

A Visit to Orchard House, Leighlinbridge, County Carlow

The Birthplace of Captain Myles Keogh, Company I, 7th Cavalry

As we drove away from the Little Big Horn battlefield having trekked using planes, trains and automobiles to get from Ireland to Montana, I turned to my brother and asked him what a person does once they have fulfilled a lifetime's ambition at the age of 28. He wisely replied; "Get another one". Although his sharp comment shattered my deeply ponderous and self-righteous mindset, it began my quest to visit the home place of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Myles Keogh.

Keogh is the reason for my obsession with the battle, with Custer and with the 7th Cavalry. Since childhood, I have been very proud that one of the heroes of the famed 7th was from only down the road - 'down the road' in reality was actually 30 miles away. Granted it would take another ten years to achieve my new ambition but the spur to realising the dream was a message board, a 'hunk' and a kindred spirit from England.

Myles Tomás Keogh, as per his baptismal certificate, was born on the 25th March 1840 in a large two-storey farmhouse in the townland of Orchard, close to the village of Leighlinbridge, County Carlow, Ireland. Many times I had driven through the town or up to the gates fronting the long winding roadway to the farm but I had never dared go further, conscious that Orchard was and is to this day, a home and not a museum. Years passed since my visit to Montana and, I'm ashamed to say, day-to-day life started becoming more important than 'Custer's Last Stand'...

Last October, I discovered the Merkels' wonderful LBHA website and its message board. As soon as I introduced myself as a Keogh-phile, my personal messages lit up. One member in particular seemed to suffer from the same Keogh obsessive disorder that I did and 'corresponding friendship' was struck up with Elisabeth Kimber. I did mention in one posting that I had made contact with a member of the Keogh family and was trying to arrange a visit to Orchard. An encouraging personal message from another board member, 'Hunk Papa', to press on with fulfilling my dream, taking Elisabeth along for the journey, was the spur to arrange a visit to Keogh's home on the day of his birthday, March 25th 2008. At short notice and by plane, no less, Elisabeth would travel to Ireland and join me in taking up the Keogh family's invitation.



Elisabeth and I met at Kildare train station and drove to Leighlinbridge, stopping only to visit Tinryland Parish Church (*left*) where a wonderful stained glass window commemorates Myles, his brother Tom and Tom's wife, Alice.

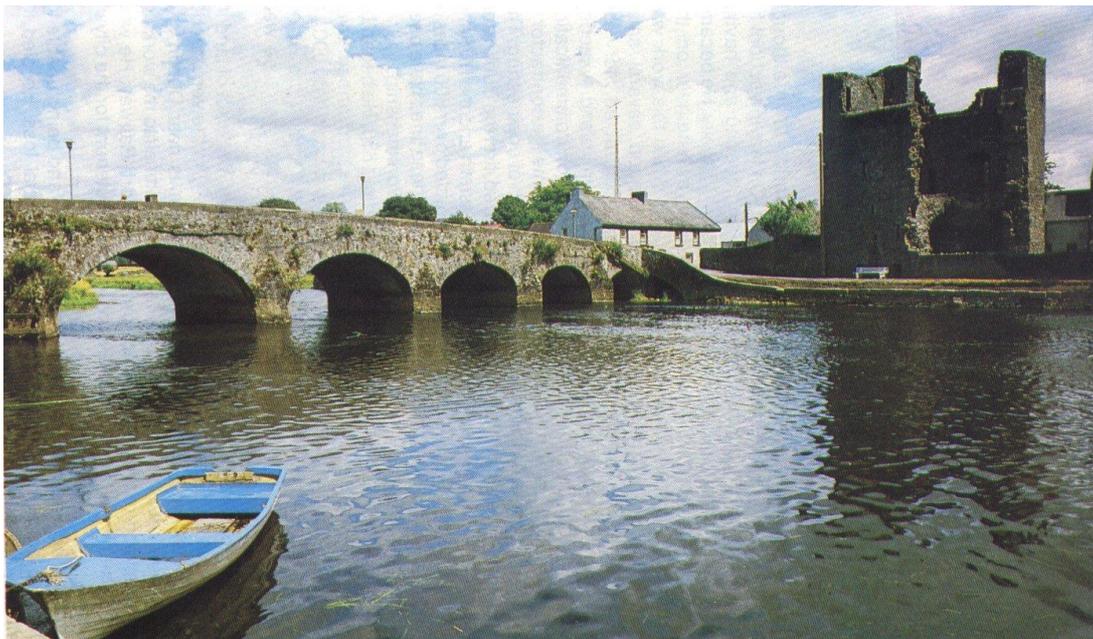


The bottom of the window reads:

ERECTED TO THE MEMORY
THOMAS KEOGH • PARK • DIED
15TH AUGUST 1897 HIS WIFE
ALICE KEOGH DIED 21ST
APRIL 1875 AND HIS BROTHER
BVT LT COL **MYLES W KEOGH**
CAPN 7 CAVALRY USA KILLED
IN ACTION 25TH JUNE 1876
RIP

As we stood in the church gazing at the detail on the glass, Elisabeth observed that many generations of children would have sat in the adjoining pews reading the words "Capn. 7th Cavalry", dreaming of John Wayne type adventures, proud that 'one of their own' was part of that exciting time.

It was then on to Leighlinbridge (*below*) to commemorate Keogh's birthday and remember Nelly Martin's annual floral tribute on Keogh's grave in Auburn, New York. For fifty years following Keogh's reburial in the Throop-Martin family plot, fresh flowers appeared on his grave on the 25th of March. Although far from Auburn, we thought it appropriate to place a basket of spring flowers beneath the wonderful memorial (*right*) that the town of Leighlinbridge had erected in his memory. I think we both found that moment quite moving. Incidentally, the flowers, chosen randomly, were predominantly 7th Cavalry blue and yellow in colour. Was there a guiding hand at work or perhaps a 'guidon' hand?



With much anticipation, we met with two of Keogh's relatives in the local hotel - Blanch Cummins and Arthur Kennedy - both wonderful lads with a keen interest in their family history. Blanch was my link to the present occupants of Orchard and to whom Elisabeth and I shall be forever grateful. He had visited the battlefield a number of years previous and was genuinely surprised at the warmth he received in Montana and South Dakota on the mention of his great great grand uncle Myles. After introductions and a spot of lunch, we drove the short distance to the house.



Driving through the gateway (*above*) and up the long winding road to the farmhouse, it was easy to imagine a young Myles on horseback or with his family in a horse-drawn carriage making his way homeward. On both sides of the driveway are luscious green fields perfect for grazing dairy cows. The house is surrounded by a semi-circle of mature deciduous trees such as oak and horse chestnut. Given the height and apparent age of these trees, they surely would have been present in Myles' time.



In truth, little has changed in over 160 years - an 1840 ordnance survey map details the house and farm buildings (*above*) in a capital 'T' shape identical to today's alignment. Behind a small porch, one of the minor additions to the house since Keogh's time, lies a large solid wood door with an arch and glass inset overhead. Arthur was confident that the glass in the arch was not original; he had put a ball through it as a boy!

We were welcomed into the hall of the house; Elisabeth and I trying to soak in as much information as was humanly possible. Left and right of the hall were two large rooms. Irish tradition decreed that one was the family room with the other being the 'good' room. In times past, the 'good' room in Ireland was only used on special occasions and when entertaining guests of high standing in the community such as the parish priest, visiting businessmen or the local gentry. The family room had an old piano, a family heirloom that may have been played by one of Keogh's sisters as the family sat around. It was poignant to see a portrait of Keogh, in 7th cavalry uniform, among the numerous family pictures placed on the piano - Myles W. Keogh is still regarded as family, over 130 years after he last set foot in that hall.

We were brought to the hub of any farmhouse - the kitchen - where we met Miley Keogh, a man in his eighties with a remarkable memory and his son Myles. As the sun shone through the large window, the six of us sat drinking tea, eating biscuits and talking for almost two hours about Carlow's most famous native on the 168th anniversary of his birth.

Elisabeth takes up the story:

"Do you remember old fellow how difficult Patrick found it to keep us from listening to the servants' stories in the kitchen ..."

Keogh to Tom Keogh, June 1st 1869

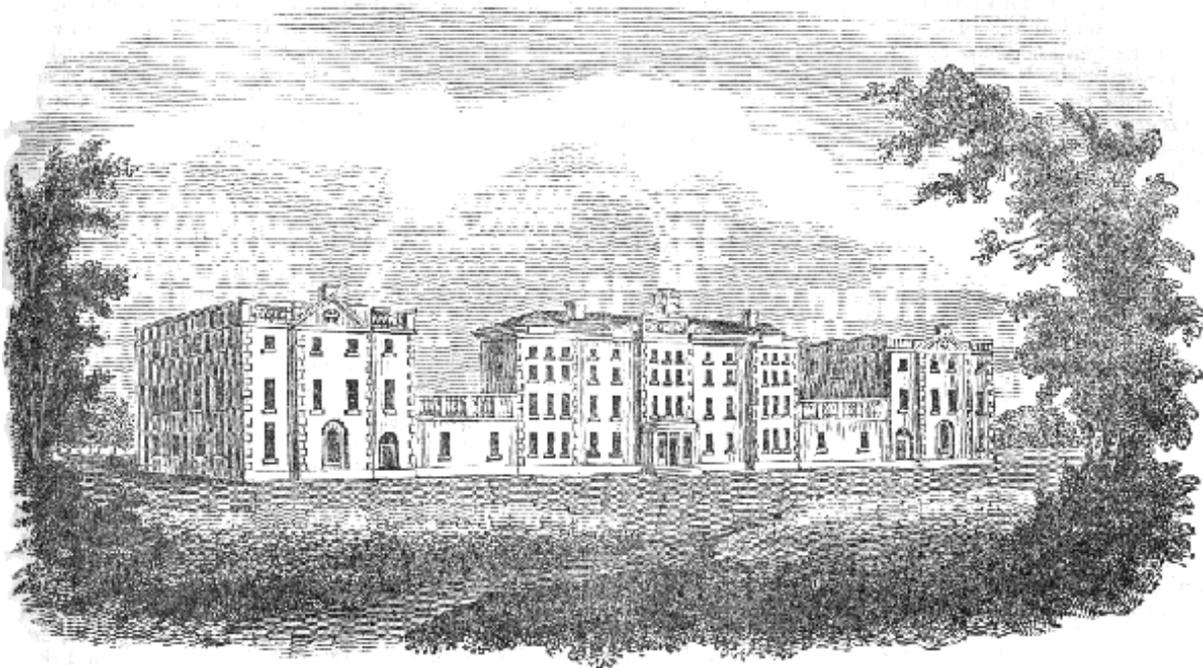
And here we were, in that very same room Keogh remembered so nostalgically. A dream come true for me, thanks to Robert.

Simply to set foot in Orchard was thrilling enough; we'd hardly dared venture to hope for new information too. But new information there was, and instantly. Out of Miley's copious file on Keogh came a document we'd never even dreamed of seeing: the school roll from Leighlinbridge National School, showing Keogh's attendance there as a boy. Neatly inscribed in meticulous copperplate -- presumably by the very hand of its schoolmaster, the famous educator John Conwill -- it lists "Miles Kehoe" as pupil no. 201, entering the school on May 1st 1848.

His age at entry is given as seven, though in fact he'd have passed his eighth birthday by then. It's striking that most of the other pupils entering that year are much older, some even in their teens. Keogh's not the *very* youngest -- there are two little boys of four and five respectively -- but nonetheless is one of only a handful of seven- and eight-year-olds. The register is divided into columns for subjects studied: Reading, at Levels 1 to 5; Arithmetic, further divided into three branches ("First Four Rules", "Compound Rules and Reduction", and "Proportion and above"); Grammar; Geography, Book-keeping; Mensuration; and Algebra. At first I, like an idiot, leapt to the conclusion that the annotations in each column (5/48, 1/50, etc.) indicated each boy's ranking in class, and was mildly dismayed that Keogh wasn't automatically top in everything! On closer inspection, however, it looks as if what the annotations *could* mean is the date of commencing each branch of study. We'll have to research this further and find out for sure, of course. But if these are indeed dates, a very interesting picture emerges: one of a boy who arrived at the school at a young age already well-grounded in the basics, and was fast-tracked through the higher reaches of the curriculum at almost dizzying speed. From "5/48", his date of entry, he's doing Level 3 Reading, Compound Rules in Arithmetic (clearly he already knows the Four Basic Rules), Geography, and Book-keeping. A year later he's moved on to Proportion; by January 1850 he's studying Grammar; shortly after, he moves up to Level 4

Reading; and he's at Level 5 Reading (attained by only three other boys, as far as I can see) by July 1852.

Even more interesting is the entry in the column for "Cause of Removal, and Destination of Pupil". For many, the reason given speaks of opportunities lost and families disrupted: "Gone to England", "Gone away", "Bad Parents", or -- two simple words that hide a poignant tale of emigration to the far side of the world, perhaps -- "Long Journey". For Keogh, it's the triumphant "At Classics": the high flyer being groomed to fly yet higher. It means either that he'd gone directly from the National School to St. Patrick's College, or (more likely?) that he was getting one-to-one tutoring in Classics in preparation for going there. His date of leaving, as far as it can be read on a photocopy, appears to be 3/50, and ten would be extremely young to enter college; the existence of the "7/52" entry on the register suggests that he might have stayed attached to the school for extra tuition for a couple of years after he officially left. That can only be a guess, though. (Next stop, St. Patrick's College, to see if we can trace his date of entry there!)



St. Patrick's College, Carlow, circa 1840

Much other fascinating stuff emerged, as well. Keogh fans will be familiar with the stories that pop up in various biographies to the effect that Keogh's father was an officer in the 5th Royal Irish Lancers. We asked about that, of course, fully expecting scorn to be poured on it, which it duly was, with much laughter. More surprising was Miley's reaction to the other frequently-repeated story that

Keogh had served with the French Foreign Legion in Africa before going to Italy. Far from dismissing the idea, Miley said "Well, you know, *there are those two missing years ...*" That made us sit up and think a bit. The two years (or possibly more, the evidence varies) between his leaving college and his appointment as a lieutenant in the Papal Army in 1860 are, so far, something of a blank. Perhaps it's not impossible after all ...

One other thing that made a big impression on us both. We're used to writers (and ourselves, be it confessed) delving into Keogh's psyche to find the reasons for his impulse to leave home: his adventurous temperament, the inspiration of *Charles O'Malley*, or whatever. Miley cut through all that with the simple, common-sense observation that "there was no room for him on the farm". *Of course*. With two older brothers ahead of him, there'd be no role for him there; he'd *have* to strike out on his own, whether he wanted to or not.

And more:

- Orchard was built in 1820. So the family was very well established there by the time Keogh was born.
- The farm's main crop was barley, for the breweries. (Bit of a surprise, really, as it looks like such natural dairy country.) They were ideally placed for that, as the barley could be floated down the river to Carlow or Dublin. They'd have had a few cows etc. for the house, but essentially the barley was king. With a good cash crop like that, it becomes easier to understand how comparatively insulated they were from the Famine. Carlow as a whole suffered less than many other areas, of course, but the Keoghs in particular were quite prosperous at the time.
- Consequently ... no, Uncle Blanchfield did *not* contribute to Keogh's college fees. The family paid those themselves.
- They'd have had live-in servants, not just "dailies". Some of the men (the outdoor servants, presumably) lived in the upper room over the byre attached to the house.
- The "family tradition" touched on in the biographies that Keogh might have worked in a bank after leaving college: not impossible. There was a branch of the Royal Bank of Ireland (as it then was) in Bagenalstown at the time ...

- The Alice who Tom Keogh married, the one who's commemorated in the stained-glass window, was indeed the same Alice whom Keogh asked after so often in his letters home. (The daughter of Richard Kehoe of Bagenalstown.)
- Major Henry J Nowlan, 7th Cavalry: One of Keogh's closest friends. His family came from Tullow, apparently, so it's not inconceivable that he could have been related to the "poor Bessie Nowlan" Keogh also writes about. The "w" spelling is uncommon, so it's more likely than not. (No family knowledge of Nowlan visiting the Keoghs on his trip in 1878, however.)
- We asked if the Martins and the Keoghs had had any contact before LBH (a question inspired by the death notification telegram, as they must have known where to pass the news on to): answer, no.
- Trying to get a picture of Margaret's life after Keogh deeded the Clifden estate to her: apparently she did *not* live there alone, but had a sister living with her. (We're guessing it was Ellen.)
- Until quite recently, Keogh's dress uniform was on display at Clifden. (We don't know if this was the same one that Nelly reputedly had on display at Willowbrook, sent to Margaret after Nelly's death, or whether Nelly had his undress uniform; again, more research required!)
- Another celebrity in the family: Nurse Margaret Keogh, hailed as the First Martyr of the 1916 Easter Rising. (Not sure if she's descended from Tom or from Patrick; should have asked.) Intriguingly, a swordstick belonging to her is now in the Carlow Museum. Since this seems an improbable thing for a nurse to own of her own volition, the question arises ... does it have a dog's-head handle? And if so ... could it be the cane that Keogh's reputed to have carried? Yet again, more research needed!
- Again the Easter Rising: there was a Dr. Myles Keogh, later TD for South Dublin, who played a prominent (though largely even-handedly medical) part in that great event. Given the coincidence of the name, we'd obviously wondered if he was a relation. It appears not. (Interesting in itself, though, as it suggests Keogh's fame in Ireland in the years following LBH was such that those blessed with the same surname chose to name a son after him ...)

- The question of Keogh's baptismal name. We found it puzzling that he should be baptised "Myles Tomás" when for ever after he's "Myles Walter"; and had sought the explanation that maybe he chose it later as a confirmation name for whatever reason. Again, Miley had a down-to-earth answer for us! He told the story of a priest who'd flatly refused to baptise a child with so barbarous a name, and insisted that the parents choose a saint's name instead. So maybe that's what happened in Myles' case, too ...

Of course, there were a million other questions that we failed to ask; maybe we'll get the chance to ask again. For sure, the family enjoy talking about him every bit as much as we do (and that's saying something) so let's hope. The glorious thing is that Myles Keogh is so much part of the family home, you almost feel he's only stepped out for a minute and will be back to join the genial party around the kitchen table at any time. He was even referred to as 'Uncle Myles' by Miley who also informed us that he remembered, as a boy, talking to one of the farm labourers about Keogh's last visit to Orchard in 1875. Robert later said that, sitting there in the kitchen, we were only two persons removed from Keogh himself.

It may be over 130 years since he could last have set foot in there, but his presence is still palpable. The continuity is amazing.



At Orchard, Leighlinbridge - L to R: Blanch Cummins, Elisabeth Kimber & Arthur Kennedy