

**BALFE THE ROBBER**  
**(A West Wicklow highwayman)**  
*By Mattie Lennon.*

**"Saint Patrick stood at Burgage an' he come no farther. An' he pointed his staff up at Lacken, Kylebeg an' Ballinastockan an' he sed 'Let that be a den of thieves an' robbers forever more' ".**

**n the above statement was made to me some years ago, by the late Jimmy Freeman of Ballyknockan, I didn't know what to make of it. I thought he was indulging in a bit of, good-natured, inter-Townland rivalry.**

**Being well aware of the God-fearing and law-abiding nature of the inhabitants of the places in question it looked like our National Apostle was out beside it.**

**Oh sure enough, a Ballinastockan man was once fined sixpence for riding an unlit bicycle in Blessington during the hours of darkness.**

**And it was rumored that (before my time) a farmer on the Kylebeg/Lacken border was prosecuted under the Noxious Weeds act, but nothing serious.**

**But now I have discovered that three hundred and eleven years ago a local man was found guilty of more serious offences.**

**In his book, "Gallows Speeches From Eighteenth- Century Ireland", published by Four Courts Press, in 2001, James Kelly gives the last speech and dying words of John Balfe who was executed, at Saint Stephens Green, for robbery on Saturday the fifteenth of June 1706.**

**I was born in Ballinestocken, in the County of Wicklow, and Barony of Talbotstown, being tenderly brought Up, and Educated as became a Gentleman, until I was Seventeen Years of Age; and then was by Lewd Women deluded from my Study. One Art Byrne was the Man that persuaded me first to Take or Steal any of my Neighbours Goods: And soon afterwards I took to the Roads and so continu'd 'till my Brother came to the Country. But I do declare that it was always contrary to me Inclination, that my Brother should follow the course of Life and I did; and therefore I often disir's him to go Home, follow his Trade and live Honest; but cou'd not persuade him thereto, until he came to him untimely End.**

**There was one John Carny Hang'd at the assizes of Wicklow, about April, or March last was a Twelve Month, for the robbing of Mr. Piercy. Now as I am a Dying Man, and said Carny was not any way concern'd in the said Robbery, nor in any respect privy to it, for it was I and my Comrades that committed the Robbery. And soon after my Brother was Executed I went to Scotland hoping to be safe there, as Living truly, justly, and honestly there; but unfortunately I came to the house of one John Mac-Donnald, Laird of Largy where I was civilly Entertained for some time, until he seemingly grew Jealous of his Wife, upon my account; and hereupon had me Imprisoned for Two Months, most of which time he kept me Confined in a pair of Stocks, and then he took away from my Cloaths, Arms and Money, to the value of Forty Pounds, which I hope (if recoverable) the Government will take and Distribute among the Poor. And finding that I wou'd not Comply with him, nor Accuse his Wife, to confirm his Jealousie of her, he then offer'd me Forty Pounds, if I wou'd but Swear that I had Debauched his Wife, that so he might be Divorced from her, they having no Children: And finding that I wou'd not Comply, he them, under colour of Friendship, brought me out of Prison and pretended, together with Captain Mac-Neal, to bring me to the Earl of Argile's House, in order to go with the Recruits for Flanders, where I intended to follow my Study, and like a true Penitent, reform my self to a Vertuous and Christian Life, but contrary to my Expectation, my private enemy John Mac-Donald, and Captain Mac-Neal, brought me to the Seaside, and immediately Bound me, set me a Board, and Convey'd me to this Kingdom, (where according to the Just Laws of this Land, I have received the Rewards justly due to me CRIMES:) But I sincerely Declare, that tho' I have Robbed many, yet I never committed any Murther, not used any Gentleman barbarously, nor to my Knowledge, ever Robber a Poor-man.**

**And as for the Robbery of Mr. Haris, my Brother and I were actually there: And my Brother was Accus'd for taking the Rings off the Gentlewomans Fingers, and threatening to Cut them. Now as I am a Dying Man, neither my brother nor I ever took the said Rings off her Fingers, but one of the Company did.**

**And now as I am a Dying Man, and shall Answer before ALMIGHTY GOD, I never did Carnally know Grisell Mac Donnald Wife of the said John Mac Donnald, nor any other Woman, from the first Hour**

*of my going into Scotland, unto the last Minute of my coming away from thence. And I do really believe, that the said Grisell MacDonnald, is a true, honest, and faithful Wife to her Husband: And I hope this will convince all Charitable Christians of the Wrong, Injury and Defamation which she Underservedly suffer'd on my account; and for which I am sensibly affected.*

*And as for my Father and Brother, that are now living, I do Declare, that they nor any of them were ever privy to any of my ill and unhappy Actions: And that they nor either of 'em ever had the value of a Shilling of any of my ill gotten Gettings.*

*And as to the fact of cutting Art Byrne's Tongue, it was thus occasioned. I had left Fifty Nine pieces of Gold in his Hand, (after often dividing our Robberies in his House) and he never returned me but Ten or Eleven pieces of the said Gold: And when he appointed me to come for the Rest, he Betray'd me, and brought the Country to Take me; so that the next time I met him, I wou'd not Kill him, but cut his Tongue.*

*And now Dear Christians, I beg that all Men may take Warning by this my Ignominious End; and Carefully avoid all such Occasions, as have brought me to it. So, most heartily begging Pardon of Almighty God, for all my Sins and manifold Offences, And desiring the Prayers of all Good Christians, I conclude,*

*John Balfe,*

*This is my True Speech, and none other John Balfe.*

*That'll teach me to doubt my elders.*

*Now I suppose I owe a posthumous apology to Jimmy Freeman .....and to Saint Patrick.*