

THE CARDWELLS – AND RAMS ISLAND

A distinctive feature of the landscape in the parish of Glenavy is the wooded Ram's Island lying across the mouth of Lennymore Bay when looking west. Its land mass is approximately one mile long, by a quarter of a mile wide and lies one mile from Sandy Bay.

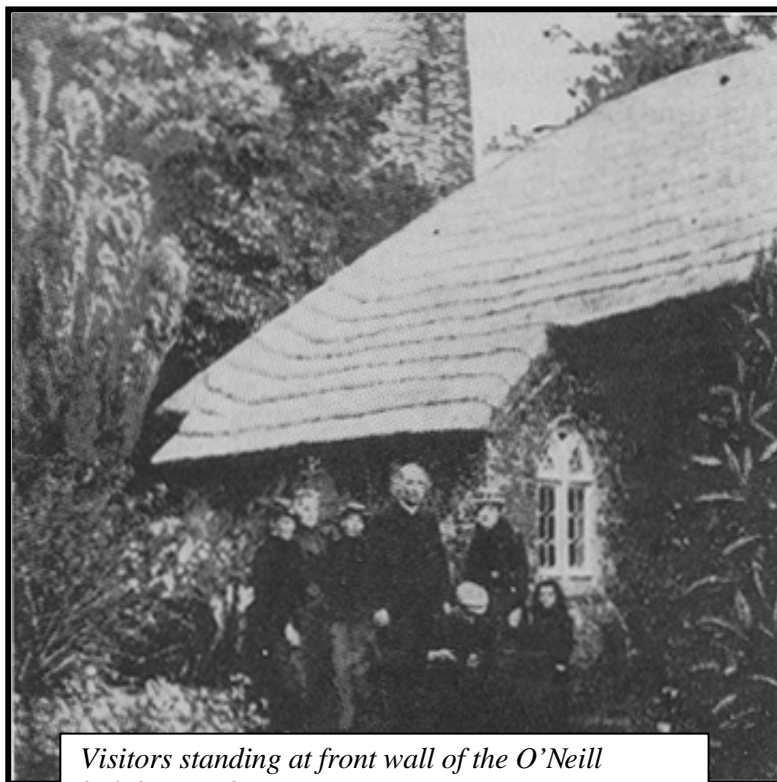
To many people it is simply a well wooded island, and apart from its scenic beauty when silhouetted against a golden sunset in the West, it means little else.

Not so to the Cardwell families who abound in the parish, since their forefathers were very closely involved indeed with the everyday supervision of Ram's Island.

It all began some 120 years ago when Robert Cardwell and his wife Jane took up permanent residence on the island, and for some 50 years they lived and worked there, housed in an ornate thatched cottage with wide overhanging eaves, nestling in thick woodland, mostly composed of stately trees planted over the years by previous owners of the island, the latest being the O'Neill family of Shane's Castle, who own the island to this day.

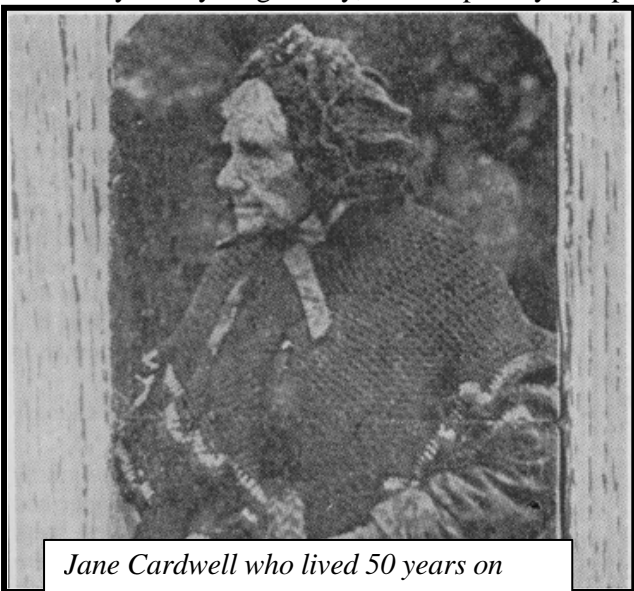
Robert came from a fishing family, and so his main source of income stemmed from fishing, using the standard "swim-nets" for trout during the Summer months, and "sunk nets" in the Winter months for perch and pollan. As his sons grew up they followed their father's tradition and finally had two boats in operation. Being island dwellers, their daily fish landings had to be made on the nearby shore either at Crumlin River or Sandy Bay.

To this day there stand on the island the ruins of what was the O'Neill's summer holiday residence, and part of a typical round tower. The O'Neill residence, in the Cardwells day (and right up until the beginning of the Second World War) was a work of art, single storied, set on low sheltered ground close to the raised centre ridge of the island. This dwelling was also thatched (and was maintained by a Thatcher from Ballinderry called Albert Devlin) with a very wide overhang. The exterior walls were finished in coloured pebbles, with the O'Neill coat of arms set into the front wall, also in multi-coloured pebbles. Much care and artistry had gone into the internal plaster work and cornices. The maintenance and daily cleaning of the holiday home, with its sumptuous furnishings, pictures and paintings, murals, and four poster beds with canopies, was the responsibility of Robert and Jane Cardwell, and so they, and eventually their young family, were kept fully occupied between fishing and island maintenance.



Visitors standing at front wall of the O'Neill holiday residence on Rams Island

In addition, they were keen gardeners, (the soil was exceptionally good), and one can still make out the neat rows and plots of their sheltered vegetable garden to the North of their 'fairy-tale' cottage. (The cottage is now rubble.) Jane also had a beautiful flower garden on the bank in front of their cottage. They kept a milk cow, milk goats, hens, geese, ducks, and liver/white gun-dogs. An occasional calf was reared, and this was brought to market using a special cot (flat bottomed boat) complete with stall and cover. The Cardwells were practically self-sufficient on the island living on fish, milk, butter, eggs, chicken, tame and wild duck, rabbit and the produce of their vegetable garden. However, some items had to be bought in, and this meant a monthly trip by boat to a local store at Rose's Lane Ends, where goods were bought and transported to their boat by the merchant. Both Robert and Jane were distinctive, he being of strong and stocky build with a long flowing beard (white in later years) - a man of the Lough - and great 'crack'



Jane Cardwell who lived 50 years on Rams Island died in 1933 aged 102

Jane was serene, upright and outgoing, a good mixer with a radiant personality and quick wit, dressed in long skirt, traditional striped shawl, and elastic sided high boots. They were the focus of attention for all visitors to the island, and there were many in those days - whole families with picnic baskets, straw boaters and crinolines, in large and small yachts and fishing boats. All collected to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of this island with its myriad of rhododendrons, daffodils, snowdrops, azaleas, walnut trees, tree lined carriageway, ornate thatched dwellings and ancient round tower, wild fowl and rabbits – all watched over by the good shepherds Robert and Jane who had become 'one' with their environment, and complemented their unique surroundings.

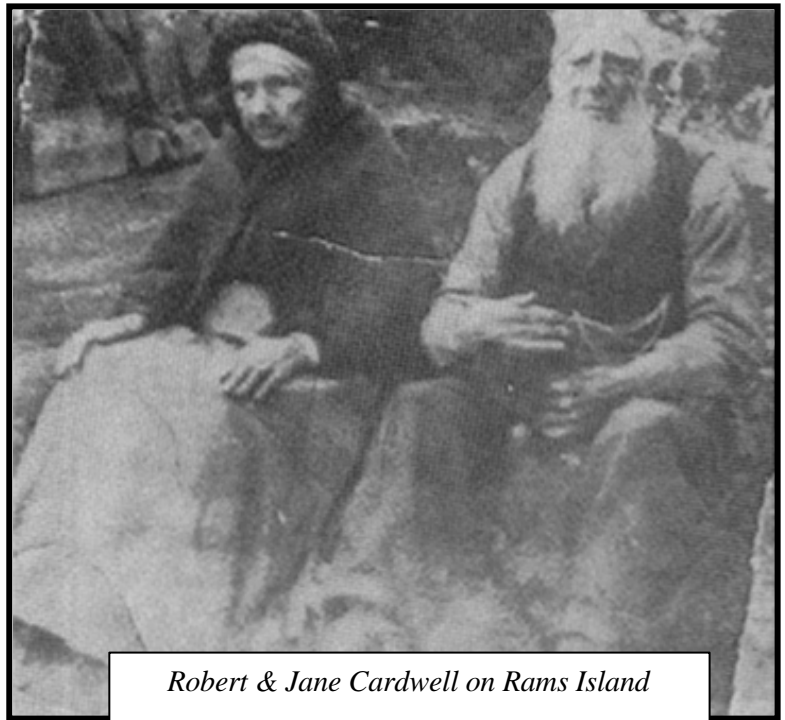
However, life on the island was not all work and play in the 'earthly' sense. Jane noticed for some time that all dusting and cleaning in the 'big house' had been done each morning when she arrived. One morning, upon opening the door

quietly, she spied two tiny (elf) people busily cleaning and polishing. The tiny man was dressed in a green cocked hat with white feather, red tunic, green britches, and pixie boots with pointed toes. The little woman had a green skirt, red tunic and very long hair. Jane watched them silently until they packed their bag to leave. As they walked past Jane the little man bowed and 'doffed' his hat- but spoke not! Anxious to know their origin, she followed them the full length of the island and watched through the bushes as they set off in a tiny boat heading north. As the boat left shore the little man turned around, bowed to her and again 'doffed' his hat - and headed off towards Shane's Castle.

When the O'Neill family were due to visit the island on holiday, a telegram would arrive with the Cardwells, giving the day and time of arrival. The boat was sent to shore to ferry the family over on the appointed day, and at the same time the O'Neill house flag would be hoisted up the flagpole on the island, to remain until the family holiday was over.

Since there was no radio or telephone communication in those days, a system of visual signalling was perfected over the years between the Cardwells on the island and those on shore, using various plaque shapes and colours erected on poles.

The long years of their island partnership had been full and fruitful, but since human life is not immortal, Robert passed away in 1929 when in his late 90s. Three years later, Jane also passed on to a 'greater island' of peace and beauty. JANE WAS 102 YEARS OLD.



Robert & Jane Cardwell on Rams Island



The Cardwell Thatched Cottage on Rams Island. Jane Cardwell sitting under right hand window dressed in bonnet and black shawl.

Jane's funeral was recorded widely by press articles and photographs and touched many hearts, even amongst those who had not had the privilege of meeting her in life. Eight Lough Neagh fishing boats, towed in line-astern, formed the funeral cortege from the island. They were filled with family and neighbours; it was a fitting tribute to one who had rarely come to the mainland during her latter years. The late Charles Morrison, assisted by William Bell, both of Crumlin, were the undertakers, and it is thought to have been one of their first funerals in the district. Both Robert and Jane are buried in Glenavy Churchyard.

Robert and Jane's family had by this time mostly scattered. Two had emigrated, the remainder had married and some settled locally. Many of these spent much time on the island whilst the principals were still alive, and afterwards. One daughter, (Mary Ann Little), and her granddaughter Sadie, lived permanently in the cottage until 1937.

Since then no-one has lived on Ram's Island and the evidence of this is plain to be seen. Both dwellings are now reduced to ruins, although the walls and the general outline of the O'Neill holiday cottage, still stand. The pathways and carriage-way are overgrown and rough - but daffodils and snowdrops still flourish.

The late Elizabeth McGarry (nee Cardwell) who died recently in her eighty sixth year, whilst still living within sight of the island, had vivid memories of her early years there and felt the 'special' atmosphere that was generated by her grandparents in league with their peaceful surroundings. The wealth of knowledge that was to be gleaned about bird life and behaviour, the opulence of the furnishings and decor of the holiday residence, the home-baking of bread, oatmeal porridge, preparing and cooking of fowl, fish and rabbit, the churning and making of butter, gardening, and generally how to be self-sufficient when living in isolation- all of these could be learnt at the knee of "The Queen of Ram's Island", whose life had been absorbed in this haven of undisturbed nature for nigh on half a century. A routine pattern of life had 'been evolved, and Elizabeth remembers that the oatmeal pot was hung onto the open fire 'crane' at exactly the same time every evening, and sufficient porridge made for that night, and for the following morning.

William Cardwell (Crumlin), grandson, also spent many memorable days with his grandparents, and father, helping with fishing, gardening, and also assisting the Thatcher to renew and repair the thatch on the dwellings. A revelation was that his grandmother set her own rabbit snares, and the resultant rabbits she skinned, boiled and fried, and stretched the skins out on planks to dry, and eventually made the skins into beautiful hearth rugs. Over the years some coloured 'tame' rabbits had mixed with the ordinary ones thus providing subtle shades for these ornate rugs.



Elizabeth McGarry nee Cardwell who spent her childhood on Rams Island

Unfortunately space does not permit reporting the reminiscences of the other surviving grandchildren (Mrs. P. O'Neill, Mrs. Trowlan, and Paddy Cardwell) who reside in the parish, but no doubt each will have his or her own special niche of fond memories of those long lost days.

Some of these grandchildren know the island so well, that even a tree felled through storms or rot, becomes apparent from their own homes on shore.

Wouldn't it be nice to think that at some time in the future, Ram's Island could revert to its former glory of thatched cottages and flower-lined paths, where peace and nature reign supreme? We, people of the Lough, who are old enough and were privileged to have made many happy visits to the island in years gone by, have no difficulty in asserting that the island has an atmosphere all of its own - a refuge of beauty and peace. In Elizabeth's own words - A PARADISE.

J. McGarry. May 1989