CHAPTER XIII

Declining Years

One wonders would St. Clerans have survived without John Huston's intervention? It certainly needed someone with enough finances, plus a great love for the place to avoid the fate which befell many other 'Big Houses' in Ireland. Throughout the country there are many examples of much larger houses which have fallen into ruin. Many of these houses were burnt during the Irish War of Independence, 1919-22, because at that time they were seen as a symbol of oppression and hardship for the majority of Irish people. There were widespread evictions of tenant farmers during and after the great famine of the 1840s, and the wounds of suffering ran very deep with the general populace. Lady Fingall (*nee* Daisy Burke) once wrote of the demise of the big house:-

> Irish landlords lived within their demesnes making a world of their own with Ireland outside the gates. ...Their children were to pay the price when they discovered themselves to belong to no country, the world their ancestors had built within their walls lying now in ashes. (Somerville-Large, P. 1995,p.355)

However some houses burnt down accidentally. Many other fine examples fell into ruin, simply because the owners could not cope with the expense such houses required for their up-keep. One can only imagine the beautiful examples of Irish Georgian architecture that has disappeared over the past number of years. In his poem, *The Curse of Cromwell,* William Butler Yeats captured the reality of the situation:-

> I came on a great house in the middle of the night,
> Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,
> And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;
> But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through:

Although the Burkes of St. Clerans seem to have enjoyed a rather good relationship with the local people, the survival of the house was not guaranteed. After careful consideration, it is, in this writers opinion, fair to say that without the contribution made by John Huston, St. Clerans might not have survived.

The departure of John Huston was a big shock to St. Clerans and to the locality. He is remembered with great fondness by the local people, many of whom experienced not just his hospitality but also his friendship. No longer

could one see the tall angular figure walking through the woods or along the river bank. The constant flow of visitors and staff ceased, and there was a general air of loneliness about the place.

The house was stripped of all its fine adornments, and one blushed at its nakedness when the occasional caller or prospective buyer made an appearance. Eventually, Mr. Joe McGowan purchased the estate and quietly settled in for a short time. He did not remain very long at St. Clerans, and found a willing buyer in the tall and erect figure of Major James Wilson, from County Meath. Major Wilson converted the house into apartments and rented some of them. The Major spent a number of years at St. Clerans, where he became well known in the hunting and the Point to Point racing circles. It was during Major Wilson's ownership that the yard and several parcels of land were sold, there-by fragmenting the old Burke family holding.

In 1984, St. Clerans was purchased by a small syndicate. Shortly afterwards Major Wilson died. The members of the syndicate included: Richard R. Rogan of Burbank, California, his wife, the Honorable Mary Goode Rogan, a retired Californian supreme court judge. The others were Mr. David M. Harney and his wife Evelyn T. Harney. Mary Goode Rogan's ancestors had emigrated from County Galway, during the last century. Over the next twelve years St. Clerans experienced a rather settled period. The new owners and their friends spent holiday periods there, entertaining lavishly in the comfort of the old manor house. They made use of all the facilities, and although it was a quiet period in comparison to earlier years at St. Clerans, it was nevertheless a particularly good time. It seems amidst all of these changes, the faithful ghost, Daly, remained loyal to the manor house.

The unexpected death of Richard R. Rogan in 1996, prompted the remaining syndicate members to put St. Clerans on the market. By 1997, St. Clerans faced similar problems to those which it had faced prior to John Huston's time. Luckily for the old manor house, salvation was at hand. Merv Griffin, a man with imagination and the financial strength to meet the task, arrived on the scene and led us from the realms of history into a new era.

CHAPTER XIV

Merv Griffin

Over the years, Merv Griffin has been described in a variety of ways. Television critics have acclaimed him 'the total performer'; newspaper writers and editors have described him as an 'entrepreneurial powerhouse'; celebrities, world leaders and Presidents called him, 'friend and confidante'. As host of the Emmy Award Winning *The Merv Griffin Show*, he is regarded as the person, who for twenty-four years, brought a virtual 'Who's Who' of the world into the homes of America.

Merv Edward Griffin was born on July 6th 1925, in San Mateo, San Francisco, California. His parents were Mervyn and Rita Griffin, *nee* Robinson. Both parents were Irish, his father had emigrated from County Clare, and his mother from Tipperary. Merv worked his way up through the ranks of the entertainment and business world. As a young man, he entered many talent contests, writing songs which he performed on a local radio station, KFRC, in San Francisco. Later he toured with the Freddy Martin Orchestra. Although Merv was becoming increasingly popular with

19. John Huston with Merv Griffin in Ireland
(Courtesy, Griffin Group)

nightclub audiences, he soared to fame among the general public in 1950, when he released his first hit single, *I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts.* With this hit he struck gold, it reached number one on the Hit Parade and sold three million copies. His other hits include: *Wilheimina* and *Never Been Kissed.* Doris Day was so impressed by his nightclub performances, that she arranged a screen test for Merv, at Warner Brothers Studios. While under contract with Warner Brothers, Merv appeared in a number of hit movies including: *So This is Love* with Kathryn Grayson, *The Boy from Oklahoma* with Will Rogers, Jr. and Lon Chaney, Jr., and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, co-starring Doris Day and Gordon MaCrae. He also became a regular entertainer on the Las Vegas nightclub circuit.

Merv's next move was into the world of television. In 1958, having become a regular performer on shows such as, *The Arthur Murray Show* and *The Jack Paar Show,* he was given the opportunity to host his own television show, *Play Your Hunch.* His success with this show led to another in 1963, called *Word for Word.* During this period, Merv conceived the idea for a show that would become one of the most successful gameshows in television history, *Jeopardy!,* which was first aired in 1964. However, it was in 1962 that Merv's career took its most dramatic turn. He became a regular guest host on Jack Paar's, *The Tonight Show,* and the 'Merv Phenomenon' swept the late night audience. The show scored some of the highest ratings ever recorded. As a result, NBC gave him his own hour-long talk show programme, and *The Merv Griffin Show* was born. Over the years, Merv pioneered a talk show style and format that has become the prototype for every successful talk show since. His comfortable but probing interviewing style, often prompted candid, revealing responses from his interviewees. Peter Ustinov once commented that he enjoyed appearing on *The Merv Griffin Show* because:- 'I find out what I think about things'.

Meanwhile, in the high profile arena of gameshows, Merv was also scoring well. *Jeopardy!* became a tremendous success and remains the second highest rated gameshow in television syndication. Other successful shows included: *One in a Million* and *Joe Garagiola's Memory Game,* both airing on ABC, and NBC, there was *Let's Play Post Office* and *Reach for the Stars.* Of course television's most phenomenal hit ever, *Wheel of Fortune,* is watched by millions of people all over the world, and continues to be the longest running gameshow to hold the number one spot in television syndication history. In 1986, Merv sold his production company, Merv Griffin Enterprises, to Coca-Cola's Columbia Pictures Television unit for $250 million, and he continues to share in the profits of the shows. The transaction at that time represented the largest acquisition of an entertainment company owned by a single individual. Subsequently, Sony Pictures Entertainment purchased Columbia, which includes Merv Griffin Enterprises. Under a series of

contracts which have recently been renewed until the year 2000, Merv continues as executive producer of both *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy!*.

In the business world, Merv is identified as the chairman and visionary of The Griffin Group. The Griffin Group is his investment and management company. It has offices in New York, Los Angeles and Santa Monica. The Group's business ventures include: holdings in hotels, resorts, gaming, television programming, event production, broadcasting, multimedia, health & beauty, and real estate. Through the entertainment division of this Group, Merv continues to develop and produce gameshows and other forms of television programmes based on a variety of subjects. Merv has released a new home video series based on his interviews with many well known personalities of our time. He has developed location-based entertainment concepts for his various properties and is creating fresh ideas for a line of greeting cards to be distributed by his publishing company. When one combines all these activities, it is clear that Merv Griffin continues to be on the cutting edge of new entertainment opportunities.

Blazing new trails in another area, Merv set his sights on gaming in Atlantic City. In 1988, he purchased Resorts International and set about turning the company around. Recently renamed Griffin Gaming & Entertainment, the parent company operates Merv Griffin's Resorts Casino Hotel, one of the healthiest and busiest casinos on the much famed Atlantic City Boardwalk. Merv's marketing skills and Hollywood flair has turned Resorts International into an exciting destination through innovative promotions such as 'Griffin Games', an exciting series of gaming tournaments. Additionally, Resorts International remains one of the few Boardwalk casinos to showcase top head-line talent. Add to this, his role as creator and executive producer of Resorts International live cabaret and musical shows and Merv stands out as one of the most active and prolific owner / operators in Atlantic City.

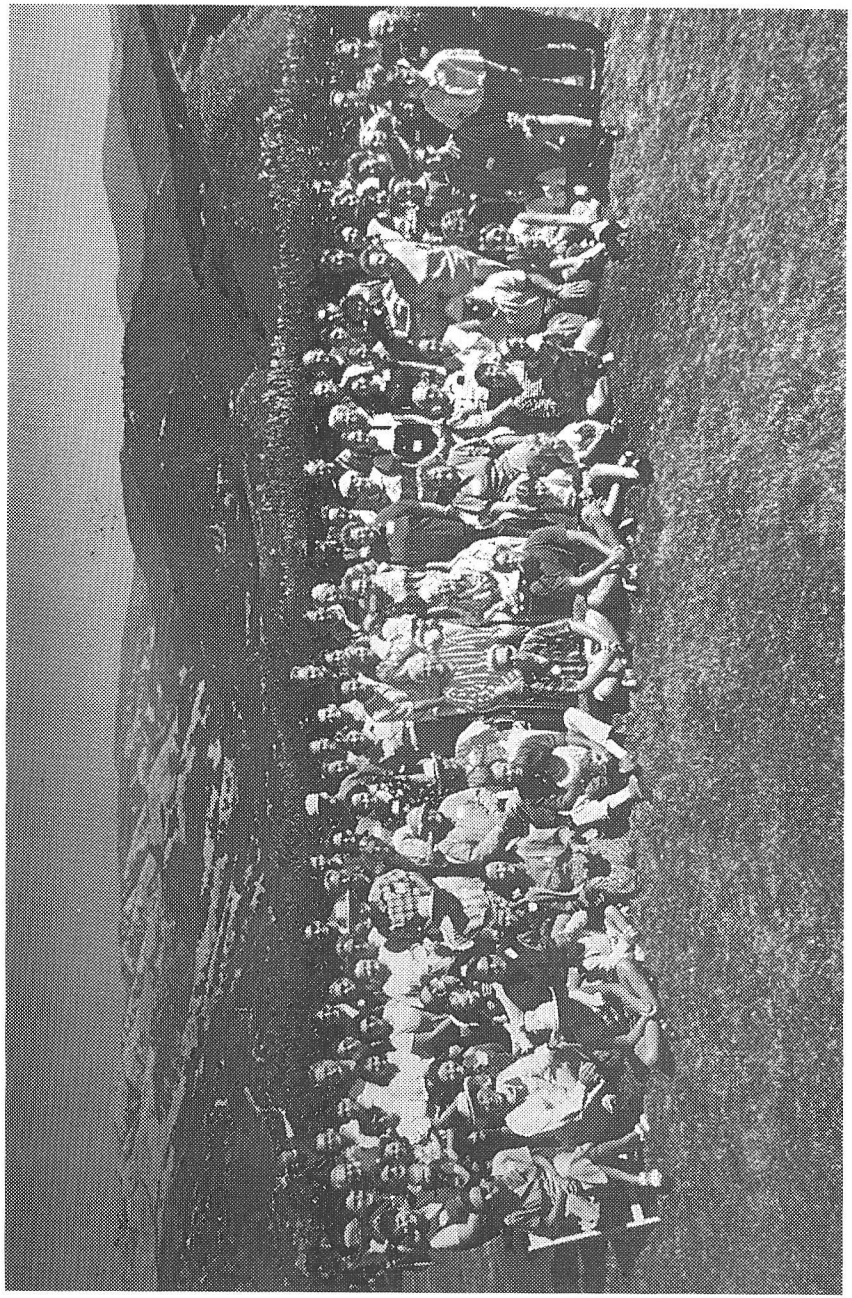
Always tracking new trends, Merv foresaw that gaming would expand outside Nevada and New Jersey in the form of riverboat gaming. He later identified what has become one of the most successful gaming locations in America, Lake Charles, Louisiana. Merv entered into a partnership with the well established associates in Players International, Inc., to develop this and other riverboat gaming opportunities. In 1992, he became the company's largest shareholder. Merv and his team are directly involved in the marketing of the Lake Charles Casino, and Players Island Resort Casino and Spa, a 500-room destination resort and casino in Mesquite, Nevada. The arrival of 'Players Riverboat Casino at Merv Griffin's Landing' in Metropolis, created 800 new jobs in an otherwise depressed area of the country. The mayor of the city, credited Merv and the Players team with:- '...bringing the city back to life again'. Merv also has a great love of horses, and owns a

string of thoroughbreds, and is active in the racing circuit. This interest led to the purchase of a close circuit broadcasting surveillance and photo finish company. His passion for fine food and wine led him to develop a private vineyard in Carmel Valley, California where he oversees the bottling of wines distributed under his 'Mont Merveilleux' label.

Which ever way you describe him, Merv Griffin, the genial host, entertainer and businessman, continues to be one of America's most popular personalities, who still finds time to create puzzles for *Wheel of Fortune*. He hosts a variety of charity events, including the annual 'Christmas Tree Lane' benefiting 'City Hearts, Kids Say Yes to the Arts'. Honoured with the prestigious 1994 Broadcasting and Cable 'Hall of Fame Award', other honourees included: Diane Sawyer and Dan Rather. Merv Griffin was the winner of 15 'Emmy Awards'. As executive producer of *Jeopardy!*, Merv was presented with an Outstanding Game/Audience Participation Show Emmy for 1993-1994. He has also been the recipient of the coveted 'Scopus Award' from the American Friends of Hebrew University. He has been honoured by the 'American Ireland Fund'. He is chairman of 'The La Quinta Arts Foundation', which promotes the work of local artisans and craftsmen through its annual art show in Palm Springs, California. In April 1997, Merv received the 'Duke Award' from the John Wayne Cancer Society

Merv's passion for the hospitality business emanated from his years of touring and literally living out of hotel rooms. He has often said that being in the hotel business is just like being in the entertainment business:- 'Bring the people in, entertain them, and give them a reason to come back'. Merv's aggressive hotel acquisition strategy began in 1987, with the purchase of The Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills. His active involvement in the management, together with his extensive and imaginative renovation of the hotel, has made The Beverly Hilton the chosen venue for virtually all of the town's most high profile events. These events include: 'The Golden Globe Awards', 'The Soap Opera Digest Awards', 'The American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Awards', 'The Scopus Awards', a variety of George Schlatter's Specials, and The Carousel Ball. Merv has recently added the Scottsdale Hilton Resort and Villas, The Wickenburg Inn in Wickenburg, Arizona, The Blue Moon Hotel and the directly adjacent Les Suites in Miami Beach, Florida, to his hotel portfolio.

One of Merv's latest ventures, was the purchase and renovation of the very fine manor house, St. Clerans, at Craughwell, County Galway. Merv and his people have managed to breathe new life into this great old house in a very tasteful manner, and without losing the sense of history attached to the house. Merv Griffin is obviously a man of culture who appreciates the importance of history. Not only has he restored the house and grounds, but also published this book. There are plans to publish historical material



20. The Griffin family reunion at Carmel Valley, California
(Courtesy, Griffin Group)

regarding each of the suites at St. Clerans. Merv is a man who is proud of his Irish ancestors, a number of suites being named after them. Credit must also be given to the many people on Merv Griffin's team, whose Herculean efforts have made this wonderful project a total success. I'm sure the past residents of St. Clerans, such as the Burkes, de Veres, and Huston, all of whom achieved international fame in their own way, would applaud the very tasteful renovations. The house is reborn, emerging from its long slumber to find itself transformed like a butterfly, bright, vibrant and full of life, and I'm sure that even our resident ghost, Daly, would approve. In Ireland over the past number of years many of our 'Big Houses' have sadly been allowed fall into ruin for one reason or another. One feels a great sense of pride, to see a house such as St. Clerans take its rightful place among the Great Houses of Ireland. What it may lack in actual physical size, it more than compensates for, in its rich history. For this writer personally, it is very reassuring to see a man like Merv Griffin come back to the land of his ancestors and restore life into what is in every since of the word, Living History, for this is the beginning of another great era in the history of a great old house, St. Clerans.

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21. William Henry is a local historian and author. He is a native of Galway City, Ireland. William has a live long interest in history, archaeology and folklore. He is a committee member of the Galway Archaeological & Historical Society and the Old Galway Society. He is also a member of Galway Civic Trust.