VINTAGE

RATHCORMICK

HOMAN POTTERTON

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About the Book

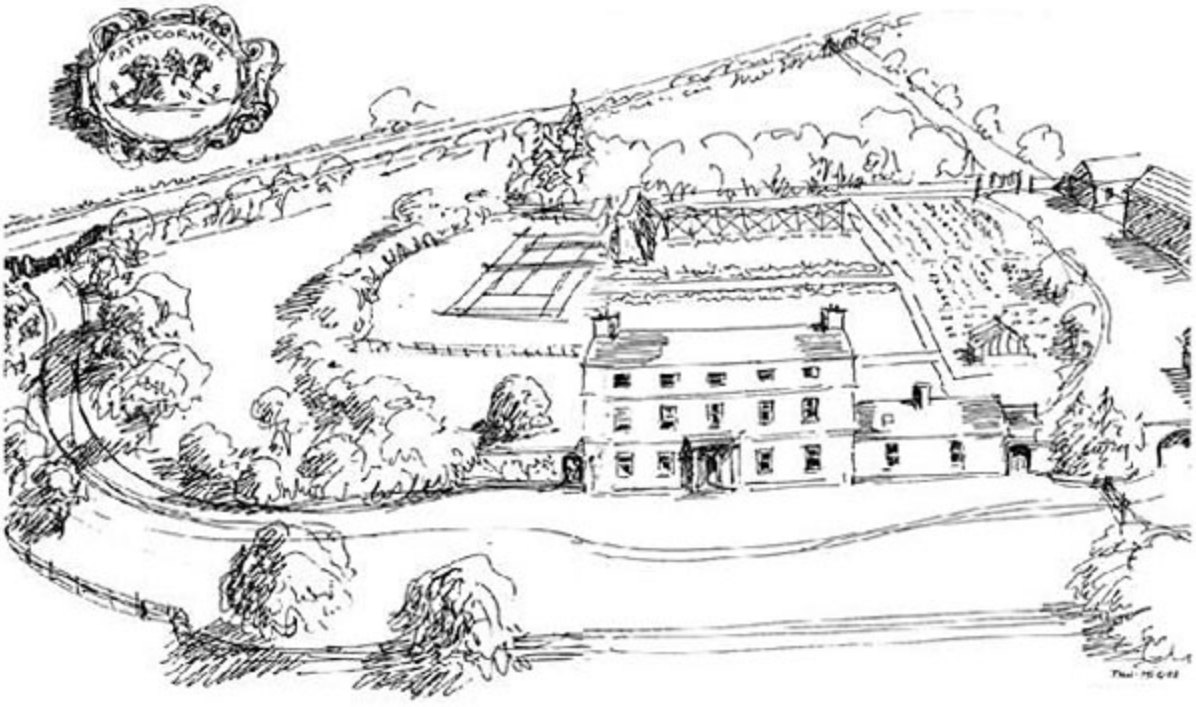
Set in 1950s rural Ireland, *Rathcormick* is an engaging tale of a large and happy family: a stern and domineering Papa, a warm and practical Mama, their two daughters and six sons. For Homan, the youngest, life is a free-spirited awakening in a world of old-fashioned virtue and frugality. But no boyhood lasts forever, and an abrupt turn of events signals an end to the idyll.

Rathcormick is an unforgettable memoir: funny, compelling and original.

About the Author

Homan Potterton was born in 1946. A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and the University of Edinburgh, he was a curator at the National Gallery, London, from 1974-80 and Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, 1980-88. He lives in rural France.

Jeremy Williams is an architect. He has illustrated several books including *The Irish Châteaux: In Search of the Descendants of the Wild Geese* and *A Year in an Irish Garden*.


PATH CORMICE

RATHCORMICK

A Childhood Recalled

Homan Potterton

With an introduction by William Trevor
With drawings by Jeremy Williams

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

In Fond Remembrance of my Parents
Thomas Edward Potterton (1896-1960)
and
Eileen Catherine, née Tong (1903-1990)

Introduction

All over southern Ireland, thinly spread, a tiny minority of Irish Protestants continues to survive. The estates of a powerful ascendancy were once its heart — a heart that has shrivelled since the great houses fell or were transformed, since their gardens went wild or were rescued to earn their keep. The Protestants left behind, of whatever standing, look after themselves doggedly now, reluctant to give up their own small part of Ireland, their Irishness a source of pride. ‘No petty people’, W. B. Yeats designated the Anglo-Irish, and today the description applies as tidily to this survival — on farms, behind counters, in Church of Ireland rectories, as doctors and surveyors, solicitors and bank officials. Surnames identify them: the Davises of Enniscorthy, the Stewarts of Boyle, the Hacketts of Cork, the Odlums, the Boyces, the Mosses, the Blennerhassetts, the Edgills. The list trails on, and is misleading too: there are Protestants among the Murphys and the MacNamaras and the O’Hagans as well. In all occupations, no work is too lowly.

The Pottertons of Rathcormick were, still are, farmers. Rathcormick was, and still is, a family home near Athboy in County Meath, a house rather more gracious than a farmhouse yet without a trace of pretension, an agreeable and comfortable place to live while the ceaseless activity of agriculture orders its day-to-day character.

Rathcormick was recorded in *The Civil Survey* as being in the possession of Sir Luke ffitz Gerald in 1640. The Rathcormick lands were confiscated following the 1641 rebellion, Sir Luke being an ‘Irish Papist’. His son later declared his loyalty and was rewarded for it. But when he died without heirs in the 1670s his estate reverted to the Crown. The first Potterton lived at Rathcormick towards the

end of that century, and died there in 1718. The uneasiness of possession was to continue, almost perfectly reflecting the history of Ireland during the same period.

When the present author's parents were returning from their honeymoon in the late 1920s they called on a cousin, the elderly Elliot Potterton, then living with his wife in the silent barracks of a house that Rathcormick was then: no children had been born; most of the bedrooms hadn't been slept in, or occupied at all, for fifty years. Old Elliot, determined that the estate should remain in the family, willed it to the newly-weds, on the condition that they provided a male heir. They provided six, and two daughters for good measure.

This is the family remembered here, in the 1950s' tranquillity of the Ireland de Valera made. In the new Republic the mores of the past hung on for a while, then gradually dwindled; the Church was the ascendancy now, its sins still private, its rule respected. Life in the country was quiet, city streets were safe. Neutrality during the Second World War had placed Ireland outside the European mainstream, which in turn provided protection from the changes that the aftermath of conflict brought elsewhere. In County Meath — as in provincial Ireland everywhere — there was the shadow of unemployment and exile. But otherwise the 1950s were ordinary.

Only superficially, there was the same ordinariness at Rathcormick: retrospect now supplies the truth. The woman whose world this house became, in which her eight children had been born, wandered away from it every day when the weather was fine to a secret eyrie in the garden — to rest alone, escaping for an hour or so from all she loved, and from love's demands. Her hidden grove was somewhere to allow herself to feel weary, to forget about her bees and bottled pears, to smoke the cigarette that was forbidden, with so much else, by her old-fashioned, well-meaning but emotionally inarticulate husband.

The father, within his family, was a lonely man, although fond of gossipy chats with strangers. Diligent and efficient in the running of the farm, and the auctioneer's business he had inherited with the house, he was given to making errors of judgement when it came to human matters, invariably picking the wrong schools for his children and ignoring the subtle demands of laying down the law. Not all his affection and respect for his wife prevented him from choosing, yet again, a bottle of Sanatogen tonic wine as her Christmas present. She never opened it; he never knew, he never asked. The stuff was good for her; he liked to order people's lives.

> Believing, whenever possible, in prevention rather than a cure he devised the most ingenious methods for denying people access to alcohol . . . Whenever he acted as agent in letting anyone's land, rather than pass the rent over as one would expect him to do, he retained it. Only when he was absolutely certain that the money would not be spent in a pub would he pay it out, and even then, only in instalments and often directly to his client's wife.

Rathcormick is the story of growing up among the modest ambitions and a tendency to eccentricity that have been a family's traits for generations. Tragedy is stoically borne, troubles endured, and there is happiness. The day-old chicks arrive again, Leghorns and Light Sussex, Rhode Island Reds. There are the eight twisting miles to Miss Thompson's school in Trim. Hardly ever different, there are the summer holidays in distant Kilkee. There are the weddings when they come.

From Bowenscourt to Myrtle Grove, from Coole to Drishane, Grenville to Woodbrook, Ireland's culture is rich in houses and their people. *Rathcormick* finds a place among

them now. The rooms that were empty have been filled, the silence has been broken.

William Trevor, 2003.

Prologue

I suppose I was about six or seven when I discovered my mother had a secret.

She used to disappear.

Every day, at the same time after dinner: gone. She always came back again about half-an-hour later but the puzzling part of it was that she went missing in the first instance.

Her vanishings frightened me to a point of terror and, even though I would try to shadow her at the times when I knew they were likely to occur, she always managed to elude me.

‘You’ll have to go and get Rusty a bowl of water, Homan,’ she might say. ‘He’ll be thirsty when he finishes his dinner. Those scraps of ham are very salty.’

But when I would come back from the scullery with the water — inching carefully through the breakfast room and out to the garden where Rusty, without having eaten a morsel much less being thirsty as a result, would be antagonising the cats by standing guard over a tasty dish of ham, boiled potatoes, and parsley sauce — Mamma would be gone.

Molly, who would be clearing the table, was never able to shed any light on the phenomenon.

‘She was here a minute ago’, was all she would ever say.

At that, I would run upstairs, even as far as the boys’ room and the nursery on the top floor, and then down again — flight by flight, two, even three, steps at a time — darting into several of the rooms and down the passage to Rosina’s room. I would look out, first one window towards the greenhouse and behind it to the farmyard and then, climbing up on a chair, through the other which opened unto a view of the garden. I could see she was not at work in any

of the flowerbeds and I could see the box-hedges and knew she was unlikely to have gone in there. That left the tennis court and beyond it the shrubbery and beyond that again the laurels. But none of that part of the garden was visible from Rosina's window and besides, by this stage I would have resigned myself to the fact that she was gone.

I would mope downstairs again. Alan and Raymond would, by now, have returned to playing up the yard; Papa, if he had been in for dinner that day, would be back in the office dictating letters to Miss Shannon; Rosina would be tidying the cutlery drawer or putting away the condiments; and Elliott would have departed in the car. Only Rusty would remain where I had last seen him, his attention still focused exclusively on the cats, and he would make it clear — with an impatient scowl in my direction — that he regarded my reappearance only as an intrusion.

I would be alone.

The sensation of being on my own in the empty house with all the afternoon ahead and no Mamma there to share it was made all the more acute as I was often lonely as a child. By some quirk or other, I was different in temperament to my brothers so that despite being the youngest of a very large and happy family, I frequently felt that I was an oddity, an outsider.

When Mamma disappeared I would remember the times when I had heard her announce: 'I am not sure how much more of this barging I can stand.' She might have emerged from the bathroom where Papa was shaving, before closing the door firmly after her and making her way down the stairs.

'It'll be the death of me and that's all that's to it,' I would hear her mutter.

On other occasions, she would be more specific.

'You don't mean to tell me that the Master has gone back out to the yard in his suit when I have just sponged and pressed the trousers,' she would say to Molly.

And when Molly replied that she thought he had, Mamma would say, ‘That man will be the death of me.’

It was a statement like this — and a statement of fact is what I interpreted it to be — that led me to believe that Mamma might really want to leave us; and, even though such outbursts were not all that common, when I gave the matter any thought at all it appeared to me that she might well be intent on doing so as her certain death and Papa seemed — for reasons which I did not fully understand — so intricately intertwined. As a result, the anxiety I felt in relation to her daily disappearances became all the more urgent, and I devoted hours to contemplating the life that lay ahead of us when she would no longer be around.

In time, I discovered that she always reappeared on the far side of the tennis court: not from the end, where there was netting in front of a plantation of spindly Douglas fir, but from the far side where the lilacs were. Some of them, the common purples, were almost trees but the whites — fewer in number — still retained the semblance of a bush and, dotted between them, one or two specimen varieties, their flowers so mauve that they were virtually black. I became frightened, too frightened, ever to go anywhere near that corner of the garden and never wandered beyond the lilacs to penetrate the banks of laurel that were planted behind them, dividing the grounds at this point from the front avenue beyond.

Then one day when Alan and I were looking for birds’ nests we came through to the woods from the other side and, when I found myself in a clearing, I did not immediately realise where I was. The laurels were very high and dense there, so dense that it was impossible to see the sky, while even the lower branches, in clambering up to the light, were so far off the ground that there was no difficulty in standing up within the bushes and even walking around. The ground underneath was completely clear of any twigs or leaves and then I noticed that it had been cleared, brushed clean in

fact, and in a corner, like a throne from some forgotten dynasty, was a green garden chair. I recognised it as the chair which had stood in a sunny spot on the path outside the kitchen window for as long as I could recall but it was only on seeing it again now that I realised it had been missing for some time.

Like a throne from some forgotten dynasty . . .

It was cold in there and I sensed the goose-pimples forming on my thighs and, when the chill began to trickle up my spine, I shot out in the direction of the garden. A thrush, disturbed by the noise I made, shuffled the leaves above my head as she too fought her way through the bushes and out into the open.

‘Come back,’ Alan called after me. ‘There’s a thrush’s nest here and it has eggs in it. Give me a leg up and I’ll be able to get them.’

But, in realising that this was where Mamma spent her time and in the belief that, one day, she might stay here permanently, I thought I had discovered her secret. Even the promise of a nest of thrush’s eggs, any number of nests in fact, could not induce me ever to return to the place again.

1. Out of the Blue

When my mother was seventeen, my father, who was then twenty-four and living nearby, wrote in her autograph book: ‘Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, his ox thou shalt not slaughter, but thank the Lord it is no sin, to covet thy neighbour’s daughter.’ He married her six-and-a-half years later.

Before the wedding, he went to see his prospective father-in-law to discuss the matter of a dowry but Grandpa Tong was fairly wily and Papa came away empty-handed, dismissed in fact. The incident was to sour his relations with his in-laws forever after. He wrote to Mamma afterwards: ‘My own Beloved Girl, My conversation with your Pappy was not pleasant or satisfactory from my point of view and we seem to look at things in a different light. So I write these few lines to say that my heart is, and still shall be ever yours and I look forward to having you on the 3rd of August as my very own. With regard to anything I have said, I am prepared to forget, and I shall always honour your parents. I really do believe you know I am not or never thought of marrying you for what you had. With ever my unchanging and everlasting love, Eddie.’

When they were on their way home from their honeymoon they called on a cousin, Old Elliott Potterton, who lived at Rathcormick, near Athboy in County Meath. In actual fact, Old Elliott, a first cousin of Papa’s father, was never old at all: he was only seventy-three when he died, and that was before most of us were born, but we always referred to him as Old Elliott.

He had given Mamma and Papa a japanned mantel-clock as a wedding-present and in sending it had asked that they would call. Papa’s younger brother, Arthur, who was living at Rathcormick at the time and working as Old Elliott’s

secretary, collected them when they arrived by the Mail Boat at Kingstown and drove them down in Old Elliott's Rover.

Mamma always remembered the visit vividly.

'I was a bit in awe going there I can tell you,' she would say. 'I was only just twenty-four and I knew well that Old Elliott only wanted to take a look at me and see what Papa had taken on.'

She remembered Nancy, Old Elliott's wife, showing her all over the house and eventually up to the bedrooms on the top floor. As they looked out the windows, Nancy said: 'Do you see that thing glinting, way off in the distance, over there, to the left of those trees?'

'Yes,' said Mamma. 'I do. What is it?'

'It's the roof of the greenhouse at Moyrath. It always catches the sun at this time of the afternoon and we see it — almost like a mirror — from here.'

'How far away would it be?'

'About three miles. The lands of Moyrath adjoin Rathcormick at the end of the Bottoms. Pottertons used to live there too, for generations in fact, but then the family has been in these parts for a very long time, you know.'

'Yes,' said Mamma.

'There's a big map hanging in the hall — I'll point it out to you when we go down — which shows all the different farms they had. That was in centuries gone by when they were tenants of Lord Darnley.'

They moved back out to the landing and Nancy closed the doors.

'But the house is far too big . . .' she said.

She started down the stairs.

'. . . all empty rooms, it has to be over fifty years since anyone slept in them.'

She stood for a moment in the sun from the landing window and then she turned again to Mamma.

‘It’s a help having Arthur here,’ she said, ‘but it’s so long since there were ever any children in the house. Dora, Jane, and Lily — my husband’s sisters — were the last and, of course, Little Jim. But they are all over sixty now.’

There was a listlessness, a languor, in her movements. She ran her hand along the lid of the rug-box as she passed and then made a gesture of straightening one of the pictures on the wall.

‘It’s a house that needs children,’ she said.

Rathcormick was so very different to the Wood-of-O, where Mamma’s own childhood alone with her uncles and aunt had been so happy, that she had difficulty in imagining the house as a home to children at all.

‘Impossible to fill’, was what she thought. ‘No gaiety about the place, it’s like a barracks.’

It seemed to her to be one room after another. The wallpapers had not been changed in years and many of the rooms had none at all: only pink distemper. The staircase was lined with a heavy canvas — also painted pink — which hung loose and bulged here and there; it had become detached in places from the batons which held it to the wall and, as a result, it trembled — wobbled from top to bottom — at even the merest touch. The woodwork everywhere, including all the doors, was grained and stained and on the stairs it had darkened almost to mahogany from the sun. The general atmosphere of loneliness was made all the more acute by the fact that all the beds were made up, their eiderdowns and quilts of colourful knitted-squares all in place, as though a house-party was expected that very afternoon.

Nancy was Old Elliott’s second wife. He had only married her six years previously — exactly two years after the death of his first wife — and so far, and at this time she was thirty-eight, they had no children. Nor had Old Elliott any children by his first wife. That was the point: Old Elliott had no immediate heir. He made his will just seven months after

Mamma and Papa's visit and when he died less than a year after that — "suddenly" the announcement in *The Irish Times* read — he left Rathcormick to them.

'It was completely out of the blue,' Mamma said. 'No one expected it, least of all ourselves.'

Then her eyes would twinkle.

'But Papa always gave the credit to me. He said that if Old Elliott had not approved of me that afternoon, such a thing would have been out of the question.'

In point of fact, apart from his own brother (whom we called Uncle Jim), Papa was the eldest of Old Elliott's closest male relatives. Even still — and notwithstanding his supposed endorsement of Mamma — he took no chances when it came to making his will. Instead of leaving Rathcormick to Papa outright, he left it to him only "for his life in trust for his eldest legal male issue", but, as Mamma and Papa had no children when he made the will, he covered the eventuality of their never having a son by adding the provision that, should that circumstance arise, the place would revert to his executor (who was Uncle Hubert) to be assigned by him "to any male Potterton to carry on the name where our forefathers have lived and died for over three hundred years".

When Old Elliott died, my sister Alice, the eldest of our family, was just eight months old and that was that. Papa had no son — no "legal male issue" — so that, on the day of the funeral, a Sunday in early January when every Potterton, no matter how distantly related, was assembled at Rathcormick and the conditional nature of the will became known, a wave of speculation rippled through the company.

'No one could have known then that we would eventually have six sons,' Mamma often said. 'Had they done so, that would have put paid to all their surmising.'

In his will, Old Elliott provided for his widow with a capital sum and an income for life and he directed his executors to allow her "to reside in Rathcormick with use of garden and

such portion of the out offices that may be in their discretion reasonable for a term of five years from the date of my death . . .” He also left her his Rover motor car. He left moneys to the Eye and Ear Hospital in Dublin as well as to the Royal Hospital for Incurables; and then as an afterthought, in a codicil which he signed ten days after the will itself, he left the residue of his estate also to Papa.

‘Almost the first thing Papa did was to go straight into the Ulster Bank in Tullamore and close his account’, was how Mamma always commented on the legacy.

‘Why?’ we asked.

‘He had applied for a loan to buy cattle only a month previously and they had turned him down. It was a decision the manager lived to regret, I can tell you, and all the more so when Papa transferred his account to the Bank of Ireland.’

*

The speculation which the conditional nature of Old Elliott’s bequest gave rise to provided occupation — almost to the exclusion of anything else — for every member of the family, even the most distant cousins, during the months that followed his sudden and unexpected demise. Hopes were raised, discussions held, letters written, alliances formed — affidavits were even prepared — all with a view to deciding upon whom Rathcormick would devolve in the event of Papa being unable to procure or obtain, by one means or another, some legal male issue of an appropriate kind. As the months went by and Mamma and Papa with baby Alice showed no signs of moving to Rathcormick and the Widow Nancy, instead of packing up, occupied herself exclusively by driving around the countryside in her Rover motor car, the eventuality that the will might ultimately be overturned seemed more and more of a likelihood. Then towards Christmas, and after several weeks of rumour, the

news leaked out that Mamma was pregnant and conjecture, which had been of a general nature up to then, became specific: would the baby be a boy?

It is not often that the nativity of a child occasions as much woe — gloom is not too strong a word — among so many people as did the birth of my eldest brother. Mamma and Papa were naturally overjoyed by his arrival but it is fair to say that they were the only ones; everyone else in the family was inconsolable in their sorrow although, when it became known that the baby was delicate, disappointment momentarily turned to hope. Thomas Elliott, as he was called, was born with what approximated to a cleft palate and could not easily feed from breast or bottle so that his survival — much less his capacity to thrive — lay very much in the balance until Mamma developed a painstaking technique of feeding him by a dribbling method using a light metal spoon.

‘What a time I had with Elliott,’ she always said. ‘The hours it used to take me to get him to drink even a saucer of milk. None of the rest of you were anything like as troublesome. It was touch-and-go for him for the first few months, I can tell you that.’

But as the months went by it became apparent that, although a struggle, Elliott would survive and when, exactly two years after Old Elliott’s death, Mamma and Papa felt confident enough to accept the bequest and move to Rathcormick, he was already out of danger. Not that they were prepared, even at that stage, to leave matters to chance; eighteen months after Elliott’s birth, Edward, healthy as a blade of grass in springtime, sauntered into the world by way of being a spare. But it did not take him long to realise that his existence was already superfluous as it was perfectly obvious — to little Elliott as he lay in his cot as much as to anyone else — that Thomas Elliott was indeed the heir, the male issue, that Old Elliott had required, nay, demanded. From that day forward no other candidacy was

ever advocated, no other contingency even considered, as it was all too clear that the case was closed, the matter settled: the succession of Rathcormick had been secured.

All of this happened, as it seemed to me when I was a child, long before my time. Rosina was born — although not for almost four years after Edward — and then David, then Raymond, then Alan and, when Mamma was almost forty-three, me. I have only hearsay, stories and photographs to go on as to what life was like at Rathcormick in those early years.

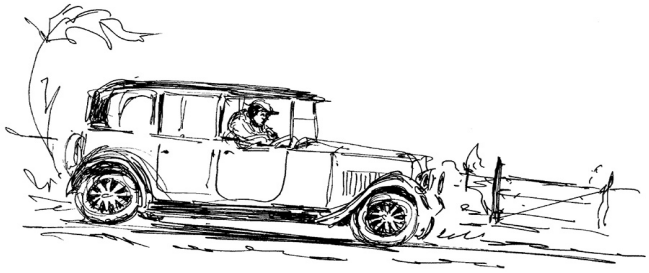
Alice had a white rabbit. I know that because when I wanted one years later Mamma, based on her experience of Alice's, would not hear of such a thing:

'After a week you would be tired of it and then who would be left to feed it?' she said. 'Me. That's who.'

Elliott and Edward had pet goats. At a later stage, I had a pet goat too but mine was purely functional and was used to suckle the orphaned lamb (or lambs) that I would be given every year in an effort to interest me in farming. Elliott and Edward treated their goats as ponies and harnessed them up to specially made chariots and rode around the place like Ancient Romans on their way to the Coliseum. Photographs show the pair of them standing in the makeshift carriages holding the reins and looking like Charlton Heston. When the time came to go to away to school, Alice went to Sligo and Elliott and Edward were sent to what many people would think of as the best Protestant secondary school in Ireland: Portora Royal School in Enniskillen. By their own accounts, they learned little or nothing there and when they were about sixteen, Papa decided that they had been in school for quite long enough.

'What good is all that Latin and stuff going to be to them when there is a life cut out for them here?' he said. 'If I take them home now they could be a great help to me and they would also learn something practical.'

Every year on Speech Day at Portora (if Elliott and Edward were to be believed) the headmaster exhorted the assembled school that it was neither here nor there if they learned nothing at all because, wherever they went in the world, they only had to announce that they had been to Portora and every door would be open to them. Elliott was not sure about this, in fact, he did not believe a word of it; but Edward, convinced of its validity accepted the recommendation and thought it very sound advice.



The Widow Nancy showed no sign of packing up

And that was the difference between the legal male issue which Old Elliott had deemed an essential requirement and the heir-to-spare whom Papa had judged an advisable precaution.

2. Three Centuries

Rathcormick is not one of the great houses of County Meath, not by a long shot. It is essentially a mean house, a farmhouse — no more, no less — gable-ended, with three storeys above a basement, and two small, low rooms leading off a hall or landing on each floor. The stairwell, poking out behind with straight flights of steps at right angles to one another, is also basic, avoiding all fancy in favour of the practical. The windows here, in contrast to all the others in the original house, open to the south so that there is a warmth about the stairs that is only found in those rooms which were later additions towards the rear.

There is no definite clue as to when exactly the house was built but it probably dates from the first or second decade of the eighteenth century. That was before plain farmers like my forebears developed the modicum of interest in “taste” which would have persuaded them to introduce an innuendo of architectural worthiness — a hint of style and ostentation — to the edifice rather than leave it devoid of all ornament as they did. The walls, of stone and rubble and rendered on the outside, are about four-feet thick and it is only the stone of the window-sills which has been cut to shape. Other than that, there is little evidence that even a stone-mason, much less an architect, impeded the construction in any way. The house is described in Lewis’s *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* of 1836 as “the Seat of T Potterton, Esq.” but there is no allusion to its architectural style. And that is probably for the very good reason that it has none to speak of.

Presumably in cognisance of this, Old Elliott made, what would have been called in the eighteenth century, “Improvements” to the place. While most of these were appropriately modest and dictated by comfort rather than fashion, the exception was the handsome limestone Doric

portico with which, in an uncharacteristic act of flagrant pretension, he embellished the hall-door. As a result, and after being so very reticent in its appearance for two hundred years, Rathcormick became, if not quite handsome, then at least moderately venerable.

While Rathcormick itself could never be described as a mansion, by the same token its lands could only with exaggeration be called a great estate. In *The Civil Survey* of 1654-56, they are described as “Rathcarmuck, half a plowlande” and the acreage is given as two-hundred-and-sixty of which one-hundred-and-sixty were arable, eighty in pasture, and twenty in bog. The location is described as “bounded on the east with the lands of Moyrath and Kildalkey, on the west with the lands of Ballynadrimna and Rathkenna, on the south with the lands of Corballis and a river on the north with the lands of Baskinagh and Ballynadrimna”. Like the rest of Ireland, the farm was first mapped by Sir William Petty as part of the Down Survey in the 1670s and then by Bernard Scalé in a *Survey of the Lordship of Athboy* which dates from 1767. This volume is now in the National Library and it is a large-scale presentation version of Scalé’s map that hangs in the hall at Rathcormick. By the time of the first Ordnance Survey map in 1836 the different fields had been fenced much as they are today and the one in front of the house, the Lawn, is shown landscaped with hardwoods. Beyond the Lawn is the field called the Round O because of the circular earthen mound capped by trees that is to be found there. We called it a fairy ring, and were always warned against playing there, but it is marked on the Ordnance Survey map as a fort; more precisely, it is a rath, the rath of Cormac. There was once a holy well on the lands dedicated to St Dympna. It had almost dried up by the mid-nineteenth century and was nowhere to be seen in our time. It may have been in the field called Tubber, *tobair* being the Gaelic word for well. Following on from the Ordnance Survey came Griffith’s

Valuation in 1854 and there Rathcormick is described as six-hundred-and-twenty-two Irish acres, of which five-hundred-and-thirty-two (or 860 English acres) were occupied, on a lease from the Earl of Darnley, by Old Elliott's father, Thomas Potterton. In his will, Old Elliott specifically mentions three-hundred-and-twenty-four Irish acres; but that was only the extent of the farm which by then was held, untrammelled by the inconvenience of either a lease or a landlord, freehold or, in Irish terms, "in Fee Simple". These are the fields that, following the Wyndham Act of 1903 which enabled tenant farmers to buy out their landlords and which became law in 1909, Old Elliott had purchased outright from Lord Darnley.

Rathcormick is not one of the great houses of County Meath

And then to the family: what of Old Elliott's testamental contention that his "forefathers had lived and died at Rathcormick for over three hundred years"?

Three hundred years? No. According to *The Civil Survey*, Rathcormick was in the possession of "Sir Luke ffitz Gerald, Irish Papist" in 1640 and it was from him that the lands were confiscated — on account of his being a Catholic — following the 1641 Rebellion. *The Book of Survey and Distribution*, which dates from the 1660s, lists "Rathcormucke" with the information that, following the confiscation, two-hundred-and-eighty-three acres, one rood, and eight perches of the

lands were distributed between the Duke of York and George ffitz Gerald while three-hundred-and-sixty-five acres went to Thomas Bligh. George ffitz Gerald had to testify his loyalty to the Crown before being reinstated on the lands of his father but when he died in the 1670s “without heirs male of his body” — as Old Elliott was to do two-hundred-and-seventy-years later — his estate reverted to the King. Passing to the Catholic Duke of York, later James II, they were sold following his defeat at the Battle of the Boyne. By a deed dated 24th June 1703, Thomas Bligh purchased for the sum of £6,850 almost three thousand acres in County Meath, including the three-hundred-and-sixty-five acres of Rathcormick which had previously been allotted to him. The father of the first Lord Darnley, Bligh was by then MP for Athboy and, on 28 July 1710, he granted a lease “for a term of three lives” to John Potterton of Rathcormick of “all the lands of Rathcormick and Rathkena . . . containing five-hundred-and-forty-two acres . . . at a yearly rent of one-hundred-and-sixty-five pounds, twelve shillings”.

The fact that John is described in the 1710 lease as “of Rathcormick” would imply that he was already in occupation when he signed it and this is borne out by family papers which record his father, Thomas Potterton, who was born in 1643 and died in 1718, as the first of the name to live there. It is always said in the family that ‘we came over with Cromwell’; but this Thomas would have been too young to have served in Cromwell’s army and it may be that he was actually the son of the first Potterton to come to Ireland. John, the first leaseholder, was my great — six times — grandfather. According to the *Index of Prerogative Wills in Ireland*, he died in 1738 and was succeeded by his son Thomas who, in turn, died in 1756. It was this Thomas who consolidated the family’s fortunes by extending their holdings to include not just the neighbouring properties of Moyrath and Balatalion which they had held for almost as long as Rathcormick, but Corballis and Baskenagh,

Pagetstown and Hardrestown as well. Exceptionally, as most other family wills perished in the bombardment of the Four Courts in 1922, a copy of Thomas's will survives. Made on the 22nd September 1756 when he was "very sick and weak in body but of perfect mind and memory", it bequeathed the "Leasehold Interest of the Town and Lands of Rathcormick with all the stock and corn that will be on said lands at the time of my decease" to his son John. That John seems to have been succeeded by his brother, Henry of Moyrath, and then by Henry's son, Thomas, who in a deed of 1794 is described as a grandson of Thomas and great-grandson of the first John. Next came another John who had seven children by his wife Lydia Bell, whom he married in 1804. Among them was Thomas — father of Old Elliott — and Richard, my great-grandfather. Old Elliott's father was master of Rathcormick for sixty-two years until his death in 1890 but, with him — as happened later with his son — the family's direct descent almost came to an end. He had no children by his first marriage and it was only with his second wife, Dora Elliott, whom he married when he was forty-nine that he had a family.

From the time of Thomas in the mid-eighteenth century the family, although always close-knit, was quite extensive with different members occupying neighbouring farms. This remained the situation throughout the nineteenth century: apart from Thomas in Rathcormick, Griffith in 1854 records William farming two-hundred-and-fifty acres in Balatalion, Henry with six-hundred-and-forty-seven in Moyrath, and Arthur with two-hundred-and-fifty-four in Clonylogan.

This is a respectable history: I am the tenth generation of my family, almost in a direct line, to have lived at Rathcormick. But what is so remarkable is that the family has remained so ordinary, so . . . undistinguished. Modesty has always governed our ambitions, plainness has been the salient feature of our demeanour, and while our motto is *Regardez l'Avenir* — Look to the Future — we have done this

over the centuries by remaining low-key, low-profile, and above all low-church. John, who died in 1738, described himself in his will as a “gentleman”; but we would hardly have the temerity to call ourselves that today and, even though Old Elliott’s father was granted arms, we have never aspired to any social elevation at all, much less attempted to establish ourselves on the foothills of the Irish aristocracy as represented by an entry in the pages of *Burke’s Landed Gentry of Ireland*. Old Elliott’s father hunted with the Ward Union and is included in the group-portrait of the hunt by William Osborne which now hangs in the National Gallery. Other than that, even though Old Elliott mentioned pictures in his will which “are to remain in Rathcormick as heirlooms”, we rarely if ever sat to be painted and we certainly never became artists and painted anyone — or anything — else. Some of the family went to Trinity as early as 1818 and others, at various times, became clergymen and, again, Old Elliott mentioned books as heirlooms at Rathcormick; but, as a general rule, we have tended to frown upon too much education or any public show. George Bernard Shaw described his own family as “downstarts” because they were the very opposite of the “upstarts” by whom he was often surrounded. The Pottertons, in a line stretching back over three centuries, have always been downstarts too.

Papa and Mamma, Alice, Elliott and Edward, Rosina, David and Raymond, then Alan, then me