

Coolacrease Tragedy

Pearson Brothers Murders

Coolacrease, Ireland

Revised July 18, 2019

The Story of the Pearsons of Coolacrease

Around 1911, William and Susan (Pratt) Pearson purchased a 341 acre farm at Coolacrease, Co. Offaly, Ireland. Originally from Ballygeehan, Co. Laois, reportedly, they purchased the property from a Protestant family and moved there with their family of seven children. They were considered Protestant large land owners.

The 1901 and 1911 Irish Censuses list the Pearson family as Church of Ireland. It is not known when they joined the "Cooneyites," which some regarded as Protestants. It most likely took place before they moved to Coolacrease, and was common knowledge. Several Pearson family relatives were deeply immersed in the Two by Two Sect, and a cousin of William Pearson was the owner of Carrick convention.

During the Irish War of Independence, all Protestants and large landowners were suspected of giving information and loyalty to British rule. There were many burnings of Protestant homes and murders, and those who escaped were fortunate. This was the nature of the political climate when the tragic Coolacrease murders took place. The ruins of Coolacrease House are located one mile northeast of the hamlet of Cadamstown in Co. Offaly, formerly King's Co. This is how the murders came about:

"It was here at Coolacrease that on the 30th June 1921, a band of thirty, perhaps forty armed and masked men descended on the house torched it, then in the courtyard shot the two eldest sons of the household, aged nineteen and twenty-four. The shooting took place in the presence of family members. These were the mother of the two boys, their three sisters and youngest brother. Also present were two female cousins. The sisters were aged sixteen, twenty-one, and twenty-three, the youngest brother was fourteen. The older of the visiting cousins was twenty, and the younger was a child of not more than eleven years of age." (Alan Stanley 2005)

The two Pearson brothers who were executed by Irish Nationalists were Richard Henry "Dick" and Abraham Pratt "Abe" Pearson, the sons of William and Susan Pearson, Sr. While their father and a younger brother, Sidney, were attending a convention about thirty-five miles away, these two older unmarried sons were shot by a firing squad numerous times in their back yard and left to die. None of the shots were fatal, and the two men suffered agony for six and fourteen hours respectively before they died. The women dragged a mattress away from the burning house into the field and somehow managed to get the two dying men onto it.

The younger brother, David, rode about thirteen miles on a bicycle to get help. A doctor bicycled to Coolacrease and dressed their wounds. Police arrived and removed the wounded men to Birr Military Barracks where they died. The two Pearson sons were buried in the cemetery of Killermogh Anglican Church, close to the village of Ballacolla in Queen's County, now called Co. Laois. These strange burial details and David Pearson's account of the family tragedy he witnessed that day are in Alan Stanley's book.

A friend, William Stanley, age twenty-one, was living with the Pearsons and working in the field when it was suddenly surrounded by rebel forces. Being a fast runner, he managed to escape while being fired upon. In 2005, William Stanley's son, Alan Stanley, published a book titled: *I met Murder on the way: The Story of the Pearsons of Coolacrease*. His book gave rise to the documentary *The Killings at Coolacrease*, which was a segment of the Irish RTE television series *Hidden History of Ireland* broadcast on October 23, 2007. According to Alan Stanley's book, the most accurate account of the tragedy is contained in a newspaper (now defunct) called *King's Co. Chronicle*, July 7, 1921, TTT .

Reportedly, the Pearsons had a visit from British troops. Add to that an incident where the Pearson sons tried to prevent the IRA from felling a tree on their property, and that was reason enough to place the Pearsons in the category of British 'sympathizers,' and therefore 'legitimate' targets. In the eyes of the IRA, these events placed together could be considered sufficient 'evidence' that the Pearsons were British sympathizers, spies and informers.

The reason for the murders has never been determined with any certainty. One of the rebels told a sister who asked "Why?" that it was *not* because they were Protestant. *The Irish Times* stated: "There was never a shred of evidence to justify the Pearson murders and there still isn't." The perpetrators were never caught or tried. David Pearson said the family viewed the murders as a way to grab their land. At that time, the common mixture of reasons for committing atrocities of that kind were: Land, Religion and Nationality. During this period, some of the worst atrocities of any Irish wars were carried out. Sadly, the type of savage act perpetrated on the Pearsons and others by the IRA was replicated in many parts of Ireland during that time.

After receiving compensation for their land, the Pearson family moved to Australia in stages, the last family members arriving on January 17, 1930. One daughter, Emily, married and lived in England, while the rest of the family relocated to Australia until their deaths. William Pearson Sr. was born in 1863 and died in 1934. His wife Susan was born 1870 and died in 1947 in Victoria. Her death certificate states the Minister at her burial was J. F. Jones, Christian Assemblies of Australia . According to Alan Stanley's book, their son Sidney Pearson continued in the Two by Two Sect but not David. The church affiliation of the other Pearson family members is unknown. David Pearson died April 25, 1991.

Wikipedia report on the no longer available on-line video **The Hidden Story: The Killings at Coolacrease**

Check YouTube for "Coolacrease Killings."

Stanley, Alan. *I met Murder on the Way—The Story of the Pearsons of Coolacrease*. Naas, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Leinster Leader, 2005. Page 13.