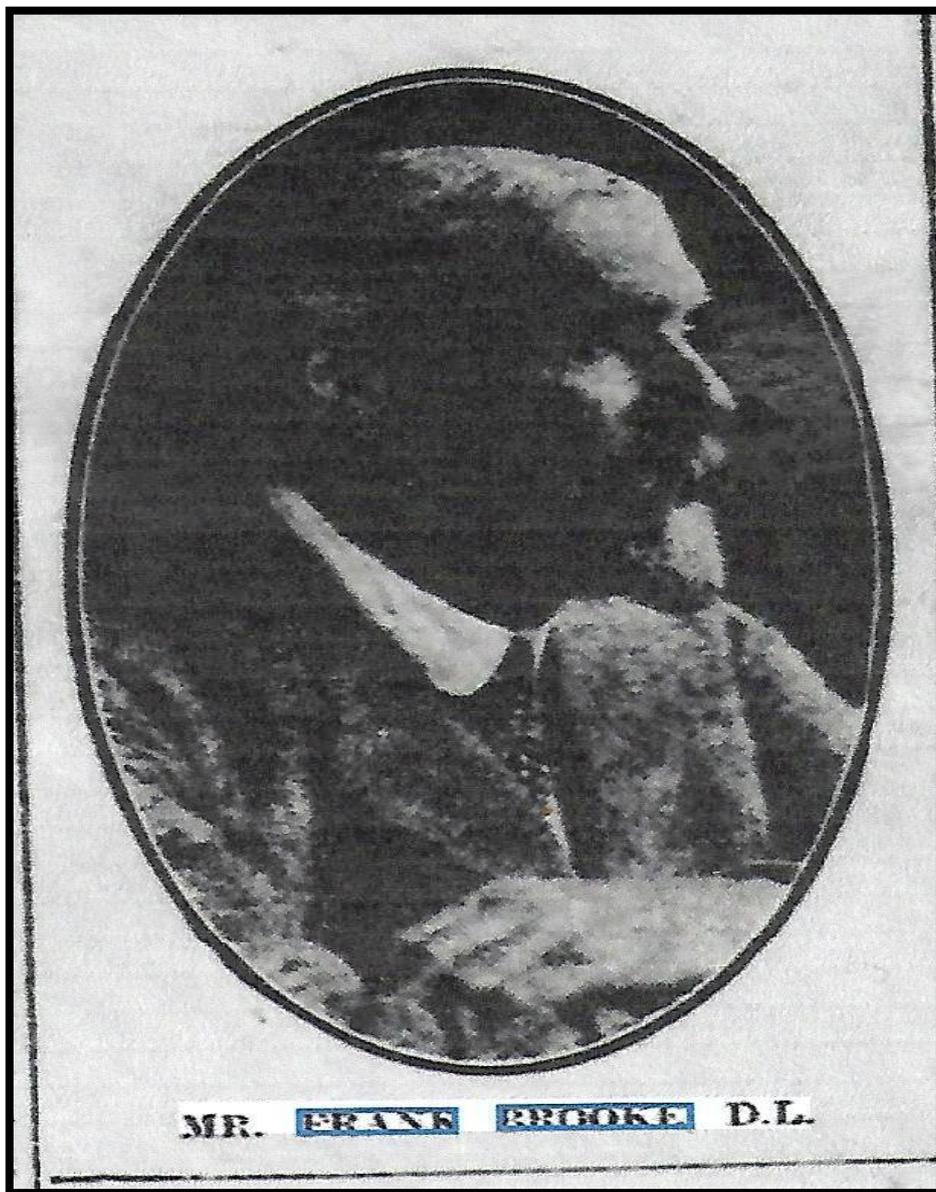
Such is the nature of terrorism.



Brooke and his Panama family, late 1904



Brooke in Barbados, early 1905



Brooke in 1914