

Richard and Annie Davis through the Years of Revolution.

A Protestant family living at Boggaun, County Leitrim.

In the twenty-five years from 1901 to 1926, the Protestant population of County Leitrim fell by half. This commentary focuses on the experience of a Protestant family, farming and living in North Leitrim during the turbulent years around Irish Independence. Many Protestants at the time felt the changes were too hard to bear, sold up and left; some destined for Northern Ireland and others further afield. Richard and Annie Davis, my grandparents, living at Boggaun, a few miles south of Manorhamilton, remained, and raised their family in a country that had radically changed from the time of their birth. The article attempts to throw some light on their choice, based on what I know of the family's history, and informed by the context of the times.

Since the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, privileges associated with Protestants had been steadily diminishing. Most felt uncomfortable with these ongoing changes unless they were insulated by wealth or business connections. The outflow of Protestants during the early decades of the twentieth century cannot be accounted for simply by the level of general emigration in the population. Neither by the eventual departure of The Crown forces and administration in 1921, which accounted for a tiny number of Leitrim's Protestants. Other forces were at work, leading many Protestant families to take the decision to leave.

But first, to take a look back at the family's roots. My grandfather's oral family history puts his Davis family coming from County Antrim in the late seventeen hundreds. Preceding this, it is assumed that they came from Scotland as part of the Ulster Plantation when the first colonists arrived from the first decade of the sixteen hundreds onwards. Richard's story tells of a family dispute over the inheritance of an 'unnatural' son (illegitimate and possibly his great grandfather) in County Antrim. At this time, favourable leases in Glenboy, County Leitrim, were advertised in the northern newspapers hoping to attract those with various linen-making skills. This was part of the landlord Nathaniel Clement's plan to establish a 'linen colony' at Glenboy outside Manorhamilton.

However, his plan never matured, leaving Glenboy the rural townland that it is today, although traces and remains of the mills can easily be found.

The first known record of the linen scheme appeared in an advert in the Belfast Newsletter in March 1768 for the letting of a bleach mill, weaver's houses and workshop looms at Glenboy. As in other development of the time, there was an intention of 'protestantising' the development. One of the first leases issued was to run the mill. This was taken up by the Robinson brothers from County Down. It seems likely that a favourable lease at Glenboy would have attracted the 'unnatural' disaffected Davis son to move into the area. Comparing mid-nineteenth century Griffith's Valuation records of family names to those living there today, it appears that, while the linen industry never took off, many of the 'linen families' stayed. John Davis is listed in Griffith's Valuation as having just over eighteen acres at Glenboy, at the location known to be my great grandfather's birthplace.

Richard Davis was born in 1882 at Boggaun, the youngest of eight children. His grandfather, from Glenboy, took up the lease for his sons, James and Thomas, and by the mid-1850s they were settled there. When Richard was eighteen, in 1900, two of his brothers had emigrated, one to South Africa and one to Canada, another brother, John had moved to Garadice, South Leitrim, and two others had joined the army, one dying in service. A generation earlier, in the latter half of the 19th century, three of Richard's four uncles born at Glenboy had emigrated to North America.

Richard's mother and father died within a year of each other and by 1910 the Boggaun farm had been willed to Richard and his older brother Alexander. The eldest and only sister Mary Jane was unmarried and living on the farm. The three had plans to expand the farm, driven by a family ambition to progress, and to a degree by a change in land laws (Land Purchase Act 1903) that, for the first time, permitted the full purchase of holdings. This significant change increased access to land for the majority of the population. However, it was also part of a post-Famine trend toward larger and more extensive cattle-grazing farms.

Richard's eldest brother John had earlier moved from Boggaun to an 'evicted farm' at Garadice in South Leitrim where he had married. In 1895 he was boycotted as a 'land grabber', and the family were unable to sell their produce. John appeared to stand fast under pressure from the Land League, who were campaigning for fairer and less iniquitous policies of land distribution. Fifteen years after arriving in Garadice he finally moved to richer pastures in Co Meath. Movement and emigration appeared to be in the DNA of this family since the early 1600s.

The Davis family at Boggaun were by no means wealthy. The term 'small house' Protestants appears a good description. However, like all Protestant families since the Plantation times, they had fared better than their Catholic contemporaries, under policies designed to maintain their allegiances, while disempowering Catholics. Generally, Protestant houses were of a higher quality and their farms were somewhat bigger, than those farming around them. Not surprisingly, like the vast majority of their Protestant farming community, the family had generally aligned themselves with the sentiments of the Ascendancy class.

My grandfather's uncle, 'Alick' Davis from Glenboy, gives an evocative self-description as reported in a letter to the Armagh Guardian in 1856. The letter writer describes a court case in Manorhamilton where Alick was a witness to a crime, and where he describes himself as walking the two miles home to Glenboy at 10.00 o'clock on a dark October night with 'a plank over his shoulder'. Not the image of a man of any great wealth, even for those harsh Famine times.

Towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Protestants hardened their attitudes to further change. This was the result of increased calls for greater Irish autonomy through Home Rule, compounded by a particular distaste for the Catholic Church's Ne Temere decree. The Ne Temere decree, which required Catholic partners in a mixed marriage to give a commitment to raise their children in the Catholic faith, was seen in the minority Protestant community as a means 'of wiping out Protestants.' The impact of Ne Temere on Protestants was one of family conflict and splits, and feelings of shame and weakness when one of their family became a partner in a mixed

marriage. Forty years after its introduction the Davis family at Boggaun would become familiar with such a scenario.

Increased opposition to change was expressed most vehemently in areas where there were strong Orange Lodges. Some of the Davis family at Glenboy and Boggaun had been members of Orange Lodges over the years, but Richard was not a member. Protestant neighbours and friends were in the vibrant lodges of Boihy and Glenboy. Vehement opposition to Home Rule was often expressed at Boihy soirees, but moderation was also counselled on a number of occasions. The Rev. Isaac Coulter and Robert Talor, Worshipful Master of Bohey (sic) Orange Lodge said that they did not want to quarrel with their Roman Catholic neighbours but instead wanted to affirm 'Protestant principles and the cause of justice for all creeds and classes'. While this may have been aimed at anxious Protestants aware of the rising violence in the northern counties, it must have had a calming effect. With the outbreak of World War One in 1914 this opposition to political change melted away. Leitrim's Protestants backed the campaign of recruitment, but ironically, in spite of this support, few Leitrim Protestants actually joined the forces. Meanwhile, emigration continued apace.

During the years of the Easter Rising and the War of Independence, violence throughout Ireland increased significantly. The family did not appear to have been subjected to any specific threats or actions. However, the family's financial troubles, detailed below, are likely to have diverted their attention elsewhere; they also engendered local sympathies. The Boggaun farmhouse, like many around, was raided once by a group searching for guns. It is likely they were local Sinn Fein activists. While the family had no experience of British Army Black and Tan raids, other Protestant houses did suffer from their heavy-handed tactics and news of their reckless campaign would not have escaped them. And in the background, there must have been a level of anxiety as their long-held fears of a Catholic and Gaelic Ireland looked more likely with each passing month.

My grandmother, born Annie Gillmor from Boihy House in a neighbouring townland, was of a more conservative disposition than her husband. She preferred calling the Boggaun farm 'Larkfield', from the more Anglo-sounding neighbouring townland. After the Easter Rising in 1916 a

British regiment, The Sherwood Foresters, was stationed in Manorhamilton. They had significant numbers killed or injured putting down The Rising. In the area they carried out many searches at the homes of suspected Sinn Fein sympathisers. A number were lifted during these raids and ended up in English gaols. It was reported in the Sligo Independent that Manorhamilton's Protestant ladies had 'hospitably entertained' these troops and were 'indefatigable in their efforts in looking after the Tommies' comforts'. There's a good possibility that my grandmother was among them, certainly, she would have wanted to be there. Her concern for the fortunes of that war was also more personal. Her brother Bertie had signed up with the Irish Guards and was injured a number of times on the Western Front.

The landslide republican election victory in late December of 1918 was a further indication to the Protestant community that change was irrevocable. Most Protestants boycotted the election which saw a massive victory for Sinn Fein across the country, outside of the northern counties. When Richard and Annie married the previous month, around the time of Armistice Day, in Drumlease Parish church in Dromahair, they must have wondered what their future held for them.

Widespread violence continued throughout Ireland up until the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Much of it was aimed at the British Regime and rurally-based RIC. After the Unionist riots in Belfast in 1920 many refugees were taken south. Seven Protestant houses in Boihy and Carrigeencor were taken over to house some of them. Householders, however, returned to their homes a few days later with guarantees of safety from national politicians. In another incident the Davises would have been aware of, a small farmer near Manorhamilton was boycotted and had their hay burned in 1915 and 1916. After the boycott resumed in 1920 and their farm produce could not be traded, the family sold up and left. While there is a debate as to the level of intimidation of Protestant families and businesses during this time it has been judged to be low-level and sporadic, without any overall pattern or organisation. Those who were singled out appear to have been overtly supporting the Crown or who were thought to be passing information to the authorities. Two Protestants who were killed in south Leitrim in 1921 were alleged to have been informing local

republican activities to the RIC. Generally, protestants came to the view that it was better to be discreet about their loyalties and affiliations, an attitude which would remain with them for years to come.

It was during these years of turmoil that Richard and Annie had their first children: Herbie born in May 1920 and Reco (Richard) June 1921 and Maureen in July 1922. Despite the exodus from their community, there were no indications that the family were going anywhere. Richard was now running the farm and had set up a cattle export business. His brother Alex had married and was living in County Meath. His older sister, Mary Jane, feeling usurped from her role as head of the household was in a head-to-head conflict with the young bride Annie. And then Richard's business collapsed. The export of cattle and horses to the UK was buoyant during the years of WW1. However, calamity struck when his partner absconded with the proceeds of a shipment, leaving him with large debts to his farmer suppliers. It seems likely that for Richard and Annie with their young growing family and in effect bankrupt, these personal events and the resulting anxieties would have overtaken their worries about the radically changing political climate around them.

Throughout this time their lives as small farmers were intimately woven into the local rural patterns of meitheals and the rhythms of the farming year. Theirs and the neighbouring townlands were predominantly Catholic. With little money and a large amount of debt, Richard and Annie pared back their expenditure to the minimum and almost became self-reliant. Richard took on local farming work with his horses whenever he could. He mortgaged some of the farm to pay his farmer creditors. There was widespread sympathy for the family. As a measure of local solidarity, no one would bid for the mortgaged property when the bank repeatedly attempted to sell it. This must have been heartening for a family struggling to make ends meet, and likely harbouring doubts about their place in an independent Ireland.

Richard's children remembered their childhood years as sparse times with little to go around. Their mother, they said, showed resilience and toughness, making hard choices to keep the family afloat. Richard and Annie would have preferred to have sent their children to the Protestant

Church of Ireland Masterson National School in Manorhamilton, yet had no transport nor means to send them, the farm horse being needed for everyday farm tasks. The children walked to the nearest National School at Mullaghduff until the late 1930s, when the family could spare a donkey and cart for school transport.

In 1926 Richard stood in a local election for the Ratepayers Defence Association, a proto-Fine Gael party, proposed and seconded by neighbours. Although he was not elected, he polled reasonably well. With a family of five then, and still struggling under a burden of debt, he saw his future at Boggaun and among his wider family and community, both Protestant and Catholic. It would be some twenty years before the legacy of the failed business venture was finally behind the family. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Richard and Annie's adult children moved to settle in Northern Ireland, England and Canada, leaving his son Cecil to farm at Boggaun.

Referring to the years of revolution, Miriam Moffit concludes her article, 'The Protestant experience of revolution in County Leitrim, 1911-1928', by saying that in a 'climate of violence and lawlessness, it is impossible to distinguish between social, economic, religious and political motivations which fostered an atmosphere of anxiety and fear among the Protestant population of county Leitrim. Apprehension of life in an increasingly Catholic-Gaelic state and/or insecurity in the face of republican hostility prompted a sizable portion of Leitrim's Protestants to remove themselves from the region wherein their families had lived for generations.'

While Richard and Annie held strongly to their religious beliefs and affiliations, in the end, it appears that family circumstances trumped any specific ambitions or community pressures they may have felt; their, and their children's futures, lay rooted in the place of their birth, now an independent Ireland.

References used in preparing this essay:

1. The above has drawn significantly from the work of Miriam Moffit, particularly The Protestant experience of revolution in County Leitrim, 1911-1928., published in Leitrim

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2. Nathaniel Clements and the making of a Leitrim estate and political interest, c1750-c1800, Anthony Malcolmson, Leitrim History and Society, Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County, edited by Liam Kelly and Brendan Scott, Geography Publications, 2019.
3. Different and the Same, A folk history of the Protestants of Independent Ireland, Deirdre Nuttall, Eastwood, 2020.
4. The Flax and Linen Industry in North Leitrim, unpublished by Barry Bradfield, copy received from the author.
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6. Communications with Nicola Morris, Genealogist, Dublin.
7. Thanks to Pdraig Fitzpatrick, Boggaun, for sharing his memories of the Davis family.