

LADY BETTY SUGRUE

Thief, Murderer & Executioner of Roscommon

BORN SOME time around 1750 in Co. Kerry, Lady Betty, or Elizabeth Sugrue to quote her proper name, was never a popular figure wherever she was living. Renowned for her violent temper, her life unfolded into one of desperation and wickedness along with cruelty taken to extreme levels.

Married to a farmer, she was evicted after his death and then homeless had to take to the road along with her two children.

She opted for a very long walk to Roscommon and it has never been known why but during the journey she lost her youngest son through starvation and exposure.

It is thought that he was buried in a shallow grave by the roadside. Now with just her older son Pádraig she arrived at Gallowstown Co Roscommon where the two made use of a disused hovel by the side of the road.

Both mother and son became accustomed to a life of the most miserable poverty eking out a bare existence from begging, general scavenging and quite possibly robbery.

Such deprivation and being regularly subjected to his mother's extremely violent outbursts, Pádraig was driven to improving his lot and he was persuaded to take the 'King's Shilling'.

In April 1775 he enlisted in the British Army and was posted to serve in North America. Betty was now a recluse and growing more and more bitter by the day.

With news of her son becoming less and less as the days went by, she managed an existence by taking in lodgers at a few pennies per night.

ON A STORMY November night in 1789, a well dressed tall man with a beard came and asked for lodgings as the local inn was full. Betty took him in and after telling him that she had very little in the way of food and drink, he gave her a gold piece and told her to

go out and buy meat, eggs, bread and spirits.

The gold piece stirred her imagination and her bitterness that the guest was wealthy and she was not. That night she stabbed him to death and robbed him of his money.

The following day when going through his papers she became struck with horror when she discovered that the man was none other than her son, Pádraig. There are many who believe that this was nothing new and that Betty had been murdering and robbing her lodgers for years.



Roscommon Gaol.

BY MIKE WEBSTER

After her arrest and trial in the courthouse overlooking the market square she was sentenced to death in Roscommon Gaol.

On the day of the execution there were no less than 25 others sentenced to death that day. As the appointed time drew nigh, the hangman stated that he was too sick to do his work. The sheriff along with his deputy, being men of 'refinement, humility, education and sensibility' declined from standing in for the hangman. In front of an increasingly restless crowd, the swarthy figure of Elizabeth Sugrue stepped up and loudly proclaimed 'Set me free and I'll hang them all'.

After a moment's pondering, the sheriff accepted the offer and the 25 were dispatched without a shred of



emotion. From that moment on Lady Betty, as she then became known also became Roscommon's hangwoman for a generation.

'THE 'WOMAN From Hell' as she was dubbed was rewarded with her own rent free room in the gaol. And it is thought, a salary for which she regularly administered public floggings in the street, an undertaking which she approached with much enthusiasm. She also supervised the removal of the

gallows from the square to outside her room high up on the third floor

Interestingly much of what we know about Lady Betty has been passed to us from Sir William Robert Wilde (1815-1876), Oscar's father.

He lived in Roscommon and knew and spoke with many who had known her. It is through Wilde that we learn that she had a penchant for drawing charcoal portraits on her wall of all those that she had hanged.

Her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 1802 'in recognition of her service to the safety of the public'. When she died, of natural causes, in 1807, Lady Betty was buried in an unmarked grave inside the gaol's perimeter. She was not the first hangwoman in Ireland.

Another unidentified woman fulfilled the role on 13th November, 1782, when she hanged 2 men at Kilmainham. ■

good to denounce any one—was addressed to women and the few old people from the immediate vicinity.

The old gaol of Roscommon stood, and, although now converted to other purposes, still stands, in the market-place, in the centre of the town. It is an exceedingly high, dark, gloomy-looking building, with a castellated top, like one of the ancient fortresses that tower above the houses in many of the continental cities. It can be discerned at a great distance; and, taken in connexion with the extensive ruins of O'Connor's Castle, in the suburbs, and the beautiful abbey upon the other side of the town, seems to partake of the character of the middle-age architecture. The fatal drop was, perhaps, the highest in Ireland. It consisted of a small doorway in the front of the third story, with a simple iron beam and pulley above, and the *lapboard* merely a horizontal door hinged to the wall beneath, and raised or let fall by means of a sliding-bolt, which shot from the wall when there was occasion to put the apparatus of death in requisition.

Fearful as this elevated gallows appeared, and unique in its character, it was not more so than the finisher of the law who then generally officiated upon it. No decrepid wretch, no crime-hardened ruffian, no secret and mysterious personage, who was produced occasionally disguised and masked, plied his dreadful trade here. Who, think you, *gentle* reader—who now, perhaps, recoils from these unpleasant but truthful minutæ—officiated upon this gallows high?—a female!—a middle-aged, stout-made, dark-eyed, swarthy-complexioned, but by no means forbidding-looking woman—the celebrated Lady Betty—the finisheress of the law—the unflinching priestess of the executive for the Connaught circuit, and Roscommon in particular, for many years. Few children, born or reared in that county thirty, or even five-and-twenty, years ago, who were not occasionally frightened into “being good,” and going to sleep, and not crying when left alone in the dark, by *huggath a’ Pooka*, or, “here’s Lady Betty.”

The only fragment of her history which we have been able to collect is, that she was a person of violent temper, though in

manners rather above the common, and possessing some education. It was said that she was a native of the County Kerry, and that by her harsh usage she drove her only son from her at an early age. He enlisted; but, in course of years, returned with some money in his pocket, the result of his campaigning. He knocked at his father's door, and asked a night's lodging, determined to see for himself whether the brutal mother he had left had in any way repented, or was softened in her disposition before he would reveal himself. He was admitted, but not recognized. The mother, discovering that he possessed some money, murdered him during the night. The crime was discovered, and the wretched woman sentenced to be hanged, along with the usual dockful of sheep-stealers, whiteboys, shop-lifters, and cattle-houghers, who, to the amount of seven or eight at a time, were invariably “turned off” within four-and-twenty hours after their sentences at each assizes. No executioner being at hand, time pressing, and the sheriff and his deputy being men of refinement, education, humanity, and sensibility, who could not be expected to fulfil the office which they had undertaken,—and for which one of them, at least, was paid,—this wretched woman, being the only person in the gaol who could be found to perform the office, consented; and under the name of Lady Betty, officiated, unmasked and undisguised, as *hangwoman* for a great number of years after; and she used also to flog publicly in the streets, as a part of her trade.* Numerous are the tales related of her exploits, which we have now no desire to dwell upon. We may, however, mention one extraordinary trait of her character. She was in the habit of drawing, with a burnt stick, upon the walls of her apartment, portraits of all the persons she executed.

Before daybreak, upon the Monday morning after Michael Welsh was shot, several labourers, surrounded by a guard of police, might be seen erecting two tall scaffolding poles in the market-square, opposite the gaol. When this was completed, the cart containing the body of the fisherman's son, with the redoubted Lady Betty sitting in it, emerged from the back

* This history of Lady Betty we have received from persons who were perfectly acquainted with her during her long residence in Roscommon.

entrance of the gaol; and, having reached the gibbet, the body, with the assistance of some of the gaol officials, was hoisted by her ladyship to the top of the poles, which stood about six or eight feet apart; and from these the body was suspended by the hands, in that attitude which nations are accustomed to adore!! Upon the head was tied one of the decorated hats, on which was pasted a placard with the word "RIBBONMAN" written upon it. The breast was bare—the wounds exposed. When the day broke, the inhabitants of Roscommon had this horrid spectacle before their eyes, placed there by order of the governor of the district.

The rain soon came down in torrents, and continued to pour all day. Every spout and eave-course gave forth its rill; the dirty streets ran seas of mud which flashed in long undulations over the flag-way or pavement when set in motion by the passing vehicle; several of the shops remained closed, and few of the respectable classes were to be seen in the streets; old ladies took to their beds, and young ones made preparations for a hasty departure to the metropolis; reports of the most exaggerated description were circulated upon all sides, and large bodies of military arriving from Athlone and Galway, strengthened the apprehensions of the timid, and confirmed the reports of the alarmists. The magistrates met in conclave all day, and it was expected that something wonderful was to take place next morning.

Around the gibbet stood a guard of military and police, and upon one of the kerb-stones of the adjoining street sat two females, who occasionally uttered the wildest strains of grief that the Irish cry, particularly when uttered by those in the position of the mother and sister of the gibbeted corpse, is capable of expressing.

During the night the rain cleared off; towards morning a smart frost set in, and after it, the sun rose large, red, and blushing through the misty air; but soon the fog cleared off, and the same brightness which shines equally on the just and the unjust lit up the old castles, and gaols, and abbeys, and houses, and threw its slanting rays through the open doorways of the long, low cabins, and evoked a reeking steam from all the

dunghills in the dirty lanes of Roscommon. Hundreds of the peasantry might be seen approaching the town from all directions. Magistrates and country gentlemen, armed to the teeth, with the light frost hanging in whitish spray upon their hair and whiskers, and clouds of vapour steaming from every mouth and nostril, arrived in gigs and tax-carts. Some great spectacle, of which a rumour had gone abroad, was evidently expected. Towards noon the town was thronged with people; every window was occupied; many climbed to the house-tops; wherever footing or elevation was to be obtained, thither crowded some of the anxious throng. There was no ribald jesting—even neighbours scarcely exchanged a greeting; sullen anger, fierce determination, savage revenge, brooded over the mass, and was fearfully depicted in every face. If we said that from twenty to thirty thousand people filled the streets of Roscommon that day we should not exaggerate. That beautiful regiment of dragoons, "The Green Horse," with their bright helmets and flourishing horsetails, paraded the streets, and parties of foot soldiers and police took up positions in different parts of the town, the sun glancing brightly from their polished firelocks.


About noon, the gibbeted body was taken down, placed in a sitting position in a cart, the arms extended, and tied to pitchforks, the back supported by a plank; around the body were arranged, as in an arm-trophy, the various guns, and pikes, and scythes, and other weapons, which had been taken from the ribbonmen for some time past; and on several of those were placed the hats picked up on the battle-field of Ballintober. This sad spectacle led the procession; after it, advanced slowly three horses and cars, and to the tail-board of each cart was bound a man, naked to the waist, who had been sentenced to be flogged three times through the towns of Roscommon, Strokes-town, and Castlereagh, but the execution of whose sentence had, until then, been deferred, in the hope that the country would have remained quiet. Lady Betty, for some reason, did not officiate upon this occasion. One of the men was flogged by a Sicilian boy—the others, by drummers belonging to regiments then in the province.

The military lined the streets ; the procession moved through the long straggling town. The rere was brought up by a cavalcade of magistrates, chiefly on horseback ; in the centre of this part of the procession rolled slowly on, to "flogging pace," an open chariot, in which sat the Major, who ordered and directed the proceedings—we have no desire to describe him—and by his side lolled a large, unwieldy person, with bloated face and slavering lip—the ruler of Connaught, the sheriff at George Robert Fitzgerald's execution—the great gauger-maker of the west—*The Right Honourable*.

Let us drop the curtain. If this was not Connaught, it was Hell.

We have only to remark that the scene, with all its horrors, would have been repeated in two of the other towns of the county, but for petitions to government from some of their inhabitants.

Well—it was a frightful spectacle, horrifying and demoralizing, but perhaps applicable to the time and circumstances ; at all events, it completely put an end to ribbonism in that district for many a year.



THE OLD JAIL

BY P. M. GANNON

The old jail occupies a prominent position in the market square in the centre of Roscommon town. The fact of it being built on a hill adds to its height and gloominess. It is many years now since the jail was used for the purpose for which it was built. It is one of the few jails still in existence in which there were public executions.

The celebrated "Lady Betty" was the "finisher of the law" for the Connaught circuit and Roscommon in particular for many years. Unfortunately, there is not much history of her life available at the present day. It is said, that she was a person of violent temper, though in her manners she was far above that of the common people of her day. She was believed to be a native of Kerry and that through harshness, drove her only son from home at an early age. Some years later the son returned home with a considerable amount of money which he had accumulated over the years. He asked for lodgings

at his old homestead and they were granted by his father, who did not recognise him as his son. His mother, discovering that he had money murdered him during the night.

The crime was discovered and the wretched woman was sentenced to be hanged along with the usual number of sheep-stealers, who were normally hanged twenty-four hours after each assizes. On this particular occasion there was no executioner available and the "Lady Betty" offered to take on the job, thus gaining clemency for herself. She completed this task unmasked and undisguised. She continued as executioner for the town for many years after.

There is another trait in her character which I would like to mention, she had a habit of drawing with a burnt stick, on the wall of her apartment, the portraits of the people she had executed.

Early one morning after a man named Michael Welsh

had been shot in Ballintubber, a large scaffolding was erected in the market square opposite the jail. When this was completed the body of Welsh was hoisted by "her ladyship" to the top of the poles. From these he was suspended by the hands. When day break came the townspeople were horrified at this outrageous spectacle. Most of the shops remained closed and only a few people were to be seen on the streets that day. Exaggerated reports were circulated on all sides and large bodies of military forces were drafted in from Athlone and Galway, to ensure that peace was maintained. The Magistrates met in conclave all that day and something great was expected to be announced on the following day. Towards noon, the town was thronged with people and every vantage point in the town was occupied.

At noon the body of Michael Welsh was taken down from the platform and placed in a sitting position in a cart. His arms were extended for-

ward and tied to a pitchfork and his back was supported by a plank. Around the body were arranged guns, pikes and scythes which had been picked up on the battlefield in Ballintubber. This sad spectacle led the procession. Shortly afterwards three horses and carts advanced, and to the tailboard of each cart was bound a man naked to the waist who had been sentenced to be flogged three times in the towns of Strokes-town, Roscommon and Castlereagh. The execution of these sentences had been deferred until then in the hope that the country would remain quiet. For some unknown reason "Lady Betty" did not officiate on this occasion. The military lined the streets as the procession moved through the town. The rear was taken up by a cavalcade of Magistrates on horseback. This sad spectacle remained in the minds of the people of the town for many years as one of the most torturing sights ever seen in the town down through the centuries.

Film on story of Lady Betty, hangwoman of Roscommon's Old Gaol

By Oisín Cusack

A Dublin-based production company has recently produced a short animated film about Lady Betty, the famous hangwoman of Roscommon's Old Gaol.

Screenplay writer for the film Bobby Moloney says that the idea, by Whackala, to tell the tale of Roscommon Gaol's only female executioner stemmed from a work colleague Lorraine Harton.

"The film's story writer, Lorraine, found out about the mysterious character of Lady Betty. She was doing an MA in Irish history at the time so she was researching little-known female historical figures in Ireland," he said.

"She came across Lady Betty and she found it was interesting because it was something that was half true and half folk-

lore. There was a mix of 'was she real or was she not'. Was it a story that just people from Roscommon told or was she an Irish historical figure that fell through the cracks?

"She also consulted with John Kerrigan of the Roscommon Town Heritage to find out more about all her contradicting and wild stories." Bobby explained that the seven-minute-long animated film followed the myth of Lady Betty from her husband dying, to her arching poverty to the murder of her son.

"The film is narrated through two friends sitting at a bar trying to outdo each other with their tale of Lady Betty. Paddy (Colm Meaney) and Mick (David Pearse) are competing with each other to shoehorn in their favourite stories or poke holes in the other person's plot. The film follows the life of Lady



A Dublin-based production company has recently produced a short animated film about Lady Betty, Roscommon's Old Gaol famous hangwoman.

Betty. Because her son abandoned her years previous to move to America, he is afraid to tell her who he is upon his return as Lady Betty has a bit of

a temper. She also does not recognise her son either because he now has a big beard and an American accent.

"During the night

though, she sees all his wealth and she gets caught trying to murder him. She is then thrown in prison but the hangman doesn't turn up to

execute her and the other prisoners. She then offers to do it and she gets the job until she dies. She does the hanging until she dies and she is buried

in the prison grounds," he said.

The "Lady Betty" film was funded by Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland and RTÉ, under their Frameworks, animation scheme with previous recipients including the Oscar-nominated "Late Afternoon". It was directed by Paul McGrath and produced by Leticia Agudo.

On plans for the future, he says that the production company has more films in the pipeline.

"We have stuff in development at the moment. It's not at the stage yet where we can discuss it but this is just one short film so hopefully, this one will premier in Galway and then go to other festivals around the world."

The film will be screened at the Galway Film Fleadh both online and in-person on July 23rd and 24th. See galwayfilmfleadh.com for details.