

The property on which Bonnettstown Hall stands has belonged to the ancient Irish family of O'Shee, the Earl of Ormonde, and later, the Earl of Desmond; it then, by purchase, belonged to the Earls of Pembroke. Likewise, it has gone by many names. It was known in Gaelic as Cromake and later as Bonnesrath; during the English occupation its name was anglicized and underwent many transformations as one house evolved into another. It became known as Bonestown, Bonnestowne, and Bonnerstown Castle. The house that stands today was built in 1737 and is known as Bonnettstown Hall. It is located outside Kilkenny off the Tullaroan Road. In *Burke's Guide to Country Houses: Ireland, Vol. 1* (London, 1978), it is described as "one of the most perfect medium-sized early 18th-century houses in Ireland." *Burke's* goes on to record in detail the architectural elements of this Anglo-Irish Georgian house. When I first arrived at Bonnettstown in 1979, it was difficult to think of it in terms of its history or its architecture; it seemed a natural part of the landscape and not so much a house, but a home.

I had come to Bonnettstown by accident. One day, in 1978, I was waiting on the side of the road next to the train station outside Kilkenny, Ireland, looking for a ride to Dublin. An elderly gentleman dressed as a priest pulled over and offered me a lift. Although he was going only thirty kilometers up the road, I accepted his offer. He was a retired Royal Navy Commander; he was wearing a long black cassock because, he said, he was a lay reader and was on his way to deliver a sermon for a vacationing priest. He was headed for a small chapel in the country. When I got out, he wrote his telephone number down on a corner of newspaper and invited me to come stay at his house if I was ever passing through Kilkenny again.

I did return to Kilkenny, a few months later, and was invited to dinner at Bonnettstown Hall. This was the first of many visits I would make over the next three years, during which time I came to know the four elderly aristocrats who lived there: Commander Geoffrey Marescaux de Saubruit; his brother, Laurence; Madame Lubov Glebov; and Miss Daphne Knox. The photographs in this book are in homage to these four people, who invited me into their home with open arms and shared with me their life histories.

They were an unusual bunch, and their diverse stories reflected their individual natures and temperaments. One told of her escape from peasant revolutions and the Russian invasion of post-Hitler Germany, another of sailing the Mediterranean for thirty years and of commandeering rescue missions in Walruses, another of working for the Tanganyika Police and as a film extra alongside Charlie Chaplin, and another of riding horses and cultivating exotic flowers. Sweet and silent and invisible was their consideration of each other and of others, but they were always expressive of the world they had traveled, telling of everything they had gathered along the way. They were the tour guides of their pasts, the museum curators of their rooms.

While living there as a boarder in my attic room, I became inspired to

document their world. I realized I had found a great subject in the remnants of a European aristocratic lifestyle, in four elderly people living together in the deteriorating splendor of a glorious estate, a family home passed on since the early 1700s. No longer tended by a half a dozen workmen, exact Georgian geometric gardens had softened, so that they fit naturally, perfectly into the haphazardly walled-in fields and brambled hedges of the wild, overgrown Irish countryside.

In a state of neglect the manor was most beautiful, but it became clear that it would not simply decay with the natural order of things. Young, broguish Irish workmen arrived one day with heavy earth-moving equipment. In the past they had come to prune hedges and define garden plots; now they came to tear down barns and rip up the apple orchard and flower gardens—all in order to make the grounds more modern and productive to prepare the estate for a young family who had bought the house.

It was then that I concentrated on making photographs. I wanted to remember this world where I had found refuge and the people that I had grown fond of. So I focused my attention on what remained of their world, their house. I had always had the privilege of roaming through the house, but now I did so with a sense of urgency. I began to notice how the house disclosed varying degrees of intimacy and privacy in its different levels. On the first floor there was the entrance hallway, the dining room, the living room, library, and the studio kitchen or butler's pantry—these were the public places for living and entertaining. I considered the next floor to be the heart of this perfectly proportioned Georgian house. Here were their private quarters, the linen closets, and the bathrooms. In the attic Louba lived with Weasel, her cat. She lived by the sun and was the first to rise in the morning to start the fires to warm the house. The attic, with its drafts and the bees buzzing in the walls, seemed to embody the spirit of the house. Down in the cellar there were many chamberlike rooms, each one concealing a different purpose. There was a room full of unused and broken china, a coal room, a place for stacking wood, a room for storing apples, the main kitchen, a place for doing the laundry, and another for removing muddy boots.

Home can be about architecture or a place in geography; or it can be about the sense of permanence we come to know through habit: an article of clothing repeatedly worn, a favorite turn of phrase, a melody of which we are fond, or the many visits to see a friend. Home is about the familiar, about gravity, about falling back into the self after being dispersed and overextended in the world. This I learned in coming to know these people, from living in their home.

In the summer of 1982 I traveled to Bonnettstown Hall for the last time. That fall I received a letter from the Commander in which he told me that they had left the house, and he described the details of their departure. He wrote that the

movers were an old man and his three boys. The old man numbered everything in the house and made a record of it in a black book; then his boys carried things out to the lorry. They worked through the night and by the next day the house was empty. The Commander's description seemed matter-of-fact; I thought this might be because he and Louba, being the last to leave the house, were weary of all the preparations involved. And I thought also that it might be because this was one of many moves they had made in their lives. But they were in their eighties, and I knew whatever possessions were listed in the man's black book could never be reassembled to furnish a home like the one they were leaving. Bonnettstown Hall was their final home.

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