

THE APOLOGY

'A piece of written, printed or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record.'

That's the definition of a document, so, yes, a tiny scrap of torn newspaper counts as a document, despite its inauspicious appearance, and the fact that it came out of the bottom of a black plastic refuse sack. My first cousin put it in there. After a lot of pestering from me about family photographs and letters (he is the one who has stayed in the farmhouse our grandfather owned) he pulled a large kitchen drawer all the way out and upended the contents into a bin bag.

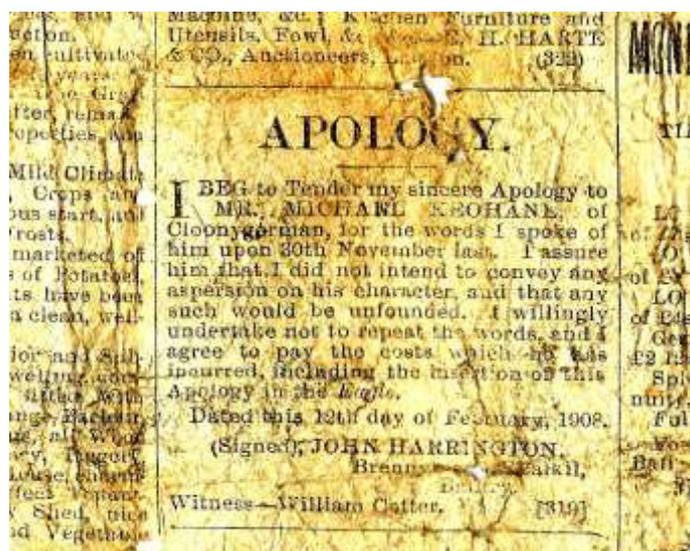
'Do you not feel privileged, sitting on the family archive?' I asked him.

'A sitting duck for yanks, more like!' he answered, laughing.

Later, I upended the bag onto my desk, and out fluttered the flimsy fragment:



It needs closer inspection:



I beg to tender my sincere Apology to MR. MICHAEL KEOHANE, of Cloonygorman, for the words I spoke of him upon 30th November last. I assure him that I did not intend to convey any aspersion on his character, and that any such would be unfounded. I willingly undertake not to repeat the words, and I agree to pay the costs which he has incurred, including the insertion of this Apology in the *Eagle*.

Dated this 12th day of February 1908.

(Signed), JOHN HARRINGTON, Brennymore[?], Kealkill, Bantry. Witness—William Cotter¹

Michael Keohane was my grandfather, a small farmer in the Mealagh Valley, near Bantry in West Cork. He died in 1941. My father often spoke with great affection about his mother, Judy, but rarely mentioned his father, Michael. Just two photographs of him survive; in both, he looks taciturn, almost sullen, while Judy smiles at the camera, eagerly engaging with the world. I'd never given Michael Keohane more than a passing thought, but now that changed in an instant; I had to know what this apology was about.

I phoned my friend Barry, a journalist with an interest in the history of newspapers in Ireland, but he didn't know what sort of event would have given rise to an apology in *The Skibbereen Eagle*. He thought that a look at the Bantry petty sessions² reports for the months preceding the apology might be useful. This can be done in the National Library, on microfiche. 'Bring a cushion!', he said, cryptically.

I soon found out what he meant. The first thing which became apparent was the tiny print size. Then there was the seemingly haphazard layout, with no large headlines, and no photographs. The spools of microfiche moved very quickly, and it was difficult to find a particular date. I wanted to find the apology itself first, so I scrolled to the edition of February 12th 1908, but it wasn't easy to spot such a small paragraph in a sea of small paragraphs. I examined my scrap of paper again, and I saw that I could discern its position in the paper; bottom right of a right hand page, which made it easier to locate. For context, I looked for other apologies. Perhaps these were a common feature in the *Eagle*, perhaps people took out public apologies for all sorts of small slights. I found just three in 1907; the one to my grandfather, one (on the same page) from a publican apologising to a brewery, and the third from someone apologising for an allegation that a Skibbereen shopkeeper's weights were incorrect.³

I turned to the petty sessions, and found what I was looking for; my grandfather, in court, for

1 'The Eagle' is the name by which the locally-published newspaper *The Skibbereen Eagle* was universally known.

2 The petty sessions were the predecessors of the district courts.

3 1907 editions of *The Skibbereen Eagle*, accessed on microfiche in the National Library.

brawling on a fair day in Bantry, in 1907. Apparently John Harrington had accused Michael Keohane of withholding four half-sovereigns after the sale of some bonnives, or piglets.⁴ My grandfather denied this, and a fight ensued. Both men were arrested, and my grandfather exonerated because the missing coins were discovered in one of Harrington's pockets, but the men still had to appear in the petty sessions for fighting. The accusation of dishonest dealing must have really rankled, and hence the apology, demanded and granted.

I examined my grandfather's life and circumstances at the time. We speak a lot about stress in 2014, but his seemingly simple country life had its own stresses, and many of them.

In that same black plastic bag I found the original deed of sale, whereby Michael Keohane bought eighty acres in October 1906, part of the estate of the Earl of Kenmare. He did this, as did many small tenant farmers of the time, with a loan from the Land Commission, set up as a result of the Land Acts passed in the preceding years. It would be 1972 before that loan would finally be paid off, by Michael's youngest daughter and her husband. He would be dead thirty-one years.

Even by the standards of the time, Michael and Judy had a large family, with seventeen children born to them between 1901 and 1922.⁵ These were my aunts and uncles, but through a combination of factors (emigration, early death, my father's late marriage) I never met most of them. The civil register of births paints a startling picture. A boy was born in 1901, and then, between May 1903 and January 1905, three girls were born, or at least their births were registered; as various genealogical sources have pointed out, registration dates were not necessarily birth dates. These 'Irish triplets' were quickly followed by 'Irish twins'; Kate on the third of March 1906 and Cornelius on the fourth of October 1906. That's just seven months apart, and I double checked the register to be sure; five children were born (or registered) between May 1903 and October 1906. However, in November 1907, the time of the altercation at Bantry fair, Michael was not the father of six, because the civil death register records the deaths of Kate (of 'burns, shock') at ten months old, and Cornelius (of 'marasmus', a form of malnutrition) at eleven months. Michael Keohane had buried two babies in 1907, and one must have been a particularly traumatic event as Kate most probably crawled into the open hearth. The purchase of the land, and the move there, in late 1906, did not seem to be bringing the family much luck, and farming his 'own' land probably seemed little different to farming as a tenant. Already by 1908, there were comments on problems becoming apparent with small farms which were not economically viable units.⁶ Michael Keohane can not have been a happy man in November 1907.

I did not give any thought to John Harrington, the man who apologised, until one day, a year after rediscovering all these uncles and aunts, idly browsing the 1911 census for the Bantry/Kealkill area, I came across him. Clicking on 'show all information', a new aspect to the altercation suddenly came into focus, because John Harrington and his wife, married ten years in 1911, had no family. Would it be a step too far into speculation to wonder if jealousy played a part, when the two men fought? Jealousy about land, and jealousy about having someone to inherit land? Was it more than those four half-sovereigns that was bothering John Harrington? In the same space where my cousin upended the drawer into the plastic bag, there had once been a pigsty, where I had stood as a small child, mesmerised, watching a sow effortlessly push out a dozen bonnives in rapid succession. Did the sight of all those other bonnives at the Bantry fair, that remarkable yet everyday fecundity, put John Harrington in mind of the babies he would never have? Was there something else said, sotto voce, something about carelessness, something about not being able to mind and feed children maybe? Even in an era of high infant mortality, few died of starvation, and fewer still died of burns, but to be cursed by infertility was the cruellest blow of all.

4 The word is hiberno-english, and still prevalent in south Munster.

5 Civil Register of Births.

6 Michael F.J. McDonnell, *Ireland and the Home Rule Movement* (London 1908)

Michael Keohane left very little documentary evidence of his time on earth, and the only other mention of him in a newspaper is a small obituary from 1941 which describes him as 'an exceptionally industrious farmer'.

That tiny scrap of newsprint was a precious find.