

CHAPTER 7

The Modern Family

The justification for the title of this Chapter is that it is possible from this point to employ personal recollection. The oldest members of the family alive today in some cases lived with, or at least spoke to, some of their forebears born in the first half of last century. They would have been regaled with anecdotes of events and experiences stretching back some one hundred and thirty years.

In his 1954 addendum to his 'Records of MacWilliam Ancestry' Neville McWilliam wrote:-

Many of our ancestors seem to have drifted back to Ireland (from Scotland) about the beginning of the nineteenth century. Some found themselves in the old home county of Roscommon, doubtless poorer, but more peaceful men than their banished forefathers. Among this group was one, John McWilliam my paternal grandfather, who died before my birth.

There is an official and therefore weighty piece of evidence in support of the statement that John McWilliam's family returned from Scotland. The certified copy of the Entry of Death of John McWilliam states that he was born in Scotland. It further shows that he died on 28 December 1881, aged sixty-nine years. He would thus have been born in 1812 (or on one of the last three days on 1811). When we realise that John's place of birth was Scotland we can accept with certainty the fact that his parents were living in that country at that time. Further, seeing that his second son, William, was born in Ireland in 1844, John must have been in that country (Ireland) at (or before) that date. Consequently it emerges that Neville McWilliam's contention that John McWilliam returned to Ireland from Scotland 'about the beginning of the nineteenth century' is substantiated.

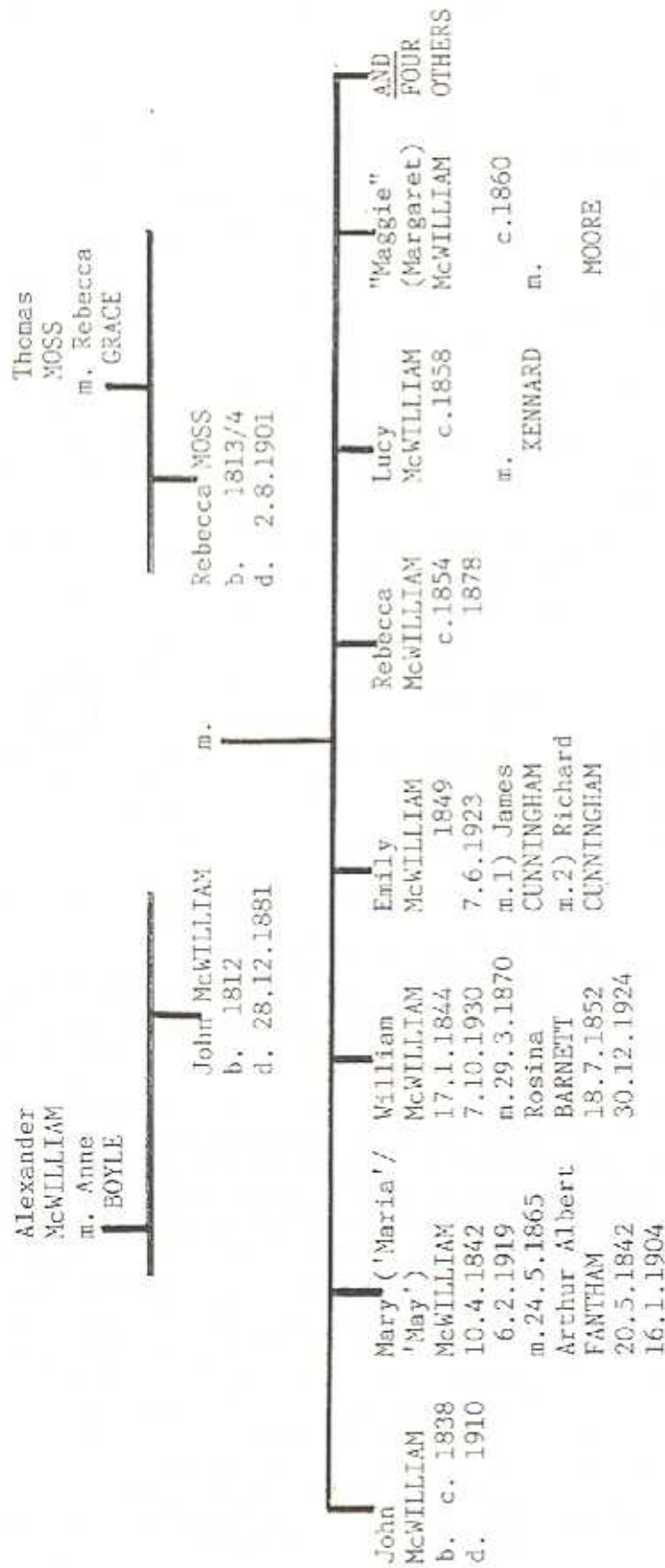
John's father was Alexander McWilliam (a coincidence of names with the 'other' McWilliams - see previous page), a builder and his mother was Anne McWilliam (nee Boyle - a different name from that of the 'Wine' spouse), according to the same official copy of John's Entry of Death. The name 'Alexander' has a Scottish ring about it suggesting perhaps that this family had been settled in Scotland for a few generations, as N.G. McWilliam claims. (See the early Family Chart on next page).

Piecing together the various segments and reports we have a narrative as follows. About the year 1653 the immediate ancestors of John McWilliam left Roscommon (or at any rate some part of the Province of Connaught) and moved to Scotland. A number of possible reasons for this move suggest themselves. Maybe the family was thought to be too belligerent, as Neville McWilliam implies, and 'left Ireland for Ireland's sake'. It is also conceivable that they were reacting to the religious injustices and persecutions, especially if they still held to the old church allegiance. It could be they were victims of the transplantations, or unsettled by the rigours of the wars which Cromwell brought and their aftermath. The famines which stalked the land may have triggered a response to leave Ireland. Perhaps the motive to migrate was a combination of several, or all, of these factors. It could even be that they were persuaded to move by none of these influences, but by the simple fact that prospects looked better in Scotland. If the MacWilliams were by this time Protestants, the northern country would have been a rational choice. What is certain is that many families transferred over to Scotland and England over a period

FAMILY TREE CHART

of

EARLY GENERATIONS

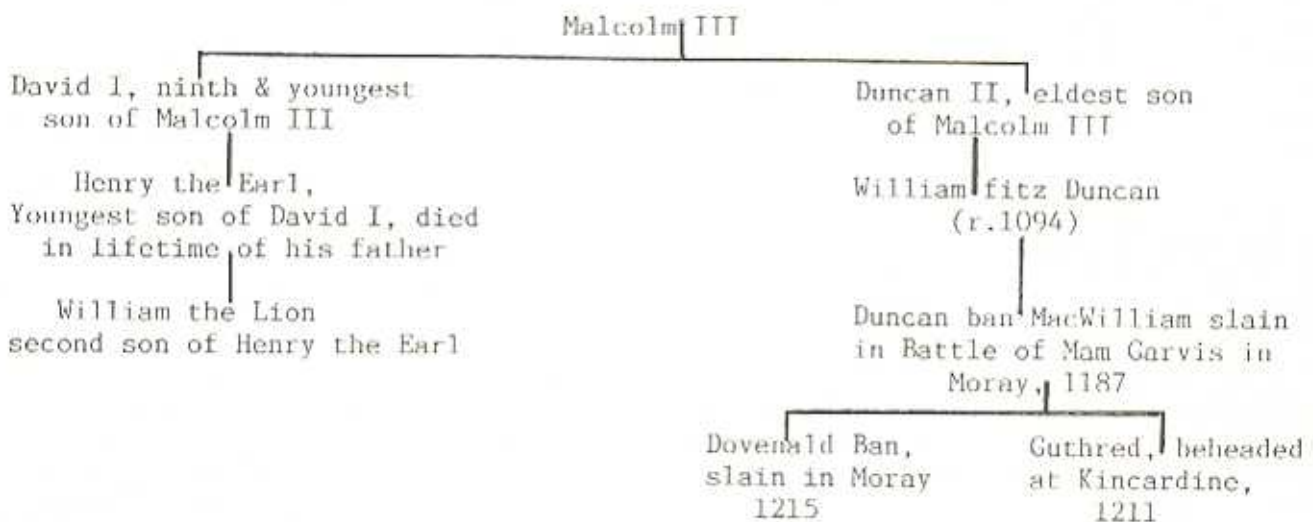


Note: In the usual manner, m. = married, b. = born, d. = died, c = about.

during the seventeenth century.

One could even speculate that there were blood relations in Scotland. There had been McWilliams there from way back. In listing the surnames of Scotland, George F. Black (54) writes:-

MacWilliam. Gaelic Mac Uilleim, 'son of William'. The Teutonic name William was early planted in the Highlands, the MacWilliams being powerful Gaelic claimants for the Scottish throne against King William the Lion. The relationship of the MacWilliams to William the Lion is shown in the following table:



Because of the lapse of time the existence of known relationships between the MacWilliams of the Province of Connaught in the seventeenth century to the MacWilliams of the above Scottish lineage in the thirteenth century is highly problematical, not to say speculative.

Whatever the deciding factor or factors, Neville McWilliam's story is that to Scotland this junior, or 'cadet', branch of the de Burgh or Burke family went. They left the Irish lands of the Earls of Clanricarde and settled in Scotland. The death certificate of John McWilliam supports this view because it unambiguously states, as recorded, that he was born in Scotland. The year would have been 1812. By 1844 (January) at least he, and just conceivably his father, Alexander and mother, Anne, would have been back in Ireland, for this was the date of birth of their second son, William and his birthplace was Roscommon, Ireland. Incidentally Neville McWilliam is quite correct in saying that his grandfather, John, 'died before my birth'. John died in 1881 and Neville was born in 1883.

'With his wife and family (ultimately of eleven children) he acquired a farming area on the old Clanricarde estate', writes Neville. This is consistent with the stories which William used to tell some of his grandchildren at the end of his life. He explained to them that he used to live with his father and mother in the lodge or gatehouse at the entrance to the Clanricarde property. His father, John, was evidently 'in charge' of the land and was presumably the 'steward' who managed the estate.

Although recorded as a contractor in the Entry of Death it seems John was an excellent practical agriculturalist and he possessed a remarkable memory, which no

doubt was a particularly useful trait in regard to stockbreeding and crop management. He could well have been a 'contractor' towards the end of his life in New Zealand and a successful agriculturist before migrating. The occupation of contractor carries a wide variety of connotations.

It is doubtful if John actually owned any land on the estate. A common practice in Ireland over a long period of time was for the landlord to let out his land in parcels to his 'tenants'. The rent was often in the form of labour performed on the owner's own land, and in return for such service the tenant was permitted to cultivate his own small allotment and have the produce of it for his own sustenance. One of the advances made at about this time by a more enlightened administration was to give the tenant a saleable interest in the portion of land so rented. As estate manager John McWilliam would probably have a quantitatively and qualitatively superior apportionment and one could surmise that he was the one who supervised the lesser tenants in their obligations to the landlord and, one likes to think, guarded their rights to land use.

William used to describe to his grandchildren the family lodge at the entrance to the estate as respectable, but small by comparison with the grand dwelling of the landlord. Neville records that here on this property, at least for a while, John McWilliam seems to have prospered.

It is highly informative to note that Neville states that the John McWilliam family consisted, eventually, of eleven children. John's death certificate gives nine (five males) and Rebecca's death certificate (twenty years later) shows eight (four males). The inference from these figures is that two of their children died before their father and another (a male) after his father but before his mother. The early demise of young children in the nineteenth century was, sadly, only too common.

Neville McWilliam's account goes on to explain that this prosperity of John continued only until the calamitous Irish potato famine. It has already been recorded how famine recurred from time to time in Ireland, including setbacks with the potato crop. The calamitous famine to which Neville refers was, however, the worst ever experienced. There were two reasons for its extreme severity. One was the fact that the potatoes were attacked by a new organism. Consequently the farmers were ignorant of any method of coping with it. It was in fact a fungus, known as phytophthora infestans (meaning literally plant decay infection). The leaves of the potato plant developed the dreaded black spots on top and a whitish mould on the underside while the tuber became black around the edges and finally degenerated into a black and entirely inedible pulp. The second reason for the extremity of the disaster of this plague was the fact that, because nothing was known about it or its treatment, it reoccurred for four successive seasons. The years were 1845 to 1849, the main initial impact being felt in the late spring of 1846 when the crop should have been maturing. Desiree Rees-Edwards writes (55) of it:-

There had been many terrible potato famines, but no terror was like that of the years 1845-49. This was partly because potato failures followed one another in quick succession, (and) partly caused by an unknown fungus. As potatoes are dug in Autumn it is in the following summer that a bad harvest is felt. The serious failure of 1845 made the summer of 1846 one of appalling suffering.

In the face of such a national disaster today one would expect cries from all sides for the government to give relief. On this occasion the British government did

(eventually) make some kind of feeble effort in the way of aid but the classical phrase of 'too little too late' is a gross understatement of their biased efforts. Cecil King in his book On Ireland writes (56):-

Trevellyan and his minister Sir Charles Wood (at the time of the potato famine 1845-49) must have been unusually heartless people, but the composition of the (British) Cabinet had to be borne in mind. Cabinets were smaller in those days, but three members, Lords Palmerston, Lansdown and Clanricarde, were Irish landlords.

Thus we see that the very landlord whose property John McWilliam managed was a member of the British government which had the responsibility and opportunity to ameliorate the sufferings and hardships of the people.

This Earl of Clanricarde was Ulick John De Burgh* who died in 1874 (See page 24). If he was like his heir he would have been an absentee landlord, living in England and prospering as a result of the fruits of his Irish lands and the sweat of his labourers**. This evil of the English treatment of the Irish is well known to those who have read the compelling novels of Maria Edgeworth, like Castle Rackrent (1800). The reference of William McWilliam to the 'big house' on the estate where the landlord resided suggests, however, that at least some of the time Lord Ulick John was on the spot on his lands in Connaught.

Nevertheless the failure of the British Cabinet to relieve the victims of the potato famine was real enough and Ulick John was clearly in a position to do something about it. The real snag was the public servant at the head of the government department, Trevellyan, mentioned above. He was, it seems, a bigoted and doctrinaire disciple of Adam Smith and his notions of laissez-faire. He advocated leaving the situation to the market forces; these would in turn settle the problem and have everything in a satisfactory state in the end. In the meantime, of course, the peasants were starving. Giving them some money, which the British government did eventually, was useless. The peasants of Ireland at this time were unfamiliar with the use of money. They cultivated their plots and lived off their potatoes and other produce for the whole year. Even with a little money in hand there was an almost complete absence of foodstuff to buy anyway. And then, as Cecil King (57) puts it:-

The effect of (British) government parsimony was not only felt by the peasants at the bottom of the social pyramid but all the way up - more landlords were ruined, shopkeepers even in prosperous towns were bankrupt.

Towards the end of the famine period the government obtained some grain from the USA which was only moderately helpful, for the Irish were ignorant of its preparation and domestic use. Those who survived naturally turned their thoughts to emigration which is the subject of the next Chapter. Long after the death of Lord Ulick John, AJ Balfour became Prime Minister of Britain (1902-5). His policy was to carry out extensive reforms in Ireland. 'He had no sympathy with Lord Clanricarde and other despotic absentees who gave their order such a bad name,' writes Terence White (58).

This may be a suitable place to finish the story of the earls of Clanricarde. The one who was a member of the British Cabinet, referred to above was born in 1802 and died on 10 April 1874. He was Ulick John De Burgh. He was raised within the ranks of the Peerage and became the first Marquess of Clanricarde. Although of only marginal concern to the McWilliam Saga, the following insight into the man given by

* In 1848 he (and his cousins) were authorised to resume their ancient name of De Burgh.

** His great-great grandson, the 7th Earl of Harewood refers to his 'unsavory reputation'. (59)

by Countess Granville (Harriet) is highly intriguing (60). The year is 1824.

Harriet told G (her sister)... 'The Earl of Clanricarde is aux pieds de Miss Canning and we are daily in expectation of the question. He is immensely rich quite good looking enough and very gentlemanlike.' His only fault seems to have been an addiction to low company of which it was hoped his wife might cure him... 'He has bought a magnificent set of Diamonds and is ordering a service of plate. De notre cote we have not been idle. Mrs Canning has provided lace, veils, gowns, etc. so the ornamental part of the concern is in great forwardness.' It seemed almost like tempting Providence but in the event all went well. Lord Clanricarde proposed in the Embassy drawing-room - apparently in public, for Harriet wrote: 'I never saw two people look so happy and radiant as they both did during the decisive conversation.'

Ulick John was succeeded by his son, the last Earl and second Marquess, for whom AJ Balfour and many others had such a poor regard. His name was Hubert George (De Burgh-Canning), the hyphenated addition resulting from his retaining an inheritance on the 'distaff' side. His mother's uncle was Earl Canning, Prime Minister (died 1827). Hubert George was born on 30 November 1832 and he died on 12.4.1916, the earldom thereby becoming extinct. Actually the official record says: 'All the honours became extinct except that for the Earldom of Clanricarde which devolved in accordance with the special limitation to his kinsman the 6th Marquess of Sligo. His estates and property passed to his great nephew the 6th Earl of Harewood who married the Princess Royal (Princess Mary) daughter of King George V.'

Henry Blyth writes of him (61):-

One of the leading personalities at the British Embassy (Dublin) in 1863 was Lord Hubert de Burgh, who was later to become Earl of Clanricarde; a wealthy Irish landlord, an Old Harrovian and man of some charm, which was more than offset by his meanness and intolerance. He was aged 30, bigoted and obstinate, worldly and selfish, and he had just come from spending ten years as attache at Turin. He owned a property of some 56000 acres (22,700ha) in East Galway, over which he exerted a feudal and harsh authority, but he lived in the Albany, in Piccadilly, and never visited Ireland if he could possibly avoid it. He was something of a rake, and his interest in women stopped well short of marriage. He cared not a jot for public opinion, and pursued his own course in life with little thought for others...

Lord de Burgh was a senior member of the embassy, and was therefore looked up to by the junior members, who were impressed not only by his seniority but also his cynicism...

These 22-odd thousand hectares were officially calculated to produce an annual income of over £24 000. His principal residence in Ireland was Portumna Castle, county Galway - not, be it noted, Roscommon. Galway and Roscommon are adjoining counties, east Galway being contiguous with west Roscommon. It is probably a fairly safe assumption to say that some of the many thousands of hectares would have been in Roscommon.

The Blue Mountains (NSW) town of Lawson, where William McWilliam's second son, Horace, was Rector in the early 1930s, possessed a postman of some erudition and much knowledge in matters heraldic. His name was Wilfred Lillas. In a letter to Horace dated 22 June 1931 he wrote:-

It is evident that... the Clan Riccard, Burke and McWilliam families of

Connaught are different branches of the same genealogical tree. Viscount Lascelles, husband of Princess Mary (only daughter of King George V and Queen Mary), inherited the huge fortune of the late Lord Clanriccard (sic) of Portumna Castle, Galway. He (ie Viscount Lascelles) was a nephew and therefore must be connected with the Burkes and McWilliams... The late Lord Clanriccard was a despicable old miser, but many of his ancestors were held in high esteem in Connaught; hence the following verse from an old Irish ballad by Thomas Davis*:-

"For often in O'Connor's Van
To triumph dashed each Connaught Clan -
And fleet as deer the Normans ran
Through Corlicus Pass and Ardahan,
And later times saw deeds as brave;
And glory guards Clanriccarde's grave -
Sing Oh! they died their land to save,
At Aughrim's slopes and Shannon's wave."

The accounts given by Henry Blyth and the Lawson postman, Wilfred Lillas are convincingly corroborated in the autobiography of George Lascelles, seventh Earl of Harewood. He writes (62):-

My father inherited a fortune from an eccentric great-uncle, Lord Clanricarde, whose sister (Lady Elizabeth de Burgh) married my great-grandfather, and whose mother was the daughter of George Canning, the Prime Minister (1770-1827). My father was wounded several times in the 1914-18 war, and once on leave he was going to lunch at the St James Club when he recognised his great-uncle sitting in a corner. Lord Clanricarde was not at all popular in London, any more than in Ireland, where he had property; in fact he seems to have been a very disagreeable old man. In any case, my father, out of manners, went to sit with his great-uncle for half an hour before lunch. In 1916 Lord Clanricarde died, leaving all his money to my father, to the great fury of my grandfather.

The present writer remembers the rumours in 1922 which said that King George and Queen Mary were keen for their daughter, Princess Mary, to marry this inheritor of Lord Clanricarde's wealth, because he was so rich. At any rate it can be assumed that the fortune acquired by the sixth Earl of Harewood was no hindrance to the marriage and its success.

Lord Clanricarde's great-grand-nephew goes on (63):-

Old Lord Clanricarde had an apartment in (the) Albany, and was so mean that rumour had it he used to search the dustbins of Piccadilly to see if they contained a decent bit of bread for his lunch... A very odd man.

The official record finishes:- 'His estates and property passed to his great-nephew, the 6th Earl of Harewood who married the Princess Royal.' To clarify the relationship between the Earl of Clanricarde and the Earl of Harewood a family tree chart is shown on the next page.

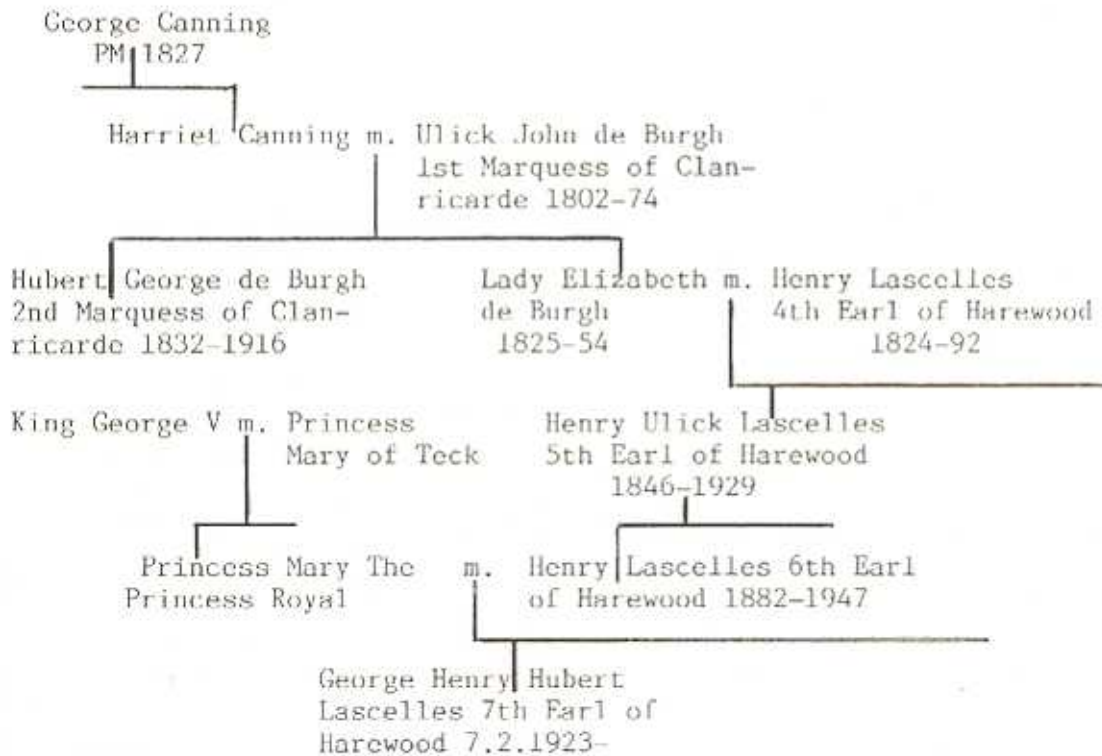
To bring the story up to the present day let it be pointed out that according to Burke's Irish Family Records (64) there is a junior branch of the family of the extinct Marquesses of Clanricarde which today is headed by Major John Hubert de Burgh MC of Oldtown, county Kildare. He served in World War II, is the owner of Oldtown Stud,

* There was a poet, Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45). One of his poems was called 'The Welcome'.

Steward of the Irish Turf Club and a member of the Irish National Hunt Committee and a member of the racing board. He was born on 17 February 1921 and educated at Stowe. He and his wife, Clare Susannah (nee Shennan) have three children, Hubert David John born 17 February 1954, William Henry Douglas (20 November 1959) and Caroline Clare (21 November 1956).

FAMILY TREE CHART

CONNECTION BETWEEN THE EARLS OF CLANRICARDE AND HAREWOOD



References

- (54) Black, George F., PhD, The Surnames of Scotland, Their Origin, Meaning and History. (The New York Public Library, New York, 1962).
- (55) Rces-Edwards, Desiree. Page 135. See (9), page 7.
- (56) King, Cecil. Page 66. See (6), page 7.
- (57) Ibid. Page 77.
- (58) White, Terence. Page 203. See (8), page 7.
- (59) Lascelles, George. The Tongs and the Bones. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London (1981). Page 309.
- (60) Ibid. Page 147.
- (61) Blyth, Henry. Skittles, The Last Victorian Courtesan. Page 138
- (62) Lascelles, George. Page 25. See (59).
- (63) Ibid. Page 26
- (64) Burke. Page 338. See (16), page 13.