

THE BENNET DIARIES

BY MICHAEL ANDERSON

“Died of a sore leg.” “Civil, harmless man.” “Cross kind of a woman.” These are typical of the comments in James Bennet’s journal.

The Bennet Diaries, sometimes referred to as ‘The Poyntzpass Diaries’ are held in the Public Record Office, Northern Ireland (D4648). They contain diary records made by Elizabeth Bennet (born 1810 died 24th May 1847) between 1831 and 1841 and a journal compiled by Elizabeth’s son James Bennet (born circa 1845 died 1932) which he titled *‘History of people who lived and died in Poyntzpass and neighbourhood from early years....up to the year 1880 said year I left it with some few remarks about them. Also a few country peoples names who were well known to me. And a few other remarks about places etcetera round Poyntzpass.’*

Of greater interest perhaps, are the Bennets themselves but first *‘The Diaries’*.

James’ diary is a journal rather than a diary and his record of the people who died seems to have been made retrospectively, since the year of death is usually entered as ‘about’. Each entry records a name, Residence and Remarks.

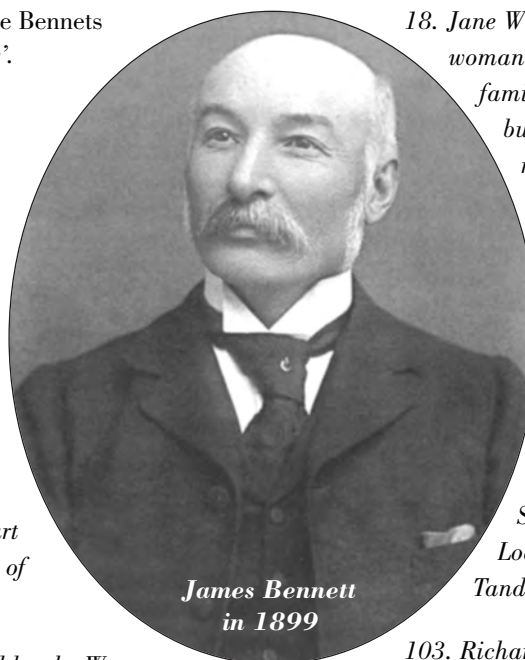
The first of almost two hundred entries reads:

Willie Walker. Old Castle, Far Pass. Smart little man. A shoe maker. Died at the age of 80 years about 1850.

2. Jamie Downey. Co. Down Roads. The old style. Wore breeches. Honest man. Weaver by trade. Lived to a good ripe old age. Died about 1860. Regular attendant at RC Chapel.



Railway Street. The former Bennet home with the porch.



**James Bennet
in 1899**

18. Jane Whiggan. Far Pass. A worldly woman. Died about 1876. Left no family. Neddy McComb, Mason, built a pig house for her and left no door in the walls, so great fun was made about this.

42. Doctor Sanderson. Church Street. For many years Dispensary Dr. of Poyntzpass, also of Donaghmore. Rented the Union Lodge, grew the best of flax. Well liked by people. Splendid doctor. Died in Union Lodge about 1875, buried in Tandragee Ch. Yard.

103. Richard Deaker. Railway Station House. Big man police pentioner (sic) and station master. Great Freemason. Was 1st Station Master at Poyntzpass after Railway opened about 1850. Died about 1876, full of years. Buried in Drumbanagher Ch. yard.

Having listed some of the people he knew who had died, and commented on them, James went on to comment on local features:-

Ball Alley was one of the finest in Ireland and some of the best players in the kingdom played there. They used to come from Dublin and elsewhere to play. But the Pass boys could hold their own. It was built by the Stewart family at the foundation of the town. William Moody, Lisraw, had a great voice. He could stand in his own door and call his servants out of the Ball Alley at a distance of fully 1 mile.

Railway.

It was prophesied by old Magill that carriages without horses would run through Mr. Madden's land. He did not live to see it but it is now the case. The first steam engine that ran on the railway at Poyntzpass was brought by boat from Newry. She was made in England. She landed at Acton Loaning in 1850 and at Acton Gates was put on the line. Her name was 'The Rose'. She was used to draw the ballast out of Doran's and Allen's fields near the station. Rails were laid through Mr. Bennet's meadow onto the mainline. The railway line was opened about the year 1852 for traffic; it was a single line then. Richard Deaker was the first station master and he held the post for five years. He died in the Station House about the year 1876.

Pass Pump.

Trees were planted at the pump by Mr. Bennet, James Magill planting them in the year 1875. The pump was first sunk by George Bennet. There used to be a crane beside it for weighing market produce as Poyntzpass was once a famed market town but it fell away, with Newry taking the lead. In 1875 a few tried to revive it. Thomas Rice, John Bennet, L.Ledlie commenced by buying hayseed. Fowls began to come, then pigs, now in the year 1890 it is a very good market held on Fridays weekly.

Acton Vault built in Acton Graveyard by Sir Toby Poyntz who was a general of the army and he came from England. He also built the old castle in the Far Pass, now long ago in ruins.

Drumbanagher Castle Rebuilt about the year 1840. It belonged to the Moores before Col. Close bought it. Maxwell Close laid the first stone of the castle. He was only three years old at the time.

Lissummon Tunnel. The tunnel on the Newry and Armagh line was built in the year 1859. I was in it when it was being built.

Windmill and Mills. Flour used to be ground in the windmill stump by my grandfather. One of the mill-stones was taken down the lane by Jack Shannon to the corn mill. He ran it down without any person helping him, he was a strong man. Someone from Wales built the mills and made the island. Then people called Patterson and Crothers owned them. Mr. Bennet bought them from the Crothers. My grandfather Mr. Boyd was the first man in all the

country to have a pair of running block wheels. They were made of oak, block kind. Many came to see the wonderful sight from all parts. My father used them for lashing wheat on for many years. Now my brother Mr. Bennet has them in his barn lying doing nothing, as wheat is scarcely now sown.



The ruins of one of William Bennet's mills.

Tea. The Bennets were the first people who brought tea into Ireland. When ready for use they poured away the water and ate the leaves. Then they got blue cups without handles and drank the tea.

Church. Rev'd J L Darby and Rev J H King were rectors in my time, and Jemmy Graham was Clerk. He used a tuning fork in sounding music for the psalms. The first person buried in Acton churchyard was a beggar woman. Her grave is on the left hand side going in; so the more humble the more blessed. The new side to Poyntzpass church was built in 1860, Rev L Henry King being the rector. He was married to Lady Mary, sister of Lord Erne. James Cole was sexton for many years during my time at home. He died about the year 1880, full of years, and is buried in the church yard. The church was again repaired by putting up a new chancel and new ceiling in the year 1890, Revd Archer being the rector. The old ceiling was lath and plaster. The chancel was built in memory of R Q Alexander Esq. JP, Acton House, Poyntzpass. Laburnams were planted at the front church wall about the year 1890 by Wilson Balance who was a workman for J Bennet.

Meeting House. Billy Acheson was the Clerk in Meeting House. He lived in Lisnabrague. The first person buried in Poyntzpass Meeting House about the year 1870 was Samuel Shanks, an elder who lived in Lisnabrague. He was an upright, honest, sober man who, long before trains ran from Newry, carted goods of all kinds for shops in Poyntzpass. He could be trusted with any thing or any

amount. *Revd Samuel Priestly built the Meeting House about the year 1830. Dr. Cooke opened it.*

Chapel Yard was given as a grant by the Stewart family some time in the 18th century. Father O'Toole was priest during my time at home 1850.

Fair. A fair used to be held in Acton, but people used to fight and kill one another, being only about half civilised at the time. It was taken then to Poyntzpass where the police were established. From that to this it has flourished, being a leading fair – cattle improved year by year. No black moiled cows now to be seen.

Tanning. The bed of the river used to run through Mr. Bennet's garden, when Mr. Boyd kept the tannyard and old tan holes are still in the yard. There is good timber yet in them. A flourishing trade it used to be and a fortune was made at it.



Market Day at Poyntzpass.

A Cattle Show yearly was held at Poyntzpass on 11th October. There were exhibited cattle, pigs, fowls etc., also fruits and turnips. Prizes were given for the best in each class 1st, 2nd 3rd. Colonel Close being the landlord of the two estates, Acton and Drumbanagher, he did his best to encourage industry. No doubt this was for his own benefit, as his rents were better paid. Landlords and tenants were then in the best of terms but they could pay their demands much better than in later years, as weather was fine for sowing crops and cattle and crops sold for fairly good prices. Wheat used to pay the rent. After show was held during the day the court house was dressed with

evergreens and flowers. Mottos printed with flower leaves were put over the top wall – 'Speed the plough'. Also the motto on the lower wall was 'live and let live.' Both these were appropriate for landlord and farmer. Landlord and tenant sat down to a good dinner, charge for the same 2/6 each. Poor tenants should have got free. James Vint sounded his Yeoman's bugle standing beside the pump. This was the call to dinner. Landlord and tenants having partaken of the good things provided, the usual loyal toasts were proposed and duly honoured. Songs were sung at intervals. An old man called James Brotherton who lived near *Revd Savage's Meeting House* sang a song yearly, composed by himself. He always made sure to honour Col. Close which pleased the old Colonel very well. Meeting generally broke up about 10 o'clock.

Names of principal tenants who kept good cattle etc and exhibited them at show held yearly. Mr. Moody, Lisraw; Mr. John and Dr. Allen, Tullynacross – these men kept very neat places and haggards. They generally got prizes for good husbandry. James Christy, Lamb and John Whiteside of Tullynacross also were nice tillers of the ground. John Porter of Tullynacross, called Minister John because his father was a minister, kept a neat place and was a large farmer. He gathered plenty of lands and money but never married. Kind of miser. After his death, about year 1884 it got a broad scattering.

John Goodfellow of Brannock also kept a neat place. He was a cross man. Just the old style, wore breeches with nice knitted long stockings. Got prizes sometimes. John McKeown of Brannock in keeping his place rather neat. Was a nice easy going little man. Had care of old Acton Grave Yard where a church was built in the very old times. Old walls still to be found about centre of Grave Yard. Stewart Medcalf, an army pensioner who lived in the cottage next to the Chapel Pillars kept a very neat cottage and always got the prize for poor man's cottage. He was a little man. Mr. John Whiteside of Drumbanagher kept splendid short horned cattle. He always carried off many prizes and was a very good farmer. People called Agnew of Deer Park were nice tillers of the ground, bred excellent cattle and were most industrious in

every way. Alex Finch, Demone, a well educated man respected by every person farmed very nicely. The Henrys, John Robert and Nathaniel were fine farmers. They cultivated very nicely and kept best of cattle. They lived in Kilrea and were highly respected men, very handsome and remarkably tall men and very loyal and true to Crown and Country. Joseph O'Hagen of Lissummon had best of turnips, and he either took first or second prize. He farmed very neatly, kept best of cattle, fattened many beasts. His family turned out only very middling. Did not follow in their father's footsteps. Charlie Madden, Lissummon, was another good farmer, he was very witty. Real Irishman – had a large farm. Tilled it first rate, although a cold climate, yet he took best of crops of it. No complaints of poverty in his day. Yet his sons did not follow in his path – went all to the bad. I give these few names as a sample of the kind of farmers



The Bennet house as it was. There were fields and a tennis court behind it.

then living. Now in my day things do not look so bright, as people are more discontented and don't work so well as people did.

At one time about year 1860 Mr. John Moody was the best farmer on the estate usually fattening 25 or 30 head of cattle. He sold 3 head of finished beasts at £100.00. This was a good price. They were fine beasts, two of them twins. He grew a large quantity of flax which generally sold yearly up to 1872 for £300 to £500. This gave a great deal of employment. David McBride of Acton grew flax largely. He had a fine family who emigrated to America about year 1875 and settled in Newark. John Madden, Poyntzpass, Magills, Hamiltons and Rices also Richmonds all grew very good crops and were prosperous.

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**James Bennet's mother Elizabeth** left her diary from May 1831 to January 1833. She heads this "A short Account of how I was employed in the year 1831 with an account of the different places I visited and the different peopal (sic) who visited our house"

Most of her writing is about the sermons she heard, funerals she attended, her needlework, making butter and cheese, retting flax and spinning, making and mending clothes, and the seemingly unexciting daily round in a very small country town. It was a life of hard work, even with servants, with the food having to be fresh and its preparation laborious, though overall, she gives an impression of contentment, apart from the ever-present danger of early death.

She writes in 1831:

"May 20<sup>th</sup> (illegible) milk for cheese. It was the first time I attempted making cheese it succeeded very well as I made 6 large cheeses and 5 firkin of butter. Took a walk to see John Yuan's child – it was ill of the croup the disorder my poor little George died (2 Nov. 1830) of in 3 days of sickness (it recovered and is quite well at present)."

"1<sup>st</sup> September 1831....I took ill at 12 o'clock in the night and continued to get worse, till between 2 and three in the evening when Jane was born. Doctor Dixon attended me, I think him a very human feeling man. "

"16<sup>th</sup> May 1832. Rose at 5 o'clock to get the cheese done. I read the psalms appointed for

the day. Mrs. George and I took a walk as far as the Glen on the Newry Road. Called to see Mrs. Minnis, she was altered for the worse. Bidy treated us to a glass of nice wine. We got a shower and laughed heartily at Mrs. George running and her so large in the family way."

There were frequent visits to and from friends to drink tea, wine or punch and to share meals with family and friends. Items on the menu included at various times tongue, cold chicken, beefsteak, duck, roast goose, apple pie, gooseberry pie. Reading material included newspapers and 'Blackwoods Magazine' and Elizabeth makes references to reading 'Cottagers' Tales', 'Rob Roy', 'The Roman Catholic Priest', 'Wreck of the Cornet Steam Packet' and others.

Drives were taken to Scarva, Drumbanagher, Glen and Loughbrickland.

Market days and Fair days were worthy of mention: “25<sup>th</sup> June 1831. Market Day. Sold all the yarn we had.” “Fair Day 5 July 1831. There was a great stir in the town. A strange woman stole a child of John Campbell’s but she was apprehended by the police. It should teach every person who has the care of children not to let them out of their sight.”

26 June 1831. John and I took a walk along the new road.

11 Feb. 1832. John and I took a walk to see the new road that is making in the Stone Dam Bray. It will be a good road but a danger to drunk persons and restive horses.

12 March 1831. The Annual Ploughing Match was held in a field convenient to Mr. Porter. Col. and Mrs. Close were there. Women attended event.

13 July 1832. We went to Scarva to see the Sham Fight but it was too late.

13 August 1832. Robert McClelland our servant boy went into the hospital. He was the first patient.

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James Bennet: “Great Grandmother Bennet lived to 107 years old at such a great age she could walk from her own

house (in Tandragee) to Poyntzpass. She was a small sized woman.... She had her coffin made of apple tree wood for over 20 years before she died. When she came to about 80 years she thought her term of life was near at a close therefore she got coffin made, during this time she kept apples in it. And when children would come in to see her she would open the lid and give them an apple.

My Great Grand mother, she was the life tenant of a lease of a great portion of the Duke of Manchester’s estate and people had their lands cheap. The Duke thought she was hardly ever going to die, and when he would come over yearly from England he would ask is she not dead yet. He wanted her soon dead and the people wanted her to live on. So her end came and like all other people she died.”

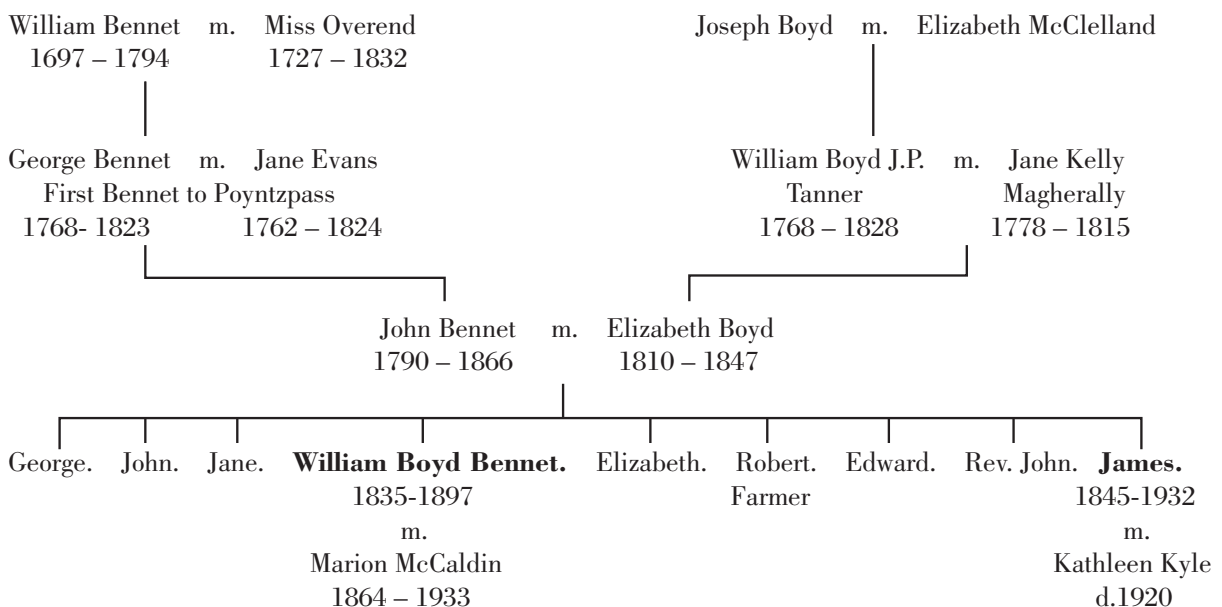
The author of the Poyntzpass Diary, **James Bennet**, contributed this sketch of his great grandmother. She had been Miss Overend who married William Bennet (died 1794).

Before surnames were used, the name of the local priory was commonly adopted to distinguish families and St.

Benedict, who had founded a monastic order at Montecassino in southern Italy in the sixth century may have provided the Poyntzpass Bennets with their moniker.

Some of the Bennet descendants may have accompanied William in his invasion of England in 1066. Wallingford was an important base for William, and the Benedictine Abbey at Abingdon, a few miles upriver from

Bennet/Boyd Family Tree



Wallingford, may have named a few more Bennets. There are certainly Bennets in Wallingford Borough records from 1339. In 1603 a Thomas Bennet was Lord Mayor of London. Thereafter this line of the family went up in the world with several being knighted.

James Bennet in his diary says *“The first of the Bennet family came with William III and some came at the time that Ulster was planted by English and Scotch, from Lancastershire (sic) or Northumberland. They settled near Tandragee County Armagh on the banks of the Cusher River, in the townlands of Cargans and Tullyhue which was given to them for their own for a small sum of money.”*

In the 1664 Hearth Money Roll, a **William Bennet** is listed as an English settler in the Barony of Orior and Parish of Ballymore. Tandragee was founded as a town in 1619.

Occasionally the Bennets came to public notice. In the *Belfast Newsletter* 15/19 September 1786:

A ROBBERY

Whereas on Wednesday the sixth instant the Dwelling House of William Bennet in Tandragee, in the County of Armagh, was burglariously broke open by Barry Moore, and feloniously taken thereout, seventeen Guineas and a half in Gold, thirteen Thirteens in Silver, one Gold Ring, with a Woman’s Pair of Silk Gloves – Said Moore is aged about twenty years, strong made, five feet seven inches high, full faced, fair hair, with black eyebrows; served in the army, and lately enlisted again. – Whoever apprehends Moore and lodges him in any of his Majesty’s Gaols in this kingdom, within six months after this date, and giving timely notice so that he may be prosecuted, shall receive five Guineas Reward. Given under my hand the eighth day of September, 1786.

WILLIAM BENNET, his Mark.

William Boyd Bennet’s grandson Glin Bennet, born in 1927, surgeon and psychiatrist, wrote a history of his family which adds to our knowledge of them. There were soon many Bennets in and around Tandragee, their occupations described variously as farmer, weaver, mason, labourer.

Great grandmother Bennet’s son **George** left the old home in Tandragee and moved about four miles to the south where the family of Stewart had started building the town that was to become Poyntzpass, around 1790.

George was probably striking out through this move to make a better life for himself and *“carried on the best business on that place for many years”* but *“was much annoyed with gout”*. He married a Miss Jane Evans and they had two sons and two daughters. The older son, **John**, went to *“America in a small sailing vessel which took him three months”* before returning to Poyntzpass where he married **Elizabeth Boyd** (of the diary) in 1828. She was seventeen and he thirty five.

As a result of this marriage, **John Bennet** acquired property in Canal Street (now Railway Street) and agricultural land left to him by his father-in-law **William Boyd**. Elizabeth’s father William was one of seven children of Joseph Boyd and Elizabeth McClelland. While a young man, William went to Castleblaney and learned the tanning business from his uncle, Dr. Edward McClelland who had married Lord Blaney’s sister. Dr. McClelland had established a prosperous tannery in Poyntzpass and William was sent there to take over the running of the business. At that time there were tanneries in Rathfriland, Portadown, Lurgan and Newry

The diarist wrote *“John and Elizabeth were left the Boyd Family property situated in and around Poyntzpass, and consisted chiefly of freehold agricultural land upon which stood a residential mansion....he was left Mr. Boyd’s property in Canal Street where he kept a tann yard by which he made a large fortune, and at one time had 1,000 guineas in his house.”* William was the first J.P. in Poyntzpass. Elizabeth’s mother was Jane nee Kelly of Tullyraine House, Magherally.

John and Elizabeth had nine children, two of whom died in infancy and one at age ten. A tree was planted in the garden on the arrival of each child. He was known as Honest John Bennet and he prospered. By 1864 he leased almost 100 acres around Poyntzpass and was sub-letting about twenty five houses, mostly in the village. Elizabeth died in 1847 aged thirty seven and John in 1866, aged seventy six.

John Bennet willed the family home and the bulk of his property to his eldest son **William Boyd Bennet**, while other members of the family, including Robert, James, John, Edward and Jane were all left money and property.

William Boyd Bennet restored the family residence and greatly improved the land and property. He was said to have owned several farms and employed about a hundred men. He also owned three mills – one for flax and two for corn. The Bennet house was close to the crossroads where the communal pump stood. It was a



William Boyd Bennet and Marion soon after their marriage in 1881. He was 46 at the time and she was 18.

well-established family home, with the farmyard and stables at the back, and beyond that a big garden with a tennis court and many fruit trees. He was a splendid

horseman and hunted with the Newry hounds. He married Marion McCaldin. Their children had a governess and did not go to school. William taught in Sunday School for 40 years. In 1896 he became ill and the family went to live in Belfast to be close to where treatment was available but he died in 1897, just six months before his eldest son William Herbert died as a result of an injury. Brother Robert had died in 1883. This was to mark the beginning of the end of the Bennets in Poyntzpass, and over the next ten years or so all the property had been sold off. The family home was taken over by A. McFarland in 1898 and then by David Allen.

John and Elizabeth's youngest child, **James Bennet**, was the author of the memoirs. He worked in the bank and eventually became a manager in Belfast. One of his sons, Trevor Moutray, received the Military Cross during the Battle of The Somme in July 1916, aged 19. He was the only officer in his battalion who returned alive from a combat mission. Later in the same year he joined the RAF and was killed when his plane was shot down on 10 Nov. 1916.

James's brother John Bennet became a Church of Ireland clergyman and was rector of Tinahely, south of Dublin. His great granddaughter, Suzanne Pennefeather, married Eddie Macken.

The Boyds and the Bennets are buried in Acton Church graveyard in Poyntzpass.



ACTON ENVIRONMENTAL

Acton House, Poyntzpass, Newry BT35 6TA