

Colonel William Cooke-Collis CMG ADC DL JP 1847-1933

83rd Regiment - Bombay Staff Corps - Afghanistan - Egypt - Sudan
South Africa - King's Royal Rifles - ADC to King



A young Lieutenant William Cooke-Collis – Gibraltar circa 1868

William Cooke-Collis was born 1st August 1847 at Fermoy, County Cork, Ireland, the first child of the Reverend Maurice Atkin Cooke-Collis DD 1812-1882 and Anne Cooke-Collis (nee Talbot) 1812-1896.

William grew up at the family home Castle Cooke in Ireland, part of an extensive estate owned by his father. In 1870, Maurice Atkin Cooke-Collis Rector of Queenstown owned 5,177 acres in County Cork and 664 acres in County Tipperary.

Following his formal education at the Rossall School in Lancashire 1858-1861, and at Cheltenham College, William joined the army in April 1866, purchasing a commission as Ensign with the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot.

The 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot had been established in 1793 during the French Revolutionary Wars. Raised to serve as part of Britain's efforts against Revolutionary France, it initially operated in the West Indies and Ireland. The regiment was involved in several key engagements, including the French campaigns in Egypt and the Peninsula War (1808-1814). During the 19th Century the regiment was garrisoned at various colonies throughout the world, including Ceylon, Canada, Gibraltar, and India, while maintaining a significant presence in Ireland. By the mid-19th century, it had become part of the British Army's regular forces.

In March 1867, the depot companies of the 83rd Regiment were moved from Dublin to Colchester in England. In April, the regiment embarked the troopship "Himalaya" at Kingstown Ireland, from where it was transported to Gibraltar. Replacing the 86th Regiment, the 83rd Regiment would spend the next three years on garrison duty at Gibraltar. On board the Himalaya that day, were 33 officers and 700 men making up the regiment, plus 66 women and 71 children family members.

Britain had taken control of Gibraltar in 1713 and thereafter had kept a military presence garrisoned there. During the Napoleonic Wars, Gibraltar had become an important base for the Royal Navy. Designated as one of four British fortresses (together with Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bermuda, and Malta). During the 19th century, the peacetime military garrison at Gibraltar fluctuated between 1,100 and 5,000 troops at any one time.



83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot Colours Emblem
Hand-Painted by Captain George E S Cartwright circa 1866

On 8th July 1868, William Cooke-Collis was promoted to Lieutenant and made Adjutant with the 83rd Regiment, a position he held until the regiment was moved to India in 1870. The role of the Adjutant was essential to the effective functioning of a regiment. Typically, a junior officer, such as a lieutenant or captain, the Adjutant assisted the commanding officer with the daily management of the regiment.

William would have been responsible for maintaining discipline and overseeing the regiment's training, ensuring soldiers remained fit for duty and proficient in drills. Additionally, the Adjutant handled administrative tasks, including maintaining personnel records, managing promotions, absences, and disciplinary actions, and ensuring all documentation was up to date.

Having served their time at Gibraltar, on 11th March 1870, the 83rd Regiment embarked the troopship "Tamar", and proceeded to Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. From there they were transported by railway to the port of Suez on the Red Sea, and on 25th March embarked the troopship "Euphrates" for onward transport to India. Arriving at Bombay 8th April 1870, the regiment travelled to Poona, where it would be quartered in Wanourie Barracks.

W. Cooke-Collis Signature of the Officer.
Ensign 83rd

Poona, located 120 miles southeast of Bombay in the western state of Maharashtra, was one of the most important military and administrative centres for the British in India. Established in the early 19th century, the Poona Cantonment (permanent military station) became a key base for British forces operating in the Bombay Presidency and the surrounding regions. The cantonment was strategically important because of its proximity to the Deccan Plateau and its distance from the coastal areas, making it a safer, less vulnerable location to potential attacks from coastal insurgents.

The temperate climate of the region also made Poona an attractive location for British officers and troops, especially during the sweltering summer months in other parts of India.

In India, William joined the Bombay Staff Corps, a branch of the Indian army created during the British Raj. Separate Staff Corps were formed in 1861 for the Bengal, Madras and Bombay armies, which were later combined into the Indian army. The Staff Corps provided trained British officers for the Indian native regiments.

Within a year of arriving in India, William was granted 15 months leave, and in May 1871 returned to Ireland on private affairs. William travelled back to India, after only 10 months, leaving Portsmouth in March 1872. Returning to the Bombay Staff Corps, William successfully completed his lower examination in Hindustani during 1873, before resuming charge of the station staff and communications office at Ahmednagar. In July, William passed his higher examination in Hindustani.

In May 1875, William was moved to Poona Cantonment, where he joined the garrison class, replacing a Captain Cahill.

On 6th November 1875, William married Katherine Oliphant, the daughter of Lieutenant Colonel Oliphant Royal Engineers. On 7th May the following year, William and Katherine had a son at Ahmednagar, only six months after they were married. Between 1876 and 1885, the couple had six children:

William James Norman Cooke-Collis 1876-1941

Nora Cooke-Collis 1878-1947

Maurice Talbot Cooke-Collis 1879-1968

Katherine Sophia Cooke-Collis 1880-1973

Geraldine Margaret Cooke-Collis 1883-1974

Florence Eleanor Cooke-Collis 1885-1886

Their daughter Florence Eleanor Cooke-Collis born January 1885, died 22nd November 1886, aged just twenty-two months old.

In September 1876, the Imperial Assemblage and the appointments to the Staff Force, were announced in India. The troops were divided for the purpose of disposition in camp and for discipline as follows:

The Escort of his Excellency the Viceroy

A Cavalry Division

An Artillery Division

Two Infantry Divisions

Lieutenant William Cooke-Collis was appointed the Brigade Major of the 2nd Infantry Division 2nd Brigade, under the command of Brigadier General Phayre CB. Infantry regiments under William's command were the 63rd Regiment of Foot, 16th Bombay Infantry, and 24th Native Infantry.

Having attended the Imperial Assemblage or Durbar in January 1877, William returned to the Station Office at Ahmednagar, and in April 1877 was promoted to Captain. His next posting was to the Bombay District as Deputy Assistant Adjutant General with the Bombay Staff Corps.

In September 1878, Lord Lytton the Viceroy of India ordered a diplomatic mission to set out for the Afghan capital Kabul, where he hoped to establish a political resident. By establishing a British political mission in the Afghan capital, it was hoped that British India could control the foreign relations of this 'buffer' state and reduce Russian influence in the region. When however, the mission was turned back at the eastern end of the Khyber Pass, the British decided to replace the Afghan leader Sher Ali by force.

In November 1878, three British columns, consisting of 40,000 men, prepared to invade Afghanistan. One column was to march through the Bolan Pass and seize the city of Kandahar, a second to occupy the Ali Masjid fortress and secure the Khyber Pass before advancing to Jalalabad, while the third would advance along the Kurram Valley towards Kabul.

The column for the Bolan pass, comprised of a force of 8,000 British and Indian troops under the command of Lieutenant-General Donald Stewart, assembled at Moltan in northwest India. From Moltan, the plan was to secure the Bolan pass crossing into Afghanistan, and to capture the city of Kandahar.

The task of keeping open the Bolan pass and ensure lines of communication and supply were maintained, fell to the brigade under the command of Brigadier General Phayre Kandahar Field Force.

In March 1880, the Times of India reported, *"we understand that Captain William Cooke-Collis Deputy Assistant Adjutant General has been ordered to hold himself in readiness to proceed to Kandahar to take up his new appointment as Brigade Major"*. Under the command of William Cooke-Collis were engineers, four companies of sappers, and infantry regiments the 4th, 5th, 10th, 16th 27th and 28th Native Infantry.

Between April and July 1880, William's brigade operated between Sibi and Kandahar via the Bolan Pass, a distance of 261 miles. Their job was to maintain roads and provide security for the safe transport of supplies, and to ensure that open lines of communication were maintained.

Kandahar, in south Afghanistan, had been captured by Lieutenant-General Donald Stewart's force without a struggle 8th January 1879. In the months that followed, the occupation of the city had been relatively uneventful, other than an outbreak of Cholera in July, which claimed over 400 lives. When, however, General Stewart headed north to Kabul with his British regiments and division of the Bengal Army, he left Kandahar with a much weaker garrison of mostly Indian troops, under the command of Major General Primrose.

In April 1880, word had reached Kandahar that Ayub Khan, the younger brother of the deposed Ameer Yakoub Khan, had amassed an army with the intention of expelling the British from Afghanistan. The Wali of Kandahar urged the British to intercept Ayub's army before it reached Kandahar.

General Primrose appointed Brigadier General Burrows as commander of a field brigade sent to oppose Ayub Khan's army, with Brigadier General Nuttall commanding the cavalry. Two cavalry regiments, 3rd Bombay Light Cavalry and 3rd Scinde Horse rode out of Kandahar 4th July 1880, followed by the infantry and guns the next day, a total force of 2,600 men.

On 28th July 1880, news reached William's brigade that General Burrows forces had been defeated at the Battle of Maiwand the day before, with the loss of over 1,000 men killed or wounded. The victorious Afghan army pursued the surviving British forces back to Kandahar, and laid siege to the city.

In response, General Roberts led a force of 10,000 British and Indian soldiers, 300 miles in twenty-three days from Kabul to Kandahar, to defeat the Afghan army of Ayub Khan. Despite the difficult terrain and oppressive heat, the force covered the distance, hardly losing a man.

At the same time, Brigadier General Phayre and William Cooke-Collis commanded a separate column of 6,000 British and Indian troops, marching 93 miles in just ten days. On 1st September 1880, Ayub Khan's army outside Kandahar was defeated and the siege ended.

For his part in the Anglo-Afghan War 1878-80, and his part in the relief of Kandahar, William was mentioned in dispatches. Brigadier General Phayre wrote of William:

"To Captain William Cooke-Collis 83rd Regiment of Foot Assistant Adjutant General my hearty thanks are due for his valuable services, commencing in April last as Brigade Major on the line of communications. His arduous duties have been performed ably and promptly."

The British left Afghanistan in the hands of Abdur Rahman, who agreed to conduct his foreign policy through the Government of India. They also seized several Afghan districts in the Khyber and Kurram border areas. However, the provocative policy of maintaining a British resident in Kabul was quietly dropped. The last British and Indian soldiers left the country in April 1881.

While William had been on active service in Afghanistan, his pregnant wife Katherine had returned to England. On 28th September 1880 Katherine had their fourth child, a daughter named Katherine Sophia, born in Worlington Suffolk.

By March 1881, William was reported to be back in Bombay and during the same year, William returned to Ireland where he rejoined his regiment's depot companies. During 1881, under the Childers Reforms, the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot was combined with the 86th (Royal County Down) Regiment of Foot, to form the Royal Irish Rifles. In December 1881, William was ordered to join the regimental headquarters based in Dover.

In 1882, William inherited the family home Castle Cooke, following the death of his father Maurice Atkin Cooke-Collis who died 8th December 1882 at Queenstown, Ireland.

On 1st April 1883, William joined the Staff of the Northern Division at York as Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General. During the same year, William's wife Katherine gave birth to their fifth child, a daughter Geraldine Margaret, who was born 26th November 1883 in York.

British forces had occupied Egypt in 1882 to safeguard the Suez Canal and protect British financial interests. As a result of the occupation, British troops intervened in neighbouring Sudan, where British, Egyptian, and Indian troops fought two bitter wars against rebellious Islamic tribesmen (Mahdists), the followers of Muhammad Ahmad, the self-proclaimed Mahdi.

Towards the end of 1883, Egypt had decided to send an Expeditionary Force of Egyptian forces to the north-east region of the Sudan, through the port city of Suakin on the Red Sea. The intention was to destroy the power of the Sudanese military commander Osman Digna and his troops operating in the area, and to supervise and protect the construction of the Suakin-Berber Railway.

In early 1884, an Egyptian force of 3,500 men commanded by Baker Pasha a British Officer, set out from Suakin towards the town of Tokar. At a halting place of El Teb, they were attacked by a Mahdist force of 1,000 men. Despite their superior numbers and weaponry, the Mahdists inflicted a heavy defeat on the Egyptians, only 700 out of the 3,500 returned to Suakin. Following this defeat, the British reluctantly agreed to divert some British units, the Royal Irish Fusiliers on their way returning home from India, 3 battalions from the Army of Occupation in Egypt, York and Lancaster Regiment from Aden and a battalion of Marines, were all sent to Suakin.

When assembled, a second expedition consisting of 4,500 British troops, supported by 22 guns and 6 machine guns, departed from Suakin 10th March 1884, commanded by Major General Sir Gerald Graham VC. Three days later, after a fierce battle, the British force inflicted a serious defeat on a much larger Mahdist army. Their leader Osman Digna, however, escaped capture.

Despite this success, following the fall of Khartoum on 26th January 1885, the British once again felt the need to defeat the forces of Osman Digna, so a second British Expedition was planned against Digna. In command of the second expedition would again be Major General Sir Gerald Graham VC, who had defeated Digna's forces the previous year at the Battle of Tamai.

In January 1885, William and Katherine had a sixth child, a daughter named Florence Eleanor. Florence was baptised 4th February at St John's Church, Ousebridge, York.

In February 1885, William Cooke-Collis was reported to be on the staff list of officers on the staff of the second Suakin Expedition. On 21st February 1885, Sir Gerald Graham and his staff officers, left Charing Cross Station travelling to Dover, en route to Suakin, via Paris and Brindisi a port on the southern tip of Italy.

By 12th March 1885, the British had assembled a field force of some 10,500 British and Indian troops at Suakin, consisting of:

Royal Engineers
King's Shropshire Regiment
East Surrey Regiment
1st Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment
Royal Marine Light Infantry
5th Royal Irish Lancers
20th Hussars
Royal Horse Artillery
Grenadier Guards
Coldstream Guards
Scots Guards
9th Bengal Cavalry
17th Bengal Native Infantry
15th Ludhiana Sikh Regiment
28th Bombay Pioneers
Madras Sappers and Miners

In addition, the expedition employed 7,000 transport men and 10,000 animals required to supply and maintain the presence of such a large force in the field. As Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General William Cooke-Collis worked directly under the command of Major General Sir George Greaves Chief of Staff.

The first action of the expedition was to send out a scouting detachment on 19th March to survey the area around Hashin, some 7 miles inland from Suakin. It was thought that a number of Digna's men were camped at Hashin, so General Graham led a force of 8,500 troops accompanied by 1,500 transport animals to capture Dihilbat Hill near Hashin, and to establish a zeriba (a fortified enclosure) nearby.

The force successfully achieved its objectives, losing two officers and only a handful of men, before returning to Suakin the same night.

On 22nd March 1885, within only 5 miles from the port of Suakin, a contingent of some 3,000 British and Indian troops, led by Major General Sir John Carstairs McNeill, were attacked by a Mahdist force. The Mahdists were heavily defeated, losing some 1,000 of their 2,000 fighters, compared to the loss of 70 British and Indian soldiers killed and over 100 wounded.

Within two months, however, the British government, in pursuing its anti-imperialist policies elsewhere, took the opportunity provided by events in Afghanistan, to abandon its military campaign in Sudan. Consequently, the Suakin Field Force was withdrawn during 1885. In despatches, General Graham singled out William, amongst other staff officers, for special mention for services rendered by him during the Suakin Expedition.

In the same month that William returned home from the Sudan, he was promoted to Major and resumed his position as Deputy Assistant Adjutant General for the Northern District based in York.

On 22nd November 1886, William and Katherine lost their youngest child Florence Eleanor who died aged just twenty-two months old.

By December 1889, William had returned to Ireland and was appointed second in command of the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles based at Mullingar County Westmeath.

On 27th January 1891, William's wife Catherine died in Ireland, she was only 40 years old.

In 1892, William was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, second in command of the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, before retiring in May that year.

Two years later, in 1894 William was appointed to command the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifles, better known as the North Cork Militia. Newspapers reported:

"Lieutenant-Colonel William Cooke-Collis who is an ex-Army man of great experience, lives in country, and his grandfather served in the North Cork. He himself, is forty-seven years of age, has had twenty-five years Army service and retired from the Royal Irish Rifles two years ago. He has been Adjutant to his regiment, has held eight different staff appointments, was twice mentioned in dispatches for his services in the Afghan and Sudan campaigns, the North Cork Militia may be considered fortunate in obtaining his services."

During the same year, William married Elizabeth Marion Shrubsole Cunliffe 1864-1926 on 4th Sept 1894, at All Saints Church, Marylebone, London. The couple went on to have five children, born between 1896 and 1906, their children were:

Marion Susan Cooke-Collis 1896-1987

Mary Doreen Cooke-Collis 1899-1995

Edward Cunliffe Cooke-Collis 1902-1989

Diana Florence Cooke-Collis 1904-1983

Philip William Cooke-Collis 1906-1977

In April 1895, William commander of the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifles (North Cork Militia), was granted the honorary rank of Colonel in the militia force.



Colonel William Cooke-Collis circa 1895

The Second Boer War started in October 1899 and lasted until May 1902. The war was fought in Southern Africa between Britain and the Afrikaans-speaking Dutch settlers of two independent Boer republics, the South African Republic (Transvaal Republic) and the Orange Free State.

On 9th October 1899, the Boers issued an ultimatum to the British government, declaring that a state of war would exist between Britain and the two Boer republics, if the British did not remove their troops from along the border. The ultimatum expired without resolution, and the war began on 11th October 1899.

At the height of the war the total British military strength in South Africa reached 500,000 men, compared to the Boers who could only muster about 88,000. The British, however, were fighting in

a hostile country over difficult terrain, with long lines of communications, while the Boers, mainly on the defensive, use Guerrilla tactics to frustrate and inflict heavy losses on the British forces.

At the news of the outbreak of war in South Africa, the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifles were one of the first militia battalions to volunteer for active duty. William wired the War Office notifying them of the wish of the men to "share the fortunes of their comrades in the field." His request was accepted and subsequently received orders that the battalion should make ready for active service.

On 11th January 1900, the first four battalions forming the first contingent of the Militia Force for South Africa left Southampton on the Troopship SS Nile. On route for South Africa, the SS Nile called into Queenstown in Ireland to embark the 600 men of the 9th King's Royal Rifles, including their commanding officer Colonel William Cooke-Collis. On board that day was William's son, Lieutenant William James Norman Cooke-Collis serving under his father. The Nile arrived at Cape Town 1st February 1900.

During their time in South Africa, militia battalions carried out escort and guard duties, protecting lines of communications, railway tracks and bridges.

In recognition of the service provided by the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifles during its time in South Africa, Brigadier General G.G. Cunningham C.B. D.S.O wrote:

"The G.O.C. cannot let the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps leave the command, on their departure for home, without placing on record the good they have done.

The first Irish Militia Battalion to respond to the call to arms and volunteer for active service in South Africa, the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps landed at Cape Town on 1st February 1900 and at once proceeded to the front, joining the force in the Colesburg District, and being engaged in the action on 14th February 1900.

When the general advance took place, the battalion was employed in guarding the railway, and at Rail head in the beginning of May when they were visited by Field Marshall Lord Roberts when the Commander in Chief expressed his satisfaction with the battalion. From the month of June onwards the guarding of the railway from the Vaal to Wolvehoek fell to the lot of the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps and the battles fought as the Boers unsuccessfully tried to wreck the railway in the Orange River Colony during this period are remembered.

A Mounted Infantry Company was formed which has rendered good service, the state in which the horses are being left behind reflects great credit on all concerned.

The G.O.C. wishes Colonel Cooke-Collis and all ranks of the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps a safe and prosperous journey home, and that the welcome may be warm as it is well deserved."

The battalion embarked the SS Pinemore at Cape Town 6th July 1901, arriving back in Ireland 31st July 1901.

For his service in South Africa, William was awarded the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George C.M.G.

In 1904, in addition to his military duties, William was appointed to the office of High Sheriff for Cork County. William was also a Justice of the Peace and held the office of Deputy Lieutenant.

In July 1905, the King approved the appointment of William Cooke-Collis, Commander of the 9th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps, as Aide-de-Camp to King Edward VII and conferred upon him the rank of Colonel in the militia.

In June 1920, the Birmingham Daily Gazette carried an article entitled "List of Outrages Cork Colonel threatened with death". The Gazette reported on several incidents involving "Sinn Feiners" setting fire to premises and reporting that notices were posted in the Fermoy district of County Cork

threatening William Cooke-Collis with death, if he did not surrender a farm he owned. This incident was perhaps a prelude to the events that would occur at Castle Cooke the following year.

In June 1921, several British newspapers carried small articles regarding an incident at William's home in Ireland. The Westminster Gazette published 9th June 1921, *"Castle Cooke Burned – News has reached Cork that Castle Cooke, the residence of Colonel Cooke-Collis, situated between Fermoy and Glanworth, was destroyed by fire at a late hour on Tuesday night. It was a fine building occupying a commanding position in beautiful surroundings. No particulars are available as to the circumstances under which the mansion was destroyed."*

The Pall Mall and Globe, however, in their article published the same day, was entitled *"Mansion Destroyed – Another Irish Seat Burned Down."* The article mentioned the fire at Cook Castle but also mentioned an incident that took place on a goods train from Dublin passing Knocklong. The train was held up by armed men, who ordered six wagons of military stores to be detached, before spraying them with petrol and setting them on fire.

Neither article mentioned the circumstances under which Castle Cooke was burned down and only made veiled references to the troubles that had existed in Ireland for some time. As long ago as April 1916, a group of Irish Republicans launched an armed insurrection against the British, with an aim of establishing an independent Ireland, free from British rule. What became known as the Easter Rising, although crushed by the overwhelming fire power of the British army after only six days, was among one of the events that ended colonial rule in Ireland and was succeeded by the Irish War of Independence.

The Irish War of Independence was a guerrilla war fought in Ireland between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and British Forces between 1919 and 1921. In May 1921, Ireland was partitioned under British law by the Government of Ireland Act, which created Northern Ireland. After a long and bloody conflict resulting in more than 2,000 deaths on both sides, a ceasefire began on 11 July 1921. The post-ceasefire talks led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921.

Four weeks before the ceasefire began, on the evening of 7th June 1921, a gang of armed men burned down Castle Cooke, William's family home in Ireland. That evening around 10.15, William and his wife Elizabeth were getting ready for bed, when armed members of the IRA arrived at the house. William and his family were locked in a garage, while the house was set alight, and released later unharmed.

Clearly the events of that fateful night, were both traumatic and terrifying for all concerned, especially for William and his family who not only lost their home but also most of their possessions.

To understand what happened that night and to appreciate the emotions on both sides, it is perhaps useful to hear accounts from not only the victims, but also the perpetrators who caused the destruction of Cooke Castle.

In a witness statement given by Con Leddy, a former member of the IRA, to the Bureau of Military History in December 1952, he recalls:

"Another very good job of work carried out by the Araglin Company early in 1921 was the destruction of the residence of a gentleman named Cook-Collis at Castlecook, near Moore Park, Fermoy. Cook-Collis was an ex-Colonel of the British Army – he was a real bad type and very anti-Irish. His loyalist sympathies were well known, and he was a frequent visitor to the nearby garrisons of Moore Park, Kilworth and Fermoy, and it was a fair assumption that he was giving any information he could pick up to the enemy. In fact, this was confirmed following the burning of the house, as one of the Officers of the Moore Park garrison mentioned that he had no sympathy for Cook-Collis for the reason that he was too keen in carrying stories to Moore Park."

On the night of the burning our party approached the house under the cover of darkness as the house was very adjacent to Moore Park, which had a large garrison. He was handed an official order for its

destruction signed by the Brigade O.C. The members of the family then left and were permitted to take away whatever money was in the house, together with some personal documents. The house and contents were then set on fire and the whole building was burned to the ground. The military garrison, only a mile away, did not send out a party although the flames could be observed for miles around."

It is evident from this statement that the IRA considered William to be anti-Irish, a loyalist, and an informer to the British Army. As an ex-Colonel with the British Army, Justice of the Peace, High Sheriff and Deputy Lieutenant, it is easy to understand why the IRA would consider William a potential target. It is also possible that there may well have been scores to settle amongst some locals, who may have had a grudge to bear against their wealthy land-owning neighbour.

Two days after the burning of Castle Cooke, William's wife Elizabeth wrote to her son "Ted" from the Victory Hotel Fermoy. Edward (Ted) Cunliffe Cooke-Collis, who was 18 at the time and undertaking his military training at Sandhurst, went on to become a Brigadier in the British army.

Extracts taken from Elizabeth's letter date 10th June 1921, give an insight into the events of the night Castle Cooke was burned down, she writes:

"Dearest Ted,

This is the first minute I have had to write to you. I know you will want all the details. Tuesday last was a very hot day and the river almost dry so that we have no light, and your father and I were both very tired and when we could see to read no longer went up to bed about 10.15, 15 or 20 min. earlier than usual, everything looking profoundly peaceful. I had just begun to undress, and father was in his pyjamas when Kerry began to bark loudly and soon Moll came flying down from her room saying there was someone in the yard.

Just then Hannah came running up to say that there were men asking for your father but weren't going to hurt him.

Father went down as he was, and I followed when I had flung on my dress. I found him at the front door, outside which was a man in a slouch hat reading from a bit of paper. In the porch was another with a rifle and flourishing a revolver.

As I came up, I heard the man read: "As certain houses in this area have been bombed and burnt by the military and you are known to have marked anti-national sympathies" (or some rot like that) "it is ordered that this house is to be destroyed and you have half an hour to remove your valuables."

Your father began "Oh my God!" etc. but I said: "Come along, don't talk to them, get on some clothes and we must get out what we can."

I got some of my clothes but forgot my wedding and diamond rings which I had just taken off! We seized pictures, ornaments, anything that came handy. The rebels helped a little but kept on saying "Hurry up" etc. They were all round the house.



Castle Cooke

We heard a cart or carts coming up the avenue which were full of tins of petrol. After a very short half hour they drove us, father, me, Moll, Ellen, Nora, [Mr Harmon?], and Geaney, into the garage, two men standing guard at the door.

While this was going on others were in the house, smashing the windows everywhere, which made a dreadful noise. They made a pile of furniture in every room, poured petrol over it, and set it alight. When the first burst of smoke came, a whistle blew, and they fled.

In 2 seconds, everyone had absolutely vanished. It was awful to see the smoke and flames bursting from the house. Moll and I sobbed and cried. When we knew they had gone, we all ran out.

We fully expected the More Parks would appear as soon as the flames flared up, but not one soldier arrived till one o'clock next day.

Your father, Geaney and the servants were about all night. The things they saved were all lying on the grass in the front and by the time it was daylight the house was absolutely burnt out, only the walls standing.

Then I went and reported it at Brigade Headquarters. Colonel Cameron was extremely nice. He went out himself later. Then I sent telegrams to you all. Of course, the news caused great excitement, and everyone was most kind. All sorts of people offered to take us in and lend us anything. Last night they tried to burn Mt Rivers but weren't so good at it as our beauties and a certain friend of ours noticed the smoke and gave the alarm, and the soldiers got there with great speed and put out the fire. Only the drawing-room is burnt. There is a report that either Lismore Castle or Ballysaggart has been burning all day today.

We must be thankful that they didn't shoot your father or any of us, and that we still have each other.

Best love, Yr loving mother.

P.S. Dick was poisoned, to get him out of the way. We had come to the conclusion he died of arsenic in the end."

Dick (the family dog) was the only fatality from that evening in June 1921, the night Castle Cooke was burned to the ground by the IRA.

After the trauma of seeing his house destroyed by fire and still with a potential threat to his life living in Ireland, William and Elizabeth decided to move to England, where in 1922 they purchased a 17th Century Rectory in Islip, 5 miles north of Oxford.

On 14th July 1926, Elizabeth died at home, she was 63 years old and buried two days later at St Nicholas' Church in Islip.

William died 22nd April 1933 at his home The Hall in Islip Oxfordshire, he was 85 years old.



1868



1895



1927

William was buried with his second wife Elizabeth at St Nicolas' Church in Islip. Much like many of the young men who joined the British army as officers during the 19th Century, William Cooke-Collis went onto become a career soldier who enjoyed a life of travel, adventure, and danger. Much of William's early service with the army was based in India, first with the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, before joining the Bombay Staff Corps. He served in the Afghan War (1879-1880) taking part in the march from Quetta to Kandahar, he was D. A. A. and Q. M. G with the Suakin Expedition (1885) and served in the South African War (1899-1900) as commandant at Taaibosch.

