

STROKESTOWN PARK AND THE MAKING OF THE FAMINE MUSEUM AN INTERVIEW WITH DECLAN JONES

by *Lorraine Pearsall*



At the top of what is said to be the widest street in Ireland stands Strokestown Park in the small town of Strokestown, County Roscommon. As one of Ireland's newest heritage attractions, Strokestown Park comprises Strokestown House itself, formal walled pleasure gardens, a restaurant, and, most important in terms of Irish history and culture, The Famine Museum. Located in what once were the stable yards on the property, this museum documents the potato famine in Ireland, the greatest single social disaster of nineteenth-century Europe. Between 1845 and 1850, when blight devastated the potato crop, fully one quarter of the population at the time—more than two million people—either died or emigrated, indelibly changing the course of Irish history.

Although there were many Irish country estates similar to this one at the time of the Famine, Strokestown Park gained particular notoriety in 1847. The landlord, Major Denis Mahon, was assassinated that year, ostensibly as a consequence of the desperation felt by tenant farmers who lived on his land. Following his death, the property remained in the hands of the Mahon family, and Strokestown House was occupied by Mahons until 1979.

In late June 1999, I spoke with Declan Jones, General Manager of Strokestown Park, who is responsible for its day-to-day operations. In the following interview he talks about the history of Strokestown Park itself, the Great Famine and its effects, and what this particular site hopes to accomplish as a major national attraction for visitors.

L.P. Declan, I wonder if you could talk a bit about how and when this museum got started? Who were the people who were instrumental in its beginnings? Why did it develop?

D.J. Well, I suppose two key personalities were equally important in the development of this museum, firstly Jim Callery though his involvement with Westward Garage [a truck leasing and sales company] and secondly and equally importantly his cousin, Luke Dodd, who started to work here in the early 1980s and became instrumental for the whole direction of the

museum. The idea came about as a result of the discovery of a collection of documents found in Strokestown House in 1979, the year that the Westward Group purchased this property from the last Mahon to live here, Olive Hales Pakenham Mahon. These documents, which the Mahon family agreed to leave behind, deal with the administration of this estate during the tenure of the Mahon family, spanning a period of about 130 to 140-odd years. We are particularly interested in those documents specifically relating to the period immediately before and after the Famine, from around the late 1830s right through the early 1850s.

The first thing that strikes you when you enter the grounds of Strokestown Park is the fine mansion, which was the landlord's house; the landlord class had the resources to leave an indelible mark on the landscape in spite of the fact that prior to the Famine, there were some 12,000 Irish tenants living on this estate. Nothing of a physical nature remains to represent those people's lives. So the idea for the museum was that it be a place to put these original documents on display so that people could get a greater awareness of the conditions that existed. Its purpose is a dual one—largely educational, making us more aware of our own history; but it also has the effect of balancing to an extent the history of the “big house,” in that it seeks to represent the lives of the particular tenants living on the estate. And also—and this is an important focus throughout the museum from an educational point of view—at different stages we draw parallels between what happened in Ireland 150 years ago, and what continues to happen throughout the developing world.

L.P. What is the specific financial history behind the museum? How is it currently funded?

D.J. The story of Strokestown Park is a fascinating one from start to finish, and no less fascinating is the financial aspect of funding for it. Strokestown Park is still privately owned by the Westward Group. Just to give you a bit of background, the Westward Garage was set up in Strokestown in the 1960s. Initially, its site was on the main road leading towards Tusk, which was directly in line with the entrance gates to Strokestown Park. It was a young company trying to survive and establish itself and make some sort of return on its investments. During this time there was an on-going battle between Olive and the principals at the Garage since Olive felt that this sort of business was ruining the main street of Strokestown—that its engines and farm machinery strewn around this lovely, wide street was taking from the surroundings. So at that stage the relationship was far from harmonious and eventually the site of the garage was moved onto the Longford Road, which backed up onto the Mahon estate.

In the mid-to-late 1970s, Westward Garage was given the sole right to import and distribute Scania trucks into the Republic of Ireland—these are heavy goods vehicles. In order to handle this increased business, Westward needed more room, and Jim Callery approached Olive (but since his personal relationship with her was less than ideal) about her property through a third party. Word filtered back that the property would not be sold piece by piece in order to expand the Garage specifically, and, further, that the entire estate was to be sold at auction in London since the quite elderly Olive could no longer live independently there. No one in her family, all of whom were living in England, had an interest in coming to Strokestown to oversee a country estate. The prospect probably did not look attractive to them since at this stage Strokestown Park was very run down.

Anyway, the estate went for auction and the directors of Westward, who felt that the

opportunity of securing this land might not come again, went to London and purchased the estate. Undoubtedly, they would have had the initial intention of utilizing a few acres for their own use and selling off the rest to recoup their finances. Because of the condition of the house and yards, however, much of the value of the estate was underpinned by the agricultural value of the land remaining with it. Actually, Olive was eventually quite pleased that a local company had purchased the entire property, and over the following months she built up a strong relationship with Jim Callery, who became a regular visitor to the house. Part of the sale agreement was that Olive and her second husband, who died in 1980, could remain in the house for as long as they wished. On one visit to Olive, Jim asked if he could look through the estate offices. It was at that point that he discovered boxes and boxes of beautifully written and quite legible documents now housed in this museum. Jim Callery was not an academic, but as a shrewd businessman he was clever and had a keen eye for what these materials represented. He was quick to realize that what he had found had a huge value in terms of our heritage and history. He was particularly moved by documents relating to the town land, and especially to that land where his own family came from, from which his own great-great-grandmother had been evicted. As a result of Jim's findings, the Board of Directors of Westward Garage voted to restore Strokestown Park rather than sell it, probably to foreign nationals since the Irish economy was doing poorly at this time, and to display the materials that Jim Callery had discovered.

Today, Strokestown House is by no stretch of the imagination a viable commercial undertaking. Because it was and still is privately owned and operated, we are largely dependent on admissions and private donations. People who visit here tend to come again because it leaves the same impression on all who visit it, but still there is that pressure as regards finances. As you can see, there is still much to be done here, and much to maintain. At the time Olive left the house, she was confined to one room because the house, first built in 1696, had physically reached its lowest point, with a leaky roof and dry rot taking over. Generations of Mahons, when their fortunes were in decline, had not spent money on it. Today, Westward Garage continues to make up the financial shortfall of Strokestown Park on an annual basis. We work very hard here, and the attraction is run in a very professional manner to insure that losses here are minimized as much as possible. Equally, however, we realize that, given the nature of the undertaking, Strokestown Park is essentially a loss-maker. We go to great lengths to limit that loss in attempting to attract as many visitors as possible and to provide an excellent service for them. Really, it's a financial responsibility that should be borne by a government or state, and that's part of the fantastic element of the story of Strokestown Park—that a commercial company which remains directly involved in the very competitive motor industry should see fit to underwrite trading losses of a heritage attraction. Certainly the Garage has benefited from its association with this museum, but not in real monetary terms.

We have also received, I should point out, some monies through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), from donations, and, in the past, some monies from the Ireland Funds for different aspects of the museum's projects and, in particular, for the restorations of the walled gardens.

L.P. About how many visitors do you see here in an average year?

D.J. In 1998, we had about 64,000 people visit Strokestown Park. To date this year, our numbers would not be up hugely, but they are holding and slightly up, and I would expect that as we get into the height of the season, there would be a healthy increase on that. We need to be focused on increasing these numbers to around 100,000 minimum visitors a year, though, as a means of really securing the future of the attraction.

L.P. What is it that you would like visitors to take away with them after a visit here?

D.J. Well, I think most importantly as one leaves it is important to note that the whole nature of the content of Strokestown Park has received so little attention through contemporary schooling both here and abroad, through even what has been handed down through the generations through word of mouth. What I would like most to see people taking away is a greater awareness of the conditions which existed in this country in relation to the Famine. But beyond those pure conditions as a simple fact, it's important for visitors to understand how those conditions were permitted to exist, how they had come about, what factors were in place in order to allow those conditions to remain in place, and the effects of all of those circumstances on the ordinary people, and, in particular, on the poorest people in society—those that tended to have the least, who had little or nothing in the way of resources, the people who had the least in terms of representation, who would not have had anyone to look out for their welfare. What I would be most interested in people to take away after a visit here would be a consciousness of the similarities between what happened here in Ireland with what still happens in other parts of the world. Currently, we see similar outbreaks throughout our own continent of Europe, as well as in many other places in the developing world, and we need to be not only more conscious but also pro-active, regarding the sufferings of the poor and disenfranchised around us.

L.P. Do you think that the Famine and its consequences still affects the Irish psyche and the sense of what it means to be Irish even today?

D.J. Oh, yes, in many, many, many respects. To know the history of the Famine and to see the many effects it had on the country 150 years ago is to also see effects that have lasted up to the present time. An immediate effect, of course, was the huge decline of population, and accompanying that was the loss of Irish culture, the loss of the use of the Irish language—all of these losses were part of the humiliation and degradation that the population had endured. The flight from Ireland, of those who had not died during the Famine of starvation or disease, was one of blind panic to seek a new world where one would have liberty and would be able to make some sort of life for oneself and one's family and get away from this on-going, constant oppression, where one was basically the property of a landlord, where anything that one generated or produced one would not have any claim over. The life of the tenant had one purpose—to fund the excessive lifestyle of the landlord class.

The effects of the Famine being so profound and complex, I wouldn't claim in any respect to be an expert on them—I am neither an academic nor a trained historian, but someone interested in the topic—but so much of what we see in modern Ireland we can associate with

the conditions that existed in our past. I live in a rural part of Ireland, farmed myself for eight years and still carry out some farming, and I have always been aware of this love of the land and how deeply rooted that is in the Irish psyche. In any community or town land in this country, you will always hear stories about the land, families feuding over land, relations who will fall out over scraps of land that are not even capable of sustaining a single person, let alone a family; but that land is still valued way and above its commercial value and what it is capable of producing. You might be familiar with the film with Richard Harris, *The Field*, which addresses this issue. I think that this kind of thinking is the legacy of the past when the native Irish couldn't own land, when they were precluded by law to ever build up a legal right to it.

And I think all of these aspects of Irish life, particularly in this part of the country which was hit so hard by the Famine, are part of the stigma which still is psychologically attached to the workhouse system. That legacy is also still with us.

L.P. Can you explain what the workhouses were and how they operated?

D.J. The workhouses were provided under the Poor Law Act of 1838, a number of years before the Famine occurred, to cater for the huge numbers of people who were living in abject poverty throughout the country. As many people as possible, however, were discouraged from going there in the first place to avail of the relief it might offer. Furthermore, the workhouse conditions were designed in such a way as to make it as unpleasant as possible once people did finally decide to go there. Specifically, in order to discourage large numbers of people from seeking the workhouse, it was made to be a humiliating and utterly degrading experience. The families who went there had to succumb to the fact that, as a family, they would be split up; there were separate quarters for mothers, fathers, and children. So once the family decided to avail of what little relief was possible, they had to reach a decision—what price survival? The family, once separated, would have no contact with one another thereafter. As food became scarcer and scarcer, most especially when the Famine came, the same follow-on decision had to be made in the workhouse that families had to make before they entered it: who got the food? Was it the men, the adults who were capable of doing some work and surviving long enough to secure some kind of income which would insure the survival of the family? What about the other family members—who would be chosen to be the first to die through disease, lack of food and water? All of these decisions had to be taken within each and every household by ordinary people who had previously lived a very simple, ordinary way of life. Certainly they had lived in poverty, but by all accounts they had almost come to accept their lot in life as Providence, that this was the way they were to live. Many of the documents you will see in the museum, which would have most likely been written to the landlord on behalf of the tenants by teachers or priests, reflect this mental attitude and use that type of language; there are comments like “we have conducted ourselves peaceably in the past” and “we have submitted to the will of Divine Providence,” but that as the situation became desperate, they wrote that unless they were given immediate help, they would have no option but to resort to outrage. So the whole use of the word “providence” is key; this is to be their life, everything that they are capable of producing goes to the landlord, and their own subservient family, in turn, suffers.

The entire workhouse system fostered the utter degradation of the individual, the total

sacrifice and surrender of any shred of human dignity or pride in order to insure survival, and I think that is another stigma still left on Irish consciousness today. In this area, the Western Health Board built a home in Roscommon for the elderly on the site of the Roscommon workhouse. It's a modern, well-laid out, well-organized, and well-run institution, but older generations still refer to it as "the workhouse." It certainly shows a lack of sensitivity, I think, to use a place such as an old workhouse site to build an old folks' home because the painful memory of what happened there and in terms of 150 years, it's not that long ago historically—is still very real, especially in the minds of the older generations.

L.P. What is the local reaction to this museum? Have neighboring people regularly lent their support here?

D.J. Reaction has been quite positive in terms of what we have done, and are still doing. At the time the museum opened, there was some criticism in the local press, letters to the editor, that sort of thing, that in the presentation of materials we were not hard enough on the British. My answer to that is that we have made every attempt here to present an objective, factual history of what happened in Ireland in the nineteenth century, without, so to speak, taking a position. We think that the documents and other materials in the museum speak for themselves, and we want visitors to make up their own minds about what they see here.

Yes, many local people have helped with the establishment of, and the continued success of, Strokestown Park. Luke Dodd, in particular, secured the help of so many people, much of it given voluntarily, in cases where if there had been a cost involved, things may never have happened. So much work needed to be done here, and often we were very far away from reaching our goals. Much of the work was done gradually over a period of years, before I was ever here, by friends of Jim Callery and Luke and others, all of whom have played a very important role in the story of Strokestown Park.

L.P. Following Jim Callery's find and the Westward Group's purchase, when was Strokestown Park opened to the public for the first time?

D.J. The first public showing of the house itself was in 1981 with the making of the film *Ann Devlin*, which takes place at the time of the 1798 rebellion and which was shot on this property. It was at that point that Luke Dodd first became involved. Luke is a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and he stayed here at Strokestown Park while *Ann Devlin* was being made as a kind of overseer to make sure that nothing got damaged during the production. Like Jim Callery, Luke is determined and dogged, and he seemed, like Jim, to know what should be done to set up a museum. What was achieved in the years following the opening of, initially, just the house, is a true reflection of Luke's spirit. In 1987, the house itself was formally and regularly opened to the public, followed by the Famine Museum opening in 1994. In 1997 the walled pleasure gardens were restored and opened up for public viewing. So all of Strokestown Park has been developed in phases; we are always conscious of the fact that to attract visitors, we must always be renewing and upgrading what we have to offer.

Editor's Note: Strokestown Park is open to the public seasonally from Easter until the end of October every day of the week from 11:00 a.m. until 5:30 p.m., but pre-booked tours can be arranged at other times

of the year. The facility can most easily be reached by car and is about 90 miles from Dublin. Plan on spending at least half a day in order to see all that Strokestown Park has to offer. A visit here can be combined with other touring in the area, including Carrigglass Manor, in Longford, the Locks Distillery in Kilbeggan, and Roscommon Castle in Ros-common.