

RABBIT ISLAND by Zara Brady

One of my earliest boating memories is going out with the postman delivering letters and food parcels to Mrs. Catherine Lennon on Rabbit Island in Lough Corrib. The island is situated about a half mile from Annaghkeen Bay near Headford. It is a fine 26-acre property with a pretty domer bungalow built in 1907 by Charles Mark Wynn, 4th Lord Headley. I knew all about the history of the house from the many stories the postman recounted to me: as a young man he had helped build the foundations of this pre-fabricated house. It had been ordered from the Army and Navy Stores in England at a cost of £800 to suit *the requirements of a fishing lodge* and was brought to the island in sections aboard one of the steamers who plied their trade between Galway and Cong. It was no small fishing hut - comprising three bedrooms, sitting room, kitchen, scullery and bathing room.

I was a very small child when these trips to the island began. I would sit obediently in the front of the boat and hold onto the bow rope as instructed. I remember my gingham pinafore ballooning out behind me and trying to restrain the flapping by gathering the folds underneath me. I would let go one hand to turn around to look at the old man at the tiller of the green Johnson Seahorse when he'd be shouting for me to look at a black cormorant, a leaping trout or the mountains. John Wall was our neighbour and official postman for the islands - he had a P&T-issue navy peaked cap and a large canvas bag slung across his chest - and thought he was more important than Séan T. O'Kelly.

Catherine Lennon was a 74-year old widow when I first saw her standing on the massive stone pier in July 1952 awaiting the provisions from McNamara Grocery, Galway. She had been the sole occupant of the island for eleven years. She had been married to the Rev. Landon Lennon who was Rector of Aran Islands and had first met him as a young visitor to Ireland from America. They kept up a transatlantic correspondence which resulted in their marriage thirteen years later. When they reached retirement age they were apparently very drawn to island life and purchased Rabbit Island where lived happily together with their goats, donkey and dogs until the Rector died in 1940. Rev. Lennon was buried on the island, in a tiny walled graveyard. For close on fifteen years afterwards, Catherine remained on only with her black Labrador dog for company. She tended Landon's grave regularly, left a home-baked cake on his birthday and each Sunday read a Prayer Service beside it.

But Catherine must have begun to experience loneliness because she placed an advertisement seeking a "*Lady's Companion*" in *The Lady Magazine*. A lady's companion was a fairly popular occupation in those days and would involve providing company and conversation to her mistress, and helping her to entertain guests. A lady's companion would accompany her employer to social events or travelling abroad. Only a woman with a similar class background to, or a little below, that of the employer, would be considered. A companion received board and lodging and an allowance – which would never have been referred to as *wages* – too vulgar. And most importantly, a companion was never regarded as a servant.

In due course, a Miss Luther applied for the position and turned up on the postman's door asking to be taken out the island. On arrival at the pier, Catherine took one look at the unfortunate applicant and summarily dismissed her remarking to the postman, "She doesn't suit me, take her out again."

News of poor Miss Luther's plight soon spread to every house in the village. The postman and his wife afforded her every comfort in their lakeside cottage and she lacked for nothing in the days and weeks that followed. She certainly did not lack visitors - the house was brim full of neighbours every night wishing to see the stranger and hear at first hand about her encounter with Catherine Lennon. They pitied her, of course, when she confided that being of a certain age she feared she "would never find employment again.. but thank goodness she had a little savings!" Ahh-ha, a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse, and in the time a song thrush would sing his song, didn't Miss Luther find herself snugly installed in a neighbouring farmhouse on the shores of Lough Corrib as a "paying guest." It isn't only hens that a clever farmer's wife can use for pin money. Keeping PG's was a very popular method of generating extra household income in the days before the free education when parents had to pay school fees. We'll probably see its revival!

But what of the lady on the island? Failing health eventually forced Catherine to settle on the mainland - into exactly the same house as Miss Luther – and within sight of Rabbit Island. The story goes that the two women did not fraternise with each other and never shared a meal at the same table.

On a February day in 1959 Catherine Lennon died and a slow-moving line of boats set out from the east shore of Lough Corrib, led by the postman's punt carrying the remains of the 81-year old woman. She was faithful to her dream and was rejoining her husband who had

never been quite lost to her in his lonely grave. Catherine left it on record that her maiden name was Catherine Philpot Curran and she claimed direct descent from the father of Robert Emmet's sweetheart, Sarah Curran.

All during the 1960's the lovely house on Rabbit Island lay just as Catherine had left it - down to the very books on the bookshelves, the pretty upholstered furniture, the china in the kitchen and her long gowns in the wardrobe - quite undisturbed. We walked in and out of the unlocked house, we looked but we never touched.

But over the years a combination of weather, animals and vandals reduced the dormer cottage to a shambles. Broken glass littered its floors; tattered remains of furniture were exposed to the elements, and the library strewn with leaves from various books. And in one of the upstairs bedrooms, the remains of a brass bed were supported by steamer trunk with faded once-gay destination labels for Le Havre and Cannes.

The island has had two owners since Catherine Lennon and is now an exclusive fishing rental lodge which you may like to view on

(<http://www.premierpropertiesireland.com/?p=2372>)

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