Mayo Folktales

By John Edward Henry

(1904-1986)
In Irish:

I ndíl-chuimhne m’athair ‘gus mo mháthair; ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anam.

In English:

(In loving memory of my parents; may they rest in peace.)
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Preface

All 54 stories in this collection are the work of my late father, John Edward Henry. He was a tireless collector of the lore and legends of former generations.

He was born in Ballydrum, a village near Swinford, East Mayo, in 1904. His father, Martin Patrick, ran a busy brick making concern, a business he had inherited from his own father before that. Many private houses and public buildings throughout East Mayo were part built with bricks from Ballydrum and the house was a hive of activity during John Edward’s early years. He developed a love of storytelling and perhaps more importantly, of listening to the stories and tales of older people who regularly stopped by.

He was to emigrate to the US in 1928, where he spent a number of years working in Chicago before returning to take on the running of the family farm and to marry his childhood sweetheart, Margaret Salmon, from Murneen, Claremorris.

He spent a number of years working as a charge hand or ‘ganger’ for Mayo County Council, carrying out road maintenance, bridge building and pier maintenance projects. From conversations with local people, especially those of the generations before his own, he gathered much of the material that would later form the basis of much of his written work.

He took a supply of pencils and wire bound notebooks with him whenever his work meant him staying away from home and he would pass away long winter evenings making notes and annotations as he listened to the accounts of those with whom he chatted about former times and tales. On his return home at weekends, he used those notes to write up fuller accounts in longhand.

He was a prolific writer and his work appeared in many local magazines and community publications. A collection of his stories, ‘Tales from the West of Ireland,’ was published by the Mercier Press in 1979 and was re-issued in 2000. He was also a regular contributor to an American travel company’s newsletter, writing commentaries on Irish current affairs.

Many of the stories to be found in this book and its companion volume have appeared before in book form or in various magazines and periodicals but the majority of them have not been published before.

Before his death in 1986, he passed his folklore collection of stories, songs, myths and legends on to me and expressed the hope that I would make them available for future generations.

The 54 ‘tales’ in this Kindle EBook form part of his legacy.

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A Note on Hiberno-English

The grammar and syntax used in some parts of those stories may appear strange and even incorrect to readers unfamiliar with the nuances of Hiberno-English.

This dialect of English retains some features of the Irish language, particularly in its vocabulary and grammatical structure. It was widely spoken and written by people of my father’s generation in County Mayo and most parts of rural Ireland and still is to a great extent.

There are a large number of Irish words and phrases in the following folktales and strangers to this dialect may find some of the sentence constructs are at variance with conventional English norms.

I have not altered the contents of my father’s work in order to preserve their authenticity so please bear this in mind as you read those stories.

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The Year of the French

When the little French expeditionary force under General Humbert landed at Kilcummin, near Killala, North Mayo on 22 August 1798, they were received with open arms by the local people who looked on their coming as a wholehearted attempt by Napoleon to free Ireland from English domination. They would not have dreamed of regarding it as an operation to divert a sizeable amount of England’s land and sea forces from theatres of war on the Continent.

The ensuing campaign, resulting in the capture of Ballina and then Castlebar and the clearing of County Mayo of all enemy forces by the Franco-Irish force, was a brilliant opening to the short-lived insurrection in the west. The fatal delay of almost two weeks in Castlebar unfortunately gave the enemy time to regroup and plan counter attacks and encircling movements unhindered.

During the French stay there, they were wined and dined on a most lavish scale by the people of the town and the surrounding countryside. The victory of the Franco-Irish forces at Castlebar and the proclamation of the Republic of Connacht under President John Moore now infused new spirit into the people of Castlebar and the whole country as well.

Those who did not come to join for active service came loaded with gifts of meat, butter, poultry, eggs, fish, etc., for the troops. One party came with a steer that had been cooked in a quarry near the town on heated slabs of limestone, a custom dating back to Hannibal’s time. Gifts of clothing and footwear donated by merchants from Castlebar and the nearby towns also arrived. Drilling the raw recruits and getting them accustomed to the French muskets, swords and small arms took up some valuable time.

Despite all this, it has been stated that the Irish recruits who stuck to or reverted to their traditional weapon the pike gave a better account of themselves and inspired more fear among the Redcoats at Carricknagat and Ballinamuck, as well as in the capture of Castlebar.

A large contingent came from the Newport-Ballycroy area. A company from Ballycroy and Erris had previously marched to Ballina to join. A body of insurgents from Westport and Louisburgh included two Augustinian Friars, Fr. Myles Prendergast and Fr. Michael Gannon. This force was led by Johnny Gibbons, locally nicknamed Johnny the Outlaw.

. From the Knock-Aughamore district came two strong companies under Captain Seamas O’Malley and Richard Jordan. A company of recruits came from Killedan and Bohola parishes under Henry Valentine Jordan of Rosslevin.
A large company from the glens around Nephin Mountain who joined on the route from Ballina to Castlebar was led by Captain Peadar Jordan of Coolnabinna. Jordan escaped to Achill Island after the collapse of the rising and died suddenly while on the run there. He composed the poem, “Cúl na Binn,” one of the finest poems of the ‘98 period.

It may be mentioned that one of the martyred priests of the Penal Days in East Mayo was Fr. Fulgentius Jordan, so the Jordans should hold an honoured place in the turbulent history of Mayo.

Another local leader who joined the Franco-Irish force just before the fight for Castlebar with a strong body of pikemen was Captain Willie Mangan of Sion Hill. The first rout of any of the Redcoat regiments guarding the approaches to the town took place at Sion Hill, according to local tradition.

This, coupled with a flanking attack from the west side of the town by about three hundred pikemen, is believed to be the main factor in the complete rout of England’s regular soldiers and the hated Irish militia. Four years previously, the people of Castlebar and the neighbourhood had flocked into Main Street to watch two wine-soaked rackrenting landlords fight or attempt to fight a sword duel. Caesar French of Oughterard and the local bully boy, George Robert (or as he was nicknamed “Fighting”) Fitzgerald of Turlough House were the contestants.

During the scuffle, Fitzgerald’s spurs got entangled in his greatcoat and he fell to the ground. Immediately, French placed his foot on Fitzgerald’s chest and pointed his sword at his throat with the familiar duellist’s demand to surrender or die.

Then the crowd surged forward to save their local oppressor with the result that French had to flee for his life. He wisely had his attendant waiting with two saddled horses at the top of the town and lost no time in fleeing for his life towards Oughterard.

One of the few landlords who led a company of United recruits to Castlebar was John Moore of Ballintaffy (midway between Claremorris and Kiltimagh). Four years previously, John Moore with his landlord neighbours, John Joyce of Oxford House and Thomas Ormsby of Ballinamore, sat on the jury that found “Fighting” Fitzgerald guilty of the murder of another landlord, Randal McDonnell of Windsor House, Castlebar.

Browne saw in Fitzgerald (an influential landlord and nephew of Thomas Hervey, the Earl of Bristol and bishop of Derry) an enemy to be eliminated at all costs, and he did not hide his happiness when Fitzgerald was executed.

Seeing one of his hand-picked jurors side with the rebels caused him to have a secret tunnel constructed from his house (now the Convent of Mercy, Claremorris) to a grove of trees some distance away as an escape hatch in case of a rebel victory.
On their march from Castlebar to Ballinamuck, the French and Irish force marched through Bohola direct to Swinford. The Castlebar-Swinford main road at that time joined the Swinford-Kiltimagh main road at Carrabawn, a mile from Swinford and it was over this road that Humbert entered Swinford.

When a historian, Dr Hayes, travelled to Castlebar, Swinford, and over Humbert’s march to Longford in general nearly fifty years ago he was wrongly informed on this point. He was told in Swinford that Humbert marched to Foxford and then to Swinford.

Such a route would involve a detour of fifteen or sixteen miles, two unnecessary crossings of the River Moy and a march through mountains foothills which would be ideal ambush terrain for enemy units. This to seasoned campaigners like Humbert, or Blake the Irish commander, would have been unthinkable. General Humbert and his aides, Sarrazin and Charcot, dined in Anthony Corley’s Hotel, now O’Hare’s, on the square in Swinford.

The French leader first called a halt and, after sentries were posted and scouting parties sent out, ordered the troops into a large field, part of which is now the vocational school grounds.

Two steers donated by Brabazon the local landlord and two more donated or taken from the Bohola landlord McManus were hastily prepared and roasted. Four large iron gates belonging to Brabazon were used for roasting grids over large turf fires. Having eaten, the troops marched on to Bellaghy. There, one of their flanking parties, sent out the day before leaving Castlebar, rode up with the news that large enemy forces lay directly between them and the River Shannon.

This decided Humbert to change course in the hope of outflanking his enemies and getting into the central plain and hopefully on to Dublin via the upper reaches of the Shannon.

Left to fight on their own, their stubborn resistance earned tributes from some of their enemies. The French force at Ballinamuck has been estimated at about nine hundred men. There are no definite figures of the Irish casualties at Ballinamuck. It is believed that three hundred dead, four hundred taken prisoners and another four hundred escaped would be a reasonable figure. With martial law and unauthorised killings by the victors being a regular pattern of life in Ireland for three years or more after the rising, it is of course impossible to place a figure on the casualties connected with that Continental invasion of Ireland.

It must also be remembered that records were scanty and unreliable, especially in relation to Tone’s ‘men of no property’ who were not fully regarded as human beings by the victorious army of occupation.

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Writers have often commented on the difficulty of obtaining reliable information in the west of Ireland on events connected with the 1798 rising in comparison to County Wexford and other Leinster counties. Unfortunately, the big answer to this question is the famine. In Mayo and in the west in general, not alone whole families, but whole villages with all their history, folklore and customs were wiped out. The famine did not make such an impact on more prosperous thinly populated counties like Wexford, Wicklow, Carlow and Kildare. Many farms in those counties remain in the possession of direct descendants of people who took part in or witnessed events connected with 1798.

Many of the Mayo men who escaped from the massacre of Ballinamuck were Gaelic speakers and were between one hundred and fifty and two hundred miles from their native heath.

To add to their woes, the River Shannon lay between them and home and it was well watched and guarded to prevent their return. Ill-clad and ill-shod with winter around the corner, their lot was not a happy one. There is a tale of a Shannon boatman who rowed two loads of Mayo men across the river one night shortly after the fight of Ballinamuck.

Only on his deathbed a few years later, could he dare mention the matter as blood money and spies were plentiful for years after ‘98. There was another story of the Roscommon woman living near the Shannon in 1798 who on a few occasions found her cows milked dry when she collected them for the morning milking.

She was afraid to mention the matter to anyone as she guessed that it meant that some Mayo rebels had passed during the night or early morning.

In 1798 the summer and autumn were finer than average and all the hay and grain crops were collected early. However, the potato stalks remained green until mid-October; this was the favourite hiding ground for the hunted rebels during the day, and they travelled all night.

To make matters worse, most of them had to discard their pikes as being too noticeable and unwieldy. It is no wonder that a high proportion of the Mayo insurgents are just listed as ‘never returned’. A few of the insurgents were men who deserted from the Redcoats or militia regiments and when caught, whether armed or not, their fate was sealed. Leaders like General Blake of Garracloon and Colonel O’Dowd of Bonniconlon and Colonel Bellew of Killala, trained veteran soldiers, were executed without semblance of a trial.
Colonel McDonnell of Carracon, who was wounded at the capture of Castlebar, escaped to France, refused promotion by Napoleon and went to America where he died.

One of the Murrisk Abbey Friars who joined the United men (insurgents), Fr. Michael Gannon, escaped to France in a French officer’s uniform and rose to high rank in the French army. The other Friar, Myles Prendergast, escaped to Connemara along with Johnny Gibbons and a few more United men. A poem by the celebrated poet, Anthony Raftery, contains the lines:

Tá Johnny Gibbons ‘gus ár n-athair Maolmhuire *

‘Gus a chomplacht fior amach san mhóin
Faoi thart, faoi easanair, a’s fuacht na hoiche
Agus deamhan braon dí acu no dram le n-ól.

Ár n-athair Maolmhuire” was of course Fr. Myles Prendergast. He never returned from Connemara, where he died fifty years after the rebellion.

Johnny Gibbons was captured by the Redcoats with the aid of a spy who had damped the powder in Johnny’s pistols to complete his downfall.

When Johnny saw his pistols useless and the house encircled by his enemies, he exclaimed: Tá Johnny i nead lachain ‘gus a mhéar i bpoll tráthair’. (Johnny is in a duck’s nest and his finger in an auger-hole.)

This saying lived on to describe anybody in a tight corner.

Packing victims’ fingers into grooved auger holes was a form of punishment in those days and ducks’ nests were so constructed that the ducks could not leave until released. Duck eggs were too valuable as a food in those days of continuous privation to allow the ducks to lay out in ponds or rivers.

When Johnny Gibbons was executed in Castlebar, his godfather Denis Browne, Donncha an Rópa, took pleasure in being present as he had previously been when his sworn enemy, Fighting Fitzgerald had been executed some years earlier.

Captain Mangan of Sion Hill was killed a few years after the rising just when a free pardon was being prepared for a number of insurgents. Local tradition says that his fate was encompassed by a spy who felled him with a stone after he had got through a ring of soldiers at Letter, near Nephin.

Among those who are listed as ‘never returned’ are John Moore of Ballintaffy, Henry Jordan of Rosslevin and Seamas Dubh Horkan of Rathscanlon, Swinford. (Henry Jordan is believed to have died in Connemara.)
Among those who went from Swinford with Seamas Dubh Horkan to join up in Castlebar were Paddy Brennan, a blacksmith who forged the pikes for the local United Irishmen, and Seamas Durkin, a tailor. Durkin had his workshop in what is now the local Garda Station. Durkin’s grandfather was a landlord locally known as Muiris na Muaidh (Maurice of the Moy). Muiris lived a half mile south of Cloonacanana ford on the River Moy. The walls of his dwelling still stand close to the main Swinford-Aclare Road.

Muiris na Muaidh was the landlord of the nine townlands nearest to Cloonacanana ford. He fought as a young officer in the Irish Army at Aughrim, one of the bloodiest battles in Irish history.

After Aughrim, he lost most of his lands in the Williamite confiscations. Admittedly he was not fighting for Ireland’s freedom. He was fighting, like his commander, Patrick Sarsfield, Earl of Lucan, for the right of the poltroon English King James II to rule Ireland in preference to William of Orange. Incidentally he was, of course, fighting for his landed estates. Ironically, the Vatican supported William of Orange.

Seamas Durkin escaped from the massacre of Ballinamuck and found refuge in a disused sandpit in a large field, from which he saw the Redcoats searching along the hedgerows around the field.

After nightfall he headed in an easterly direction, luckily for himself, as all roads to the west were well watched. After some days, he found shelter and employment with a farmer in a quiet spot thirty miles from Ballinamuck. Some time afterwards, he went back to his old trade and worked from place to place as a journeyman tailor.

It was almost three years after ‘98 before he returned home. He built a small house in the townland of Cloonacanana beside the old fort of Lisconnell.

He married a few years later and I can remember his two daughters, Nellie and Winnie. Winnie married a local man, Tom Salmon, and Nellie married Martin Henry of Ballydrum, my paternal grandfather.

Grandmother Nellie never fully mastered the English language but for a torrent of invective in Gaelic she was hard to beat. When she died in 1912 she was nearly one hundred years old.

Two Mayo priests were executed for complicity or aiding and abetting the insurgents. Fr. Manus Sweeney of Achill was executed on the market crane in Newport and Fr. Conroy of Addergoole in Castlebar. Another priest, Fr. Owen Cowley, died from ill-health and hardship while on the run. The tree in the Mall on which Fr. Conroy was executed was blown down by a storm in 1918. At a huge county anti-conscription meeting in the Mall a few days later, De Valera referred to the tree and its history, having been briefed on the matter by local republicans.
The priests who sided with the rebels in 1798 were excommunicated. To this day it is believed the fiat or excommunication edict has not been revoked.

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Great Grandmother’s Tales

My maternal great grandmother, who died in 1911 and to the best of her reckoning, one hundred and two years old, was a mine of information on events connected with the famine. Unfortunately, nobody thought of recording her tales of her early days.

Her husband Thomas McDonnell of Ballintaffy, Claremorris, died a young man in 1847, leaving her with a very young family. In keeping with local custom, the Widow McDonnell was known all her life by her maiden name, Mary McHugh. Her holding of land, being a middleman’s holding, was larger than the average and this she regarded as being more of a liability than an asset as the annual rent to her landlord, Ormsby of Ballinamore, was correspondingly high.

At the time of her husband’s death, she had four cottiers as small subletters on her holding. Each cottier rented one field with his cottage and tilled it to the utmost. The size of the field varied from one to two acres. Milk was usually supplied by the landowner who let the cottage and field, in return for seasonal assistance with spring and harvesting work.

Her landlord allowed her to increase the number of subletters to eight. This, she maintained, meant the difference between security and eviction for her.

Their small rents, plus their assistance with her farm work as required, almost paid her rent to the landlord. She had a rather amusing tale involving her husband. Some time after their marriage, he went to Dublin to lodge some money in a bank, there being no provincial barks at the time.

One of his horses was lame and the other one, a mare, was rearing a foal, so he set off walking at daybreak on a fine summer morning. Sometime on the second day, having crossed the Shannon, he got a lift from two men on a horse-drawn miller’s dray or low slung cart. He found that his companions could not speak Irish. Luckily for himself he could understand English much better than he could speak it. Between their hints and whispers, he picked up enough of their conversation to realise that they meant to rob and kill him, if necessary, when they came to the wood beyond the next little town. He had donned a new suit and shoes leaving home and this led his companions to believe that he was worth robbing.

He planned to jump off the dray when they got to the town. Hearing an unusual animal-like roar, he looked ahead and saw a donkey drover and a bunch of donkeys approaching along the road. On spotting the horse, one donkey ran forward braying loudly.
The horse wheeled around on the road and bolted in the opposite direction at top speed. My great grandfather leaped off the dray and over the fence into a nearby field. He had never seen a donkey before, and judging by their blood-curdling braying, he felt it better to get out of their reach as fast as possible. The drover however hailed him and assured him that his animals were harmless. Seeing a donkey was an experience for him as donkeys were almost unknown in Mayo at the time.

When the Napoleonic wars left Ireland almost denuded of horses, they having been snapped up for the Imperial cavalry regiments, English and Scottish donkey dealers saw a ready market in Ireland. They shipped the donkeys in thousands over the short Larne-Stranraer route in flat-bottom boats.

He called to a farmhouse shortly afterwards and stayed there overnight. He continued his journey at daybreak the next morning and took care not to fall in with his carter companions again.

The McDonnells kept a bull. In Irish farming circles, a bull rated nearly as high as a hunter or a racehorse as a status symbol. One of the most sustaining foods in those famine days, a mixture of oatmeal and blood known as preasán fola, was expected to sustain a hard-working man for a full day.

(A mixture of oatmeal and milk was known as preasán and a mixture of oatmeal and butter, which could be moulded into cakes or rolls, was known as bustán. In the McDonnell household, the bull bore the brunt of the bleeding rituals. For some reason, the bleeding operation was always carried out on Sunday afternoons.

The widow said that her bull became so accustomed or resigned to the ritual that he uttered the most mournful bellows when he saw his tormentors approaching.

Bleeding was effected by puncturing a vein in the animal’s left shoulder. On the final occasion (for the bull), the operation was carried out by a son of the regular vet who was ill.

Through some miscalculation, the bleeding could not be stopped and in the excitement the bull broke loose and quickly bled to death from over exertion.

The widow decided to make the best of a bad job. She sent for a regular butcher to Claremorris and got the bull prepared and salted.

She found that she had to send a man on horseback to Kisallagh, Westport, for a bag of salt as she said she could only get pinches of salt locally. The man who sold the salt was known as a panner. He got his salt from trapped sea water by what was known as the shallow pan method. Having salted most of the animal, she found she had enough left to make a feast for her cottiers, relatives and neighbours.
She said that feast, and what they took home, put them over the hungriest spring she ever remembered - 1848. Watercress was a highly prized piece of food in the famine years.

A broad, sluggish drain where watercress abounded, midway along the Claremorris- Kiltimagh road, was mentioned by the Widow McDonnell as being black with people eating watercress in the famine years. The edible root of an herb known as the blioscán was dug up and eaten raw, as was another herb root known as the cútharlán that had a marble sized bulb on the root.

My great-grandmother had vivid memories of turbulent elections and bye-elections around the famine years and later. The candidates, all landlords, were adept at rousing the starving peasantry. In the words of James Connolly, ‘They engendered as much heat as was possible into the part of the body politic furthest removed from the idea of social justice’.

In one election, Lord Oranmore and Browne, the Tory candidate, was opposed by Kirwan, a Catholic landlord with repeal sympathies. After 1848, the year of revolutions around the world and the first incipient attempts at democratic upsurge, the English government passed a law that made a defeated election candidate accountable for the victorious candidate’s election expenses.

This in itself was a blow against democracy as it ensured that only men of substance could seek election. When Lord Oranmore opened his election campaign in Claremorris, he had a kinsman, a son of Donncha an Rópa, on his platform.

A local clergyman, Fr. Gibbons, led a group who broke up the meeting shouting ‘soap the rope’ at young Browne. This was one of his father’s nicknames.

Lady Oranmore, seeing the election tide flowing against her husband, went to Archbishop McHale and begged him on her knees to turn the tide in favour of her husband. Her husband went around swaggering that the branches of his trees would pay for the election if he lost.

Kirwan replied by saying that the hooves and horns of all his cattle would more than pay for the election. Lady Oranmore however realized that her husband was an encumbered landlord. Archbishop McHale acceded to her request and threw his weight behind Oranmore, who won the election. Dr McHale lived to regret his action, as Oranmore proved a strong opponent of any scheme designed to benefit the plain, hard-working masses.
Old Animal Charms and Cures

Two miles west of Bohola along the main road to Castlebar lies the townland of Loughkeeraun. The tiny bogland loch or lake from which the townland got its name has completely disappeared over the past half century owing to local drainage operations. There was an old tradition that St Kieran cured a valuable cow that was dying with water taken from the loch and because of this the loch was a popular place of pilgrimage for centuries.

Pilgrims came to Loch Kieran mainly to pray for luck and prosperity with their livestock in the forthcoming year. Not to be outdone in religious fervour or whatever, some pilgrims took rolls of butter to throw into the lake as an offering to the saint. More practical local people came later and salvaged the rolls of butter. Having recycled the butter, it was packed into their butter firkins and sold in the Swinford butter market. I can remember pilgrims going to Loch Kieran on 15th August, which seemed to be the most popular date of all for local pilgrimages in this country. For a kicking cow, a popular cure was to get two people to pass a burning sod of turf under and over the standing cow in the names of Saints Patrick, Bridget and Colmcille. For a newly calved heifer cow to give butter-rich milk, a similar ritual was performed. In this case, the lighted turf sod was passed around the cow’s back legs in the names of the Blessed Trinity.

I can remember on one occasion, while assisting an aunt in this operation, the cow showed her disapproval by kicking the burning sod into a bundle of straw, almost setting fire to the byre. Having been rebuked for laughing, I was told that the fire was blessed. However, I felt that the ritual was more of pagan than Christian origin. In some districts down to the present day, giving away milk on May Day was forbidden as it was regarded as giving away one’s luck for the rest of the year. Giving away fire on that day was also taboo. I recall a story by an old neighbouring woman who absent-mindedly went to borrow a coal on May morning when she found her fire had gone out.

Her return trip was done in record time without the coal of fire. Some years ago, I called to a well-known County Mayo chemist for a remedy for calf scour. I mentioned to him that in my neighbourhood, people of old had great faith in the soup of boiled briar roots for this ailment. The chemist said that tannin was a popular agent for contracting the lower bowel to arrest scour. Briar root, he said, contained a high percentage of tannin.

In bygone times, beef and butter were the most important items in rural economy - as they are at the present time. Anybody found trespassing on a neighbour’s land on May Day might be suspected of gathering certain lucky herbs in
order to take the neighbour’s luck. If the trespasser could be heard saying the words “Im agus bainne dom” when plucking herbs on another man’s land, he was in real danger.

The use of the dead hand to bring luck in butter gathering is happily a thing of the past. The last known instance of anything in that line being practiced in Mayo was over a hundred years ago at a point where the three parishes of Killeedan, Knock and Kilcolman join, almost midway between Claremorris, Kiltimagh and Knock. An old woman who lived alone was being waked in the year 1850. A frightening thunderstorm sprang up during the night which so frightened all at the wake that they all rushed out and away home.

When some of them returned the following morning, they found that the old woman’s right hand had been severed and taken away. I heard this tale being told by an old man, John Hynes, over fifty years ago. His father was one of those who attended the old woman’s wake. In some cases, animal help was invoked to cure human ailments. Donkey’s milk and ferret’s leavings, (food) together with the fasting spit and boiled primroses, were time-honoured cures for jaundice and other mystery complaints. Some of those confirm the saying of the cure being worse than the ailment.

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Matchmaking and Elopements

The arranging of marriages and all the mediation and diplomacy involved was known in Ireland as ‘matchmaking.’ It was regarded by many as an old Gaelic custom. It was in reality, a product of hard economic realities begotten by alien repression; the landlord system; the famine and the repeal of the Corn Laws, which some economists regarded as a greater economic blow to the country than the famine.

The law gave first claim to the estate, farm or property involved to the oldest son of the family. In return he was expected to provide ‘dowries,’ or fortunes, to use a more common term, for sisters and sometimes brothers as required.

Sometimes when the oldest son was in line to get married, he was approaching the ‘sere and yellow leaf’ stage. To make matters more complicated, he often had a sister still on hand, waiting for his intended wife’s fortune to take to her future husband. This future husband often had a sister waiting for this fortune to take away with her and so ad infinitum. I heard in my young days of a fortune of forty pounds in a nearby parish that was in this manner instrumental in concluding six marriages before finally coming to anchor.

During the famine years, when money all but disappeared, runaway marriages or elopements gained momentum as an alternative to the matchmaking system. These marriages, while generally frowned on by parents and relatives of the bride and groom, were often secretly welcomed by the oldest son as it helped to let him off the hook from the financial angle. Many of the runaway couples, if they had the few pounds required, headed for England or America and were married by a priest they found agreeable enough to waive minor regulations in their favour.

In many other cases, the runaway couple found a willing relative to hide away the prospective bride until as often happened, the outraged parents of the bride or groom relented to save the family honour and in a good many cases, to save the fortune that would otherwise be expected. I can faintly recall an old shanachie, Seán Mór, in my young days telling of elopements or runaway marriages as he called them. “I can remember,” he said, “of my father telling me all about the time around the year 1850 when Máire Wee (Bhuidhe) and Seán Bán, who lived in that tumble down house below the crossroad, ran away.”

“God rest them both. Máire came from Carricknagower, over there at the top of the mountain. Her parents had notions and did not think Seán or his holding here in Shraigh good enough for them, or maybe it was all pretentious.”

“After all hopes of getting her parents or even his own to give in failed, Seán and Máire decided to run away. On the night Seán came to take her off with him, there was snow on the ground and he carried her down the mountainside on his back.”
Her neighbours said afterwards that the tracks of her two big toes were visible on the
snow the next day, as she was much taller than Seán.

To lend more evidence to the tale, she carried her only pair of shoes wrapped
up in the pocket of her coat, to save them for her hoped-for marriage.

Seán left her with a sympathetic old bachelor uncle of his, hoping that her
parents would relent. He felt he would get around his own parents more easily. The
two sets of parents foamed and threatened and nearly went back to the flood to find
some tale from the past to fling at each other. In spite of all, Máire’s parents made no
attempt to find her. They could easily track her in the frozen snow if they wanted.”

“After some days of ructions, Séan’s parents gave in and allowed the marriage
to go ahead. In this way, the family name was saved and the gossips silenced.”

“They managed to save Máire’s fortune as well, as I heard they never gave a
penny to her and Seán.” When someone listening to the shanachie in the visiting
house asked him did Séan and Máire live happily ever after, the shanachie replied:
“I’m not sure of that. They were only a short time married when Máire cut her finger.
The old cure in those days for a cut, and a good cure it was, was a spider’s cobweb.
After a search around the home, they could not find a cobweb.”

“God be with my father’s house’,” said Máire, “But you would not be
searching all day to find a cobweb.”

“On the night,” said Scan, “that you left the track of your toes on the
mountainside, you were glad to get away from your father and his cobwebs.”

“On one occasion,” said the shanachie, “My father was home from the fair
with Séan and Máire. He asked Máire if she would rather live in Shraigh than in her
native Carricknagower.”

“To tell the truth,” said Máire, “Good Friday in Carricknagower was better
than Christmas Day in Shraigh’”

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Scrawling and Burning

In the short spell between the famine years 1845-1848 and the repeal of the Corn Laws by the British government in 1851, the peasants of Ireland changed over in a big way to the production of grain crops, chiefly oats. They saw the futility of placing too much reliance on the potato as a main tillage crop. Unfortunately, they continued and intensified an old custom connected with tillage known as ‘Scrawling and Burning,’ which involved cutting away or stripping the top grassy or heathery sods of the field intended for cultivation.

Those surface sods or scraws were dried and piled into heaps which were set afire and allowed to smoulder to heaps of ashes.

The ashes were later spread on the land in the mistaken belief that it was a first class fertilizer. This practice, as time proved, only impoverished the land.

Forty years ago, a man named John Drudy, who had been well-versed in local history and traditions, showed me fields in his native village of Glann, Charlestown, to prove a point. He said the fields in question, after nearly one hundred years of good care and treatment, were only recovering from the effects of scrawling and burning. The skimming off of the tough surface scraws with heavy spades or loys was hard laborious work, and it was unfortunate that it was so much labour in vain.

I heard a local joke about a father and son in those days that had spent the whole day scrawling and came in to their evening meal around nightfall. This meal and a breakfast, of which two boiled duck eggs apiece were the main feature, were all that stood for sustenance in those times. There were no tea breaks or other perks of that kind.

The father and son’s main meal was a large plate of Indian meal porridge laid down between them. This Indian meal was generally known as ‘yella buck.’ The son sat down first and as the stirabout was hot, he began skimming off the cooler, outside part with his spoon. When the father mentioned this, the son replied, “I can be scrawling, Father, and you can be burning.”

At that time, distilleries and malting houses were a feature of the economic life of many provincial towns in Ireland. At the malting houses, the grain was bought from the farmers and prepared for the distilleries. While not absorbing near as much of the grain grown in the country as the mills, they helped to stabilise prices.

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1851 was a cruel blow just as economic conditions were slowing improving after the disastrous famine. This law allowed the dumping of foreign grain into the country, free of tax or any restrictions.
This grain, chiefly Indian corn and meal from the United States and wheat from Canada imported at low prices, put many Irish millers out of business and also most of the distilleries and malting houses. Oat production declined and emigration from Ireland which had been slowing down began to escalate again.

One of the last malting houses in Mayo to close was located in Upper Mount Street, Claremorris. Some years before they closed, they advertised in a Dublin newspaper for an experienced maltster.

A Dublin man who gave the name of Doyle got the job. He proved to be very talkative and boastful over his drinks. As the first manifestation of famine began to appear, he openly advocated rebellion as the only remedy left to the people. He told them of being out in 1798 and in 1803 with Robert Emmet. He would dramatically exclaim, with a far-away look in his eyes “Ah! Them were the days!”

The local parson in Claremorris at the time was the Rev. Darcy Sirr. He was a son of the notorious British army town major in Dublin around 1798, Major Sirr, who did more than his share in the hounding down of Lord Edward Fitzgerald and the ‘98 leaders in Dublin and played a similar role with Robert Emmet and his comrades five years later. Having heard the maltster Doyle blowing his trumpet on one occasion, the Rev. Darcy Sirr felt that he had seen the man and heard the voice before. By degrees, it dawned on him that he had seen the man many years ago in his father’s house handling some papers with the Major.

He also remembered that the man’s name was Duggan. He searched among his father’s papers, most of which he had taken with him to Mayo. (He later gave those papers over to be filed away or published as the authorities saw fit.)

When he found the papers he felt would clear up the identity of Doyle, alias Duggan, he sent for the man in question, saying he would be obliged if he called on the following Sunday to his house. When the maltster called, the parson told him to be seated while he went to his study. When he returned, he laid a paper before his visitor on the table. Pointing to a signature at the foot of the document, he said, “Do you recognise that signature, Duggan?”

Duggan seemed stunned for a few moments. He then stood up and went silently out, returned to town and then turned left on the Ballyhaunis road and probably on to Dublin. He was never seen in Claremorris again.

The document the Rev. Sirr laid before Duggan was an acknowledgment of having on a certain date received the sum of fifty guineas from Major Sirr for information which helped in the capture of Robert Emmet. The document carried the signature of James Duggan and was counter-signed by Major Sirr. Incidentally, a few years later another man connected with the 1803 uprising drifted to Mayo. Barney Moran, Robert Emmet’s executioner, came to Mayo a penniless mendicant. Despised
and disowned by the government he served so slavishly, he died in Ballina workhouse fifty years after Emmet’s rising.

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The Bellmen

Up to forty years ago, nearly every town in Ireland could boast of one or more town criers or bellmen, as they were more generally called. Now they are fast becoming only a memory. It seems strange that a segment of the community with so many colorful characters in its ranks down through the years can evoke such little notice of its passing out parade.

Nowadays, with more advance notices and ever-increasing advertising in newspapers, television and radio, public address systems, printed handbills, etc. the crier or bellman is no longer required to ‘get the message across,’ to use a modern slang phrase. It seems possible that the criers may have been part of the economic life of the country for at least two hundred years in their own way.

When the French invasion force landed at Killala, in 1798, the town crier in Ballina, eight miles away, went on the streets of Ballina a few hours later announcing that Napoleon had landed near Killala.

A month later, when Lord Roden’s Foxhunters and other Redcoat troops returned to retake Ballina and Killala, the Ballina crier was arrested. He would have shared the fate of the United men, Walsh, Barrett and others executed, only that an officer of the notorious North Mayo Militia vouched that he was ‘stupid and harmless’, and would believe any story he was told.

One of my earliest recollections is listening to a Swinford crier, Patsy Cox, locally known as Patcheen, ringing his bell and announcing the coming of a circus to town. Patsy Cox was a child of three years when the famine hit Swinford in 1847. He was taken to Swinford workhouse together with his parents, all stricken down with the dreaded fever that left little hope for famine victims. Two or three days later, he was carried out with a dozen more to be buried in a mass grave. After the first shovelful of earth was flung in over the victims, the infant Patsy stirred his feeble hand slightly. Luckily, one of the grave attendants noticed the movement and took him back to the workhouse again. He recovered and grew up to be a fit able youngster, as he got better inmate treatment by the Workhouse staff who regarded his escape from death and burial as a miracle.

Over five hundred famine victims were buried in mass graves in an elevated spot beside the modern Swinford hospital. Those victims came from the Swinford Poor Law Union Area, which embraced all East Mayo and extended to the Lung River in County Roscommon at that time.

In the closing years of the last century and the opening decades of the present century, a keen rivalry existed in Kiltimagh between two local bellmen: John Forde
better known as Jack Straw, and Tom McNicholas, known as Tom Thrasher. He derived the title from his father who was a noted thresher of oats with the old time flail.

The flail now passing into the Limbo of forgotten things consisted of a five foot by one and a quarter inch stick called a colpán which was loosely attached to a shorter stick known as a buailteán or beater. The two sticks were tied together by a tie of leather or a strip of calico cloth called a fuang. Grasping the colpán firmly in his hands, the thresher swung the buailteán over his head in a circular motion to give impetus to the blow before bringing it down on the head of the sheaf to be threshed. The most satisfactory wood for the colpán was said to be holly; for the buailteán hazel.

One of the Celtic legends of old mentions St. Patrick meeting Oisín from the old Fenian school of warriors. Amongst other things, St. Patrick showed Oisin his father, Oscar, engaged in busily threshing the devils in Hell. Every time he had the devils well cornered for better results, the fuang of his flail snapped and he had to start all over again. As Oisin stood watching, St Patrick said he would grant him one wish, expecting he would ask that Oscar be delivered from the lower regions.

Oisin immediately replied, “I wish Oscar had a fuang on his flail that would never break.” Tom Thrasher’s father threshed a good sized stack of oats daily with Tom turning the sheaves for him, and their combined pay was four shillings and two meals per day.

Jack Straw was a less aggressive type and had spent a short term in college in his youth. During the Land War days, ballads applauding the fight of the tenants and condemning the landlords and the authorities were classed as seditious.

To prevent the circulation of those ballads, the RIC were ordered to prevent the ballad singers and vendors selling those ballads. Bellmen were the chief sellers of ballads, with other sidelines such as peddling matches, shoe laces, pins and needles and other everyday household necessities.

John Forde circumvented the government order by carrying a bunch of oaten straw for which he charged his ballad customers a half penny each, giving them a free ballad and saying at the same time, “I’ll sell my straw and I’ll defy the law.”

From this incident he got the name Jack Straw. During the Boer War years, Jack was progressive enough to get a peep show lantern which showed pictures of the war and the combatants for which he charged a half-penny a peep. On one occasion the Kiltimagh bellman, Padneen Kane told Tom Thrasher that he had a good mind to get married and asked for his advice.

Tom said, “You have no house or land, not even a garden and I suppose you have no money?” “No.” replied Padneen.
Having pretended to give the problem serious consideration, Tom said, “Go ahead and get married; ‘You can’t be much worse off than you are.”

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Achill Breezes

I spent the winter months of 1939-40 on Achill Island supervising road construction, bridge construction and repairs to piers and boat slips on behalf of Mayo County Council. World War II was gaining momentum at the time and travel was becoming more difficult as cars, petrol, bicycles and spare parts were becoming more difficult to obtain. I can remember well my first 60 mile bicycle journey to Achill with a good stiff wind in my face. Between Mulranny and Achill, I caught up with a tramp locally known as Pateen. As I was making slow progress cycling against the strong wind, I decided to walk and enjoy his company to Achill.

Observing some men digging around a telegraph pole, I told my companion that they must now be lifting up the line of telegraph poles as the railway line had been closed down and the rails lifted a short time previously.” Well indeed,” said the tramp, “they could leave them alone because those poles were the only biten of shelter they have in Achill.”

Seeing me laugh at the idea of shelter from telegraph poles, the tramp said, “I was fooled once when I was depending on those poles for shelter.” Pointing to a densely populated village close to the old railway line, the tramp said, “That village down there is Shruffaun and a nice friendly old crowd live down there. I seldom pass this way without calling down to see them.”

Meeting an old man on the road, the tramp stood back to exchange a few words with him and then rejoined me with a broad smile. “If you don’t mind,” he said, “that poor devil has got it in his head to get married.”

“I admire his courage,” said I.

“Courage?” scoffed the tramp, “You could call it the biseach chun bás.” (This is an Achill saying meaning the improvement before death.)

When I parted with my companion after a drink at Achill Sound, he said, “We must soldier on to the end of the road, brother, and we should never worry too much about anything.”

I really envied him the faculty of being able to look on life and its problems so lightly. Around this time, the famous swing bridge at Achill Sound had been declared unfit to carry heavy traffic. One result of this was that two heavy stone crushing plants intended for road works in Achill by Mayo County Council could not travel to the island. All the broken stones required for road making in Achill had to be broken by hand with eight ounce hammers. The stones had to be broken small enough to pass through an iron ring three inches in diameter which was used occasionally for spot
checks. Each man’s pile of broken stone was shoveled through a wooden measure to determine tonnage.

The pay rate was four shillings per ton of broken stone and the men were limited to three days work per week. If a man that been in receipt of twelve shillings or over per week in unemployment assistance, (dole) he could claim four days work per week. To crown it all, the stone was hard blue granite. All the bleakest and most windswept roads in Achill were staffed with stonebreakers when the scheme got underway.

The Shraheen, Dooega, Keel-Dugort, Dooagh, and Bunnacurry Valley roads resembled British Empire building at its most pernicious in North West India as we read about it or saw it in pictures. One day I was sizing up the depressing sight of gangs of fine specimens of Irish manhood seated on piles of wet stones on the Shraheen road, hammering away at the unrelenting granite and gneiss rocks.

I was roused from my day dreams by the local parochial priest.

He told me he had called to know if there was any cursing by the workmen on the job. “Oh, yes father,” I replied facetiously, “the finest cursing I ever heard in any part of the world.”

He told me that cursing was one of the worst sins and that I should not allow it. I replied that I was not so sure that it was a sin at all. I quoted the biblical passage about our Lord cursing the fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season. “You must realise,” said the parish priest, “that he was our Lord and he could do as he liked.

I concluded by saying that apart from breaking the stones to size, the men could do as they liked as far as I was concerned.

After the good Father departed, I began to wonder what reasons he would have given for all the cursing mentioned in The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick, the cursing of Tara by St Ruadhan, or the litany of curses attributed to St Colmcille, who if we are to believe legend, must be the greatest fulminator of curses among all the Irish saints.

While residing at the foot of Tonragee Mountain in 1938, I climbed the mountain one fine evening in spring. A companion, a local youth, gave me the history attached to a cairn of flagstones on the mountain summit, the cairn being known as ‘Leachtaí Lytell.’

Father Manus Sweeney, a native of Dookinella in the lower part of Achill Island, was executed in Newport on the day of the August Fair there in 1799 after a sham trial for complicity in the 1798 rebellion. His having been educated in France and having a good knowledge of the French language went a long way in securing his conviction with the judicial minions of English Imperialism, especially after the ill-fated French invasion of Mayo in the previous year.
When Fr. Manus mounted the scaffold, one of the onlookers was a native of the Protestant colony in Dugort, Achill; a man named Lytell who with two companions had attended the fair. Lytell, who had a fair knowledge of the Irish language and wanted to show his bigotry and hatred of priests, exclaimed, “Tá splionach shagairt ag eirí go h-ard inniú.” (Priest’s flesh is rising high today.)

A sister of Fr. Manus who knew Lytell well (or according to another account, Fr. Manus himself) turned to Lytell and told him not to be so brave or bold; that his own end would come some day and that he might not have so many witnesses to sympathise with him. Fr. Manus was executed on the market crane in Newport, which stood on the market square up to twenty years ago. Executing political prisoners on fair days or occasions of public assembly was a ritual of the British calculated to strike terror into the greatest number of people.

After the execution, Lytell and his two friends retired to a local alehouse and later set out on foot for home about twenty eight miles away. As they approached the village of Tonragee, a thick fog came in from Bellacraher Bay. The three travellers became separated in the fog.

Two of them arrived in the colony on the following day, but there was no trace of Lytell. Several days later, the dogs in Tonragee were observed coming down off the mountain, carrying human bones in their descent.

A search party that followed them on their next journey up the mountain found all that remained of Lytell and flung together the mound of stones to mark the spot.

Having heard the tale, I wondered what unseen compelling force caused Lytell to climb the steep side of Tonragee Mountain 1,500 feet above Bellacraher Bay, and perish there alone.
Window on the Past

Before the Claremorris-Swinford-Collooney railway line was opened in 1895, Swinford for one hundred years had been a leading provincial market town for the sale of farm produce, chiefly butter, pigs and oats. The repeal of the Corn Laws around 1850 adversely affected oats production; afterwards, the pig and the butter firkin became the small tenant’s standby to meet his landlord’s rent. The ford over the river at Mill Street, Swinford, was a Mecca on fair mornings for hundreds of steaming pigs. Having been walked several miles to market, they wallowed and washed themselves at this ford. Hence the name Swineford, later shortened to Swinford.

In those days pigs were not sold until they were twelve months old. In summer when the previous year’s potato crop ran out and before the new potato crop was harvested, they were often fed on green foods (cabbage, grass, coarse docks and other edible weeds), and were able to walk for miles to market. After a fair in Swinford, droves of pigs were walked to the ports of Ballina, Sligo and Newport. An old man told me he often saw scores of pigs being driven after the pig fairs in Swinford over the old Barnacoogue- Orlar- Carrowbehy route to Castlerea railway station.

The Swinford butter market attracted buyers from Sligo, Ballina, Westport, Newport and Killala and suppliers from all East Mayo and South Sligo.

At the market, tailors were on hand to measure you for a suit of home spun frieze. As the art of packing footwear with cardboard had not arrived, cobblers measured your feet if required for a pair of comfortable boots guaranteed to give two years of ‘honest wear’. As late as 1941, I saw this custom in operation at the fair in Achill Sound. At Swinford market in those days, there were spinning wheels, wheel and hand-barrows, carts and cartwheels, chairs, stools and a straw woven armchair called a ‘suisteóg.’ Upholstered with horsehair or wool clippings, it was regarded as a luxury.

Bundles of heather besoms, neatly tied and trimmed, were carried on the back from mountain districts and sold for a halfpenny each. Maxwell in his ‘Wild Sports of the West’ asserted that on a market day in Tuam, the number of beggars would outnumber the lazzaroni of Naples.

At one butter market in Swinford around 1880, a thousand firkins of butter were said to have been sold.

As the gathering of one firkin of butter took months, this meant untold persevering, self-denial and drudgery for the housewife and her undernourished family.
At the market place, the butter buyers set up their tripod beam scales. Before being weighed or purchased, each firkin was pierced full length with an auger which when withdrawn showed if the butter was of uniform quality and colour.

Prices were determined by this system of grading.

Afterwards, local carters took the firkins to some port, usually Ballina or Sligo. The carter’s lot was not an easy one. If listed for Sligo, a convoy of carts left Swinford about 5 am.

Having delivered their loads at Sligo Quay, they collected a load of provisions to take back and tried to get to Ballinacarrow before nightfall where they stayed overnight. In bad weather, they felt lucky to get to Ballisodare on their way home. Between full and part-time carters, about fifty found unemployment in this way. Bunyan in his “Pilgrim’s Progress” describes Vanity Fair as a seductive mart where all the wares of the world were bawled out to hoodwink poor Christian and make him tarry or turn aside from his pilgrimage.

Swinford market was just as thronged and miscellaneous. The spacious Main Street square was packed with tradesmen, handymen and pedlars of all kinds displaying their wares.

Coopers were there with tubs, firkins, piggins, noggins and churns; nailers with hand wrought nails; tinsmiths with tin cans, saucepans and tinker’s lamps. This last named item was a globeless paraffin oil burning contraption, giving off smoke and smell out of all proportion to the sickly light produced. Nevertheless, with paraffin oil selling for a halfpenny a pint, it gradually replaced dip candles and bog deal ‘splits’ for domestic lighting.

In those days, in this respect, Swinford was little if any behind Tuam. After the Napoleonic and Crimean wars, every garrison town in Ireland had its quota of ex-soldiers. These, left without means of livelihood by their former masters, crowded into alleys and back streets like The Lane in Swinford or Bothar Garbh in Claremorris. There, they created social problems that remained down to recent years. In those days, there were knights of the road converging on the workhouses, ballad singers, travelling musicians and many other types of unfortunates. Petty robberies were a regular occurrence so that buyers and sellers strained a point to be clear of woods and ‘heel of the town’ spots before dark. Then, as now, there was the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. Gombeen men, as odious as the publicans of the Bible, grew fat by lending money. Crock of yellow sovereigns were displayed on some shop windows in Swinford during and for many years after the Famine, with the rate of interest and an exhortation to borrow displayed alongside.

The interest rate of 5d per £1 seemed innocuous till the victim learned too late that this quotation meant 5d per month, or 25% annually. Happily, this tribe of gombeen men have disappeared ‘nor left a wrack behind’.
These jottings are a window on the hard times that prevailed in Swinford and similar provincial market towns over the greater part of the last century.
The Night of the Big Wind

The most disastrous and terror inspiring natural event in Irish history from 1798 to the Famine was the storm that swept the country on the night of Sunday, 6 January, and the morning of 7 January, 1839. It is believed that over seventy people were killed or drowned and well over one hundred more died from exposure and hardships attributable to the storm.

Thousands were rendered homeless, boats were swamped or blown inland to incredible distances and smashed to matchwood and coaches were blown off the roads.

One group of Erris fishermen did not put to sea on that fateful night because, as they stoutly maintained later, they saw the sí gaoithe or storm spirit, a skeleton-like shadow with wildly waving arms silhouetted against a bank of sea fog.

Much of the destruction caused by the storm could have been avoided if the landlords had been more considerate towards their tenants. The tenants’ dwellings would have in general been in better repair to withstand the storm but every little improvement they carried out on their dwellings or farm buildings drew a reprisal from the landlord in the shape of an increase in their rent. In those days, petty country squires known as middlemen rented sections of the landlord’s property which they then sublet to tenants.

When from the north-west, the storm of 1839 caught Swinford on its exposed side; there was no railway station or sheltering railroad embankments at the time. Piles of thatch, slates, timbers and roofing flagstones blocked the streets. One street, Mill Street, was left without a single roof which had not been blown down. In its humble way, Mill Street was then the industrial sector of Swinford. Nailers, coopers, shoemakers, weavers, tailors and tinsmiths worked side by side in houses that have since disappeared.

One young man in Ballydrum village was so worried about his two stacks of oats, his only standby to pay his landlord’s rent that he got a ladder and climbed on to one stack and stayed there all through the storm to keep the stack from being blown away. His widowed mother climbed on to the other stack and did likewise. During the night, one fierce gust of wind swept her shawl away and it was found in Killaturly, two miles away. It was recognised by a large shawl safety pin which was a new innovation at the time.

The shawl pin had been given to the old woman by the lady at the Big House as a gift for paying her rent so promptly. The pin, being fastened, caused the shawl to balloon and be carried so far by the storm.
The threshing flail had only been introduced to the village a short time before the storm and before then the scutching stone was an important part of farm equipment. The old woman who lost her shawl said that the storm must have been sent as a punishment for adopting such a devil’s emblem as the flail.

The Old Age Pensions Act granting pensions at the age of seventy became law in 1909, anyone born on or before the night of The Big Wind automatically qualified for a pension. As no records of births or deaths were kept in 1839 or for many years afterwards, claimants had to appear before a pensions’ official, magistrate or clergyman and satisfy him as to the genuineness of their claims.

Many children born around the time of the great storm had been told by their mothers that they were born on the night of the ‘Big Wind’. The result was that the number claiming to have been born on that night realized a staggering total. One parish priest in a parish near Swinford appointed a certain day on which to take particulars from pension claimants.

When he found almost all the claimants saying that they were born on the night of the Big Wind, he exclaimed, “It must have been the greatest storm since the beginning of the world if it blew you all into the world on the same night.”

One applicant from Swinford district told the pensions’ officer that he well remembered the night of the big wind. Asked what he remembered about it, he said, “I remember my mother blessing herself and shoving me and my cradle under the bed and saying the house would fall on us.”

“Surely,” said the pensions’ officer, “you don’t expect me to believe that you remember what happened when you were in the cradle?” The old man told him that he was the youngest member of his family and that in his day the youngest child might have to sleep in the cradle for years owing to shortage of accommodation. He told the official that cradles were often made outsize on that account. The pensions’ officer smilingly allowed his claim.

With modern buildings, stauncher and better sheltered farmsteads and advance warnings of gales being announced, it seems unlikely that the havoc and terror caused by the storm of 1839 can be repeated in this country.

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Waking the Gael

Many theories have been advanced to explain the old Gaelic custom of playing games at wakes for the dead. All authorities agree that no disrespect for the dead was intended. Very often relatives of a deceased person asked the younger people at the wake to commence the games. Often an old man, feeling his end draw near, gave instructions as to the games to be indulged in at his wake.

The old Gaelic race looked on a natural death as a happy release from the cares and worries of this world to a happier life in the next world. Only when a young person met a sudden or untimely end, did they regard it as a cause for lamentation.

Down to recent years, when the last sod of turf was cut, the last sheaf of grain reaped or some other seasonal work completed, God’s mercy on the dead was invariably invoked by the people involved in the work.

When enjoying the first sample of some fruit or vegetable such as new potatoes, the usual saying was, ‘Go mbeirimid beo ag an am seo arís’ - ‘That we may be alive this time (next year) again.’

I have often heard those invocations which prove that consideration for the dead and thoughts of the hereafter were never far from the mind of the Gael.

East Mayo seems to have been one of the last strongholds in Ireland of the custom of playing games at wakes as there are many people still alive who took part in them. The First World War and the troubled times helped to put an end to many old world ideas. Some of those games were just trials of strength or agility, such as ‘tug-of-war’ with a brush handle over a chalked line on the floor or jumping over and back across a stick while holding an end in each hand.

Two of the most popular games were known as ‘Thart an Bhróg’ and ‘Riding the Blind Donkey.’ In the first named game, a number of players sat in a circle and secretly passed some small object to each other. A ‘victim’ seated on a chair in the centre of the circle, was expected to name correctly who was in possession of the object when asked. The object was often a child’s shoe and to mislead the man in the middle the person in possession of the shoe would whisper ‘Chuir thart an bhróg’ (pass the shoe). This is how the game got its name.

In the game of Riding the Blind Donkey, two stout kitchen chairs were placed about four feet apart. A strong spade or shovel handle was placed horizontally with an end resting on the seat of each chair. The operator then had to sit cross-legged like a tailor on the spade handle. While precariously balanced there, four small objects such as potatoes or small sods of turf were placed on the outer corners of the chair seats
and he was expected to knock those objects on to the floor with a short stick while maintaining his balance.

The penalties or forfeits for failure in those games varied in different localities.

The penalty in ‘Thart’ was usually a number of thumps on the back by the strong man of the company. As a concession, the victim might be allowed to hold his open hand palm outwards on his back to cushion the blows. In other places, the punishment might be a number of blows of a knotted straw rope. In Riding the Blind Donkey the punishment often was to force a handful of deannach down the fallen jockey’s back between shirt and skin.

Deannach was a dusty abrasive product of oat milling, and as small oat mills dotted the countryside in those days, there was no shortage of the commodity. It had the property of generating a most unbearable itch on tender skin. Near Claremorris, a small lake bears the name of Loch na nDeannach owing to the deannach formerly dumped there. An old man in South Mayo once told me of a game played at wakes around Claremorris in his youth.

This game, which could hardly be called a parlour game, was known as ‘Bearradóir’ (the shaver).

A number of young men lined up to be ‘shaved,’ each being compelled to take a large mouthful of water and stand with distended cheeks while the barber or shaver gave him a mock shave with a goose or duck quill while intoning the words, ‘Bearrraidh mise mo sheandhuinín go lom, lom, lom.” This implied that he would shave his client bare, bare, bare. If any client laughed, the rest squirted their mouthful of water in his face.

Sometimes the unfortunate barber was on the receiving end when his client’s mouthful of water exploded in his face. The playing of those games was not always confined to wakes. Sometimes they were played on the night after a meitheal, assembled to help a backward neighbour with some seasonal work or when flax scutching or some such work was completed.

When the journeyman tailor came to a village, he usually billeted in some ‘ready’ house where there were no children to interfere with his work and where he often stayed the whole winter.

Owing to the poor lighting facilities in those days, it was work all day and play and yarns all night as people gathered to while away the long winter hours before bedtime. Years ago in the village of Gleann Mhullaigh an Eo, (Charlestown) I heard fragments of a local song to commemorate the visit of a journey-man tailor, Seán Bán Duffy and his apprentice, Mullaney. One verse contained the lines:

“There was cally for Mullaney and boxtiy for Seán Bán.
And with songs and tales and games galore we waited till the dawn.”

(Cally was the equivalent of the English colcannon.)

At funerals, which usually proceeded from the deceased’s home in those days, all the neighbouring young men gathered in some field out of sight of the house of mourning. There for two or three strenuous hours they indulged in athletic feats: jumping, weight throwing and weight lifting, long and high jumping, wrestling, etc. There was a keen air of friendly rivalry between opposing townlands and it was here records were reached or broken.

Regular athletic or sports meetings were out of bounds in some areas as some landlords did not want land being cut up and trampled unduly by young men whom they described as ‘skylarking vagabonds’. 

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Before the Famine

When the English writer and farming expert Arthur Young toured Ireland two hundred years ago, he was very critical of the wasteful farming methods he found there. Of course he should have directed his fire more to the landlord class who were mainly responsible. If a tenant tried to improve his farm or farm buildings, the landlord increased his rent and could evict him whenever he pleased.

One of the few things that pleased Arthur Young was the view of Lough Key from the Rock of Doon in North Roscommon. He classed it as the grandest scenery he had beheld in any part of the world.

He appreciated the view all the more as he had been passing through plain uninteresting countryside when the view of Lough Key with its wooded islands and their historic ruins burst into view. For a similar reason, a traveller going through Southwest Sligo between Tubbercurry and Ballina might feel enraptured when the view of Lough Talt comes into view.

Before coming to the lake from either direction, the visitor passes through the plain featureless foothills of the Ox Mountains, described by a geologist who toured the area as uninteresting hills of gneiss and schist. Close to the lake lies the lonely glen of Glanavoo.

The holy well there, known as St Attracta’s Well, was a popular place of pilgrimage in former times. At the north-western end of the lake, a high well-built stone wall encloses 13,000 acres of rough mountainside.

I had mistakenly taken this wall to be a boundary fence for one of the deer parks which were so common as part of a landlord’s estate in times gone by until I learned that the wall and the ground enclosed by it were part of a land project initiated in 1839 by the Irish Waste Land Improvement Society.

While the scheme was not over-ambitious, it was at least a beginning. Among its weak points, it was slanted more to the benefit of its shareholders than to the slaving occupants of the land; it still offered no security of tenure to the tenants. The Society in its preamble described its objectives as the provision of a liberal profit to the shareholders as well as providing employment to the ‘industrious and necessitous peasantry.

In 1839, the Society bought a bankrupt landlord’s estate at Gleneask, near Lough Talt in County Sligo.

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This landlord had impoverished the tenants as well as himself with rent increases. This short-sighted policy had backfired on him so much that the Society bought it cheaply. It was the last word in a rundown neglected estate.

The Society, in leasing this land, stipulated that no lease should run beyond the life of a tenant. This in itself was a disincentive to the tenant to improve his holding. No lease was issued to the tenant with less than twenty Irish acres. Those with less than twenty acres were classed as tenants-at-will meaning they had no claim on their holdings beyond day to day occupation. This maintained a high percentage of the tenants, over forty families in all, at the level of peons or squatters. Main drains were to be constructed at the Society’s expense, while the tenants were to make cross drains and surface drains. Thirty miles of roads were built by the Society.

New houses were built to replace the houses of the tenants which were described as being with a few exceptions, “badly built, damp, and wretched’.

The Society undertook to build cottages thirty feet long, twelve to fourteen wide and eight to ten feet high, of stone or brick, with roof of slate or thatch, at a cost to the tenants of £20 for each house.

Each holder was to have one or more cows, with an expected return of seventy-five to one hundred and twelve pounds of butter annually. This butter was expected to fetch 8d per pound in the Sligo butter market. If sold in the more convenient Swinford butter market, the price averaged 1/2d per pound less, and at that time every 1/2d counted.

The people’s main food was potatoes and buttermilk. Labourers working for the Society were paid 10d without food or 8d per day if a meal was provided. This was the summer rate for a twelve hour day; 2d per day less was paid for a nine hour day in winter.

The Society placed emphasis on livestock rearing in preference to increased tillage. They claimed that increased livestock rearing would mean more fodder production and eventually more farmyard manure to enrich the land. Only a low percentage of the land could be classed as arable. Some of the cottages were roofed with slate quarried in nearby Mount Taafe.

However, the slate deposits were too inaccessible to encourage worthwhile production. The Waste Land Improvement Society bought a second impoverished landlord’s estate at Ballinakill in north Connemara around the same time as their purchase of the Gleneask estate.

They proceeded to develop both estates on similar lines. Unfortunately, when they felt that they were making headway to the mutual benefit of their tenants and shareholders, the Great Famine of 1847 struck with full force. It resulted in two thirds of the Society’s tenants ending in famine graves or on emigrant ships and the collapse of the Land Improvement Schemes.
To make matters worse, the tenants had grown more potatoes than usual. When the potato blight struck with full force, it wiped out their promising potato crop in a few days.

The summer of 1847 was the wettest in living memory and with the stalks blighted, the tubers, in the words of a local man, ‘stood no stagger’ but rotted steadily in the sodden heavy clay. There had been local outbreaks of potato blight in 1845 and 1846, but with the continuous rain in 1847, the outbreak was nationwide.

There were warnings sounded by farming experts and public bodies in 1845 and 1846 but the government of the day callously ignored all of them.

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Mountain Dew

North and East Mayo, in common with other parts of Ireland where the distillation of poteen or illicit whiskey was routine, had their legendary characters that were noted for the good quality of their product or for their resourcefulness in thwarting or evading the law.

Over one hundred years ago, one of the best known poteen makers in Mayo was a man known as Red Owen Judge. He lived on a slope of the Ox Mountains a few miles from Foxford. One day he set out for Foxford with a donkey carrying two creels of turf for sale. The creels were wicker work or woven rod baskets suspended across the donkey’s back. Under the turf in one creel was a gallon jar of poteen. Owen Judge heard that a new police sergeant (RIC) had been appointed to Foxford and he was anxious to sell as much poteen as possible before making his acquaintance. He had learned from another home brew expert in Sligo that the new sergeant was a good judge of a right drop and came down more heavily on those making bad stuff. As he came within a half mile of Foxford, he met the sergeant walking along leisurely.

The sergeant of course had found a description of Owen and others of the same profession in the barracks so he guessed he had the right man for an interview. He casually held up Owen, and after a few words about the quality and price of the turf, he lifted a few sods and found the jar.

Owen betrayed no dismay but asked him if he was the new sergeant. When the sergeant answered that he was, Owen told him that the jar contained a special good drop that he was taking in to him because, said Owen, “I heard a man from your last station in Sligo to say that you were a good judge of real good stuff.”

After some consideration, the sergeant said, “Well, in that case, carry on to Foxford and call to my house and leave the turf there as well as the jar. There is another jar there and cover the two jars well with the turf. Tell my wife I sent you, and God help you if your stuff is not as good as what is in the other jar,” added the sergeant with a smile.

Owen continued his journey to Foxford and went at once to the sergeant’s house. He told the sergeant’s wife that he was in a hurry and to hand him out the jar that was in the turf shed. “Your husband is expecting a call this evening from the D.I. (District Inspector) and he does not like to have any poteen lying around when that man calls.”

“I do not blame him for that,” added Owen, “as the same DI would smell poteen a mile away.”
The sergeant’s wife handed out the jar and Owen lost no time in taking it to the other end of the town and selling it along with his own jar. Knowing that the sergeant was trying night and day to get him, Owen had to lie low and be more vigilant than ever.

For a year or more, he made his whiskey in remote hideouts and got other people who were not suspect to sell it for him. After a year of caution, Owen decided to take a chance and run a round at home on Christmas Eve. When he got his plant set up and everything humming, he strolled out to his lookout spot. He had a good pair of field glasses with him that he had brought with him from England in his youth. When he focused his glasses on the road to Foxford, he was horrified to see the sergeant and two comrades less than a mile away on foot and heading in his direction. He rushed indoors and dragged the still, worm, cooler, etc., into the bedroom. He then took the large fire and took it into two neighbours’ houses that were side by side with his own. Hastily disrobing, he got into the hag bed, as most kitchen beds were then called.

He told his wife to call in the children and say he had just died. She did that and then she called in the woman next door to assist. She was also a Mrs. Judge and was a professional crier.

Criers were women who attended all wakes and funerals and cried and lamented, chanted the praises of the deceased and clapped their hands in paroxysms of grief. In many instances criers did not know (nor care) who the deceased was. The sergeant and his men arrived just as the two women, having hung a set of white curtains outside the bed and placing a lighted candle on a chair beside the bed, were getting into their stride crying as well as Owen’s children who really believed that he had died. When Owen’s wife, between sobs, told the sergeant of his demise, he turned to his men and ordered a retreat, saying under his breath, “Too bad he did not do this a year ago.” Some days later, the sergeant learned the true story. He at once applied for a transfer, stating that he felt the poteen menace was well under control in his area.

Another noted distiller who flourished in the same area a generation later was known as the Legger.

He earned the title from his prowess in escaping on foot from his pursuers whenever they tried to surprise him at his distillery. His would-be captors guessed his identity from his long legs and massive strides, but could never get close enough to positively identify him. Finding himself under extra security and with no income in sight, he wrote a brief note to the sergeant in Foxford, ostensibly as a tip-off. The note stated that the Legger would be taking a donkey cart load of turf to Foxford the next Saturday morning and that he would have a two gallon jar of poteen hidden in the turf. Delighted with the tip, the sergeant met the Legger on the outskirts of the town and told him he just then wanted a load of turf. When he asked what the price would be, the Legger said it was five shillings.
The sergeant felt that in the circumstances it was worth the price, so he told the Legger to take it around to his place and he would show him where to dump it. The Legger innocently asked him would the next load suit as he had another customer waiting for turf. “No,” said the sergeant, “and here is your five shillings and get a move on, I can’t be waiting all day.”

The Legger took the load around and emptied it under the vigilant eye of the sergeant, who found that he had got the nicest turf “from Pollagh Bog to Knockfadda,” to quote the Legger’s own words.

I can remember an old woman of eighty from Killasser parish telling of the adventures of her father in the poteen making industry.

“My father, grandfather and great-grandfather,” she said, all had the name of making first class whiskey.”

“If a round did not turn out good as they expected, they would dump it rather than give their stuff a bad name. On one occasion, my father got an order for two gallons from the parish priest in Kiltimagh.”

“We had a young half-trained horse at the time. I was a young school-girl, but being the oldest of the family, my father took me with him, partly to help with the horse and partly to attract less notice to our real business. He put the jar of whiskey in the cart and put a bag of hay over it. He told me to sit on the box and keep a tight hold of the horse’s reins. He took a short hold of the horse’s bridle and walked by his head all the way to Kiltimagh, eleven or twelve miles away.”

“When we got to Kiltimagh, we found it was fair day there. When our horse saw all the cattle on the street, he began to prance and back away from them. The police barracks at that time was close by and the sergeant was standing outside.”

“When he saw our trouble, he walked over and spoke to the horse and patted him. He then took a hold of the horse’s bridle on the opposite side to my father. In that way, the horse gave no more trouble.”

“When we got to the parish priest’s gate, the sergeant turned back, giving me a slow wink as he did so. I heard afterwards that he was one of those who attended small parties in the priest’s house sometimes. I have no doubt that he guessed who we were and had a good idea of our reason for going to the parish priest’s house.”

“My father always believed in leaving a drop outside for the good people (fairies) any night that he made a round. Any night he forgot this, he regretted it as that round would go against him. He always made sure to put the braon broghach (ugly drop) aside by itself to use as a rub for rheumatism, and a good cure it always was. Many a time it was a help to myself,” she concluded.
The braon broghach, pronounced ‘breen broagh’, was the first two cupfuls of the round that came from the still. As its name implies, it tasted bitter but had its commercial value as a liniment.
In Feudal Days

During the famine years 1845-49, many Mayo landlords, finding further evictions unprofitable and further increases in rackrents impossible, initiated instead a system of forced labour. Tenants were forced to report to their landlord and work gratuitously, according to the size of their rents: cultivating and reclaiming ‘His Honour’s’ lands, levelling buildings, garden walls, etc. of evicted tenants and other useful works. Their reward was one meal daily for a working day of twelve hours.

One landlord in Killasser parish solved the problem of feeding his workers by driving out to them in his horse and cart with a tub of stirabout (Indian meal porridge). His son was heckled about it in later times at an election meeting in Swinford.

Years ago I heard an old man from Carracastle parish tell of his grandfather working for a similar reward for his landlord, Phillips of Cloonmore. As the potato famine eased, the Cloonmore landlord changed the meal of porridge to a ration of potatoes which the workers roasted in an open fire. This was termed a ‘caste’ of potatoes. As times improved and herrings got cheaper, a cooked salty herring wrapped in a cabbage leaf was occasionally sent out to each worker in addition to his potato caste. At Hagfield House nearby, dinner was served to the workers in the yard on a shovel. On one occasion, the Cloonmore slaves were busy digging out their landlord’s potatoes alongside the Carracastle-Doocastle road. Around noon, a petty landlord, Joe Mór McDonnell of Doocastle, emerged from the Big House leading an old nag after an all night party with their landlord.

Joe Mór complained to the starving workers that Tomeen Phillips’s geese were tough as leather and that after drinking four bottles of his wine and four of his whiskey, he was still going home sober.

He was known all over Mayo as the ‘Doocastle Sunday Man,’ not for religious fervour but because Sunday was the only day of the week he could claim immunity from arrest by his creditors if he left his own grounds. Joe’s other claim to fame rested on his great size and phenomenal appetite. He sat as an MP for Mayo in the House of Commons after he gained victory over George Henry Moore of Moorehall with the aid of Archbishop McHale and the clergy in the famous 1847 election. Moore had enlightened national views and treated his famine stricken tenants with more humanity than any landlord in Mayo.

Joe Mór’s term in the Commons was short as he was ousted by Moore the following year. During the 1848 election, it leaked out that Joe Mór was not averse to a good meat dinner on Fridays and he was severely heckled about this at a meeting in Foxford. When the heckling began he took a letter from his pocket, offered a bet of £20 that it was in the handwriting of Pope Pius IX and then read:
“My dear Joe, I am glad to hear that you are carrying on the fight for the ould faith in County Mayo. As a mark of my appreciation for your zeal and hard work, you are not to fast or abstain until the campaign is over.’

Yours truly, Pius IX.”

Their wits dulled by famine and oppression, many believed the huge fraud. In offering a bet of £20, he was on safe ground as possibly his listeners had not £20 among them (and neither had Joe).

In 1847, the opposition leader in the House of Commons Lord Bentinck sponsored a motion to allot eighteen million pounds for famine relief work in Ireland. Fearing another election, Joe Mór and another Mayo M.P, Dillon Browne of Glencorrib voted with the government and helped to defeat the motion. At the time, some of McDonnell’s neighbours were dying on their way to Swinford workhouse. Others were dying from surfeits of spawned salmon or trout, the toxic effects of which in their rundown condition they were unable to withstand. As the rivers and fish belonged to the landlords, this was a hush-hush matter. It should be noted that Gavan Duffy in his memoirs referred to Dillon Browne as ‘the worst type of an Irish place hunter’.

One of the most influential landlord families in East Mayo in those days were the Ormsbys of Ballinamore. Thomas Ormsby sat on the jury that sent Fighting Fitzgerald to the gallows in 1796.

Three years later, he filled a similar role when Fr. Conroy, the patriot priest of Addergoole, was sentenced to death in Castlebar. Over the lean post-famine years, his son Black Anthony Ormsby ruled in Ballinamore with the traditional severity of his ancestors towards his tenants. Yet, he found one tenant pliable enough to compose a lengthy poem in praise of Ballinamore and its landlord. Despite the poet’s lavish praise, only one line of the poem pleased Ormsby:

“I’m sure ‘tis as strong as the temple of Rome.”

Another poem, ‘The Whiskers of Ballinamore,’ was not so complimentary. It tells of a rent collection day in Ballinamore when Black Anthony ordered three tenants from his presence because they had grown whiskers, as he thought in imitation of his own flowing black beard.

He ordered:

‘Get off those whiskers and that without delay,

Or fifteen shillings yearly, with your rent you all must pay.’

As refusal meant eviction, the tenants complied with his demand. In his opening lines the poet sang,
'In the Parish of Killedan in the County of Mayo,
There dwells a cruel landlord whose name I’ll let you know.
There rules a cruel landlord whose tenants suffer sore,
And they call him Tony Ormsby, the Lord of Ballinamore.’

Having sent all landlords to warm regions the poet concludes:
“Now all you weary bachelors and rambling boys take care,
If you happen to be tempted a whisker for to wear.
Be wary of your landlord now and for evermore,
Or else he might mistreat you like the Boy from Ballinamore.”

* The Ormsbys’ arrival in Ballinamore can be dated back to the aftermath of the Cromwellian wars and the arrival in the area of John Ormsby, an adventurer and an officer in Cromwell’s army in 1651. He first purchased some land that had been seized from the previous owners and in the 1670s was granted the Ballinamore estate by royal patent. For well over 250 years the Ormsbys of Ballinamore were one of the biggest landowning families in County Mayo. “Black” Anthony Ormsby was recorded as owning almost 4,500 acres in 1876 - two hundred years after his ancestor, John Ormsby, had founded the estate.

But that was the heyday of the Ascendancy classes in Ireland and thereafter the family fortunes were to decline. All of the Ormsbys’ property, with the exception of the ‘Big House’ and its immediate surrounds, had passed out their ownership before the foundation of the Irish Free State. The house and grounds were bought by an order of nuns in 1938 and that marked the end of the Ormsbys of Ballinamore.
The Friar’s Christmas Night

It was a cold dark Christmas night in 1847, the peak year of the terrible famine. An aged friar, the last of the Carmelite Friars from the now dying but once influential friary of Ballinsmall, two miles east of Claremorris, was hurrying on foot on the road from Claremorris to Knock. He was going in answer to a sick call to the village of Dalton about four miles north of Ballinsmall. He was accompanied by his neighbour and part-time servant, Mark Gabhlain (or Forkan).

Although their road was a Grand Jury road, as main trunk roads were then called, and was the road used by the Bianconi coaches plying between Sligo and Galway, it was rutted and dangerous after dark. On that account, they had to travel slowly in places and the friar’s companion carried a military style lantern. This was something of a novelty as the only torches used by peasants in those days were live coals impaled on iron spikes or old reaping hooks.

A well known shebeen stood at the junction of their road and another very old road at Barnacarroll. This other road was one of the roads that formed part of the Tochar Phadraig or pilgrim road that took pilgrims to Croaghpatrick.

It was also an important road linking the old castles of Ballyhowley, Murneen and Brize. The forces of General Lake travelled over it in 1798 to retake Castlebar from the United Irishmen. On passing the shebeen, holding his lantern low to the ground, Mark Gabhlain observed two unusually bright-looking crowns close to the grass margin. Mark felt that the money was a Heaven-sent gift and felt that they should avail of it to get a tumbler or two of punch to help them on their way. In those days, the steaming bowl of whiskey punch was a popular remedy among the peasantry for most human ills. Nearly everybody had faith in a bowl of punch in its own good time, and in this regard, the priest was no exception. The good friar hesitated, but only for a moment.

He then bade his man to cover the crowns with two small flagstones from the road fence. “If they are there on our return, well and good,” he said. The friar arrived at his destination just in time and with not a minute to spare to anoint a young man who lay dying. He waited till all was over and the Rosary recited for the deceased before setting out on his return journey with his companion.

He felt happy and kept thanking God that he had not yielded to temptation when passing the shebeen, while Mark Gabhlain allowed himself visions of steaming punch when they got back to the premises.
When they got to the spot where they had seen the crowns, they found the flagstones undisturbed to Mark’s joy. He hastily lifted the stones. All he found was a large black ciaróg (cockroach) under each stone.

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The Moy Corries

Up to the drainage of the River Moy in the late 1950s and early 1960s, forecasting weather conditions with the aid of the stepping stones, or ‘corries’ as they were locally called, was a time-honoured custom. In some districts, the lines of stepping stones were called ‘clocháns.’ In calm weather, old people living within a mile of the river could predict with uncanny accuracy if a change in weather conditions was imminent or if existing weather was to continue by listening, usually before retiring at night, to the changing sounds of the water passing through the corries.

In my neighbourhood, if Cloonacanana corrie sounded loudest, it foretold rain. If Seán’s corrie was the noisiest, it meant frost in winter or colder than average weather in summer. If Cruckawn-Aughanna corrie was ‘going’ to use a local term, it meant fine weather.

When atmospheric conditions, anticyclones, wind direction and other such reasons were given to account for the behaviour of the corries, the older people scoffed at those ideas.

They had their own legends and traditions and stuck to them until the drag lines lifted all the corries and broke a grand link with the past.

In 1947, I can remember Seán’s corrie being as noisy as an express train night and day for some days before the onset of a record breaking frost spell, which lasted for five weeks and culminated in a blizzard of drifting snow which brought all wheeled traffic in the country to a standstill.

With the possible exception of the earthen forts which abound in this part of the country, no other physical feature of the countryside carried such a wealth of folklore and pisreógs as the corries.

The round towers, being of pre-Christian origin, also carry a wealth of pagan folklore. It seems strange that some learned authorities regard the round towers as being of Christian origin without a single shred of evidence, not even an etched cross which should be the hallmark of Christianity, to support their beliefs.

Seán’s Corrie was named after a famous Killasser poteen maker who flourished two hundred years ago named Seán O Ruadhain. On one occasion, he was escaping across the corrie named after him with a jar of poteen, closely pursued by the revenue men. Seeing more revenue men on the opposite bank, Seán smashed the jar on the stepping stone at his feet. Not to be outdone, the revenue men went downstream along the river to Cloonacanana corrie.
There they recovered the poteen-soaked cork and convicted Seán on that piece of flimsy evidence. Being a native of a rebellious inclination, he had no chance of an acquittal.

During Black and Tan days, many men on the run used the corries to escape dragnets and encircling operations.
In my youth, I often heard the name ‘Ultach’ added to some people’s names to distinguish them from persons with similar surnames. I still hear this title applied, but not so frequently. On inquiring the reason, I found that the Ultachs, meaning Ulster people, were descendants of the victims of Protestant bigotry and persecution who had to flee from Ulster, in some cases as far back as 1793. Around that time, a secret Protestant society was formed in North East Ulster with the avowed object of banishing all Catholics to ‘Hell or to Connacht’, a statement which was a revival of Oliver Cromwell’s proclamation of over one hundred and fifty years earlier. This secret society, because they carried out their acts of murder, arson and intimidation at daybreak, took the title of ‘Peep O’ Day Boys’.

This society, after 1795 changing its name to the Orange Society, earned and is still earning worldwide notoriety as the ultimate in religious bigotry and intolerance. In 1795 a convention of Ulster magistrates and lawmakers, presided over by Lord Gosford, Governor of Armagh, condemned the Orange Society as a ‘lawless banditti guilty of dreadful murders and destruction of property.’ All but one member of this convention were Protestants. Despite this, the religious persecution continued unabated.

Catholics who got the customary twelve hour’s notice to get out were in one respect the lucky ones, as many were shot out and burned out (to quote an Orange Society report) without warning.

A society known as the Defenders sprang up to defend Catholic property, but with obsolete arms, they had little hope of turning the tables on their well armed opponents.

Much persecution came from County Armagh. Often those people who fled had to gather their livestock, poultry and other belongings and head for Connacht in the depths of winter. The journey to West Connacht sometimes lasted up to eight weeks, depending on weather conditions and the assistance or opposition they encountered on the way. Luckily for themselves, they came at a time when Mayo landlords were looking for tenants, as they had many vacant holdings on their lands.

Emigration, chiefly to the United States and Canada, was getting into full swing and whole families were leaving from Mayo every week. Many more holdings were vacant through the wholesale eviction policy of the more tyrannical of the landlords. The Ultachs brought advanced farming ideas with them to Connacht.

One of my informants said that even to catch a salmon, snare a trout or hare or make a good drop of mountain dew, they were hard to beat. One man of the Ultach
posterity told me that be fully believed that his grandfather made the best poteen in Ireland.

He pointed to a small moss covered ruin between fifty and a hundred yards from his dwelling house and said, “My grandfather was born and reared there.”

“Some time,” he continued, “after my grandfather’s parents died and his sisters had gone to America, he felt it was time to think of getting married. He decided to make a run of poteen as a first step. When he had all ready for firing, he got two neighbours to help him. He was getting a good return.”

“He had very few bottles in hand, so he had almost every spare vessel in the house filled with poteen. Sometime after midnight, they all seemed to get weak with hunger, and taking sips of the whiskey only made them worse, so my grandfather said he would cook something to eat. Two or three days before, a good calf belonging to one of his neighbour’s broke a leg and had to be killed and salted.”

“The owner sent in a large lump of veal to my grandfather. In those days, if a neighbour had only one potato, he would share it with another neighbour if he was in need of it. Today, they would hardly give you the cuasán.”

The cuasán was a vacant space or vacuum at the core of the potato, sometimes equal to the size of a large marble. It seems something was lacking in the growth and formation of the potato which retarded the completion of its growth. I have not seen a cuasán (pronounced coosaun) in a potato over the past fifty years. Possibly the use of more fertilizers has helped the potato to close this gap. In those days, most of the heifer calves were sold to butchers for killing to keep down the cattle population.

My informant continued, “My grandfather put the veal in a small pot or skillet and hung it over the fire but it seems he put the veal in the wrong pot. He had the first dash of poteen, called the braon broghach (ugly drop) in one pot. It was as inflammable as paraffin oil.”

“Before they noticed anything, the chimney was blazing and then the thatch. My grandfather had barely enough time to grab his best clothes and whatever money was in the house and get out before the house all went up on fire. When the neighbours gathered the next day to thatch the house again my grandfather said he would wait a day or two.

“He felt that the house was too near the old fairy fort at the back and he never seemed to have much luck in it. He went to a wise woman who lived above the town of Swinford, Bid Heaney. When she came, she pointed out this spot instead for building the house on. My grandfather did as she told him and found he had better luck after that.”

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Old Charms and Customs

Superstitious and semi-superstitious customs and charms were to a large extent a feature of rural life in Ireland up to and including the famine years. Whole villages were wiped out by the famine or by the succeeding mass evictions by rackrenting landlords and many old traditions and customs disappeared forever. But some of the old customs lingered on even down to our own time.

A charm or cure that seemed to be popular in south Mayo down to a couple of generations ago was Crean’s or Creheen’s blood. This meant blood belonging to anybody by the name of Crean, locally pronounced Creheen.

It was believed that a few drops were an infallible cure for lung or chest ailments if the blood was diluted with hot water and the vapour inhaled by the affected person. I can recall being told in my school days by an old man of a trip made by him to an old woman of the Crean clan for the cure for his grandmother who was ‘caught up in the chest’.

The old woman with the Crean surname simply tied her index finger at two points near the tip and base, made a small gash on her finger between the two points and gave him the required blood. The man’s grand mother said she felt a big improvement having tried the remedy. The blood donor took no cash in payment but accepted two ounces of tobacco and a noggin of whiskey as a gift.

I remember in my younger days listening to an old man, Ned Flanagan, telling of a trip he once made ‘to the far end of Kilmovee parish’ on behalf of his young wife who got a dust or hayseed in her eye while haymaking. His trip was to an old woman who possessed cure for disorders of the eyes.

According to Ned Flanagan, this old woman on hearing his story got a saucer of spring water, made the sign of the cross over it and said what he believed to be a prayer in a low voice. She then called over Ned and showed him the cause of his wife’s trouble; a small hayseed which had begun to sprout. Having left a small bottle of whiskey as a present to the old woman, Ned Flanagan set out on the sixteen mile walk to his home.

On his arrival, his wife informed him that she got instant relief in the affected eye around three o’clock in the afternoon, which was around the time Ned was shown the hayseed floating in the saucer of water.

To cure boils, carbuncles or external blemishes, bathing in water at a point where three parishes met (or better still four parishes) was recommended. To cure boils, carbuncles or external blemishes, bathing in water at a point where three parishes met (or better still four parishes) was recommended. The thread to cure sprains was confined to, and handed down in, certain families.
If an old man or woman possessing the sprain thread had no family or if all his family had emigrated, the thread was handed down to a niece, nephew or some other close relation. When any sufferer had occasion to send for the sprain thread, the messenger was instructed to go ‘around the road’, as taking a short cut through fields was believed to lessen the speedy efficacy of the charm.

If anybody was lucky enough to collect the dropping seeds of the Royal Fern (Raithneach na Rí) he was said in olden times to have a charm worth his weight in gold. One snag was that the seeds had to be collected at midnight on St John’s Eve, a date to which a lot of old beliefs were linked. May Day (1 May) and Samhain Eve, the eve of 1 November, were also favourite dates for old ideas and customs. An object of mixed fear and veneration in Kilcummin churchyard in north Mayo was the Leac Chuimin or Cuimin’s flagstone.

St Cummin was said to have been washed ashore as an infant in a frail boat and found and adopted by a local man named Maughan. Cuimin adopted a religious hermit’s life when he grew up and built his little church which gave the name Kilcummin to the spot. On his deathbed, he is said to have bequeathed the flagstone to be placed over his grave to the Maughan family, together with the power to use the stone for cursing slanderers and evil doers.

If anybody for miles around felt badly wronged by a neighbour, he had first to fast for fifteen days and then employ the Maughan in charge of the Leac Cuimin to turn it over if he wanted to avail of the powers of the leac to get even with the one he felt had wronged him. A walk around St Cuimin’s well nearby before the curse functionary was also included in the rituals. A Maughan always turned the stone and intoned the curse for a stiff fee.

In the course of time, the Loughneys, another local sept that had intermarried with the Maughans, claimed a right to use the stone, which was becoming a lucrative possession. Feuds and faction fights ensued, especially on the annual pattern day in Kilcummin and this went on for generations.

Nearly a hundred and fifty years ago in the 1830s, the son of a local parson named Waldron decided that the stone was bringing the district into disrepute because of all the fights and squabbles of which it was now the centerpiece.

He took a sledge hammer at night and broke the stone to fragments. This caused a rush to collect the fragments to use them for the same purposes as the original stone - to curse one’s enemies. The situation became so bad that Dean Lyons, then Administrator of Ballina Cathedral had the fragments of the stone collected and built into the masonry of the new cathedral where they have remained since.
A Tale of Barnalyra Wood

A film director on the look-out for a suitable setting for an eerie film would probably regard Barnalyra, about five miles south-east of Swinford, County Mayo, as an ideal location.

The extensive woods that once covered the bleak hills and steep gorges have practically disappeared. Most of the trees remaining are stunted, twisted or commercially useless specimens which seem to resemble brooding spectral sentinels guarding a shady past and adding to the loneliness of the locality. It is small wonder then that Barnalyra can boast of a unique ghost of its own with the unusual name of the Beicheadán.

A couple of centuries ago, according to local legend, a poor cottier and his wife lived in a clearing in Barnalyra Wood along the road, which at the time was the main road from Sligo to Galway.

In later times, this road was the route used by the Bianconi mail coaches travelling from Sligo to Galway. The cottier and his wife had a daughter, an only child who grew up to be a remarkably handsome girl and was acclaimed the belle at every local céili and crossroads gathering. The man and his wife felt that with such a beautiful daughter and no money for her dowry they were cruelly slighted by Providence.

It became an obsession with them that owing to their poverty, she would eventually marry some local herd or gamekeeper and spend her life in poverty and drudgery.

One summer evening, a passing stranger called and asked for a meal and, if possible, a bed for the night, promising to pay well. He said he had been at sea for some years, and having left his ship at Sligo, he hoped to visit his aged parents at the southern end of the County Mayo.

The couple gladly agreed to his request. Saying that he felt tired and footsore, the sailor retired to the little room pointed out to him by his hostess. On peeping into the room through a chink in the door some time later, the cottier saw his visitor counting a neat pile of golden coins through a slit which served as a window in the bedroom. He and his wife decided that this was a golden opportunity to provide their daughter with a dowry. They first sent the daughter to stay overnight with an aunt who lived a mile distant. When night fell, they stealthily entered their visitor’s bedroom and took his life.

Then they buried his body in the nearby wood, and to prevent identification, they buried his head in the nearby Curragh Bui bog.
After a few days had lapsed, stories began to circulate about a headless man being seen rushing along the road by Barnalyra wood after nightfall. Many people scoffed at the tale but gradually even the most incredulous of the local people admitted having seen the headless ghost which in time they named the Beicheadán, the Screamer. The drivers of the Bianconi mail coaches plying between Sligo and Galway always strove to be clear of Barnalyra Wood before nightfall when the story of the Beicheadan gained more publicity.

According to the legend, the cottier and his wife met untimely deaths. The cottier was killed by a tree he was felling and his wife’s body was found in the stream that flows parallel with the road through the wood after a flood one year later. She told the terrible secret of the sailor’s murder to her daughter some time before her death. Her daughter lost her reason and pined away and died a short time after her mother.

The legend of the Beicheadán lingered on down to comparatively recent times. In 1924, a very wet summer created a fuel scarcity and this, coupled with the unsettled state of the country, resulted in Barnalyra wood almost disappearing in a few months. People within a ten mile radius of Barnalyra flocked to the wood, ostensibly for firewood, but as most of the timber was first class larch, beech and pine, a very small fraction was used for firewood.

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Captain Gallagher

The Irish highwaymen who lived mostly over the later half of the eighteenth century may be regarded as a more commercialized version of the Irish Rapparees. The Rapparees were mainly dispossessed landowners who had to make way for a newer set of Crown favorites and adventurers.

This forced the dispossessed landowners to take to the woods and hills with as many followers as they could muster and wreak vengeance on the new set of landlords and other landowners. The Rapparees in their campaign against the new set of Planters and the English Crown flourished mainly from the collapse of the 1641 rebellion to the middle of the eighteenth century. The highwaymen who followed them could be called more proletarian in origin and outlook.

Many of them had gained knowledge of firearms through membership at one time or association with English military or militia units. Some highwaymen carried out raids and holdups of mail coaches singly while others operated with a small band of followers, rarely exceeding half a dozen. To the latter category belonged Captain Gallagher, the famous County Mayo highwayman. He was a native of Bonniconlon but spent part of his youthful days with an aunt in the townland of Derryronane, Swinford, near the wood of Barnalyra. When he decided on a freeloading career, he picked three or four companions. Equipped with fast horses and the erratic blunderbusses of the period, they ranged over all East Mayo and parts of South Sligo and West Roscommon.

In addition to the holding up and robbing of the mail coaches, they raided the houses of landlords and other wealthy people. On one occasion, they raided the home of a particularly hated landlord in Killasser, and in addition to seizing all his silver and other valuables, they compelled him to chew up and swallow eviction notices he had prepared for half a dozen of his tenants.

After some narrow escapes from the English soldiers, Captain Gallagher’s luck finally ran out. He was spending a quiet Christmas recovering from illness in a friend’s house in the parish of Coolcarney or Attymass among the foothills of the Ox Mountains. A jealous neighbour of his host, a man whom Captain Gallagher had formerly helped, sent a message to the commanding officer of the Redcoats in Foxford that Captain Gallagher was staying in a house beside his in Attymass.

He sent to Castlebar and Swinford for assistance before attempting the capture. With a force of nearly two hundred men, the Redcoats surrounded the house. Being ill, and in order to save his host and his family, the highwayman surrendered without resistance. He was rushed to Foxford and after a hasty sham trial was sentenced to be hanged and taken to Castlebar to have the sentence carried out.
Questioned before mounting the scaffold, the Captain asserted that all his treasure was hidden under a rock in Barnalyra. Hearing this, the officer in charge hastily carried out the execution and then dashed towards the wood of Barnalyra with a handpicked squad of cavalry. Doubtless, visions of new-found wealth or rewards from the Crown helped to hurry them on. When they reached Barnalyra, they found to their dismay, not the few rocks they had imagined but countless thousands of rocks of all shapes and sizes. After some days’ searching, all they found was a jewel-hilted sword.

Possibly the puzzle about the location of Captain Gallagher’s treasure may never be solved. Some people believe that his confession was made in the hope that he would be taken to Barnalyra to point out the rock in question. He knew that his companions were staying in a hideout on the Derryronane-Curryane border close to the wood and he may have had hopes of a rescue attempt by them.
North and South Inishkea islands, off the West Mayo coast, were a noted nursery for a hardier than average type of west of Ireland manhood.

This hardihood sprang from a harsh and unrelenting struggle for survival with primitive boats and equipment in stormy seas. The rocky, inhospitable soil of the islands and the long row to the mainland helped to add to the islanders’ unceasing struggles and worries. The inhabitants of the two islands were taken to the mainland and allotted holdings of land by the Irish Land Commission about four decades ago.

Prior to their migration, the people on the neighbouring mainland liked to indulge in jokes reflecting the gullibility and innocence of the islanders.

One such story was told of a young lad from Inishkea who came to visit relatives in the mainland parish of Ballycroy. In those relatives’ house, he saw a round earthenware jar minus the handle. On questioning his host about the jar, the lad from Inishkea was told that the jar was a mare’s egg, and that if it were placed on a hob or some warm spot by the fire and turned regularly, a young horse foal would emerge after eleven months.

When leaving for home, the young lad was presented with the jar by his host as a memento of his visit. The jar, bound around with a straw rope, was placed on his back as he left in high spirits for Inishkea. The day being warm and the journey to the ferry for Inishkea a lengthy one, the young visitor soon grew tired and sat down to rest on top of a steep hill. As he sat down, the jar slipped out of the straw rope and rolled rapidly down the hillside, crashed into a large rock and broke into fragments.

Immediately, a hare resting on the other side of the rock took flight at top speed, with the lad from Inishkea watching with admiration, as no hares exist on Inishkea. Concluding that the hare was the horse foal released from the mare’s egg by the crash, he exclaimed in Irish, “M ‘anam ‘on diabhal, when he is a two year old, the devil out of Hell won’t catch him!”

Another tall tale about a lad from Inishkea and also involving a hare was one of my grandfather’s special yarns. As I am not committing myself to say how much of the story is to be believed, I will tell it in his own words.

“In my young days,” said my grandfather, I once hired a spailpin fánach who called on me in search of work. He was a native of Inishkea. He was a fine, supple, lively lad, every footstep about two yards long when walking. His name was Manus Lavelle.”
“One summer morning we went out early to take some lambs to the fair of Claremorris. On the previous evening, I showed him a steep sandpit with a narrow sloping entrance. I told him that I wanted the sheep and lambs flocked into the sandpit the next morning, in order to pick out the fattest lambs for the fair.”

“The lad was out in good time next morning and after a quick breakfast went off to round up the sheep, while I waited to milk the cows before going to his assistance. When I got to the sandpit, I found he had the sheep already gathered and among them a large, panting hare.”

“Oh Manus,’’ I exclaimed. “You have a hare along with the sheep.’’

“Arrah’’ coolly replied Manus. “Is that what you call him? Well, believe me, that little devil gave me more trouble than all the rest!’ The yarn of the mare’s egg, still popular in Ballycroy, must be a very old one as it was related by Maxwell in his ‘Wild Sports of the West,’ written nearly a hundred and eighty years ago.

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From Matriarchs to Piteógs

Listening to a lively debate on the subject of women’s liberation or ‘Lib,’ helped to take my memory back to a shanachie or storyteller of my early youth who specialised in debates on the same subject. He was known to one and all as ‘Michael the Yank.’ He had been a schoolteacher for a few years until, in his own words, he fell out with the system and the customs of the time and getting paid only once a quarter. He then ‘Lit out for the Land of the Almighty Dollar.’

On his return, he often stopped at our home when coming back from the town. He would regale us with old local stories and tales of his experiences in America. Since he regarded me as an attentive listener, he always took me a ‘ha’porth’ of sweets which in those days meant 30 or 40 bullseyes of the canned sweets type.

He could mix doleful stories with ones in a lighter vein. I can vividly remember one of his accounts about priest hunting, murder and persecution in the Penal Days.

“Oh, well he would say, “Priests and people can both breathe more freely today and can enjoy a joke in its own time.”

“I remember that when I was a lad, a young man from my mother’s part of the country, was ordained a priest. My mother took me with her when she called on his father to offer her congratulations. Now, the priest had a younger brother who was sitting beside his father at the fireside when we called. Unlike the new priest, this individual did not live up to the behaviour standards expected of him. My mother congratulated the old man and said it was a great privilege to have a priest in the family.”

“The old man said it was indeed a great privilege and then added, As a matter of fact, I’m thinking of making a priest out of that black devil over there!”

On another occasion when he called to our house, the burning topic of the day was the struggle for women’s rights; chiefly the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

The suffragettes, as the campaigners were called, could command a large degree of support, especially amongst the working classes. Launching into this topic, Michael was in his element. As he himself was a bachelor, he could judge the subject more objectively than most and being a voracious reader of up to date periodicals helped him to know what he was talking about. At least he could in his own opinion

“There was a time in Irish society when women ruled the roost. Back then, under matriarchal laws the men had narrow corners.
“Some of them lived in terror of being picked by a queen or some other powerful lady to be one of her many husbands and of being snuffed out later by some other jealous husband. This often happened with the connivance of ‘Her Ladyship.’ In those days of indeterminate fatherhood, a man’s nearest relatives were reckoned to be his sister’s children!”

“Gradually, as private property, a disturbing element as always, crept into the reckoning, the monogamous or single marriage evolved to solve the problem.”

“One writer in Ancient Greece, who deplored the introduction of the single marriage, wrote brother will fight against brother and sisters’ children will break the bonds of blood.”

“It could indeed be that he was in the pay of some old ‘hairpins’ who wanted the old system to continue. It’s a fact that most of the history of the world was written down by historians under orders from their tyrant bosses. Otherwise, they might have to go looking for their heads! It was a long, uphill struggle for the men and even when they got on even terms, there was still an odd old queen, like the beehive queen, who could still show who the boss was.”

“Our own Queen Maeve was no joke in this regard and wasn’t there a queen in Britain who used to lead her conscripts against the Roman legions until her final defeat in 42 AD?”

“There was another old battle axe who was responsible foe the battle of Clontarf. What we have been led to believe was a glorious struggle for freedom was really only the outcome of a family struggle.”

I do feel that Michael the Yank was on solid ground here: Brian Boru had married the mother of the Danish leader, Sitric, after getting shut of his own brother, Mahon, the rightful heir to the High Kingship of Ireland.

At that time, as now, it was easy to stir up a family squabble. Of course, Brian did not carry a cross before his men into battle at Clontarf. Like William Tell’s apple or Nero fiddling while Rome burning (a good 1,000 years before the fiddle was invented) those stories are fables.

You can add in the story about Patrick Sarsfield taking a handful of his blood at the battle of Landen and saying, “Oh that this was for Ireland.” Like others all around him, Sarsfield was fighting for the preservation of his landed estates and of his standard of life; the notion of nationhood was still far away into the future.

To continue at the point where Michael the Yank left off, I may add that the Famine and Tithe wars, as well as the Land War, produced their own quota of unsung heroines. Parnell’s sister, Anna, who founded the Women’s Land League and had to fight an uphill struggle against Church and State as well as against her own brother, on behalf of the starving peasantry, deserves to be remembered. The advent of the
20th century ushered in a period that Michael the Yank termed an armed truce between the sexes.

“I fear,” he once told me, “that the men of Ireland are fast becoming a race of ‘piteógs.’

In Michael’s estimation, a piteóg is a degenerate type who insists on doing women’s work and is constantly bowing to them, at least in a figurative sense. (Piteóg is an old Gaelic word that in modern English would be termed a ‘sissy.’)

The cold war situation in Ireland between progressive male and female elements over the early years of the present century manifested itself in songs and poems of dubious literary merit.

I can recall a duet where ladies sang a composition in praise of one of their gender who rejected the attentions of a hard drinking Romeo with the words;

“There is an inn where you call in as I hear some people say,
Where you tap and call and pay for all and go home at the break of day.”

A composition from the other side tells of a young married man whose light of love turned out to be a scolding dame. The aggrieved young man went to his godfather for advice on the matter. The ‘song’ concluded with the words:

“Just get a little stick, do not get it very thick but just about the thickness of your thumb.

And lay it on her back ‘till her bones begin to crack
And ‘tis then you’ll get ease from her tongue, tongue, tongue.”

A poet of the minor variety form Rathduff, near Balla, decided to add a further verse to add insult to injury, as it were.

His contribution ran;

“I took my friend’s advice and I went home to my wife,
And I laid the timber on her back ‘go trom’ (heavily)
I beat her body round, made the holy hazel sound,
And was then I got relief from her tongue, tongue, tongue,
Oh, ‘tis then I got ease form her tongue.”

He got a pal of his, a reasonably good singer, to contribute the song with the added verse to a concert in Balla, where it nearly caused a riot. I do not intend to step
in where angels fear to tread in the realms of Women’s Lib and other up to date organisations. Their questions and grievances are linked to many controversial side issues in the social, economic and political fields.

In temporal matters, production and distribution for unreasonably excessive profits are the real enemies of real charity and brotherhood. The old maxim that the value of any commodity should be determined by necessary social labour involved in its production is a dead duck today. So the production of alcohol, drugs, arms and other lethal weapons of destruction goes on unabated.

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Fishy Stories

Living in an area removed from the larger Irish lakes and rivers with the exception of the River Moy, I would not be conversant with many of the customs and taboos associated with inland fishing in Ireland. One of my earliest recollections is of being chased home by my elders when found fishing for perch in the River Moy on Whit Sunday. Two or three more youthful anglers shared my fate on that occasion.

I have never been able to find the reason for Whit Sunday being regarded as a forbidden day for fishing as the ban is still rigidly observed in parts of the West of Ireland.

Apart from fishing, boatmen in some parts will not go on the water alone on that day. Four small lakes two on each side of the roads lie close to each other midway between Swinford and Kikelly. They are located in rough unfenced commonage and border three townlands – Shammer, Tullinahoo and Cornaveagh.

Faction fights and quarrels were a regular occurrence in the days of old as each townland claimed the lakes and the surrounding commonage- or tried to claim these rights. One of those lakes is called Lough na mBreac Caoch, (The Lake of the Blind Tout)

On enquiring the reason for the name of this lake, I was told that formerly the larger trout in this lake were blind in one eye and sometimes in both and that occasionally trout so affected are still caught there. Re-stocking has possibly improved the quality of the fish there. Regardless of the legendary reasons, I believe that low PH or high concentrations of bog acid in the water may be a contributory factor.

As regards the Loch na mBreac Caoch near Kilkelly, the old tale was that many generations ago a local man went fishing on the lake in question on Whit Sunday and caught a large trout which he landed with his gaff. Taking the trout which he had gaffed through the eye, he put it in the scouring tub and covered it over until he had time to prepare and cook his fish. Returning some hours later, he found his trout gone leaving no trace. Every trout he caught after that was blind or had diseased eyes and he always threw them in the lake again. Fifty years age a man was drowned while fishing for white trout on Christmas Day on the picturesque Glenmurry River. An old man from the same district told me that the man in question was the author of his own misfortune by fishing on Christmas Day.

No fish in Irish rivers or lakes is regarded with so much mystery and superstition as the eel. The legendary Rí Eascóin or king eels who were supposed to
lead their hosts downstream to their long-hidden spawning grounds were regarded with superstitious dread.

When travelling downstream to spawn during the waning moon, the eel shoals emit a half-hissing, half-whistling noise that the old folk believed was the marshalling call of the Ri Eascon as he led his followers to the spawning grounds and eventual death in the Saragossan Sea.

This sea had not been identified until recently as the eels’ spawning grounds. A good many years ago, people living near the Yellow River in the Knock-Kiltimagh area heard the sound of a large shoal moving slowly downstream. As the Yellow River enters Cultibo Lake and emerges at the opposite end, this slowed down the movement of the eels and gave a local man time to send a message to two brothers that lived a mile downstream.

They were active poachers and owned a strong close mesh eel net. They hastily strung their net across the river. When the shoal of fish hit the net, they swept right on, taking the net and its mooring ropes with them. The poachers said that they had little fishing luck afterwards and they resolved not to interfere with the Ri Eascon or his plans again.

Near Dunmascreena Bridge, between Claremorris and Dunmore on the Mayo-Galway border, I witnessed an unusual type of eel fishing. Local people ran a stout cotton thread longitudinally through a number of earth worms. They then roll the worms in a ball and drop them in the river at the end of a strong fishing line. This is done on a dark night when there is a ‘rise’ or flood during the waning harvest moon when the eels are moving downstream on the first stage of their journey to their spawning grounds.

When the eel takes the bait, his teeth get caught in the soft cotton thread. When the fisher feels a slight tug on the line he hauls up his eel without a struggle. Strangely, eels make no struggle in darkness. I saw one operator land 24 eels at the historic bridge of Duamascreena in this fashion about 50 years ago. He called this system of eel fishing, ‘bobbing.’

In the naked limestone belt that runs from Balla in Co. Mayo to The Burren in Clare, there are countless turloughs or winter lakes which in many instances dry up in summer. Larger ones recede to pools a few square yards in extent called ‘swallow holes.’ Eels were caught in thousands in the drying-up swallow holes and were salted away in tubs and discarded butter firkins in less opulent days.

The skin of an eel was regarded as an infallible cure for wrist sprain or ‘talach’ when wrapped around the wrist. Skins of large eels were used as whangs or fuangs for threshing flails to join the colapán to the buailtiún or beater stick. There is the partly solved mystery of the dog eel which was believed to evolve from the hair of a dog. I
have often observed wriggling live hairs in ponds and wells but can offer no opinion as to their origin or eventual fate.

Large scale drainage of peat bogs and low ponds has in the opinion of many anglers hastened the decline in the numbers of the trout population.

The deepening and widening of streams and drains from virgin bogs and swamps ensure that high colour flood water build up and spill over much faster than of old. This militates against the trout more than other types of fish. I should perhaps, add a few lines on the dying art of salmon poaching with candle and gaff. This was a dangerous exercise in the perpetual war between the prevention bailiffs and the poachers or illegal fishermen.

Clashes between the bailiffs and poachers occasionally had fatal results. Sometimes armed bailiffs found themselves overpowered and ducked in icy waters. In salmon poaching, a ‘candle’ could be a canvas bag or a disused sheet or blanket or any material that would absorb paraffin oil (kerosene) and burn well. This oil soaked material wrapped around a light steel bar or pole when ignited and held aloft threw a powerful light over a wide area. The glare momentarily dazzled the spawn sick salmon. He was gaffed by the alert fisherman before he knew what was happening. On more than one occasion, fishermen lost their lives by wading into deep holes or were dragged there by unusually large salmon. Encumbered by rubber waders or pigskin protective clothing, the poacher often found himself handicapped in the icy and often flooded waters. On a dark night, it was a colourful sight to see up to a dozen ‘candles’ blazing on a short stretch of river or adjacent rivers. Nowadays, the poacher drives in his car to a salmon ford, unrolls his net and silently gets his fish. His system may be safer and more efficient but certainly not as glamourous as the way ‘the brigands of the midnight fords’ operated.

The candle and gaff technique was also used to a lesser extent to catch spawning trout. During the famine years, the smaller rivers and lakes in the West Ireland were said be almost scoured clean of fish by every legal or illegal means that could be devised.

In a townland bordering the Trimogue river between Swinford and Kiltimagh, (Cnoc Breac) after surfeits of spawned salmon and trout, a system called ‘routing was devised that almost cleaned out all the fish in small rivers. A large turf ‘cliabh’ or basket was placed in a stream with the mouth facing upstream. Around the sides of the basket, sods were placed to ensure that no fish escaped downstream.

Two operators with shovels went 40 or 50 yards upstream and began systematically plunging their shovels into the sides of the stream to frighten all fish into the cliabh. When they got to the basket, it was smartly lifted and the fish tipped put. I can remember seeing up to a dozen fish, mostly trout, in the cliabh after a rout. After one rout recently, I saw two youngsters who had been told of this system trying their luck. All they got was one sickly looking trout.
In the good old days when trout were more plentiful, I saw a system for
snaring trout on the Dalton River, separating Knock and Kilcolman parishes. The
brown trout in clear, shallow water have a habit of darting forward and then stopping
dead for a few seconds.

The angler gets three or four long ribs of hair from a cow’s or horse’s tail,
preferably white or grey in colour to avoid detection by the trout. He plaits the ribs of
hair for strength. He then ties a loop of the hair to a rod and drops one end of the loop
into the water in the expected path of the trout. If the trout comes to rest in the loop,
one flick of the fisherman’s wrist is enough to send him several yards inland.

In conclusion it may not be out of context to add a poem written in 1880 by
Edmund O’Byrne Gear, in which he draws comparisons between migrant fish and our
own emigrants. Gear was a National Teacher domiciled for some years in Kiltimagh.
He taught for some years in Cultibo (old school) in the heart of fishing and poaching
territory. He could compose a reasonably good poem on almost any named subject in
a specified time for a bet; the bet usually taking the form, in his own words, of ‘liquid
nourishment.’ Gear’s love for convivial company led to him ending his days as a night
watchman for a timber importing firm at Liverpool docks. An old man from
Slievehorn told me many years ago that he knew Gear in Liverpool.

On one occasion he said that Gear after eating his lunch, sat down on a pile of
timber and selected a clean, smooth board on which he began to write a poem
dedicated to the overworked, underpaid Irish workers in Liverpool. A works manager,
who was passing by, came over to Gear and smilingly admired his poem and
handwriting. Remarking that Gear must have seen better days, he offered him a
responsible office job. Gear sadly shook his head, saying, “I have earned my fate and
must abide the consequences.

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Migrants and Emigrants

(by Edmund O’Byrne Gear)

Last night I passed the bare, brow sweep of bog beside the Yellow River,
Where solitude and silence keep unquestioned reign and state forever.
And there I heard a plaintive cry, like ‘caoiners’ oe’r a fallen king,
And saw against the starlit sky, a wild goose flight its spearhead fling.
By some strange instinct surely led, their northern pathway swiftly taking
From Eire’s fragrant shores they fled to where pale frozen wastes are quaking.
Later, I crossed the salmon ford to reach Killedan’s verdant valley,
And saw a glittering silver horde of young smolts through the water sally.
From many a willow girdled pool though many a crooning sandy shallow,
Like children glad released from school as the swiftly darting swallow
For Mother Nature sends her call to those, her children of the deep.
And fast through ford and foaming fall, their onward march they faithful keep.
Today I came by Garryroe, as dawn’s sweet radiance filled the land
And saw a sad procession go, all destined for a foreign strand.
Boys in their early youth and prime; girls with their unspoilt maiden charm,
Fated to pass by haunts of crime; God keep their simple souls from harm.
Solemn, I spoke to Michael Clarke, “Thou art a wise, far seeing man,
Make bright to me the seeming dark; is Eire placed ‘neath Heaven’s ban?”
“The wild goose leaves the sun-browned moor for frozen wastes and arctic seas.
The salmon flees from waters pure to where the shark exacts his fees.
Upon our land hath Heaven’s power its withering wrath revengeful spent,
That thus our nation’s youth and poor outcasts like Ishmael now are sent
To fields where foul weeds rankly grow; where vice contends with nature’s plan,

Where souls are chained to Earth below and Mammon sears the heart of man?”

Said Michael, sad but undismayed, “Deep have I delved in ancient lore,

My musings with the past have made day bright things seeming dark before.

I’ve schooled myself in nature’s laws; I know the ways of beasts and men,

But when think of God, I pause and am a simple child again

There are three or four more verses to this poem but so far I have failed to collect them. I got two lines recently of one of the missing verses in which Gear mentions the salmon that always returns, unlike the emigrant who rarely returns.

“When Samhain’s harvests safe are stored, the vaulting salmon will return,

And brigands of the midnight fords again their flaming torches burn.”

Edmund O’Byrne Gear was a bachelor. However, he nourished a secret affection and admiration for a girl from ‘the mountain,’ (Slievehorn) and composed poems in her honour.

‘There are many maidens in Mayo, so bright and blithe and bonny,

But there’s not one of all I know to equal Maggie Moloney.

Her home is where the wild winds blow, o’er banks and bleak land stony,

Yet, not a flower our gardens grow, can equal Maggie Moloney’

Gear wrote poems on social problems. His assessment of politicians and statesmen, whose aims were to ‘delude the masses,’ showed an analytical judgment of political science well ahead of his time.

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Near the closing years of the 19th century, a very popular Roman Catholic curate, affectionately called Father Johnny and sometimes Father John Eddie, ministered in the west of Ireland diocese of Achonry. Many tales are still told of his happy, easygoing disposition. During one very wet summer, Father Johnny was ministering in a parish some miles from Ballaghaderreen. One Sunday after mass, the good curate said, “Today we have a letter from His Lordship, the Bishop, asking us to pray for fine weather.”

“However,” he continued pointing to the south, “if the wind continues from that direction, I would not feel too sure but anyhow we will say one Our Father and three Hail Marys for fine weather.”

Many of Father Johnny’s sermons had the Devil and his plans and powers for their central theme. One occasion while on the theme, one of his parishioners known as Happy Jack was seated beside the pulpit. Happy Jack was known for his occasional lapses from sobriety and was the recipient of good humoured reminders and rebukes when passing by the Presbytery.

“The Devil,” said the curate in the course of his sermon “has great power. Still, he can not do all he would like as God has him chained up to a certain degree. Nevertheless, he could get at you and you,” said the priest, pointing to two men near the pulpit. “And,”’ continued the preacher, pointing to Happy Jack, “he could get you as well.”

“Ah sure,” retorted Happy Jack in a louder voice than he had intended, “If that’s case, he might as well be loose.”

On another occasion, Fr. Johnny was preaching on his favourite subject. “Once upon a time,” he said, “There lived, according to an old tale a very patient, resigned boy. Whenever he met with any misfortune or trouble, this boy always exclaimed, “Thank God it is not worse.”

This resigned attitude was not appreciated by his rougher school mates. On one occasion while this good boy and his mates were at play in the school yard, the Devil sneaked up and reached over the wall of the playground and grabbed the good boy and was bearing him off on his back. The boy’s ill-mannered companions ran after them at a safe distance shouting, ‘Now could this be any worse?’ ‘Wouldn’t it be worse,’ coolly answered the good mannered boy, ‘if I had to carry the Devil on my back?’ On one occasion during a Temperance mission in the parish, Happy Jack took the Total Abstinence and anti-drinking pledges against all intoxicating drinks.
Some days later, he went to the fair of Ballaghedereen and meeting old comrades he got well and truly ‘oiled.’ He met Fr. Johnny as he was leaving the town with uncertain steps.

“Tell me, Jack, what did you do with your pledge?”

“Ah sure, I left it at home in case I might break it,” was Jack’s reply. Father Johnny spent the last two years of his ministry in Ballaghadereen.

On one occasion, his housekeeper, Maureen Finn announced her intention of getting married and going to live in England.

Despite his misgivings that Maureen’s intended husband was none too fond of hard work, Father Johnny agreed to perform the ceremony. As the marriage ceremony would cost a pound to perform, Maureen told the priest that she had no pound to spare and neither had her prospective bridegroom. She promised the priest that she would send him the first pound that they would earn when they got to England. “Oh, no,” said the priest, “You have played too many tricks on me already and as far as money is concerned, no money means no marriage.”

After some quick thinking, Maureen told the priest to wait and she would be back in half an hour. She went to the curate’s house a short distance away and told the housekeeper who had replaced her that Fr. Johnny was suffering from a slight chill and was feeling cold in Church and he wanted his new, heavy overcoat.

The new housekeeper handed the coat to Maureen. A pawnbroker operated a pawnshop near the Church. He was nicknamed ‘Pawnie Paddy.’ Maureen took the coat to the pawnbroker who advanced her a pound on it and the usual redemption ticket in the event of the article being redeemed inside a specified time. Maureen proceeded to the Church and handed the pound to Father Johnny. After the marriage ceremony, she calmly handed him the redemption ticket and told him to recover his coat as the weather was getting colder. Seeing that the laugh was on him, Father Johnny handed her back the pound with the wish that they would live ‘happily ever after’.

Another local wit who was apprenticed in his youth to a baker loved to engage in friendly repartee with Father Johnny. Being the father of thirteen children, this wit always referred to them as the baker’s dozen. On one occasion one of his sons got into trouble at school with the teacher and was promptly expelled. His father took him up to Father Johnny to compose a letter of apology to the ‘master,’ as the teacher was styled and to arrange for his son’s reinstatement. To which request, Father Johnny agreed.

Being Christmas time, the priest poured out a small tot of whiskey for his visitor telling him that it was genuine twelve year old stuff and that no better stuff existed on their side of the Shannon. Commenting on the son whom the visitor
referred to as the last of the baker’s dozen, Father Johnny said, “He seems a likely lad but isn’t he a bit small for his age?

On being asked for his opinion of the whiskey then, the visitor replied, “Oh, it’s a good lively drop but isn’t it a bit small for its age, Father?”

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Tales of a Spailpín

A favourite ‘shanachie’ or storyteller in my locality was a spailpín or seasonal migratory worker. He was known as Tom Dick. His surname I have forgotten. A discreet, unassuming, well-spoken bachelor; he was a natural born storyteller. In addition, he had been a good, natural athlete in his youth but his natural shyness prevented him from attaining his full potential in this regard.

His tales of the trials and troubles of Irish migratory workers were a mixture of humour and pathos. Over 100 years ago, most of the spailpins from the west of Ireland had a fair knowledge of Gaelic and this was an advantage if they did not want the native English to know what they were talking about.

“The first year I went to England,” said Tom, “I went with my father. The Shah of Persia was on a visit to England. Finding his country to be rich in oil, the British Government invited him over. He was wined and dined in a big way. At the farewell party, the poor Shah got such an overdose of food and wine that he behaved undacently.”

(His reported ‘undacent’ act was to get up from the table and attempt to relieve himself behind one of the dining room curtains.) When the Irish workers in England got to hear about this, you can be sure they added to the tale.

“Have you seen the Shah today?” was a favourite catchphrase whenever they met up. When some of them got sacked for this, they changed the phrase to Gaelic. “An bhfaca tú an Shah inniú?” became the greeting.

Years later, the Boer War was to provide a ready outlet for the spailpin’s wit and sarcasm. In the early years of this war, the conspicuous, over-decorated uniforms of the British officers, largely drawn from the ranks of the upper classes, made them sitting ducks for the Boer snipers. The Boers picked them off with monotonous regularity. After some time the British got wise to this and the uniforms were changed to less conspicuous models. A favourite piece of doggerel with the spailpins contained the following lines:

Our dukes and earls, our nation’s pearls,

From dodging bullets, their necks are sore,

It is no nigger who pulls the trigger,

But a real sharpshooter; the Transvaal Boer.
“On one occasion,” said Tom, “I walked into a big public house row between our spailpíns and a bunch of English navvies after this song was sung. I had only landed from Ireland the same morning and I had a big oatmeal cake with me that I had carried over from Ireland. “Those oatmeal cakes were harder than the devil’s horns. In the thick of the row was a big English navvy who was too good for any of our lads. I later learned that he was a trained boxer. Seeing him head in my direction, I backed off and swung my cake that was wrapped in a calico cloth. I managed to hit him on the side of the head.

He went down for the count and a bit more. Seeing their hero down, the English navvies fled and we soon put a few miles between us and that town before night.”

“A story often told by a member of our gang helped to start trouble a good few times. This story was about an English landlord’s son who went to South Africa to fight the Boers. He first went to his tailor and ordered a special uniform that was to include a steel plate in the front of the jacket to protect his heart. He told the tailor to hurry things along as he was afraid that the war could be over before he had the honour of fighting for his country.”

“Well, the tailor rushed the job so much that he forgot about the metal plate until he had the vest complete. As he still had the pants to tailor, he conceived the bright idea of inserting the plate in the seat of the pants.

“He had only inserted the plate and had padded it comfortably, when the aristocrat rode up to collect it. He did not have time for a fitting but just grabbed his uniform and headed straight for the nearest seaport and on to the war front. In his very first skirmish, he and some of his companions were greeted by such a hail of bullets that they turned around and fled at top speed with heads up and tails down. A few bullets hopped off the steel plate but the wearer was otherwise unharmed. When they got a safe distance from the danger, he and his companions dismounted at a roadside alehouse to celebrate their escape.”

According to Tom, when the mail clad warrior was called on to say a few words to mark the occasion, all he could think of was;

“God bless my old tailor, he knew where my heart was better than myself.”

“In our spailpin gang,” continued Tom, “there was a young man who would surely have been a world champion boxer if he got the training or the chances that boxers get nowadays. His name was Mick Carroll and he came from the Cleerhy district, near Kiltimagh. In those days, cockfighting was not unusual and meetings for this cruel sport were often held in quiet places. Mick Carroll owned a fighting cock and also a fighting terrier. He was as active as a circus acrobat and he could walk on his hands and perform cartwheels and spins as good as any circus performer.”
“Whenever he attended a cockfight meeting he would issue a challenge to fight any man, cock or dog on behalf of himself and his team. Another man in our group had been a schoolmaster who lost his job for hitting an inspector who had charged him with being drunk.”

“We called this man ‘The Rhymer’ because he was always composing rhymes and poems about somebody or other. He composed a rhyme about Mick Carroll but I can only now remember a line or two.”

“A health to Mickeen Carroll, he’s a whopper you must know. His native place is Kiltimagh in the county of Mayo.”

I went back to school,” said Tom Dick, “for two winters after spending the first two summers in England and so did some of my mates. There was no compulsory schooling in those days; you just went if your parents had nothing else for you to do. I think the master was glad when he finally saw the back of us.”

“Before the railway came, we used to tramp to Ballina or Sligo to take the boat for England.

One time, we were joined in Ballina by nearly 100 Achill men. They had walked nearly 80 miles and were as light on their feet as deer. They came over the mountains near Nephin through a pass called Mam A’ Scardáin. All were Irish speakers.”

“Once we were hurrying to Ballina around six o’clock in the morning when we found that the only watch we had amongst us had stopped. It was a big old-timer, about the size of a small clock. We all had to run for the last 4 or 5 miles, after walking more than 25 miles, before that and then found we had plenty of time to spare.”

“I remember once getting on a train to Dublin and getting stuck near there. It was 8 or 9 o’clock before we got to the Broadstone Station. When we were leaving Claremorris, one of our gang asked for a ticket to the broad flag. He could not think of the right name for the place we were going to get off at.”

“At the Broadstone, we were directed to a small hotel in the locality. We were informed that they were all booked up but they had a big back kitchen and a couple of old sofas, where we could spend the night.”

“There was a good fire going, so we ordered a couple of drinks brought in as we felt the crowd at the bar was more of the ‘swell’ type than we were. The girl who took in our order looked to be a shy country girleen, about 12 years old or so.

One of our gang, ‘Long Jim,’ was a heavy smoker. He always smoked a clay pipe; a Knockcrockery pipe he called it and he always carried a spare pipe in his bundle. Those pipes were made in Knockcrockery in County Roscommon and Long
Jim always maintained that they were the coolest and sweetest ones in the world for a smoke.”

“When the little girl saw Jim spitting on the floor while smoking, she got a spittoon and placed it on the floor in front of him. He did not know what a spittoon was so he spat to one side of it. When the girl moved the spittoon to that spot, Long Jim then began to spit to the other side.” This kept going on like a game of see-saw for a while until Jim at last said,

‘Listen, girl, if you don’t take that yoke away, I’ll spit into it.’

The girl, who had been too shy to tell him, then informed him that that was exactly what the ‘yoke’ was designed for and we all had a good laugh. “You know, “said Tom, “in those days, you could buy a glass of beer for a penny farthing and a glass of good whiskey for three pence.”

Tom went on to tell me about the time he worked with a man who was a good hypnotist. His name was O’Connell and he hailed from the Mayo-Roscommon border area. One time they were ‘on tramp’ after finishing some harvest work in Lincoln and were on the lookout for more work.

They had been lucky enough to meet up with a farmer who had a three acre field of oat sheaves to be stooked and a promise of some more harvest work later. (Stooking meant putting the bound sheaves in small stooks or stacks, about 12 to 16 sheaves in each stook.)

The harvest field was over a mile from the farmer’s house and Tom Dick felt they should begin work that evening but O’Connell told him to stop worrying and they should head to the pub instead.

They spent the entire evening in the pub and awoke much later than intended. O’Connell told Tom not to worry but he was to stay out of sight until he had finished business with the farmer. He saw the farmer handing over the agreed price and then going off. O’Connell told him to get his bundle and to get ready for the road. After a hurried meal, they set off. The sheaves were all lying flat and it had commenced to rain.

O’Connell told Tom that he was a hypnotist and that he had hypnotised the farmer into believing that the field of oats was fully stooked. He added that it was lucky that the farmer was the right type as he would not have been able to do the same with everybody.
Dudley Costello

Barnalyra Wood had the distinction of being a favourite hideout for the noted Rapparee, Dudley Costello, one century before it served as the headquarters of Captain Gallagher and his small outlawed band. The Costellos were one of the earliest Norman families to settle in Mayo and in time had intermarried with the McDermotts, O'Garas and other leading native Irish families and had adopted native customs and manners.

For this, they incurred the enmity of the English authorities in Ireland, and after the collapse of the 1641 rebellion, their lands were gradually seized by the Crown forces and parcelled out to the latest set of Crown favorites.

Most of the Costello lands were given to the Dillons. Other East Mayo families to suffer a similar fate were the Anglo-Norman Jordans and Burkes who lost a good deal of their lands to the Brownes, Ormsbys, Cuffes, Joneses, etc. Around 1660, the chief of the Costellos, Dualta Costello (anglicised Dudley Costello), seeing his estates whittled down to a few acres around Castlemore near the modern town of Ballaghaderreen, decided on open revolt against the English Crown.

Gathering a few dozen followers, many of them veterans who had fought on the Continent and in the 1641 rebellion, he took to the woods and the hills harrying the new planters with fire and sword. His operations extended over all the country between Lough Erne in Fermanagh and Lough Mask in Mayo. The State Papers of the period refer to him as the ‘Scourge of Mayo.’

In addition to burning the mansions of his enemies, he drove off their cattle to inaccessible woods, mountains and swamps. In 1667 he carried out a big cattle raid on the planter’s estate in Cruachan Gailing in the parish of Killasser.

While driving the cattle in the general direction of Barnalyra Wood, Dudley Costello and his men were ambushed at one of the River Moy fords at Tumgesh. Costello was killed by a lucky shot from Captain Dillon’s gun but the rest of his party, including his second in command, Captain Nangle, escaped.

Dudley Costello’s head was sent to Dublin and placed on a spike for a year and a day outside St James’s prison, now Guinness’s brewery. Over the head was the inscription, ‘The Scourge of Mayo’.

There is another version of Dudley Costello’s death which gives his native Castlemore as the scene of the fatal encounter in which he met his death.
However, a letter written by Captain Dillon (whose brother got most of the Costello lands) to the Governor of Connacht mentions a crossing on the ‘Moy Water’ as the location of the ambush by the Crown forces.
On foggy autumn mornings in Ireland, observant rural dwellers have the privilege of viewing one of the grandest sights to the otherwise hidden side of Nature.

The hitherto invisible spider’s webs strung on hedgerows, long grass, shrubs, weeds etc., become visible in delightful shapes and patterns owing to the settlement of fog-film over them.

On a foggy autumn morning in the middle of the 17th century, two men fleeing for their lives did not view the spider’s webs with a happy mind. They knew that the trail of a broken webs left in their wake would make their pursuers work of tracking them so much easier. The fugitives were two members of the Balla Burkes, who were known as Burcaí an Tearmainn or Burkes of the Termon.

In 1641 they had assisted in the taking and holding of Castlebar for the Confederates. Now, nine years later, Cromwellian troops under Sir William Coote had invaded Mayo to wreak vengeance on those who had supported the Confederates and also to engage in special reprisals for what the state papers termed “The Massacre off the Bridge of Shrule.”

At this bridge a force of 80 civilian refugees and English soldiers fleeing from Castlebar were set upon by the Burkes and practically wiped out. The Protestant bishop of Castlebar, his wife and servant alone escaped. Their lives were spared at the intercession of the local Catholic curate, Father Brian Kilkenny of Knock.

The memory of those events helped the fugitives to greater effort as they knew the grim fate that lay in store, if captured. Coming to a shallow section of the Yellow River they waded through it for some distance to cover their trail and then headed for the bleak village of Lackafínnna on the side of Slievehorn Mountain.

This village was known as, “Leac a finna fine fána, gan greim ime nó braon bainne.”

In Lackafínnna they fell in with a local squatter who agreed to act as their guide. Knowing that their pursuers were not far behind, their guide led them directly to a steep gorge in the mountainside. Two freebooters of the Clan Mac Nicholas lived one on each side of the gorge. They had an ingenious system for communication and for a quick getaway if needed. A stout “bog deal” rope was strung across the gorge and was looped at each end over a strong oaken peg, which was inclined outwards from the cliff’s edge.
The bog deal rope was made of strips of bog deal, which when twisted expertly made a rope capable of withstanding a high breaking strain.

A stout wickerwork basket was suspended from this rope and two lighter ropes were attached to the basket to enable it to be pulled from one side to the other if required.

If enemies approached from one end, the people in danger were hauled to the other side of the gorge and the rope was jerked off and, with the basket, was hidden in the thick shrubbery until the danger had passed.

The guide lost no time in getting the Mac Nicholas brothers and their aerial ropeway into action. The two Burkes, their guide and the Mac Nicholas brother living on that side of were quickly hauled across the gorge and the rope and basket taken off and hidden before Coote’s men arrived on the scene.

Peering through the fog over the cliff edge, the pursuers concluded that the fugitives had toppled over into the deep chasm and were probably lying dead at the bottom. Later, the Burke brothers doubled back on their tracks and continued their flight for some distance into Gallen until the warm sun dispelled the fog and made the task of tracking them less easy.

From that time onwards that remarkable canyon three miles northwest of Kiltimagh has been known as the Cliff of Alt a’ Chléibh. The Mac Nicholas clan came to Mayo early in the 14th Century and with another adventurer sept, the Mac Hales, acted as vassals and retainers for the powerful De Exeter Jordans. In turn, the Jordans acted as vassals to the De Burgos, or Burkes, who ruled Connacht for almost 400 years.

“The Cliff,” as Alt a’ Chléibh, was commonly called, was a favourite gathering place for the young and not so young boys and girls for two and sometimes three Sundays in late July and early August when the bilberries or “fraocháns” were ripe.

The last Sunday in July was the most popular date for the purpose and was known by various names:- Bilberry Sunday, Garland Sunday, Fraochán Sunday, Reek (Croagh Patrick) Sunday and so on.

Another favourite spot for bilberry picking was Cloughwally Hill, overlooking a picturesque lake three miles south of the cliff. The bilberry, alias the blueberry, is well-known in the U.S. and other countries; blueberry pie being a big favourite in those places. A sister, acid-laden bog berry, locally called the “múnóg” abounds in many local bogs. The same berry, known as the cranberry, is extensively propagated in the U.S. where cranberry sauce is popular for sauces and flavourings.

The bilberry gatherings at Alt A’ Chléibh and Cloughwally died out over 60 years ago.
Alt A’ Chléibh- The Cliff of the Basket

Cloughwally- Stony Village (Cloch Bhaile)

*Roughly translated, this means Lackafinna bare and wild without a pat of butter or a dram of milk.

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In my early school days, I often heard old age pensioners on their way to Swinford to collect their pensions of two shillings a week refer to a bridge on the road from Swinford to Tubbercurry as “Droichead na dTuile,” the bridge of the flood. A man who lived fifty yards from this bridge was known as Micky “Bridighe” to distinguish him from others of the same surname, (Groarke). Mickey was a noted fisher, fowler, poacher and storyteller.

My father had similar interests as Mickey where wild life was concerned and they often exchanged visits and ideas to update their plans and strategies. On one occasion on which I accompanied my father, I got the history of the nearby bridge from Mickey and the reason for its watery sobriquet- Droichead na dTuile.

According to Mickey, the bridge, a well-built two arched structure was built in the “bad times”. This probably meant the famine years. Unfortunately, bad times could apply to more epochs in Irish history than good times. County Grand Juries, collections of influential landlords, were responsible for county roads and bridges before County Councils and Rural District Councils came into being around the turn of the last century.

For some reason, the floor of one arch of this bridge was laid at a slightly higher level than the floor of the other arch. This meant that the higher arch would take the overflow of the other arch only in floodwater. This arrangement resulted in this arch getting silted with sand and clay up to a height of three or four feet and served no useful purpose except in very high floods. In fact, that is the position with regard to this bridge up to the present time.

The local landlord did not reside in the vicinity of the bridge but on another estate some miles away. His wife was a lady who had a penchant for organising open air parties and picnics for her friends during the summer months.

On one occasion, she accompanied her husband on a trout fishing expedition to the river in the vicinity of the” Bridge of the Flood” of later times. This river, the Sonnagh River, is a noted trout stream and is one of the two Moy tributaries left untouched by the recent £10 Million Drainage Scheme.

The other was the Yellow River in the Foxford area, conservation being the reason in both cases. The good lady fixed on the dry arch of the bridge as the ideal picturesque spot for her next open air party. She got her husband to have the soil under the bridge levelled down to a height of two feet above the river level and edged with flowers. Some planks or strong boards resting on boxes were installed for seating and on a fine Sunday in early summer, the party was launched in the early afternoon.
The eviction of a tenant and his weak family from his cottage about a mile upstream from the bridge a short time previously had created a great deal of local animosity for the landlord and three men with “Ribbonmen” affiliations decided to express local anger in a positive way. They picked a quiet, lonely spot about a half mile upstream from the bridge to construct a sod and stone dam over the river. They started operations before midnight on the night before the party, working all through the summer night they had a high strong dam across the river by eight or nine o’clock the following morning.

Covering their footprints was no problem as they worked in their bare feet. They took the doors from the home of the recently evicted tenant and used them in the construction of the dam. They probably regarded this as an act of poetic justice towards the landlord.

The flow from two small tributaries between the dam and the bridge coupled with the overflow over the dam helped to give the river a normal appearance by the time the party started.

A sentry posted midway between the bridge and the dam, but concealed by a clump of bushes from the bridge party, gave the “dam busters” the sign when the party was in full swing.

When the Ribbonmen got the message, they lost no time in wrecking the dam and letting the full might of the waters built up over the preceding 15 to 18 hours down on the revellers. The Ribbon Society it may be mentioned in passing was an agrarian rights society founded to fight landlord injustice and members were so named as they wore a small strip of ribbon inside their coat collars as a badge of recognition amongst themselves.

On the approach to the bridge, the river narrows and there is a sharp turn to the right. This coupled with the steep sides concealed the rush of waters from the bridge party until it was almost too late.

With a wild rush to a horse-drawn carriage, they disappeared at top speed. A mopping up party sent by the landlord the following day only saw mud and slush and some stray boards and planks. Local people who had scarcely a second spoon in their kitchens now had silver spoons, knives and forks to play with. However, they wisely kept them under cover until the storm blew over,

Once in a while, flash floods occur in the Sonnagh River in summer when thunderstorms occur higher up the river around Barnalyra Wood. With a descent of over 700 feet these floods have often wreaked havoc. As the day of the bridge party was hot and sultry with local thundershowers, this excuse was trotted out and believed by the picnic party. By the time the real story leaked, it was too late to do much about it.
Mention of the dearth of spoons locally before the party brings to mind a current local joke of former days. A youth who was late for roll call was taken to task by his teacher as to his reason for being late gruffly replied, “Had I a spoon, had I?”

The implication in this cryptic reply was of course that he had to wait his turn in the queue for porridge or “stirabout” until a spoon became available for breakfast. Three or four miles upstream from Droichead na dTuile a townland along the river bears the unusual and unlikely name of Trouthill. Early in the last century a team of Ordnance Survey engineers and ex-British Army surveyors known as Sappers were busy mapping and surveying areas of the country overlooked or unfinished in this regard.

The sapper engaged in this work along the banks of the Sonnagh River was anxious to give English names or English translations to townlands with Gaelic names.

When he came to the village of “Cnoc Breac” (Grey Hill) he asked the local landlord the English translation of the name. “Well,” replied the landlord, “I am not much of a Gaelic scholar but cnoc means a hill and breac means a trout. To this day the official name of the village or townland has been Trouthill.

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The 17th and the early half of the 18th century marked the heyday of the swaggering, hard-drinking landlord clique in Ireland. The Famine and the resultant miseries and misfortunes of their tenants left many landlords without their rack rents and a good many of them wound up in the Bankruptcy Courts. In addition to a well-stocked cellar, a well-fed flock of ducks became a status symbol with many top-ranking landlords.

A large flock of ducks and a duck pond were a feature of many landlords’ demesnes in those days and the duck girl to feed them and to cull out the fattest ones for his lordship’s table, was a necessary adjunct.

A landlord living a short distance from Balla in County Mayo was believed to own the finest flock of ducks in the country around the early famine years. His son had incurred his wrath owing to his infatuation for his duck girl, Sibby Cottle.

He boasted to his boon companions that he first became enamoured with Sibby when he saw her washing her dainty feet in the duck pond. Sibby, however, told some of her friends that her power over Robert, the young landlord, came about for a different reason.

She confessed to them that she owned a charm so potent that when she invoked it Robert would come to her even though it meant forsaking gay company and high life in London or Dublin. This charm was given to her by an aunt, who was known as a sly, furtive type of person around Balla.

When O’ Donovan Rossa, along with Duffy of Kilmovee, visited Balla to discuss initiating George Henry Moore of Moorehall into the Fenian Brotherhood, they gave the slip to the Government agents and spies by meeting Moore in the new Courthouse, a Government building. However, Sibby Cattle’s aunt was able to talk the next day about the two strange men who had spent most of the night before in the new Courthouse with Mr. Moore.

The charm in question was known as the “Búrach Stiaill.” (Pronounced as Booragh Stheel) It is believed to have been the last of its type to be used or invoked in the country. The charm consisted of an unbroken strip of human skin, cut longitudinally from a corpse, from the top of the head to the sole of the foot and back again.

When a young, energetic curate from the Tuam area came to Balla, he soon learnt of Sibby’s gruesome charm. He demanded that she surrender it so it could be publicly burnt. Even though her friend had by now lost interest in her, Sibby prevaricated and eventually maintained that she had already given it over to the
church. The observant sexton of the R.C. church in Balla recalled that he had seen Sibby entering the church the previous evening with a parcel and leaving without it. As Sibby was rarely to be seen near a church, a search was mounted and the sexton’s ladder was found leaning against a sidewall. Directly above it, Sibyls charm was found hanging from a roof rafter. On the following Sunday afternoon it was publicly burnt in town under the supervision of the young curate.

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“Fighting Fitz”

Listening in early youth to fireside tales of “Fighting Fitz”, as George Robert Fitzgerald of Turlough was locally called; I formed the opinion that he must have been a wonderful type of folk hero. As I grew older and realised that he belonged to the gambling, rack-renting, privileged landlord class implanted by Cromwell or William of Orange, his career lost much of its glamour for me.

Probably no member of the Irish Ascendancy packed so action, adventure, and physical danger, genuine attempts to improve his estates and give employment and also childish acts of cruelty, as Fitzgerald did in his short life of 38 years. If ever there was such a person as a victim of fate, Fitzgerald should be considered for the honour.

At the height of his pride and popularity in 1783, he was described as the best-dressed dandy in Ireland. Yet, when he went to his execution in 1794, he was described as being dressed in a tattered peasant in a coat tied with rope and an old caubeen hat tied with a string.

Born in Turlough House, Castlebar in the year 1748 he was the eldest son of George Fitzgerald. A second son, Lionel, did not hit the headlines - except as a spendthrift and wastrel of the average “spoilt boy” type. George Robert’s mother was formerly Lady Mary Berkely, a sister of Bishop Berkely, a noted scholar and philosopher, who was Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry, a post which carried an annuity of £20,000. The Fitzgerald’s of Turlough were large property owners with a high rent roll. George was described as being not very tall, wiry and active, with the face of an angel but the mind of a devil.

He enjoyed jumping horses down over steep banks and quarries and into flooded rivers and waterfalls. He organized midnight foxhunts by torchlight, which only achieved injuries to horses and men, terrorising tenants, livestock and levelling their fences.

On one occasion, he laid a bet that he would walk his horse over the parapet wall of Ballylahan Bridge with the River Moy in full flood. His friend, Chris Boynes of Lakelands, Manulla, took up the bet. When Fitzgerald and his horse were halfway across the bridge, the horse took fright at a huge lump of foam in the water and plunged straight into the river.

Horse and rider were quickly swept downstream but Fitzgerald steered him to land at the first turn in the river. “I thought you were a goner, Fitz.” said Boynes when they met afterwards. “Never fear,” said Fitzgerald, “The man born to be hanged need never fear water!”
It was only later when he got among the duelling, gambling, high-living fraternity that Fitzgerald’s troubles really began. His first duel, with an army officer in Galway, was said to have affected him adversely for the rest of his life. He received a deep head wound and was unconscious for three days. Thereafter, he was troubled at times with spells of moody depression and at times with ungovernable fits of temper.

When his marriage to Lady Jane Connolly of Kildare was arranged, his father signed over a slice of the Fitzgerald property and nearby Rockfield House plus an annuity of £6,000. Old George thought that this spelt the end of his troubles and worries on account of his spirited son.

In fact, they were only beginning. George Robert took off to Europe on a protracted honeymoon, returning three years later. He is said to have spent £40,000 plus debts unknown on his three years sojourn on the Continent. He brought back a motley collection of beasts and birds which added to the expenses and worries on the Turlough estate. When old George refused to hand over any more money to his son, George Robert promptly locked him in a room with some of his motley pets.

The enforced company of the foul smelling, verminous bear was believed to have broken down the resolve of his father as George Robert was believed to have got at least promises or promissory notes that solved his immediate problems. He ordered his wines direct from France and the wine carts travelling from Turlough to Westport Quay to take delivery of them was a common sight.

In one of his constructive moods, when he felt there was a future for flax growing and linen production in the area, he took tradesmen-weavers, spinners, hacklers etc. from Northern Ireland and built houses for them in Turlough. He encouraged flax growing in a big way. Unfortunately, his plans were not as successful as he had hoped. His unstable nature and his having too many irons in the fire together with too many incompetent advisers proved to be big drawbacks.

At the great Volunteer Convention in Dungannon in 1783, George Robert may be said to have reached the zenith of his power and popularity. He was in command of the Review Force of the huge Volunteer muster there. His uncle was one of the two leading candidates for the post of Supreme Commander of the Volunteers, the other being the Earl of Charlemont. Fitzgerald’s uncle, the Bishop, was described as arriving at the Convention in a coach and six with silver mounted harness and purple ribbons flying.

Charlemont won the scramble for “pelf and power” to quote one account and needless to say it meant little difference to the hewers of wood and the drawers of water. Had his uncle won, George Robert probably would have got a lucrative post that might have meant changing the whole course of his career. Instead his return to Mayo and mounting debts spelt disaster. His frequent duels, however, went merrily on. He fought two duels, which were regarded as inconclusive with “Humanity” Dick Martin of Connemara and Caesar French of Oughterard.
In all, he is believed to have fought between fifty and sixty duels. Local legend gives the figure as a hundred, which most likely is an exaggeration. He fought his third duel in Paris while on his honeymoon, receiving a leg wound resulting in a limp ever after.

On one occasion, Fitz borrowed 100 guineas from the Kiltimagh landlord, “Minor” Browne of Newtownbrowne.

Seeing no hope of repayment, Browne paid a personal call on Fitzgerald. Guessing the reason for the call, Fitzgerald took him out to the shooting gallery after dinner. Fitzgerald had an auger hole an inch in diameter drilled through a tree in the midst of some shrubbery. Measuring twenty paces, he took careful aim and fired his bullet through the auger hole.

Browne, like many young landlords’ sons, had spent a term in the British army and was the crack shot of his regiment. He asked Fitzgerald for a nail, which he drove part way into the tree. He then took aim and hit the nail squarely on the head. Fitzgerald decided that a duel would not solve his problems so he sent Browne home with a hunting colt in lieu of the debt. The general belief locally was that Fitzgerald never fired through the auger hole but into the shrubbery beside the tree. Early in 1786 with mounting debts, Fitzgerald was most anxious to secure one lucrative post-the command of the Mayo Volunteers. Those were of course the Volunteers under Grattan’s Parliament, where money was spent lavishly.

His main opponent for the post was a neighbour, Patrick Randal Mc.Donnell of Chancery Hall, which to annoy Fitzgerald; he renamed “Liberty Hall.” Fitzgerald had his Turlough Volunteers, locally dubbed the Turlough Militia, which were more of a liability than an asset.

The County Sheriff, Denis Browne, was a sworn enemy of Fitzgerald’s, so it came as no surprise to many that McDonnell got the post. Fitzgerald had once challenged Browne to a duel and had taken a pot shot at him at Westport Quay. As Fitzgerald’s name was next on the list for the appointment he, in his misguided rage, saw the elimination of McDonnell as the solution to his problem.

One of his shady advisers was a discredited lawyer, a Welshman named Timothy Brecknock. Fitzgerald was a magistrate and as such had the powers of arrest. Brecknock’s advice to him was to arrest McDonnell on some trumped up charge, arrange a rescue attempt for him and then shoot him.

Under English law a magistrate had the authority to order the shooting of a legally held prisoner to prevent a rescue from custody. Another character in the plot was a general manager for Fitzgerald, Andy Craig, known as “Scotch” Andy. Sir Henry Lynch-Blosse of Balla had previously employed him.

However, the plans were discussed too freely and somebody at the last moment informed McDonnell. McDonnell is believed to have tried to get to the
military base in Swinford as the road into Castlebar was too well watched by the Turlough Militia. He was arrested in Ballyvary and in the fake rescue attempt in Turlough was shot dead by Scotch Andy.

When the news spread, the military in Castlebar decided to steal a march on Fitzgerald as they expected a hot reception in arresting him otherwise. When they got into the house noiselessly, Fitzgerald was unarmed but he grabbed a heavy silver candlestick and then backed into a narrow porch where only one assailant at a time could follow.

He defended himself by parrying the sword thrusts with the heavy candlestick until his arm became too swollen and painful. It is believed that the orders of Browne were to take him alive.

The names of the members of the jury make for interesting reading.

In Faulkner’s “Life of Fitzgerald” they are given as follows :- John Moore, Ballintaffy; William Lindsay, Hollymount; Thomas Ormsby, Ballinamore; James Lynch, Clogher; Smith Steele, Foxford; John Joyce, Oxford; William Ousley, Rushbrook; Joseph Lambert, Togher; Christopher Boynes, Lakelands; James Miller, Westport; James Gildea, Crosslough; and William Ellison, Tallyho Lodge.

In addition to Fitzgerald, Brecknock, Craig and a minor accessory named Fulton were charged with murder. Craig turned King’s evidence, which was the official term for turning informer and his life was spared. Before Craig fired the fatal shot, McDonnell, according to local tradition, offered him a hundred of his greenest acres to spare his life. A verdict of guilty was returned against Fitzgerald, Brecknock and Fulton and all were sentenced to be hanged.

The day of Fitzgerald’s execution was a day of intermittent spells of rain, thunder and lightning so violent that many superstitious people stayed indoors. Executions in those days took place on the corner of the Mall opposite the main gateway to the Military Barracks.

When all was ready for George Robert’s execution, after spending some time in prayer, he leaped impetuously from the scaffold, breaking the rope and breaking a leg.

He shouted, “My life is my own”, according to local tradition. “Not while there is a rope in Castlebar,” was the grim retort of Denis Browne.

When his body was taken to Turlough House to be waked, there were no silver candlesticks left so candles stuck in bottles were used. In the spell between his arrest and trial, mobs had invaded Turlough House and taken everything of value. With Fitzgerald having fallen foul of the authorities, little was done to prevent this wholesale vandalism.
George Robert’s family consisted of one daughter. Her mother, the former Lady Jane Connolly, died a few years before her husband. All their family lives were said to be happy as could be.

Their daughter was raised with her mother’s people, the Conollys of Castletown House, Co. Kildare.

She died while still a young girl. There is a belief that she accidentally came across an account of her father’s life and death in the library there and it so affected her that it hastened her untimely death.

Local tradition asserted that a few minutes before George Robert Fitzgerald’s execution a horseman was seen approaching Castlebar on the Dublin Road trying to urge on his tired horse and waving a piece of paper in his hand. Denis Browne according to the story speeded up the execution. The paper in question was believed to be a pardon for Fitzgerald from the Lord Lieutenant but nothing further was heard of the matter.

Spencer Street and Station Road were not built up areas at the time and that a horseman approaching the Mall on the Dublin road could be observed over the last few hundred yards east of the Mall.

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Some time ago I was questioned by a grandson as to whether I had ever seen a ghost. My reply was in the negative. “However,” I continued, “I felt close to seeing one on a couple of occasions.”

That answer did not let me off the hook so to be more specific I related the following two are three anecdotes to him, which happened to be the truth.

“When,” I commenced, “I was in my middle teens I was returning one night alone from a small country house dance some time after midnight. Not far from a lonely landmark known for generations as the “Black Gate,” I came to a crossroads, or rather a branch road that had a reputation for generations of being haunted, even on some occasions in broad daylight. As I approached this spot I began to dwell on some of the eerie tales I had heard about it.

A man was said to have been killed by a neighbour beside the road at this junction. The happened during one of the lesser potato famines preceding the Great Famine of 1847. In those days, and in some parts of Ireland down to our time, land was held from the landlords in a kind of communal occupation called the Rundale system. The landlords did not favour high, earthen fences, which they regarded as a waste of land.

As the tenants were ticket of leave people who could be evicted at a day’s notice, they had to agree to this arrangement. The line of demarcation therefore was a small token fence about a foot wide and a foot and a half high, called in Gaelic a “cealoid.”

With a teeming rural population at a time when our peerless Goldsmith reckoned “that every rood maintained its man,” there were no waste headlands. Every inch, right up to the cealoid was tilled. On one occasion a man came early to dig out his potato allotment at the spot I have mentioned during a lean famine period. He found his next-door neighbour tunnelling under the cealoid or dividing fence to take his potatoes from his allotment. A fight with the two “loys” or heavy, cumbersome spades ensued, resulting in one man’s death and the transportation of the other man to Van Diemen’s Land - a penal colony now known as Tasmania.

Local people for a long time afterwards avoided that place after nightfall, some asserting that they had seen the dead man and his loy there. About 100 years later a cousin of my mother’s, who was a card playing fanatic, was returning home in the small hours of the morning from one of his many late night, and sometimes all night, card games.
When he came to this reputedly haunted spot the moon was shining brightly so he never dreamed he would see anything ghostly or eerie in any way.

To his surprise, his dog seemed to enter into a savage fight with an unseen adversary. The dog snapped and snarled, even standing on his hind legs at times and swaying from side to side. He finally broke into a run for home about a quarter of a mile away.

When his owner came along and opened the door, he dashed in and got under the bed, where he stayed trembling until daylight. His owner gave up his late night card games from that night onwards.

As my mind travelled back to those days, I felt a little puzzled to say the least to see two bright, glowing spots on the grass margin of the road, spaced at the right distance to resemble two eyes. I stamped my foot on the road in case it might be a cat or some other small nocturnal animal. With a certain amount of caution and uneasiness, I crept closer and grabbed one of the “eyes.” I found a sticky substance in my hand that stopped glowing.

As the night was very dark, I postponed further examination and wrapped the substance in a handkerchief, examining it by daylight the next day. I found it to be old, decayed timber, which gives a phosphorescent glow when placed in a very dark place at night.

An old tree said to be a rare type of poplar was blown down at this road junction some years previously. Being useless for firewood and being no obstruction lying on a broad grass margin, it was left to decay there. “Was that the only time you nearly saw a ghost?” asked my youthful question master.

“Well,” I continued, “about 40 years ago I can remember a warm day I spent helping an uncle of mine harvesting oats. He lived about 10 miles away. He worked late into the night to finish the programme. When leaving for home my aunt sent two large bucketsful of apples with me. I secured the apples in a light canvas bag on the carrier of my bike.

The night was warm and heavy and I ran into several thunderstorms, from which I had to shelter in dwelling houses and other buildings on the way home.

When I got to the railway bridge outside Swinford, it was past midnight. I found the roadway under the bridge flooded to a depth of two or maybe three feet. This left me no choice but to detour by the roadway that went by the ancient churchyard of Kilconduff.

Seven hundred years previously, “marauding foreigners,” according to local tradition, murdered the resident priest there.
His faithful black hound stood by his body for two or three days and when the marauders returned by the same route the hound fiercely attacked them. They eventually killed it.

The spot was named from that time onwards as “Cille Chon Dubh”- the grave, or churchyard, of the black hound. Kilconduff is frequently mentioned in the old annals as a turbulent spot in the wars between the natives and the “foreigners,” dating back to the 13th. century. Needless to say, it carried the reputation down through the years of being haunted.

I was giving a quick mental run-down to those details when cycling past the churchyard gate. I thought I heard a light footstep right beside me and at intervals two more footsteps.

I braked and jumped off the bike. As the night was dark I took the battery-operated lamp and shone it on the ground around me along the road. I found in a large apple on the road and going back on my tracks I found two more. When I examined the bag of apples on the bike I found a hole in the bag, caused probably by the bumpy, sandy, potholed road and the sharp carrier. So that explained the “footsteps.”

Two or three years after this event, I was cycling to a road construction job on the Irishtown - Dalgan road 20 miles distant from my home. It was a fine spring morning about six am. As I came to the Ballinamore Wood near Linbawn Bridge, (now cut away) visibility was good, up to maybe 200 yards. At a gap in the roadside fence about 20 per 30 yards and front of me, a stoat crossed the road and entered by a gap on the opposite side into the wood. He was carrying a dead stoat in his mouth. He was followed by a dozen or more stoats travelling slowly in an orderly, single file. I felt, and to this day feel convinced, that I had the privilege of witnessing a stoat’s funeral. Like his English and Scottish cousins, the weasel, the stoat is regarded among rural dwellers with a good deal of superstition, because so little is known of his life style.

There was a belief that a stoat’s spit was very poisonous and that if it came into contact with a raw cut death would ensue inside three days.

On one occasion when I was 10 or 11 years old and was walking on long grass by a fence, I came to a halt and I immediately heard screams at my feet. On looking down, I saw I had stood on a young stoat, which was screaming and spitting. I jumped aside very quickly and was glad to see him disappear through the long grass.

I was wearing knee-length trousers at that time, the usual schoolboy’s wear at the time. I’d probably had my quarter of scratches and cuts. Even so with youthful bravado, I was inclined to scoff at all the ideas and beliefs. I was nevertheless happy when the next three days had passed by.
A country public house a couple of miles from my native place was a noted meeting place for tellers of tall tales in my early days.

I can remember some tales I heard at the age of seven or eight more clearly than the more important (and more truthful) tales heard later in life.

On one occasion my father took me with him to this pub as I was too noisy and turbulent at home. During the night a few tales and jokes were told. Then the two leading storytellers were called upon to wind up the proceedings. The first of the two, when I remember was called Maurteen began by telling of his wonderful, clever dog.

“My dog is so wise that when he sees me wearing my good clothes instead of my old ones he jumps up and frisks about me with joy. He knows that if it means I intend visiting my sister’s house a mile away and she always treats my dog well.”

“My dog is so wise that when he sees me wearing my good clothes instead of my old ones he jumps up and frisks about me with joy. He knows that if it means I intend visiting my sister’s house a mile away and she always treats my dog well.”

“Any dog that can tell the difference between your new and your old clothes must be extra clever,” was the facetious comment of a young interrupter who hastily shot out the back door with Maurteen’s stick whistling in his rear.

“Some time ago,” resumed the wise dog’s owner, “I began giving my dog his dinner in the threshing barn as he did not like being annoyed by the hens or ducks while feeding. One hen to whom he did not seem to object often went to the barn to pick up the loose grains of oats off the floor and soon got bold enough to go up to the dog’s saucepan and eat with him.

One day the dog lay down in the open doorway after eating and the hen seeing her way barred when to a corner and laid an egg on some straw. The dog, who was watching out of the “tail of his eye,” calmly went over and gobbled up the egg while the hen went off about her business. The same thing happened every day for a time but in the long run my wife got wise to the business. After hearing the hen cackling (as all hens do after laying an egg) she kept a close watch on the dog and caught him in the act. She laid down the law for me as owing the war eggs were getting dear, jumping in a few and months from a halfpenny to 5 pence each. So I had to break up the partnership between my dog and my hen.

The other finalist was then called on and he related a story about a horse that belonged to his grandfather. In those days there were no vets but certain families like the Nallys of Balla, the Prendergasts of Claremorris or the Taafes of Aclare were noted horse quacks or horse doctors as they liked to style themselves.

One day my grandfather’s horse dropped down and lay still after a few kicks. My grandfather had to go off as it was rent day for paying the landlord and he could
not miss this, anyhow. He got a local all-round handyman to skin the horse as horsehides were dear at the time and the skinner soon came and did the work of skinning.

When my grandfather returned from the Big House he nearly dropped when he was met at the door by the horse, already skinned. It seems that the house had only a stroke or something that caused him to be stunned for a time. My grandfather borrowed a neighbour’s horse and galloped off as quickly as he could for the nearest horse quack. When the quack came he said the horse was still alive has ever but as it was in the month of March the horse would soon die of cold.

Grandfather said, “I have six or seven sheep fleeces here. I lost those sheep in a snowdrift about two months ago. I kept the fleeces, skins and all, when I buried the sheep and maybe we should cover the horse with them.

“The very thing”, exclaimed the horse doctor. As the horse’s legs were not skinned it made their work a lot easier. In covering the horse with the sheepskins they ran short of ropes to tie them on. As there was a fine hedge of blackberry briars close by, they cut the longest strands of briars and laced them around the horse and they helped to keep the skin so in position.

As spring came along, when everything is inclined to grow, the sheep skins began to take hold and in time the briars began take hold as well. The result was that when summer came along my grandfather took a fine crop of wool off his horse. When the harvest time came the briars that took hold produced a fine crop of blackberries.

My grandfather said he never tasted these blackberries himself but that he had a hard job keeping away youngsters who said they never tasted any that were nicer.

This tale was awarded the “nod” for the night in the pub.

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Kilconduff in Local Tradition

While the official name of Swinford parish is Kilconduff, there exists no corresponding townland of the same name hereabouts for reference in tracing the origins of such a unique name for a parish. Neighbouring parishes such as Killedan, Kilcolman, Kilmovwee, Toomore etc. differ from Kilconduff in this regard.

The churchyard of Kilconduff, from which the parish derives its name, is located at the centre and highest point of Rathscanlon townland. Naming parishes to commemorate some saint of the Celtic Church has been the most popular form of parish nomenclature in Ireland.

Finding saints’ names for the purpose should not have been too difficult when we consider that for instance, over forty saints of the old Celtic Church bore the name of Colman. According to local belief in the Aran Islands over 120 saints of the old Celtic church are interred in the little churchyard of Killeany.

Most of those old saints are said to have come there to end their days in private seclusion and contemplation. How those dedicated people managed to survive in such harsh, inhospitable surroundings puzzles the imagination. Many of them are believed to have been amongst the foremost scholars of their day.

They could not even depend on locusts and wild honey, which were the mainstay for the Israelite anchorites of old. Needless to say, unlike the Israelites of old they had no Golden Calf to worship should they feel so inclined.

Incidentally, the golden calf of Israelite tradition should be worth a “dig” to use a materialistic American phrase, if its whereabouts could be guessed. Leaving the location and the value of the Golden Calf to tradition and the computer, we will return to the slightly more straightforward realms of local tradition.

Early in the 12th century, according to local tradition, the friar in residence at his little church on the site of the present Kilconduff churchyard was slain by a marauding band.

In addition to the constant warfare between Norman colonists and the native Irish for over 400 years, there were non-aligned armed bands, to use a modern expression, whose main objective was plunder. Monasteries and churches suffered in a big way before The Reformation came along to make such acts official for the invaders.

The robbers who killed the friar returned over the same route some hours later and were fiercely attacked by the friar’s black wolfhound. They succeeded after a fierce struggle in killing the hound and they buried him beside the friar. From that
time onwards they place was named Cille Chon Dubh- the Church of the Black Hound.

From the early 12th century onwards, Kilconduff is frequently mentioned in the old annals in connection with the ever-recurring warfare between the Norman and Welsh adventurers on the one hand and the native Celts on the other. The division was not always so clear cut in those turbulent days as on occasions some natives sided with the foreigners and at other times Normans who had intermarried with natives sided with them against fresh Normans sent over from England to supersede them. The murder of the Kilconduff friar is not mentioned in the old annals but the killing of Meachair Ó Ruadhain, at the door of his church in Kilsheshnan, by the foreigners, which is only 3 or 4 miles from Kilconduff, is mentioned. The ORuadhain clan (Ruanes) was a ruling class in Kilsheshnan (Killasser) at the time.

In addition to O’Ruadhain, other named clans in the old annals from the area include O’Hara, O’Higgins, O’Hennigan, O’Moráin and Mac Duarcain (Durkin). While not as numerous as of yore perhaps, all those surnames are to be found locally up to the present time.

The help to prove that the famous prophesy made wishfully by the “London Times” over 100 years ago still awaits fulfilment. This was the forecast that “the Celtic Irishman will soon be as rare in Connemara as the Red Indian on the Plains of Manhattan.”

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Killasser Mysteries

Over 200 years ago, in 1778, the English traveller, writer and farming expert, Arthur Young, toured Ireland. He made a brief reference to the East Mayo parish of Killasser.

“In this parish,” he wrote, “I have found some of the best land in Mayo bordered by some of the worst land in the world.”

Killasser- St. Lasser’s Church- is so named after a saint of the early Irish Church founded by St. Patrick. Between Ballyfarnon and Carrick-on-Shannon, on a sloping elevation, adjacent to one of the most beautiful of Irish lakes, Lough Key, there is a blessed well dedicated to St. Lasser.

It is a place of pilgrimage around the 15th August, a popular time for local pilgrimages in Ireland. Close by lies Kilronan churchyard and abbey, where O’Carolan, the last of the old Irish bards, lies buried.

The road leads from the main Swinford-Foxford road near Cloongullane Bridge (on the Moy) to Croghan Hill, the highest point of the parish of Killasser.

The Norman invaders and their allies, referred to in the old Irish Annals as “the foreigners” were adept at discovering prime land. They figure in the history of Killasser as early as 1236.

In his topographical Dictionary of Ireland, published over 180 years ago, Lewis mentioned a bloody war fought in Killasser in earlier times between the native O’Rowans and the Norman Jordans. This battle according to Lewis was so bloody that the battleground was known as Lugnafulla- the hollow of blood.

O’Rowan is a variation in translation of O’Ruadhain, the ruling clan in Killasser in days of old. The location of Lugnafulla remains a mystery today. A townland, whose official name is Dromada, seems to be the most likely guess.

This townland is still called locally by its older name of Lug na h-Achaidh, pronounced Lognahauha (sometimes shortened to Lognahaw) and meaning the hollow of the fortified field.

The Annals of Lough Key record that Meachair O’Ruadhain was slain by the ‘foreigners’ at the door of his church in Kilshesnan. Kilsheshnan (Cill Saicsnean) has been bracketed with Killasser but that location is also not known today either. The date given in the annals is 1263 A.D.
The peak of that hill still retains its old name of Srón Cam. The date recorded for that battle is 1328 A.D. The exact location is no longer known today.

Near the border separating the parishes of Killassar and Attymass/Coolcarney and close to the Eagle’s Rock lies the picturesque old world village of Glendaduff. “Gleann dhá Ghuth” - the glen of the two voices (echoes) is sometimes incorrectly spelt “Glenduff.”

In one of their frequent raids into Carra, which was “foreigner’s” territory, the Mc.Donoghs of Ballymote and their allies, the Mc.Dermotts, were pursued by Mac William Burke and his Gallowglasses.

The old annals record O’Donnell of Tirconnell and his Ulstermen invaded Connacht on a cattle raiding foray and, at a battle at Cruachan Gailing, slew the local chieftain, O’Ruadhain, before retreating northwards again. Cruachan Gailing is Croghan Mountain in Killasser.

The Annals of Lough Key record that Meachair O’Ruadhain was slain by the “foreigners” at the door of his church in Kilshesnan. Kilsheshnan (Cill Saicsnean) has been bracketed with Killasser but that location is also not known today either. The date given in the annals is 1263 A.D.

In one of their frequent raids into Carra, which was foreigner’s territory, the Mc.Donoghs of Ballymote and their allies, the Mc.Dermotts, were pursued by Mac William Burke and his Gallowglasses.

In an action at Glendaduff, the raiders repulsed their pursuers. To avoid a confrontation with the O’Haras of Belclare who were preparing to protect their cattle stocks. The McDonogh/McDermott force seized a local herdsman to guide them over the mountain to Attymass. Being lame, he could not get away in time like his neighbours. He was called Cathal Bacach (Lame Cahal.)

This route over the mountain, over which Lame Cahal guided the cattle raiders, is known to this day as “Staighre Cathail Bhacaigh.” (Lame Cahal’s mountain path or stairway.)

This path, visible for a distance of 20 miles, is getting fainter every year due to the decrease in pedestrian traffic over the mountain. It is easier nowadays to sit in a car and “go round the road.”

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The Sulphur Spring

In the opening years of the twentieth century, Claremorris, or “the town of Clare,” as it was called locally, attracted national attention on local, political and administrative fronts. In 1901 a parliamentary bye-election got a good deal of publicity when Major John Mc. Bride, standing as an Independent Republican opposed the nominee of the Irish Parliamentary Party, (Redmondites) John O’Donnell. Opposing the Parliamentary Party was regarded by most with horror, almost amounting to heresy.

Mc.Bride, later to be executed after the 1916 Rising, had just returned from South Africa, where he had acted as second-in-command to Col. Blake with the Irish Brigade, fighting for the Boers against British Imperialism.

Even though Mc.Bride polled less than a quarter of the votes, it was regarded as a good result since he had no election machinery, no funds and only a handful of devoted workers. A more bitterly contested Local Government election some time later engendered more local animosity, which smouldered for years. This election got much publicity in the local and national press ion account of the actively hostile part played by the local clergy against the local idol, Conor O’Kelly, and the determined manner in which his followers rallied behind him in spite of them being labelled anti-clerical.

When the massive support given to O’Kelly silenced his critics, there was a short lull; before the next storm. On this occasion a proposed water supply for “the town of Clare” attracted rural opposition before finally getting off the ground. A local poet expressed the feelings of the local opposition when he composed a lengthy poem, ending with the lines: -

“Should we rob oursel’s for the lazy swells
When we’ve three fine wells in the town of Clare?”

(A “swell” was the local, derogatory term for a well-off person.)

Soon after the water supply controversy had subsided, a local character felt it was time to stir up some more local agitation in a big way. A fine spring well existed on this man’s land- a man known as “Paddy the Yank.” The Yank bought a few pounds of sulphur, which he put in a canvas bag and buried in the path of the main spring feeding the well. He then circulated a report that the well was a noted sulphur spring of old and that his grandfather and great-grandfather had been cured of rheumatism by drinking draughts of water from this well over a long period.
Paddy the Yank got the Local Council so interested in his well that the council had a sample of the well’s water taken and sent to Dublin for analysis. The analyst’s report showed that the water had high sulphur content and he asked for two more samples to be taken at monthly intervals.

The second sample showed lower sulphur content while the third, a month later, showed only faint traces of the mineral. In view of this development the District Councillors called a special meeting to which the analyst and the Yank were invited.

The first question put to the meeting by the analyst was:-

“How could this man know that the spring contained sulphur since, on his own admission, he had no previous knowledge of chemistry or no means of analysing the water?”

“Well,” coolly replied Paddy, “I was always a hard working man and believed in getting up early every morning. I always looked out the window, if it was bright enough, and very often saw three or four hares drinking at this well. Since I never saw or even heard of a hare with rheumatism. I concluded that it must be a sulphur spring!”

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Fun of the Fair

Like most fairs of long established origins, the fair of Swinford on the first Wednesday of every month was more than just an market for the buying, selling and exchange of livestock. It was a Mecca for tradesmen and handymen from a wide area come to sell their wares.

Fish, fresh and salted, cockles, dilisk and other produce of the sea were there in abundance, chiefly in spring and early summer.

Fair evenings were regarded as a social event by the young and not so young elements. Street singers and musicians, ballad singers and acrobats, gamblers, confidence tricksters and medicine quacks helped to contribute to at the fun of the fair.

Fair evenings were regarded as lucky places for the arrangement of rural marriages and in some places semi-professional matchmakers did their part in this regard. Like most Irish garrison towns Swinford had its ghetto-like district known as “The Lane.” Here ex-soldiers and ex-militiamen thrown on the scrap heap of human misery by their imperial masters existed rather than lived.

Fishing, doing odd jobs and catching goldfinches and other songbirds with some bird lime in decoy cages were the main sources of income to supplement their meagre pensions of 4 pennies a day.

There were cheap rooms and lodging houses in “The Lane” where long-distance chancers sometime stayed on the night before Swinford fair. Many of them got away to an early start after the fair as some of their items and wares would not stand up to much investigation.

In this regard I can remember, as a youngster, hearing an inhabitant of the Lane known as Old Neddy tell of his experience with two of his shady lodgers around the turn of the last century.

“On one night before the fair,” said Old Neddy, “two brothers called for lodgings. After I agreed, they asked leave to use the kitchen fire and a large boiling saucepan for an hour or two. They carried two large, battered-looking suit cases.

One of them took several dozen empty ointment boxes out of one case and the other brother took several bars of Sunlight soap out of the other.

Some of the boxes were very small and would hold little more than a spoonful of ointment or similar substance while the larger ones were three or four times bigger. After boiling the soap they filled it into the boxes after adding some light powder to
kill the soapy smell, as one of the brothers told me. Next morning they took all the boxes to the fair and set up their stalls on either side of the street. I gave each of them a herring box and a square of old tarpaulin to do for stalls.

One of them took the larger boxes to his stall and left the smaller ones to his brother. I had no interest in the Fair so I went off to the Moy fishing as a salmon or even a perch for dinner would suit me better than loafing around corners.

I returned as the boyos were coming in from the fair and were getting a mug of tea before moving on to Charlestown for the fair the following day. I asked them how they got on at the fair and they said that they had done very well and had sold all their stuff. I casually asked them the reason for packing some of this stuff in small boxes and some of it in the larger ones. I said I suppose that they had two different prices. The man who had the larger boxes said that he had sold his stuff as a remover of stains from clothes.

“You know,” he said, “blue serge is getting very popular and is easily stained. Anyone I saw in the crowd wearing serge I called him up and damped any spot I saw with a wet cloth, maybe some spots that had no stains at all. I then rubbed in a little of the “stain remover” and told him not to brush it off for twelve hours. I felt that was giving me plenty of time to get out of town!”

The other brother then chimed in and said that he had less trouble selling his stuff.

“I just told them that it was the latest remedy for corns and bunions. I think that half the people listening to me must have had corns or bunions with the way they limped. I could have sold as much more “corn cure” if I had it.”

Old Neddy said that he did not meet the two brothers again until a year later. He walked to Croaghpatrick for the annual pilgrimage on the last Sunday of July. This day was variously known as Reek Sunday, Garland Sunday, Fraochán Sunday, Bilberry Sunday etc.

Beside the St. Patrick statue at the base of the mountain he saw the two brothers selling medals of St. Patrick as fast as they could hand them out, while solemnly swearing that they had been blessed by His Holiness, the Pope.

Two regular patrons of Swinford Fair in those days were former members of a circus. When they got around middle age and their strength and their eyesight began to slip, they were let go. They were no longer able for the exacting role of circus life. At the fair they gave exhibitions of strength, skill and human endurance that to the ordinary people were both sadistic and frightening.

Treading barefoot or lying bareback on boards studded with nails three inches long or allowing flagstones to be broken with sledgehammers on their bare chests as they lay on the wet, guttery streets were two of the feats they endured.
I can faintly remember seeing them walking around the streets with their heads thrown back while one of them had a heavy iron shod wheel of a horse cart balanced aloft on the bridge of his nose eyes his comrade balanced a similar object on his chin. That those so unfortunate men earned their donations over and over again goes without saying.

Those were the days when soft money was unknown. As all the old customs, good and bad, make way and the name of progress for modern innovations we may be pardoned to ask what progress is. A little over 100 years ago the great transatlantic cable linking the new world with the old was laid from Valentia, off County Kerry to Newfoundland. At the official opening of the Valentia terminal among the notables to attend was the writer and critic, John Ruskin.

The chief engineer, an avowed agnostic, showed Ruskin around. He asserted that the cable was only man’s beginning of the ultimate solution of all the problems of “time and space, infinity an eternity.”

When he had finished, Ruskin confounded the critic with a simple question - “Will a lie, cabled in at one end, come out the truth at the other?”

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The Man Who Never Forgot

Around closing use of the last century, Johnny Baun and his wife, Mary, lived in their comfortable small farm in a fold of the Ox Mountains - a few miles from Tubbercurry. One of the snags in their otherwise happy life was Johnny’s lapse on his periodic visits to “Tubber,” as Tubbercurry was locally named.

Those lapses were doubtless caused by Johnny’s partiality for pints of “single,” his favourite sort of porter. Mary had been urging Johnny to get a shoemaker’s last to do his own small shoe repairs and so avoid most of his trips to a Tubber shoemaker, nicknamed in Irish, “Greasuidhe Bradach.” (Tricky Shoemaker)

When attentive listeners like Johnny suggested a drink, the “greasuidhe” was never known to refuse.

An old Gaelic proverb on this subject ran:-

Ceathair greasuidhe gan a bheith bréagach,

Ceathair Franncaidhe gan a bheith buí,

Ceathair sagart gan a bheith sanntach,

Sin dóidheag nach gheobhaidh tú sa tír.

Loosely translated, this means -

Four shoemakers who are not liars; four Frenchmen who are not tawny; (yellow-skinned) Four priests who are not greedy; that’s 12 you won’t find in the country.

Well, Mary’s insistence won the day. One fair day Johnny finally bought a last. It happened to be the coldest day in living memory. On his way out of town a small shopkeeper gave him an old woollen stocking to use as a cloth to carry the last. Owing to the intense cold, the last, he said, was sticking to his hand.

When he got home he was so delighted that he could not wait to enter the house. Leaning over the half door he shouted, “There’s your last,” flinging the last onto the hearthstone. The last been made of cast iron or pot metal broke into two or three pieces. Speaking from experience, I would agree with this theory. In 1930 I was working as quarry foreman for “Stearns Lime & Stone Co.” in the heart of Chicago.

In their extensive quarry, 300 feet deep, worked two mammoth labourers, Joe and Angelo. In weightlifting, wrestling and other trials of strength they were evenly
matched. One day during lunch hour I proposed for a tiebreaker that they should try hurling the jumper bar for distance in javelin fashion.

The jumper was about three times the weight of the ordinary iron crowbar and was nearly a handful of for the average man to carry. Angelo threw the bar several yards with little trouble. I can still see Polish Joe, his beard glistening with icicles and his breath forming clouds of vapour in the sub-zero cold. Pulling his gloves tight, he threw the bar slightly beyond Angelo’s mark. The huge bar landed, however, on a rock and broke cleanly into three pieces. It was the first time I saw the power or the effect of intense frost demonstrated.

On one occasion Johnny, who always boasted that he was a man who never forgot anything, went to the fair of Tubber to buy a pair of bonhams or piglets as they are grandly named nowadays. Johnny met some old cronies, including the shoemaker, and put such a dent in the pound note given to him by Mary that he had to forego the intended purchases.

On his trip to Tubber the following fair day, he made sure to buy the bonhams in good time. When he came to collect them from the former owner he could find no neighbouring cart or conveyance of any kind to take them home. He decided to get a good strong bag and carry them on his back. Johnny was stronger than average; In Mary’s words, he was “All strength and little sense.”

A shopkeeper obliged him with a strong sugar bag of close texture. Commencing on his journey home, Johnny got a rough passage from the kicking, squealing pigs. Gradually, the kicking and squealing eased off. When he got home he emptied the bag onto the kitchen floor. His quiet passage home was soon explained. The two bonhams had died from suffocation. After a long, wistful gaze on them, Johnny remarked, “Wisha, Mary, weren’t they the two loyal comrades?”

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The Ribbonmen

The Ribbonman captain, Roger Keane, more popularly known as “Rory of the Hill,” is still remembered in his native West Mayo parish of Kilgeever even though over 140 years have passed since, in his own words, he made it hot for “landlords, middlemen and grabbers.”

At the same time as Roger was doing his part for agrarian reform and redress, another Ribbonman leader, Seán Prendergast, nicknamed “Seán na mBaintreach,” (the widow’s Seán) was operating along similar lines in South Mayo.

Seán was known locally as the man who “lepped the Shannon,” which was a sizeable exaggeration.

Being called to assist in a punitive expedition against an obnoxious Roscommon landlord, Seán found himself surrounded by enemies while rounding up some of the landlord’s cattle. Seán was mounted on a very good hunting mare of his own. He, himself, was a fairly extensive landlord in Mayo.

Seeing himself cornered, Seán had no alternative but to force his mare to a seemingly impossible jump over a good sized tributary of the Shannon. Amazingly, Seán’s mount cleared the river and took him to safety.

On another occasion, he was surprised in one of his favourite hiding places; the top storey of the ruined castle of Ballyhowley between Claremorris and Knock. Whenever he stayed there, he placed a carpet of hay or long grass on the ground directly under the window in the top storey on the west gable of the castle.

This was to facilitate a quick getaway if the need arose. On this occasion, hearing his enemies rushing up the stairs, Seán coolly leapt down onto his landing pad and into the nearby Rockfield River, which was in full flood.

Being a good swimmer, he dived and allowed himself to be carried for some distance downstream before surfacing. He got away to safety while his enemies were still searching the castle.

Seán was a relative of Francis French of Rockfield Cottage, Claremorris, who was executed in Castlebar in 1799 for the mere possession of an incriminating letter referring to the United Irish Rising of 1798. He was executed on the same day as Father Conroy. He was an ancestor of the Mossbrook Frenches.

Once, Roger spent the night in a deserted fisherman’s hut on Tollaghbawn strand. The little shack was completely devoid of furniture of any sort except for a rough and ready bedstead and a tub of fisherman’s grease that doubled as a seat.
As Roger stood waiting for daylight and looking out through cracks in the timber walls, he spied a number of figures stealthily approaching his sleeping place. From the way they were running from one sand dune to another and crouching down, he realised that they were locals who knew the area and who didn’t want him to be aware of their presence.

Straightaway, he knew they were scouts for a detachment of soldiers sent to arrest him. Even as he stood and watched, he could see other shadowy shapes in the half light moving into position and encircling the hut.

The situation looked dire. As he looked desperately around him for some means to effect his escape, the tub of grease caught his eye. An idea struck him. Hastily divesting himself of his clothes, he liberally smeared grease over all of his body and stood crouching just inside the door.

He waited until his would be captors were just about to charge the door and he threw it wide open and then quickly jumped aside. As he hoped, his enemies were taken completely unawares and were thrown into utter confusion. Those who were close enough to see the door opening fired their guns, which only served to add to the confusion as the main body of soldiers had not got into position yet and had no idea of what was going on in the still murky light.

Several foes grabbed, but failed to hold their intended prisoner, who slipped through their hands and away. They found that they could not manipulate their guns as speedily as they would like owing to the grease on their hands.

By the time they fired a ragged volley, their quarry was out of reach. Even though Roger ran for three miles to reach the house of a bachelor uncle near Killadon on a bitter frosty night, he contacted no cold or flu.

Evidently the heavy coating of grease provided him with insulation against cold and frostbite. Many years ago I heard an old man from the “Creggauns” singing a song commemorative of the exploits of “Rory of the Hill.” (Roger) I can only remember the lines:-

“We’ll rout them all from Thallabawn

Said Rory of the Hill.”

The man from the Creggauns told me that he heard that the cream of the stick fighting fraternity always wore leathern thongs on their wrists, which were attached to their duelling sticks at the “grip” point. This was to ensure that they did not drop their sticks when, as often happened, a blow on the knuckles or elbow numbed their leading arm.

In addition to being a crack shot with the uncertain type of small firearms circulating in those days, Roger Keane was a redoubtable antagonist in a stick fight.
Stick fighting was a pastime that lingered on in the Murrisk barony long after it was forgotten in the rest of the county.

Oddly enough, Murrisk, under the repressive Brownes of Westport and their vassals, was the first barony in Mayo to lose the Irish language.

An old man from Kilgeever gave me a rough example of the stickfighting techniques handed down to him by his grandfather. The weapon, usually a stick about three and a half feet long, was grasped by the operator slightly nearer to one end than the other. The long end of the stick was used as a weapon of offence and the short end to parry the blows or thrusts of the assailant. Considerable skill and dexterity were called for. Sometimes when the game got out of hand, deadly wild swinging replaced the thrust and parry with sometimes fatal results.

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When Red Hugh Came to Tawin Island

It had been stated that no one figure in Irish history packed so much action into his short, warlike career as “Red Hugh O’Donnell. The real driving force behind him was his mother, “Inghín Dubh”. Being the daughter of the Scottish chief, Aengus Mac Donnell of the Isles, she could call for assistance on hosts of Scottish “Redshanks”, which she regularly did. In this regard she was probably a greater thorn in England”’s side than the inconsistent, uncertain “Granuaile”.

Like most warlords of old, winter seems to have been Red Hugh’s open season for his numerous campaigns. Even the epic march of O’Neill and O’Donnell to Kinsale was accomplished during a record spell of frost, which enabled them to march over hitherto impassable swamps and shallow lakes. It seems probable that the main reason for this lay in the fact that beef was the staple food for armies in the field or on the move in former times.

There were no fridges or deep freeze containers of old so that summer campaigns meant huge losses in food, especially meat. Huge cattle raids and accompanying herds of cattle were a feature of warring armies in former times.

In Red Hugh’s deepest incursion into Connacht in 1597, he took Athenry and demolished its walls. He encircled Galway but lifted the siege for lack of siege guns and scaling ladders. While besieging Galway he was informed that the inhabitants of Tawin Island and the adjoining mainland had lost all their cattle in an epidemic of “Galra Pheist Rubaill” (tail worm disease). Cattle suffering from any painful internal ailment will show their displeasure by continuous swishing of the tail. People down through the ages have mistakenly believed that a worm in the tail was responsible for the trouble.

I have seen an old man, many years ago, make an incision in a heifer”’s tail and insert garlic and unsalted butter as a remedy for the “peist rubaill” disease. “Peist Rubaill” was a derisory term of old for a small, truculent person.) Red Hugh replaced the cattle with ones from his own herds of seized planters’ cattle and ones taken from lukewarm Gaelic clans, chiefly the O’Haras of Belclare, the Conroys of Mayo and septs of the De Burgos and O’Malleys.

Before his return back to Ulster from Kilmaine, he spent Christmas 1595 in Brize Castle, within a few yards of the modern “Beaten Path” entertainment complex.

Brize, referred to in the old annals as “the strong town and castle of the Brees,” was captured by the McDonoughs of Ballymote and the McDermotts in earlier times from the McMorris-Prendergasts and burned.
Brize had feudally established cattle fair for centuries until the Lynch-Blosses superseded it with the fair of Balla, which became the second most important fair in Connacht, after Ballinasloe. There was a tradition that Red Hugh and some of his men spent part of their time in Brize in field sports on the castle “Bán.”

One sport, in which Red Hugh excelled, was a game akin to modern leapfrog. In this game, requiring two competitors, one man stood in a half stooping position. His comrade, after retreating 30 or 40 yards ran at top speed and leapt over the stooping man, resting his hands on the other’s back to propel himself ahead when passing over him.

The route of Red Hugh back home is pointed out over the hill of Crucksbullagadawn and onto Ballylahan castle and from thence to Ardnaree. He is believed to have returned to the North after this campaign with over 4,000 head of seized cattle.

In 1593, two years earlier, he had advanced south as far as Kilmaine in South Mayo.

On a commanding hill there he had all the leading Connacht clans assemble and pledge support for his campaign against the “Heretic Queen.”

In 1598 Red Hugh fought alongside Hugh O’Neill at the battle of the Yellow Ford. His army on that occasion included 1,000 Connacht men, drawn largely from the numerous De Burgo septs.

A game of leapfrog in the grounds of Ballintubber Abbey ended all interest in life for Tibóid-na-Loing, the “sleeveen” son of Granuaile. After a career of crossing and double-crossing, he was finally made Viscount Mayo in 1627 for “devoted service to the Crown.”

In 1629 he decided to visit Ballintubber Abbey to attend the annual pattern day there. This day was partly a day of remembrance for the dead, culminating with field sports and music. When the leapfrogging began, Tióbóid-na-Luing decided to take part. Being no longer young, he called on a young man, called locally Diarmeen Cruchtach (little crooked Dermot) to be his partner. Diarmeen belonged to a sept of the De Burgos who had suffered death and deprivation at the hands of Tióbóid in earlier times when he had sided with Queen Elizabeth.

Diarmeen felt that Tióbóid wanted to make a laughing stock of him and his disability. As Tióbóid was sailing over his back, Diarmeen felled him with an upward thrust of a short dagger that he had concealed in his sleeve, a thrust that proved fatal. For centuries after, “Turas Thibóid-na-Luing leat go Baile an Tobair” (May you have the journey of Theobald of the Ships to Ballintubber) was a feared and much used curse in Mayo.
For Red Hugh’s visit to Tawin Island I am indebted to the late Freda Evans of Fairhill Road, Galway, RIP. I got the account of Tibóid-na-Luing’s death from Fr. Michael PO’Flanagan, RIP, when he visited Chicago in 1932. He was a former Vice-president of the Sinn Féin organisation and was engaged in an unofficial capacity in Dublin researching John O’Donovan’s papers when he came across this anecdote.

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The Souper’s Little Cow

From social, economic and spiritual viewpoints, one of the most controversial figures in the West of Ireland from 1831 to 1883 was the Reverend Edward Nangle.

Born near Athboy, County Meath, he later took up a religious career after leaving Trinity College, Dublin. A tireless worker, he was All-Ireland representative for a Dublin firm of printers supplying a seemingly endless supply of religious tracts and pamphlets. In addition to this he acted as Secretary to the Protestant School Society of Ireland. These posts, coupled with his duties as an evangelical clergyman, proved too much and he had a temporary breakdown in health. On his recovery, he came west and rented the island of Achill from the landlord, Sir Richard O’Donnell.

He founded in Achill a church, a school, a hospital and a printing and publishing business. He published a huge amount of propagandist tracts and pamphlets attacking “The Idolatry of Rome.”

He also published a newspaper; “The Achill Missionary Herald and Western Witness.”

In his writings and sermons he had a forceful, abrasive style for which he incurred (and enjoyed) the hostility of both Catholic and Protestant clergy.

During the worst years of the Famine, 1845-48, he was often attacked for diverting monies intended for relief to his missionary activities, which included his “souper” policy.

This meant giving free soup to the starving peasants to encourage religious conversions. On one occasion one of his boilers for preparing soup was hidden by “idolators.”

Nothing daunted, the Rev. Nangle had small portions of raw beef doled out to his “customers” while awaiting another boiler from Galway.

Some days later, one of his agents came across a bunch of juveniles playing a type of football game. Many of the players were barefooted and wearing the kilt-like smock, which was standard wear with many juveniles in rural areas in those days. The agent thought that they were kicking around a young hedgehog, or “gráinneog.”

When he inquired in the matter one youngster said, “We are kicking the Devil out of the Protestant beef.” A tough looking lump of grilse and sinews bore out his statement. The agent reckoned that their mothers were to blame.
“They cooked their share of the little cow too fast,” he said. “Tell them to cook it slower the next time.”

From that time on local people, when they met very tough meat or other substance, they referred to it as being “as tough as Nangle’s little cow.”

I remember a travelling butcher using the phrase in the 1940s when selling beef to a housewife, who asked him if the beef was good. He laughingly replied, “Well, as Nangle’s man said, the little cow is alright.” Despite the souper slant to his activities, Nangle persevered and gave a good deal of temporary relief and doubtless saved many lives. By 1853 he was reckoned to have almost one third of the teeming population of the island converted. His success was a constant source of worry to John McHale, the R.C. Archbishop of Tuam.

Mc Hale visited the island in 1853 and established a Franciscan Third World Order community in Bunnacurry, in addition to bringing more priests to the island.

A local pious lady met an easy going character named Manus na Gug one day at this particular time. She said that Nangle’s race would be cut short soon as God was sending more priests to the island.

(The word, “gug,” was a sort of Gaelic slang for an egg. The word was added to Manus owing to his ability to locate wild birds’ nests and drink the eggs, which, no doubt, helped to supplement the ration of thin soup.) I “think,” said Manus, “that if God sent a good crop of potatoes instead this would be the best way to stop Nangle.”

As if in answer to his prayer, there was a good crop of potatoes that year and a repeat the following one with the result that Nangle’s converts reduced to a third of the number. Nangle later left on promotion to the rectorship of Skreen in north Sligo.

He astounded his friends and critics by buying out the Achill Island Estate from his former landlord, Sir Richard O’Donnell, in The Encumbered Estates Court. The price of £17,500 was regarded as a colossal sum for those days. (This purchase eventually led him to spending the last years of his life in violent opposition to Michael Davitt’s Land League.)

Among his other accomplishments, he was a fluent Irish speaker. He published an able work- “An Introduction to the Irish language.”

When a new courthouse was being built on Achill Sound in 1939, I saw a forty-gallon pot-like boiler being used for boiling tar or asphalt for roof work. I was informed that it was one of Parson Nangle’s soup boilers and that it was over ninety years old.

I wonder where is that interesting “relic of oul’ dacency” today.
Shaun na Soggarth

Irish history over the last 300 years has produced no character more universally hated and execrated in the west of Ireland than the man known as Seán na Sagart, (often phonetically spelt as Shaun na Soggarth.) His real name was John Mullowney. In modern times this would be Maloney.

Despite his infamous notoriety, comparatively little is known of his early life. This may be due in part to the fact that children were forbidden to mention his name and grown up people blessed themselves or muttered an imprecation, or maybe both. When young aspirants were being recruited prior to finishing their education for the priesthood on the continent, no candidate with the surname of Mullowney would be accepted.

The preparatory schools and were damp caves and similar hideouts. Those were the Penal Days in Ireland when in the words of the old poem:

“They bribed the flock, they bribed the son,
To sell the priest, to rob the sire,
Their dogs were taught alike to run,
Upon the scent of wolf and friar.”

England’s Penal Laws against Irish Catholics got into their stride at the close of the seventeenth century. They grew progressively more severe over the entire eighteenth century. The sums of bribe money paid in this persecution ranged from £100 for the apprehension or death of an archbishop or bishop down to £10 for a friar.

It was said that the Irish clerical students could be easily recognized when they got to the continent by their red eyes and the smell of turf smoke. Living and studying in damp caves, a good turf fire was needed regardless of other effects. The fires at night had to be extinguished during the day so no tell tale smoke would give the spies a clue. The owners of the boats that took students to the continent were usually smugglers who abounded along west coast of Ireland in those days.

Running the gantlet of the English navy and the elements, they probably has no more than even chance of reaching the mainland of Europe in their light luggers, as their small boats were called. The smugglers were the unsung heroes would help to keep the people’s hopes alive in dark and evil days.

The ordained priests were taken aback by the fact that the “smokers” faced certain deaths if they were caught in Ireland are as often happened, were caught on the
high seas. In which case, the smuggler and his crew shared the same fate with their ultimate end unknown and unrecorded. The Oath of Abjuration introduced in 1712 stipulated that all Roman Catholic clergymen who did not swear to abjure all Roman Catholic practices and rituals by a certain date were to be transported and any who returned again would have rendered his life forfeit to the Crown. Out of nearly 2000 Roman Catholic clergymen of all ranks, only 33, all in poor health, took the oath. The only Mayo clergyman to take the oath was named as Father John Durkin of Killedan parish.

Later in the same year, the Protestant archbishop of Tuam, Archbishop Vesey, convened a meeting of priest hunters from all over Ireland for one that would today be termed a pep talk.

Shaun Mullowney is believed to have been given post of responsibility in this fight for the “cause.” From that time on, he covered all of Connacht, accompanied by a posse of soldiers to protect and assist him in his priest hunting activities.

Prior to this, his patron and paymaster was Bingham of Newbrook, Claremorris. This Bingham was Lord Clanmorris while the Castlebar Bingham was Lord Lucan.

Both worthies were kinsmen and were equally oppressive in their attitudes to the plain people. The Brownes who succeeded the Binghams carried on in the same tradition. Shaun Mullowney is believed to have been born in a townland, Skehanagh, five or six miles from Castlebar around the year 1680.

He was born in a turbulent part of County Mayo, an area that had been unsettled for centuries.

One of my informants said the good limestone land there was worth fighting for. The nearby castle of Kinturk with its projecting hanging stone was a place where rough justice was dispensed for centuries by the warlike Stauntons. In 1388, Edmund de Burgo, (Burke) a son of the Red Earl, was drowned in Lough Mask with a stone around his neck.

For their part or suspected part in his murder, the powerful de Burgos exacted a heavy revenge on the Stauntons. One sept of the Stauntons to escape the De Burgo vendetta, changed their surname to Mac Evilly. This surname, formerly pronounced Mac Aveeley, is found in the Castlebar area.

Archbishop Mac Aveeley was a successor to Archbishop McHale in the See of Tuam. He is chiefly remembered for his long reign. Captain Seamas McEvilly was one of the Castlebar IRA men who died fighting the Black and Tans at Kilmeena in the long hot summer of 1921. Shaun Mullowney was described as being powerfully built and athletic with low cunning and intuition to suit his nefarious occupation.
For a long time, he seems to lead a charmed life. When his arch enemy, Fergus McCormack, who fought at Aughrim as a youth and was known as the Rapparee, and others planned ambushes for him, he changed routes and plans at the last minute. Shaun Mullowney’s first murder of a priest is believed to have been that of Father Higgins as the cave of Pollathackeen on the west Mayo coast. The priest was saying mass when Mullowney surprised him. He had almost escaped in a boat when Mullowney plunged waist deep into the water and shot him. Around 1724, a young curate, Fr. David Burke, had arranged to celebrate mass in the “Lane” in Castlebar. Castlebar at that time was described as containing a maze of lanes.

It was a big market day in the town and the priest in disguise had been acting as an assistant to a packman or second hand clothes dealer in his stall on the market square. The man, known as Johnny McCann, was deeply distrusted by the priest hunter.

Mullowney had a close watch kept on him in his stall. When the time came to celebrate mass in the granary on The Lane, McCann’s assistant slipped away silently to the Lane. The direction he took was noted by Mullowney who followed slowly behind him. He saw one or two entering the granary which was filled to the door. A lookout shouted, “Shaun na Soggarth,” several times. The crowd upstairs in the granary panicked and rushed for the door. In their mad rush, the rotten floor of the granary collapsed and one feeble old man was crushed to death. The priest hastily stowed his sacred vessels inside his coat and jumped out the window where he was grabbed by the wily Mullowney, who had been expecting this.

As Mullowney pinned the priest down, some of the crowd pulled the priest hunter’s long overcoat over his head and loosened his grip on his adversary, who lost no time in getting out of the town.

Hearing from the spies of Lord Lucan that a priest named Fr. Kilger had come back, Mullowney swore that he will not rest until he had the priest “at the end of his dagger.”

Mullowney had been responsible for having this priest transported to the continent some years before this. When all his plans and inquiries failed to bring any success in this direction, he decided to use his sister, a widow named Nancy Loughnan as a pawn to achieve his bloodthirsty ambition. One cold wet evening, he stumbled into the cabin of his sister in Ballyheane.

Feigning a wracking cough and weakness, he asked to be allowed to stay for the night. On the following day he said he was much worse. His sister, a devout Catholic, who detested Shaun and his actions, eventually showed interest in his condition. Seeing this, Shaun professed repentance for his past life and said he would die happy if he could only confess his sins to the man he had wronged so much, Fr. Kilger.
Falling for this agonized plea, she went to the house of one of her neighbours, where she knew she would find both Fr. Kilger and his nephew, Fr. Burke. Returning with Fr. Kilger, she waited outside the door and priest entered. Hearing shouts and the sounds of a struggle, Nancy entered the house and met Shaun rushing out with his bloodstained dagger and he ran across the fields towards Castlebar. Fr. Kilger lay dying on the floor in a pool of blood. The widow fainted with shock.

When she recovered, she crept back to the house she had visited as she was too weak to walk. There she told her story and fainted again. Fr. Burke refused to heed her advice to flee and said he would attend the funeral and bless his uncle’s grave. The funeral was hastily arranged for the following morning to hoodwink the authorities. Nevertheless, John Bingham had sent out a troop of soldiers to frighten the peasantry.

After the funeral had covered a mile or more of the road to Ballintubber, Shaun na Soggarth, who was concealed behind a whitethorn hedge, leaped out onto the road and grabbed Fr. Burke who was disguised in a long peasant’s frieze coat. The priest managed to struggle free and leap over the roadside fence and run away in the direction of the Partry Hills. The epic chase with Mullowney is still remembered to this day, almost 300 years later.

The chase which ended in Partry, covered several townlands and took a circuitous route through Dereendaffderg and Shraigh. The whole concourse, including soldiers stood and watched until the chase disappeared from view. They had possibly thought the priest hunter would be happier to kill our take back his quarry singlehandedly.

The spectators saw another man suddenly joining the race and he began to closing on the other pair. When the chase got to Partry, Fr. Burke in desperation suddenly swung around and grappled with Mullowney. As both rolled on the ground, he luckily wounded Shaun in the arm with a dagger thrust. The third runner came up just then and lost no time in plunging his dagger into Mullowney’s side. Mullowney was able to identify him as Johnny McCann.

To rub salt into dying priest hunter’s wounds, the packman told him that his name was not McCann but Higgins. “I am a nephew of the man you murdered at Pollathackeen. I have longed and waited for the day I would avenge my uncle’s death.”

Ironically, Shaun na Soggarth was buried in the cemetery of Ballintubber Abbey. An ash tree once marked the grave where he lay. A plain stone near Partry Garda Station is said to mark the spot where he met his death.

The two men involved in the death of Shaun na Soggarth escaped the manhunt that followed. In a party that included Mullowney’s sister and McCormack the
Rapparee, they were believed to have escaped to France later. I got much of the foregoing information from an aunt who lived in Gary, Indiana over 50 years ago.

In addition to local tradition, she had the advantage of reading in her youth, “A Life of Shaun na Soggarth,” written by a Castlebar writer, Anthony Archdeacon.

The book has long been unobtainable.

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The Welshmen of Tirawley

The early Norman invasion or invasions of Ireland in the late 12th and early 13th centuries were not strictly confined to Norman adventurers. While the better armed mail-clad Normans may be regarded as the shock troops that took all the choicest spoils of conquest, a goodly number of Welsh and Anglo-Normans were also involved.

The Welsh adventurers were the first fortune hunters of that era to come to County Mayo. The Normans who came later to take the lion’s share of the plunder pushed them westward. The Normans included the De Burgos who later became the Burkes, the De Exeters, who later changed their name to Mac Jordan, later again dropping the Gaelic prefix, “Mac”.

The D’Angulos did the same after changing their name to Mac Costello, while some of the Claremorris De Prendergasts changed their name to Mac Morris.

Tirawley, the North Mayo Barony, seems to have been the happy hunting ground of the Welshmen while the going was good. Cusacks, Barrets, Lynotts, Flemirigs and Evans are all regarded as being of Welsh origin.

In 1281, almost 100 years after the first Norman invasion, a fierce battle in which scores were killed was fought at Kilroe beside Killalla. This battle was unusual as the main contenders were Welsh factions, the Barrets and the Cusacks. The Barrets and the Flemirigs were overcome by the Cusacks who were aided by the local Gaelic chief, Torlach O’Dubhda (O’Dowd).

O’Dowd was killed by the Cusacks on a North Sligo strand some months later. It seems that alliances were short-lived in those days, but to quote a latterday phrase, “there was never a dull moment.” A better-remembered clash between Welshmen occurred in 1394, involving Barrets and Lynotts in the Crossmolina area. The Barrets at that time were overlords of the Barony of Tirawley and tried to exact tribute from, amongst others, the Lynotts. A poet of the last century, Samuel Ferguson, in the opening lines of his epic poem, “The Welshmen Of Tirawley,” gives the reason for the historic blood feud between the Lynotts and the Barrets.

Scorna Boy (Buidhe) the Barrets’ bailiff, lewd and lame,

With evil thoughts and threats and writs

Unto the Lynotts came.

When he rudely drew a young maid to him,

Then the Lynotts rose and slew him
And in Tubber na Scorna threw him.

In retaliation, the numerically superior Barrets seized a dozen of the picked fighting men of the Lynotts. They offered them a grim choice; either to lose their manhood or their eyes. Having opted to lose their eyes, the Lynotts were taken to a spot where a line of stepping-stones crossed the Dubhown or Black River. Any Lynott who crossed the river in a stumbling, slipping way got his freedom but any who walked across without faltering got another blinding. But in spite of all the precautions at least one victim got away with minor injuries to his eyes. This was Edmond Lynott of Garranard. (Garán an Ard)

As the Lynotts were on good terms with the De Burgos, (Burkes) they soon sought them out for their sympathy. Six years previously Richard De Burgo of Carra had got a grant, on paper, of all Connacht from the King of England, in return for an annuity of 500 marks and 10 knights. The De Burgos, despite some setbacks and interruptions, were able to enforce their claim up to the Flight of the Earls in the early 17th century. The ancient system of fosterage was in vogue at the time of the Barret/Lynott confrontation and the Lynotts had adopted in fosterage a son of Edmond Burke of Castlebar. As hostilities got worse, the Barrets killed this foster son of Lynott at the ford of Cornasack on the Crossmolina/Ballycastle road.

According to Duald Mac Firbis, the last of the great family of annalists and genealogists, the decline of the Barret power and the coming of the De Burgos to become the rulers of Tirawley date to this event. Incidentally, in later times Mac Firbis was murdered at the Inn of Doonflynn in North Sligo, between Templeboy and Skreen. He was said to have been on his way to a gathering of writers and annalists in Dublin. He was trying to save a lady from being molested by a drunken patron of the inn at the time.

Local tradition says that with the intervention of the De Burgos in the Welshmen of Tirawley feud, the branch of the Barret clan directly involved were forced to retreat to the uncharted wastes of Erris where they changed their name to Mac Andrew. This name is a popular surname in Mayo today.

Strangely, the surname of Cusack is rarely met even though the Cusacks were the ruling faction in Tirawley at one time and the area around Killalla was known as “Cusack’s Country”. The well to which the Lynotts consigned Scorna Boy Barret was afterwards called “Tubber na Scorna” (Scorna’s Well), while the stepping stones utilised for the Barret eye testing scheme were afterwards called “Clocháin na nDall” - the stepping stones of the blind.

( Lynott is pronounced Lye-nott )
Leg Warmers and Treheens

Some time ago, a relative of mine told me of a purchase which she had recently made and of which she was very pleased. This was of a pair of soleless stockings known as leg warmers. She said they were wonderful value and wondered to that such a useful invention as she termed them had not been thought of earlier. She seemed more than surprised that her invention, under the name of “treheens” had been known to her ancestors for possibly thousands of years.

The light footed, lightly armed Irish soldiers known as “Kerna,” sported soleless hosiery, which of course meant treheens and in severe weather they were said to wear wooden-soled sandals, secured to the legs with rawhide thongs. Some sketches suggest that only a plain wooden sole was used in many cases.

As late as 200 years ago, a tough, hard-drinking fraternity from Northern Ireland came to Connacht for cock-fighting matches, mostly held in the winter months. To emphasise their toughness, they came on horseback wearing treheens and when there was snow on the ground, they carried a handful of straw, which they put under their feet when they dismounted.

They called themselves “The Devil’s Fliers.”

Word got around that some of them were English officers in disguise from the garrison at Enniskillen and as they were believed to carry concealed weapons, they got most of their own way.

In my younger days I heard an old Donegal shanachie describe a battle fought around 1647, the battle of Scarrifhollis. (Scaribh Salach) This battle is rarely mentioned in Irish history although it was a decisive, bloody engagement, which finished the Catholic cause in Ulster at the time. According to the shanachie, the Catholic force was a formidable one, containing 3 crack regiments that were previously part of Owen Roe’s army. In addition, the infantry contained hundreds of battle-hardened veterans who had fought with Owen Roe in the Low Countries.

A good many of the infantry were local recruits with hastily fashioned pikes and as they wore treheens they might as well be barefooted, as the shanachie aptly said. For some reason, the Donegal bishop, Heber Mc.Mahon, insisted on leading the Irish army. When he decided on an immediate attack on the Puritan Conventor army, some veteran army officers tried to dissuade him.

They pointed out that the boulder-strewn terrain was highly unsuitable for cavalry to manoeuvre and that the thorn bushes and briars would make matters worse
for both the cavalry and that section of the infantry wearing treheens. Unfortunately, against all advice, the fiery bishop decided to attack with disastrous results. The Irish army was heavily defeated and Bishop McMahon was captured and executed in a barbarous manner.

Digressing at this point, I may mention that in our lop-sided presentation of history nearly every Irish schoolchild is taught about the victories of Clontarf, Benburb, The Yellow Ford, The Curlew Mountains or the Races of Castlebar- some of them Pyrrhic victories.

Decisive battles like Scariffhollis or Dungan’s Hill, near Trim in 1647, are rarely mentioned. Dungan’s Hill ended the Catholic Confederate cause in Leinster and was rated the bloodiest battle fought in that province. (Preston’s army was defeated by the Puritan army under Jones).

Similarly, the Battle of Knocknanoss, near Kinsale in Co. Cork is seldom mentioned. This battle was also fought in 1647 and ended Catholic resistance in Munster. The Catholic leader, Lord Taaffe of Ballymote, stood idly by and allowed 1,200 Scottish Redshanks to be wiped out by the victorious Inchiquin. (Morrogh the Burner)

The legendary Alastrom Mc Donnell died with his Scots comrades who fought almost to the last man. It should be noted about this war that, what was referred to as the Catholic cause, was in reality the Catholic landowners’ cause. I was told in my younger days about a visit by my great-grandmother to a blessed well in Balla (and then on to climb Croaghpatrick) around the Famine years. She felt that the children were old enough and wise enough to look after themselves and she wanted to pay a long promised visit to the blessed well.

So she set off, taking two pairs of newly knitted treheens and a pair of high-buttoned boots that were to be worn only in an emergency. Some time after she left home, there was a general rush to enjoy a pot of tea, and she had been very strict and sparing in the use of that commodity.

Tea was then a rare item, only recently introduced to that area. The teapot, often borrowed by neighbours for tea-making experiments, was a tin one, made by an itinerant tinsmith. The spout was so long and thin that my great grandmother used to say that she could almost stand by the fire and pour out a mug of tea on the table.

The revellers that my great grandmother left behind were in a state of panic when they could not find the lid of the teapot. They had to use a slice of turnip, a crop only recently introduced to the area.

When their mother was doing her penitential walk in the ancient cemetery beside the blessed well in Balla, she stood on a broken bottle, cutting her foot.
This meant she had to wear her high-buttoned boots. When she unbuttoned her boots out rolled the teapot lid from one of them. “Oh, well,” she said, “that will stop the tea making at home until I get back.” In this surmise she was slightly off the mark!

It has been said that the pilgrimage in Balla in those days could attract up to 20,000 pilgrims. I have a recollection of hearing two old men at a fair in Balla engaging in a sarcastic argument in a pub, which included references to ancestors. “My ancestors,” said one, “were able to go to the Fair of Brize in shoes and stockings when yours could only go to the pattern in Balla wearing treheens!”

Patterns it should be noted were gatherings originally intended to commemorate some local saint or other notable. (Some saint, that is, of the old Celtic Church.) Athletic games, sports and fairs got on the agenda and often there was the inevitable fight to round off the proceedings.

In a doggerel poem by a local poet deriding the imposition of a dog tax by the British Government early in the present century, the treheen is mentioned.

“Poor Pat is in the bog,
With a treheen in his clog
And five shillings for his dog,
Said the grand old man.”

The Government having previously granted pensions of five shillings weekly to people over 70 years of age recouped themselves with a dog tax of five pounds annually as dogs considerably outnumbered pensioners.

I recollect in 1942 in a remote area of Mayo seeing a woman of over 90 wearing treheens (and no footwear) on a cold November evening. She was living alone and was taking in a basket of turf for the fire. She was locally known as Old Peggy. When I congratulated her on her health and hardiness she drew herself up proudly and said, “I would not swap my treheens with the Queen of England.”

I thought for a moment of how the spirit of Old Peggy (Lyncheaun) epitomised the uncompromising spirit of the Gael over 1,000 years of Dane, Norman and English presence.

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When the Motor Car came West

Many tales, grave and gay, true and false, are still remembered in relation to the coming of the first motor cars to the west of Ireland, around the opening years of this century. It is believed by many Mayo people that the first private car to come to Mayo was purchased by Sir Henry Lynch-Blosse of Athavallie House, Balla. This house was later taken over by the Sisters of Mercy and is now a Secondary School.

He purchased his car in Dublin and had it sent to Balla railway station, well wrapped and packed in canvas wrappings. It was taken from there to his nearby mansion by railway float. A few days later, as arranged, a driver for the car arrived by rail from Dublin. He was well equipped with a driver’s cap with high pointed earflaps that could be folded down over the ears in stormy or frosty weather and dust goggles. The cars in those early motoring days had no fixed roofs. A folding canvas roof with celluloid squares to act as windows did duty until the weather cars came along some years later.

Next day after the arrival of the chauffeur, Sir Henry decided to give the car its maiden run, to Claremorris if all went well. The driver, accompanied by Sir Henry, took the car onto the main Castlebar- Balla road and then turned east towards Balla. Rounding the bend near the Glebe, or parson’s house, they saw a well-known knight of the road forty or fifty yards ahead and travelling in the same direction. He was known locally as Seán Bacach. Hearing the loud rumbling noise at the rear, Seán looked around and came to a standstill in the centre of the road. He almost dropped with fright. The car slowed up but two or three blasts from the horn, or hooter, caused Seán to run ahead at top speed. Even though he always boasted of being “as light in foot as a Tyrone ragman,” he found that the monster was gaining on him. His first impression was that he was seeing the headless coach of prophecy and legend, complete with the Evil One who was abducting Sir Henry to probably warmer regions.

As Seán had heard many fireside tales on such themes, he felt that legend was being translated into reality before his eyes. In his fleeting backward glance, the high pointed cap of the driver registered as the devil’s horns and the goggles confirmed his worst conclusions.

Coming to a small bridge or “gullet” beside the modern “Woodlands” housing estate, he flung himself over the parapet wall and crept well under the eye of the bridge. He found that the stream was completely dried up, as always in prolonged dry weather.

When the fugitive plucked up courage to peep out from under the bridge, he was horrified to see the headless coach and its occupants at a standstill at the
crossroad one hundred yards ahead. A well-known blacksmith’s forge, Keville’s, stood at this crossroads. This gave Seán a faint glimmer of hope.

Blacksmiths in those days were credited with occult powers above the ordinary, especially where evil spirits were involved. Seán thought that the blacksmith might have invoked some charm to halt the devil in his tracks. He said a silent prayer that the blacksmith would be able to turn the anvil on the devil and banish him off with a few well-chosen potent curses.

However, to Seán’s disappointment, the headless coach and its occupants turned slowly towards Balla.

Seán then jumped into the wood and, dodging between the trees, he got to the Parochial House, where he told the parish priest his story. On his way through the wood he judged, by the trail of fire and smoke at the devil’s rear, that he had gone out the Claremorris road between the two fairgreens. The “smoke” that Seán saw was probably dust.

The use of tar in later years to keep down dust was one of the great innovations of those days. Seán burst into his story to the parish priest in a half-hysterical manner.

He described the devil and the coach, he with his big eyes, “twice as big as cow’s eyes” and his horns short and sharp. He described the terrifying roars of the devil. The rubber ball type horn or hooter of those days emitted an ear-shattering roar when squeezed. Seán could be excused for coupling those bloodcurdling roars with his satanic majesty. The PP had a good idea as to what Seán had really seen as he had advance news of the intended purchase of the car from Sir Harry. To allay Seán’s fears, the PP said that if Sir Harry did not return in a few hours he would see what could be done about it. “A few hours!” exclaimed Seán aghast.

“At the rate they went out the Rathduff road, they will be in Hell in half the time. If you can do no good by prayers or curses you could send a tallywagger (telegram) to the peelers in Claremorris or Dublin to stop him. “Well,” replied the PP. “if you agree to leave everything in my hands I will promise that everything will turn out alright.”

So Seán agreed to call off his demon hunt.

A West of Ireland bishop of those days also purchased a new motorcar. The name of his particular purchase was, “The Moon.” A brother of the bishop was one of the local town “gods,” a bunch of cynics who used to meet daily at a certain street corner and engaged in criticism, both constructive and destructive, of the changing times and of innovations and events in general.

On one occasion when the bishop’s brother saw the “Moon” approaching, he said to his companions- “You were talking a few minutes ago about the changing
times and there is one of the biggest changes of all before our eyes. We read in the
Bible about Our Lord riding on His ass and now here comes our “Tomeen” riding on
the moon! I heard a story in Achill relating to those early motoring days. While the
story in general may be true there are parts that can be taken with the proverbial grain
of salt.

A young Achill man emigrated to Cleveland, USA during the closing years of
the last century. After a few successful years in the saloon business he decided to
come back to visit the old home and also to take one of his nephews back to
Cleveland with him. He decided to surprise his relatives by taking a car with him from
Dublin. Owing to the poor roads and slow travelling speeds of those days, that meant
staying a night in Athlone.

His relations in the home place had a few busy days giving a face-lift to the
buildings and surroundings. The empty farmyard manure pit was regarded as an
eyesore and a covering of fresh hay was spread over it for camouflage. When the
Yank arrived he drove up on the hay and promptly got stuck there. A neighbour,
known as Pat Vicky, had a mule so strong that, in Pat’s words, “he did not know his
own strength.”

The mule was got into action and pulled the car onto terraferma. When the car
owner told Pat some days later that the car was ten horsepower Pat replied that his
mule must be eleven or twelve horsepower when he was able to do what ten horses
failed to do.

On the day after his arrival, the Yank proposed a trip around the island and out
to Mulranny by car. The only one to venture with him was the nephew he hoped to
take to America. A tree growing in front of the house was a partial obstruction so they
had to drive by slowly in order to get onto the main road.

When they got to the main road they kept to a steady 20 mph owing to the
poor condition of the sand roads of those days. When they left the island they went
through Currane to Mulranny and returned through Tonragee. When they got back
home, the Yank did not allow for the slippery, greasy state of the bye-road and
jammed on the brakes too sharply with the result that the car skidded into the tree in
front of the house. As the roof was folded back, one driver and nephew were pitched
out on their hands and knees without injury.

“Well,” exclaimed the nephew, “you did well to stop it that time, Uncle, but
what would you do if there was no tree?”

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Sam the Nailer

Up to the closing years of the last century, nailers’ workshops were a common sight in most Irish towns, large or small. The nailers’ work consisted mainly of cutting nails from a red-hot stock piece of iron, as the parent piece of iron was called and then shaping and pointing the nail with a few deft hammer blows dealt with all possible speed while the iron was still hot. The nailer kept several blocks of iron in the fire together and as each block glowed white-hot, he took it to his anvil and began nail cutting at top speed.

It can be readily understood that the terms “working like a nailer” and “drinking like a nailer” carried an element of truth.

Ninety years ago, a nailer’s shop existed in Swinford in the house until recently occupied by the late Frank Reilly, jeweller. The last proprietor of a nail making shop on those premises was the Widow Ryan.

One fine summer morning, Sam Langely, a journeyman nailer, arrived from Kiltimagh, after having a row with the Kiltimagh nailer, Luke Leydon. He was employed right away by the widow, who knew from past experience that he was a first class tradesman but with an incurable thirst, like most top class nailers.

The widow’s staff of nailers was mainly journeymen who travelled from town to town, and, like their counterparts, the journeymen tailors, they never stayed in any place for too long.

After an hour or two of hard work, Sam’s craving for spirits hit with full force. Knowing from past experience that he had little hope of getting any monetary aid in advance from the widow, he decided to have recourse to the tender mercies of the pawnbroker who lived a few doors up the street. He was wearing at the time a better than average suit of clothes. Calling the widow’s messenger boy, he sent his coat to the pawnbrokers with orders to hurry back with the money realised for it.

When the boy returned with the money, Sam lost no time in converting it into good red rum, which he maintained was the best cure of all for thirst.

After another short spell of work, Sam’s thirst returned again so he sent off the messenger boy to the pawnshop with his vest. As the sum of money realised on the vest was much less than on the coat, it was not long until his thirst returned with greater insistence than before. As a last resort, Sam took off his trousers and sent the messenger off to the pawnbroker’s with orders to hurry back with the rum. Grasping the bottle hurriedly when the boy returned, Sam took a long eager drink and then
collapsed on the floor. Hearing no sound of hammering for some time the widow peeped into the workshop.

Seeing Sam stretched on the floor in his leather apron and underpants she concluded that he had been set upon and murdered and she set up an alarm. The nearby doctor, Edmund Burke, was called in. Seeing what Sam’s trouble was, he got his stomach pump and pumped Sam dry (as far as rum was concerned.)

Some time later on receipt of the doctor’s bill for five shillings for services rendered, Sam retaliated by sending the doctor a bill for five shillings for depriving him of the benefit of two and a half pints of good rum. As Doctor Burke enjoyed a good joke and a tot of rum himself, the matter was eventually settled out of court.

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In the Year of the Hot Summer

Down to very recent years, 1921 was an often referred to in the west of Ireland as the year of the hot summer. Some shorter heat waves in that year were followed by a record breaking spell of hot, dry weather extending mid-May to mid-July.

The armed struggle with the British forces of occupation in Ireland; military, RIC and Black and Tans, had reached its peak, ending with a truce to take effect on July 11th, 1921.

In the warfare preceding the truce, that IRA had no course open to them but guerrilla tactics.

They were outnumbered, possibly to the tune of 20 to 1, by an enemy infinitely better armed and equipped so their only hope lay in what Lloyd George called the “hit and run strategy.”

The fine summer weather enabled active service IRA units to sleep in the open, often under clumps of whins (furze) or sally (willow) bushes to escape detection by spotter planes. West Mayo was one of the busy theatres of war.

I worked as a supervisor on the construction of mountain and bog roads, bridges and boat “slips” or small piers, in the Westport area, sometime after the outbreak of World War II.

On one occasion, I had an interesting conversation with an old man in McKeon’s public house in Drummin. We talked of the Troubled Times.

“You know,” he said, “that the Westport area was always a busy spot even going back to 1916.”

He told me that martial law was declared for Westport and the surrounding area. Anyone entering or leaving the town could be arrested and jailed if they did not have a permit from the RIC or some British authority in 1920.

The Americans sent over three leading Irish-American lawyers and politicians, Walsh, Ryan and Dunne, to tour Ireland and get all the facts about the Black and Tans and the reign of terror then prevailing in Ireland.

The British government did not interfere until the emissaries approached Westport. They were met at Knappagh on the Leenane road and turned back in typical Imperialist style with no explanation by an armoured car squad. This shows how well the British were keeping an eye on Westport. The real troubles did not reach this quiet countryside until early in 1921.
“One moonlit night,” continued my informant, “Michael Kilroy of Newport, the OC of the West Mayo brigades of the IRA, was cycling around here with four or five of his officers. He was supposed to be picking a suitable ambush spot. Around the bend down there on the road they met face to face with a scouting party of the RIC that were also cycling. The IRA order to take cover and fire was rapidly obeyed and that short, sharp encounter ended with Sergeant Coughlan dead and police constables McGuire, Love and Creedon wounded and disarmed.”

“From the time on to the truce, we did not get much ease or peace from the authorities around here.”

Just across the valley from Drummin, lies the bleak stony village of Carrowkennedy that was the scene of one of the fiercest encounters of the old days between the IRA and the British forces.

My immediate superior on the local county council supervisory staff was a man who played a leading role in the Carrowkennedy encounter and other major engagements leading up to it. His family was deeply involved in the struggle for freedom as were his forefathers in the national and anti-landlord activities down through the years.

As he is, I hope, still going strong and being of the most unassuming disposition, I will not use his surname without his permission but will refer to him by his first name of Johnny as I give his account to me of his experiences before and after Carrowkennedy.

“You know, “he said,” our successful action at Carrowkennedy was long overdue. Up to two or three months previously, we had a undergone a period of hard training under our Brigadier, Michael Kilroy, who left nothing half done. Then we met two setbacks which only served to make us redouble our efforts and take no one necessary risks.

In one of those reverses the whole force RIC and Tans from Westport set out to encircle and surprise us in a night attack on Skirdagh, below Newport. The surprise attempt was foiled by our sentries and resulted in a 15 hour fight in which a plane and strong reinforcements were called on to assist the Newport RIC and Tans.”

Johnny continued. “Our better knowledge helped us to get outside the enemy cordon at night. On the nineteenth of May we suffered an ugly reverse at Kilmeena, between Westport and Newport. It was one of those happenings when the best laid plans can all go wrong at the last moment.”

“A routine enemy convoy was travelling along the Westport-Newport road was to be attacked at Knocknaboly. A larger, better armed enemy convoy than expected came along earlier than anticipated. As this early arrival had not been expected, many of the IRA men had not arrived or got into position.”
“To make matters worse, the first carload of RIC was preceded by a car load of nuns in their black uniforms. A lookout man mistook the dark uniformed RIC for a second carload of nuns and did not act to stop them until it was too late.”

“When the two lorry loads of Tans arrived, they were immediately attacked by the IRA. The RIC car, mistakenly allowed through, returned and opened fire on the IRA with a machine gun from the high ground at the bridge. To make matters worse, a second machine gun opened fire on the IRA from the opposite side of the road.

Two thirds of the IRA had only shotguns which were only useful at short range or when an element of surprise was involved.”

“The OC ordered a retreat and fought a rearguard action with his riflemen. In that action, his coolness and good marksmanship went a long way towards getting the column out of an ugly situation. On the second of July 1921, two weeks after the unlucky reverse at Kilmeena, we came to grips with the ancient enemy again at Carrowkennedy.”

After a reflective pause, Johnny began again. “On that day, three lorry loads of Tans and a carload of RIC arrived in the early afternoon from Westport and halted in Carrowkennedy. Here, the road had been cut across and they commandeered a number of turf workers with their loads of turf and compelled them to fill in the trench on the road with the turf and then they drove on to Connemara.”

Five years ago in Chicago, I met a man from this area, Jim Friel, who was one of the young turf workers pressed into service by the Black and Tans. He gave me details of the treatment meted out to the locals later by the Tans; tortures, burnings of dwelling houses and other reprisals.

“We arrived at Carrowkennedy after the enemy’s departure,” continued my informant, “and we set to work making peep holes for our rifles in the stone walls and altering some stones to a higher level.

We were just finishing our work when we got the word that the Tans were back and were at Darby’s pub. When the leading lorry came opposite us, it received a full volley and crashed into the wall.”

The driver, Police Inspector Stevenson, was shot dead. Two of the Tans jumped out. One of them was discovered under a bank, shivering with fright when the fight was over. The man had not fired a single shot. The other Tan was lying prone with his gun, as I thought, pointing straight at my loophole in the wall. I had kept banging away at him with no visible results.”

“After the fight I went over to him and found that his head was simply scalped by my bullets and I concluded that the man might have been dead after my first shot.”
“Well, war is war and my only regret at the time was for all the valuable ammunition I had wasted. The Tans in the first lorry had a machine gun and immediately opened up on our position. One of our snipers shot the gunner and two others who followed met a similar fate. The gunner of course had to expose himself more than the riflemen. As the fight was going on for too long for our wishes, the OC said we had neither the time nor ammunition to continue in this way and we’d have to get in closer to rush the lorry. Jack Keane, my brother and I were picked to get closer to the lorry on our side of the road.”

“Joe Baker, Tom Ainsworth and Hagan were picked to creep closer on the other side of the road. Jack McDonagh and Tom Heavey were to cover up for us as we edged closer to the enemy.”

“We hoped that we might be able to lob in one or two of our homemade bombs which with luck might explode and the confusion we would be able to rush the lorry. As we moved closer, a Tan on the point of firing a rifle grenade was shot and the grenade fell into the lorry, killing two policemen. The rest hoisted a white flag. All the RIC and Tans in that lorry were either killed or wounded, except the one under the bank who had jumped out. The other two lorry loads of Tans had still to be dealt with.”

After the first shots they had abandoned their lorries and rushed to the house of the Widow McGreal. In their hurry, they had left a keg of rifle ammunition behind in the lorry and tried to induce the widow to order her young son to go out and retrieve it. She scornfully told them to do their own dirty work if they were brave enough.”

“They had plenty of rifle grenades but the range to our positions was too long. Still, they ignored all calls to surrender. Luckily, one of our men, Jamie Flaherty from Westport, had been an army machine gun operator in Flanders three or four years previously. We soon set up our captured machine gun and trained on the house. At the first burst of fire he cut the door to ribbons and then he trained it on the thatch of the roof, which he sent flying in waves.”

“Knowing that the sparks flying from the stonework would soon set the thatch on fire, the occupants pushed the dish towel out the window and surrendered. The coolest occupant of the house was the widow herself who laughed and joked and hoped we had killed all the black devils. The Tans expected death after their record of tortures and reprisals but Michael Kilroy turned down any suggestions in that regard. The injured had their wounds dressed and he gave one RIC man a pass to be allowed through the IRA sentries so he could get medical attention for the wounded in Westport.”

“He also warned him that any reprisals would be drastically dealt with. Then the booty was collected and the vehicles were set on fire.” “Some of the boys almost
wept for joy,” said Johnny “When they handled the machine gun that had turned the
tables on them at Kilmeena two weeks earlier.

We found that we had taken about 30 rifles and about the same number of
revolvers and most prized of all, apart from the machine gun, 5,000 rounds of .303
rifle ammunition. Before the fight, Kilroy was asked what his line of retreat would be
and he replied that it would be to Aughagower, through Sraheen.”

“When we moved off from Carrowkennedy, the OC gave us the order to
march down the road to Sraheen. After going a short distance, he stopped to talk to a
local man, Sonny O’Malley. He then gave us the right wheel command doubling us
back on our tracks over the Leenane-Westport road and on to the hills behind
Croaghpatrick.

He had told O’Malley to inform any enemy search parties that he had seen us
marching down the Sraheen road in military formation, which was of course true.
O’Malley carried out those instructions and was thanked by a British officer for his
help!”

“Sometime later as we were resting at the top of Maum a’ Chassagh and were
watching the enemy plane cruising and diving over Aughagower, we felt more
inclined than ever to trust in our leader’s foresight and coolness. The Joyces of
Durless, Black Pat and Red Pat, gave us a royal welcome and killed a sheep to
entertain us. I think I have tasted no mutton so sweet from that day to this.

Later, our men spent a few days around the Creggans and Ailmore, where the
people were wonderfully kind and hospitable to them but they felt the need to move
on because with the sea at their backs, they were in a restricted area if the need for a
quick getaway arose. After the ambush at Carrowkennedy, the rumour had gone out
that the IRA unit had gone to Tourmakeady to link up with the South Mayo battalion.
Some time before the action at Carrowkennedy, a large scale engagement took place
at Tourmakeady where Tom Maguire and his South Mayo men took on an enemy
force there. After losses of 4 or 5 men killed and some more wounded, the RIC and
Tans withdrew.”

“They returned after two hours with huge reinforcements and after making
contact with the IRA, a huge engagement took place, lasting until darkness fell. A
factor that gave a temporary respite to the IRA on that occasion was the fact that the
British army reinforcements from Clarermorris, advancing up the Partry Hills, shot at
more troops from Castlebar who were coming over the hills from the western side.

“As there was a slight fog or haze hanging over the hilltops, they mistook the
Castlebar troops for the West Mayo IRA coming to the assistance of their South Mayo
comrades and opened fire on them. An undisclosed number was killed and more were
wounded before the mistake was discovered. The authorities were to go to great
lengths to hush up the whole affair, even to the extent of dispatching coffins by rail from Ballinrobe station in sealed and darkened carriages."

“On that day, the IRA OC, Tom Maguire was wounded, suffering a broken arm. His adjutant, Michael O’Brien was shot dead while assisting him to bandage his wound. Tom Maguire though suffering intense pain went back and continued to direct operations until nightfall and the column got outside enemy lines. Tales of the subsequent escape of Tom Maguire and his men during the intensive comb out of the area by thousands of British troops are legendary.”

“On the day of the Tourmakeady fight, Michael Kilroy got the message that the South Mayo men were surrounded in Partry. Kilroy and his men were then at the foot of Buckagh mountain north of Westport. He set off with a cycling column and they travelled all through the night. When they got to Glenmask, they learned that the men from South Mayo were safe.”

“Believing the rumour that Mick Kilroy and his men had gone to the Partry-Tourmakeady region after Carrowkennedy to link up with the units in South Mayo, a second comb out of the area by the British forces took place. Finding nobody home, they returned to the search in West Mayo. Strangely enough, they kept on the trail of the ‘boys’ right up to the truce and never seemed to be more than a day or two behind. They often indeed arrived only an hour or two after the IRA had moved on.

The IRA trail led from Aughagower to Islandeady, Glenhest, the glens around Nephin and on to Tavanaghmore and Ballyclogher. It was decided at this time to divide the column into sections.

With more than 3,000 troops on their trail along with planes and even cavalry squads to search mountain areas, an unwieldy column of 50 men stood little chance of survival even though they were better armed than ever before.

Owing to the continuing fine weather, the enemy adopted the IRA tactics of sleeping in the open or in bell tents that could be set up in a matter of minutes.

The IRA men’s luck continued after the splitting up of the column up to the truce ten days later. Two days after the truce, a heavy shower of rain heralded a break in the record breaking hot summer.

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Before School Buses

Watching a queue of school boys and girls boarding a homeward bus recently set up a train of thoughts and mental comparisons on conditions in my school days and theirs. In addition to the amount of bottles of soft drinks, potato crisps, candies and chocolate taken onboard, a number of light magazines of little or no educational value were also included. I saw one youngster who dropped a halfpenny from his hands full of change look down disdainfully on the ha’penny and he did not even stoop to pick it up.

In my school days, Pat Moran and his wife, Mary Flynn, kept a neat, well-stocked shop in Swinford, where sweets, fruit and many smaller grocery items were stocked. The most prized items of all were Pat Moran’s handfuls of sweets, which were whatever amounts that came up to his hand when he plunged it into a shining can of “bullseyes.” Mary’s Flynn’s handful was only a small pinch compared to Pat’s straight handful.

I often saw tempers raised and small fists flying in defence of Pat or Mary when it came to a matter of deciding the relative merits of either’s “ha’porth” of sweets. I may add that halfpennies were so scarce that the ones who were in a position to buy sweets had to share them around or were liable to have them hijacked.

World War 1 and cruel inflation put an end to ha’porths of sweets. Against the heaps of goodies enjoyed by modern schoolchildren, we had to make do with berries sweet or sour (mostly sour) sloes, crab apples, hips and haws, blackberries and wild raspberries. All those items had to be consumed by November Night, when we were told they would be polluted by the Púca. (Pooka)

A feed of raw turnips was considered a luxury, especially if the turnips had been sweetened by frost. Often, we were chased by irate farmers when they felt we overdid our visits to their turnip fields.

One of the most dreaded hazards for schoolchildren in my school going days was meeting a cross gander.

Most of the small farms in those days had a flock of geese, complete with ganders, to help out the farm economy. Those birds were not handfed, except at Christmas when they were being fattened with feeds of small waste potatoes and fistfuls of inferior grain. This left the gander in fighting condition in our estimation. A half starved gander was an adversary to be avoided and feared by young school children.
Any child who got bitten by a gander or got slashed by his powerful wings would thereafter give him a wide berth. Those birds were regarded as polluters of pastures and many flocks were maintained along the roadside along their owners’ holdings.

Around 1920, speeding Black and Tans loved to drive through those flocks of geese, leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake and they were also liable to take pot shots at the geese for good measure. This coupled with ever-increasing road traffic led to these flocks being taken off the roads.

One legendary gander was owned by a widow woman who lived in a quiet spot by the River Moy. This bird was reputedly over 20 years old and only that he met a sticky end he would undoubtedly have clocked up a good many more.

He had often put foxes and stray dogs to flight and it was mainly for that reason, the old widow maintained him as a protector of her chickens and ducks. Not having a flock of geese for company seemed to make him extra vicious.

He spent his time patrolling up and down the nearby River Moy, chasing young anglers away from his domain. Some of those anglers swore his skull must have been armour plated as they hopped heaps of stones off it to no avail.

One day, when a teaman, as tea sellers were known back then, called to the widow to sell her a pound or two of tea, the gander strode up to his pony and bit it on the heel, causing him to run away. The wagon was turned over and the stock of tea was spilt all over the road.

The teaman threatened legal proceedings against the widow, who decided it was time to eliminate the gander. On the very next night, two IRA men on the run called to the widow’s house for a cup of tea.

She asked them to kill a “goose” for her and invited them to return the next day to share the dinner with her. Being natives of a neighbouring town, they hadn’t the slightest idea of how to go about killing a goose.

Finally after a hard struggle, they managed to catch the gander; one executioner grabbed his body and stretched his long neck over a wooden block the widow used for chopping firewood. His companion grabbed the widow’s firewood axe and with a mighty blow he severed the gander’s head from his body. Both men jumped back to avoid bloodstains. Without warning, the headless bird rose into the air and made a long, slanting dive towards the Moy, which was in flood at the time.

There was a swift current at that point and the headless carcase was swept rapidly downstream. The two men sympathised with the widow and promised to make up her loss in some way.
They got a message carried by a young schoolboy through to some sympathisers in Swinford and ordered two pounds of bacon (rashers) and two pounds of sausages.

Pork sausages were new to the market back then and the casing or skins of those new arrivals were many times thicker than those of their modern-day counterparts. After procuring the bacon and sausages, the two men returned to the widow and delivered the parcel. She thanked them and invited them to return that night to share a meal with her when she had the bacon and sausages fried.

They duly came back a couple of hours later to find a plate of rashers served up with a pile of what resembled charred, shrivelled skins. When one of the men asked her what had happened to the sausages, she replied, “Sausages? Is that what they are called? Well, when I got the dirty things cleaned out and rinsed, they were hardly worth cooking!”

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Brick Making

Seeing a kiln of bricks being “burned” after going through all the preparatory rituals in brick production is one of my earliest recollections. My father, grandfather and great-grandfather carried on a small, handmade brick industry in Ballydrum, Swinford from around 1825 until 1920. This was a seasonal operation, confined to the summer months as sun-drying the freshly-made bricks was one of the imperative initial steps in brick production.

The deposits of brick clay which existed in this neighbourhood were blue boulder clay, carried down by the Moy and deposited in lowland flats by backwash action. Those deposits usually varied from two to eight feet.

This clay went under several names, including “dobe” and “daab,” which was the most popular term. The clay being prepared for brick production was first lifted manually above ground. It had to be mixed, sliced and turned over several times and pressed down with heavy planks to get a pliable, even mixture, free of air pockets.

There were no excavators or manual diggers in those days.

Incidentally, the first steam-driven excavator seen in Mayo was employed in the construction of the Claremorris-Ballinrobe railway almost a century ago.

It was instrumental in cutting the Hill of Caltra to a depth of 95 feet. It was nicknamed “The American Devil” and people travelled long distances to see this wonder.

When ready for moulding, as the shaping process was called, the clay had the texture and consistency of soft putty. The spread ground had to be level and sanded over to prevent the freshly-made bricks sticking to the ground. The moulder took his stand with his pile of moulds at the moulder’s table. He had to pack the clay firmly into the wooden shapes, which usually measured nine by four by two and a half inches. He levelled off the clay in the mould with a deft sweep of a rounded stick. Three spreaders, working at top speed took the filled moulds away and emptied the raw bricks onto the smooth and sanded ground, returning with the moulds for a refill. Two good moulders working very long hours could turn out 4,500 bricks per day.

Around 1890, the pay of a moulder was three shillings a day and that of other labourers was two shillings. The extra shilling for moulders was envied and viewed as a big differential in those days.

After some time on the spread grounds, the bricks, if sufficiently sun-dried, were turned over like sods of peat and later stacked in square piles close to the kiln.
When stacked in the kiln, six fire tunnels or arches measuring three feet high by two feet high were constructed at ground level. Those arches extended the full length of the kiln. Those arches were filed with turf and set alight and continuous fire had to be maintained until the bricks were sufficiently burned or baked. This could be four and a half to five and a half days, according to wind and weather conditions, quality of turf and other factors.

It was an unwritten law that two men had to attend the burning kiln at night. An old man told me that he enjoyed being one of the night watchers while the kiln was burning. He said that one of their favourite pranks or pastimes was cooking a fat chicken or succulent young duck in one of the fire arches of the kiln.

After the fowl was killed, they merely covered it with soft “daab” and placed it in one of the arches close to the entrance. After the bird was cooked, all the feathers were reduced to a black smear and the intestines were shrivelled up by the intense heat. As for the flesh, he said, “You’d be licking your lips after you ate it.”

In those days over 100 years ago, wealthy shopkeepers’ sons and other young “gods” from the Swinford area formed a club called, “The Cock and Hen Club,” or alternatively, “The Duck and Hen Club.”

It was so called because of the practice of going out into the countryside and raiding fowlhouses for fowl to capture and cook after taking them back to town. The feast usually ended with a good soak of spirits. This club seems in a way to be a smaller edition of the famous Dublin Hell Fire Club.

“One night,” said my informant, “we heard the fowl in a house a short distance away making a loud racket. It was a very bright night as we rushed to the fowlhouse and surprised three intruders who took to their heels. They seemed to be half drunk and the two dogs we had with us gave them such a mauling that they were not seen around again.”

Around 1895, a journeyman potter from North Leitrim or Fermanagh, whose name, as far as I can recollect, was Jim Mullen came to Ballydrum. He had his own potter’s wheel and after a deal was struck with my father; he commenced to make butter and milk crocks, flower pots and other types of household receptacles.

He built a small kiln like a beehive to bake his wares. He had a pony and a small spring cart and he visited all the small towns within a 25 mile radius to sell his products in the market place.

After two or three seasons, he left to start operations in his native place. He was known locally as “Jim the Crock.” Glazing his crocks was a secret he guarded jealously at all times.
Brick making operations employed a staff of from 16 to 24 according to business fluctuations. This included two or three carters for delivering bricks. About 500 horse cartload of turf were burned annually in brickmaking in Ballydrum.

The most popular size kiln of bricks contained 50,000 of them.

When “well burned,” to use a local term, the bricks turned from blue to red owing to the transformation of the iron oxide in the brick clay. The age of cement was slowly gaining momentum at the beginning of the twentieth century and sounded the death knell for all the small brick works in the country.

They had mostly disappeared by the start of World War One as concrete was faster to prepare and utilise and was also a less labourious substance for building purposes.
Temperance Missions

The Father Matthew crusade for temperance over the middle decades of the last century was an astounding success.

This success, even allowing for Father Matthew’s organizing ability and indefatigable zeal was probably due in part to the fact that material conditions were ripe for such a movement. This factor has helped to make or mar revolutions, reform movements and crusades from time immemorial. During the lean Famine and Post Famine years, people in Ireland, to quote a modern slang phrase, hadn’t a bob to spend on drink which made their conversion to temperance so much easier. As the hard times slowly passed, intemperance as far as drink was concerned began to appear in a big way. Realising that desperate situations require desperate remedies, the ecclesiastical authorities re-introduced the temperance missions giving priority to towns where drinking was most rife and to places where illicit distillation or poteen making was rife. A feature of those special temperance missions was the large black cross erected in front of each chapel where a mission was in progress.

Over 50 years ago, an old woman of 80 told me that her experience at a drunkards’ mission as she termed it in her native parish. “When the missions came to Kiltimagh parish” said Kitty, “they said that anyone that passed the big black cross in front of the church drunk would be in danger of burning an Hell for all eternity. One fair evening in Kiltimagh during the mission my husband, Tom, got a big feed of drink. I tried to get him home or at least to get him past the cross before the drink went to his head but where did he fall but at the foot of the cross? I tried to rouse him and get him back on the town side of the cross. In my innocence I thought that if he went past the cross drunk that he might go up in smoke in front of my eyes. When I roused him up a little, I said, “Arrah, d’anam o’n Diabhal Tom. Do you know where you are at?”

“Ah leave me alone Kitty, I would like to die here, He was looking up at the cross and thought that he was in church. Two of my neighbours going home from the fair helped me bring him back a few yards towards the town and leave him there to sober up. I looked over the wall of the chapel grounds and saw a missioner walking away smiling after watching the whole performance”, continued Kitty.

An old man in Chicago told me a tale many years ago about a temperance mission in his native Connemara, County Galway.” Sure,” he said, “poteen would be so plentiful that a policeman said that he would not: be surprised if we were washing our feet in it. He was not saying much wrong there as my mother who had rheumatism down to her big toe washed her foot in the braon broagh from the still, when she found that drinking it did not cure her.”
“The Parish Priest arranged at last for a temperance mission to be held in our backward country parish. One of the two missionaries who came was a noted preacher against drink and drunkenness and was known to us as the poteen missioner.

This missioner and our PP got the authorities to agree that all who surrendered their poteen stills and gear in the chapel yard at the end of the mission would not be prosecuted. On the closing night the P.P. and the missioner watched and were happy to see several noted poteen makers arriving and surrendering their stills. They were particularity happy to see one noted poteen maker who had not previously attended the mission arriving with an ancient looking well worn still.

At the commencement afterwards of the concluding mission ceremonies the “Yank” as this man was called locally, took up a position just inside the chapel side door. When all were lighting their candles and holding them aloft and repeating the concluding prayers of the mission, the Yank took advantage of this diversion. He silently slipped out the side door and made a bee line for a good looking still he had spotted on the way in and quickly got over the chapel wall and away to his distillery hideout.

With all his old competitors being disarmed, he raised his price for his poteen and soon made a small fortune.
Tomás Láidir

Tomás had won many of the prizes for athletic prowess and swordplay and Una Bhán excelled at harp playing and singing. The frail beauty of Una so haunted “Proud Costello” (one of his nicknames) that he decided to call on McDermott and ask for the hand of his daughter in marriage. To the surprise of many, McDermott consented and ordered a celebration to mark the betrothal of his favourite daughter to Costello.

During the festivities McDermott, who had imbibed freely behaved arrogantly towards Costello. He referred in a sneering way to the comparative poverty of the Costelloes and extolled his own magnanimity for accepting one of them for a son-in-law. Costello jumped to his feet saying he would take no more insults and that he was leaving at once. He swore that if he crossed the little river Donooge without an apology or an invitation to return from McDermott that he would never come back.

He ordered his attendant, a young man named Eamon “Gearr” O’Malley to get the horses ready and they set out for Castlemore. They came to the flooded stream of Donooge. O’Malley crossed the stream but Costello waited in mid-stream until his horse began to shiver and neigh piteously. The attendant asked Costello to come out of the stream and not be making a fool of himself.

Costello took his advice but just as he climbed out of the stream a messenger arrived from McDermott asking him to return and tendered McDermott’s regrets. Tomás rode over to his attendant and with one blow of his clenched fist, he toppled O’Malley from his horse and left him disabled for life.

Too inordinately proud to return with McDermott’s messenger, he continued his journey home. Two days later he left for the wars on the continent. He was to the forefront in every battle in which he was engaged, hoping that death would end his love-crazed grief but all in vain.

In a little over a year after his departure, Una died of heartbreak and it took almost another year for the news to reach Tomás in France. He returned to Castlemore broken in heart and spirit. Being a powerful swimmer, he swam almost nightly to Una’s grave on an island in Lough Key and lay there all night, prostrate “with grief and madness,” to quote a line from “Costello’s Lament,” a poem commemorative of his tragic romance.

Even the powerful frame and indomitable spirit of Tomás Láidir could not stand up to such a harsh ritual. Slowly, he pined away and in less than two years he was laid to rest with his forefathers.
There is a vague belief that he was laid to rest beside Una Bhán in “Kilmacleneven grey,” according to Costello’s Lament.

Some time later, the McDermotts moved some miles westward to Coolavin in the O’Gara country. The McaDermott chieftains there carried the title of “Prince of Coolavin.” The McDermotts are referred to in one of the old annals as being the brightest light of the Connacht clans in the fight against the foreigners.

The annals also mentioned an incident where the McDermott pursued and slew the O’Malley with his sgian (dagger) in the stone church of Oughavale near Westport, which resulted in the church being re-consecrated.

Sixty years ago when the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence Mc.Swiney was dying on hunger strike in Brixton prison, the McDermott of Coolavin publicly implored the King of England to exercise his royal derogative and release Mc.Swiney. Even though a McDermott had lost his own life in the 1914-1918 war, his request was refused.

Many years ago I saw a lady from the McDermott country break down and cry while listening to the haunting lament, “Una Bhán” being played on a phonograph in the music shop of John Bowen at 55th and Halstead Streets, Chicago.

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In Captain Houston’s Country

When Captain Boswell Houston died at his Doo Lough Lodge in the South West Mayo Highlands in 1872, like so many more that came to conquer and colonise, he departed this life saddened, embittered and frustrated.

Having served the British Empire well with the 10th Hussars in the conquering and colonising of large tracts of Africa, he decided to retire to the largely unspoilt and untamed West of Ireland to give the natives the benefit of his ideas and experience.

Getting huge tracts of land from the Crown and from Lord Sligo, inside of three years he was said to own 12,000 head of sheep and also a large number of horses and cattle. The area stretched from Killary Bay to within a stone’s throw of Croaghpatrick, embracing the Muilrea, Sheeffry and Ben Gorm range of mountains.

Commencing on a peaceful note, he soon changed his attitude as he found that his ever increasing herds of livestock required more land- if the rough heathery slopes from Bundorragha to Loughta could be called land.

He embarked on a policy of tenant evictions, which his wife described as “a true form of mercy to the poor, poverty-stricken natives.”

“The Scotchman,” as Houston is known down to the present day, soon found to his cost that the poverty stricken natives were not as easily cowed as the “little brown natives of Africa.”

An old man from Derrygarbh told me that his great grandfather saw 500 “smokes” in Tullaghbawn before the Famine and before the Scotchman and his evictions came to lay waste the countryside. In the warm summer of 1856, many of the Scotchman’s evicted tenants did not leave the county as he had hoped. They squatted in remote mountain retreats and lived on the fattest of Houston’s sheep. With four or five shepherds and half a dozen sheepdogs, he tried to keep constant vigil over his countless thousands of sheep. A ringleader of the evicted tenants solved the problem of the tracker dogs.

He met a Galway man with his own ideas of landlords and land grabbers at the Pattern of Leenane. The Galway man gave him a recipe to poison the Scotchman’s dogs and one morning Houston awoke to find 6 or 7 dead dogs outside his front door. To the Scotchman, this was a challenge for all-out war.

He came down heavily on trout and salmon poachers as he lived in one of the best fishing areas of the world. One local poacher, named the “Rí Eascón” (King Eel) retaliated by “milking” salmon outside Houston’s front door. This consisted in squeezing the milt from the spawn sick salmon.
Then the Scotchman played his last card. He compelled three or four of his herdsmen to live on mountain peaks in rough huts so they could keep a lookout on the sheep and keep watch for the sheep rustlers. The rustlers got a few active lads dressed in sheep skins to infiltrate the sheep at nightfall to grab and make off with their prey as night settled down.

After his death, his wife wrote her “True Story of a Modern Exile,” telling from her standpoint his experiences in County Mayo.

In her book, Mrs. Houston complained of the almost constant storms and frequent torrential downpours of Delphi, Doolough and Glenamurra. This region has been recorded in different years as having the highest annual rainfall in Western Europe. Therefore, her complaint was not without foundation.

On my first trip to the former Houston country, I cycled from Westport through Drummin and under the overhanging Rock of Sheeffrey and on through Glennamurra to lovely Doolough lake. This was during World War Two and petrol supplies had all but dried up. The humble bicycle was truly the King of the Road. This mode of transport gave one more time to admire the wonderful scenery. The view of Tawnycool and Derrintin lakes, I regarded as a scenic gem.

A young state forest obscures the view today. My trip followed an unusually heavy shower of rain the previous night and the early morning so Glenamurra was looking its wildest and loveliest. The numerous fissures on the wild, high mountainside were filled by overflowing torrents of water, cascading and foaming down to the flooded Glenamurra River.

Later, when I called to the house of a sheep farmer nearer to Louisburgh, he pointed to some sloping rafters in his roof and proudly claimed that they had come from the wreck of the “River Dee.”

This he explained was an English merchant ship wrecked on rocks “Back West” about a hundred years before. It was carrying timber for the roofing of Westport workhouse.

A local curate, Fr. O’Malley, returning from a sick call, spotted the wreck and roused the neighbourhood on horseback. Local people succeeded in rescuing some lives and “salvaged” a goodly part of the timber cargo. This timber was dispatched well inland until the storm was over in more senses than one.

The wreck of the River Dee was the theme for several local poems, snatches of which still survive.

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Letting out the Dark

One of my early recollections is of an elderly, gentlemanly type “knight of the road.”

I think his surname was Kilgunn or maybe Gilgunn and he said he had been born in Co. Leitrim. There was a belief that he had studied for the priesthood in his younger days. As he dressed better than the average traveller, he was known locally as “The Toff.”

He collected bottles that he carried in a bag on his back to be sold to merchants in the local towns. Men of his calling were known as “Bottlemen.” I can remember him calling one bottle that he collected in our house a beauty and saying that he would get a halfpenny at least for it.

This gives an idea of what prices were like before production for excessive profit became the greatest single factor in the economic malaise crippling the world today.

The Toff carried a flannel in which were stuck hundreds of pins and needles and in a home where he got a meal, he always left some for the “Good lady of the house,” as he termed the housewife. He generally called twice a year. On one occasion I found his arrival to be very welcome. I had just wrecked a window pane of glass with a misdirected shot and his arrival helped to get me off the hook.

He sat down by the fire and told me about the first window that ever came to his native village of Cruck.

“In my great grandfather’s time,” said The Toff, “there were few glass windows to be found except in the Big Houses, and churches and with some well off people here and there. Among the poorer people, there were various excuses for windows. In some houses, long, narrow openings in the walls served for windows. It was narrower on the inside than the outside and a board was fitted on the outside at night or in bad weather. In some cases, a mare’s placenta or a sheepskin with all the wool and fat removed was stretched across the “window.”

These allowed a dull light to get through but were far from being as satisfactory as glass. A good many dwellings then were only “bohauns” or mud huts; they had no light except what came in over the half door.”

“My great grandfather was known locally as Máirtín Bradach. (Mischievous Martin) He went to Sligo on one occasion and brought back a pane of glass. He was so careful of the glass that he carried it all the way home on his back in a sack that was well-padded with rags and paper. He never once sat down on his journey of 22
miles. With the help of a local handyman, he fitted the glass to a wooden frame and installed it with the proud boast that it was the first glass window ever to come to the village of Cruck.

The Toff went on to add that his great grandfather had a well-known habit of turning things around when he spoke. So, when a neighbour who came across him while fitting the window, asked him what he was doing, he received an unexpected answer.

“I’m trying to let out the dark,” my great grandfather is said to have replied. “Letting out the dark, as Maírtín Bradach said,” became a popular saying in the locality afterwards. When the window had been fitted, some of the neighbours felt it that a celebration known as a ball was called for.

Accordingly, a small money collection was held and Maírtín donated the food and the music, he being a player on the fife or wooden flute. During the ball, Maírtín saw a neighbour to whom he had not spoken for some years, peeping in through the new window. There were two lighted candles, one on each side of the window, and he had no trouble recognising the “gobadán” (curlew) as this man was known locally. He had a very long nose, which earned him his title.

After making up his mind, Maírtín moved quietly to the back door and picked up the hardest sod of turf he could find. Moving stealthily, he waited until he got beside the window. He waited until the gobadán had his long nose right up to the window. Then he let fly catching his opponent full on the nose and of course breaking the window in the process.

The gobadán was not seen in public for two or three weeks and, even then, his nose bore some scars. Later, when neighbours sympathised with Maírtín on the loss of his window, he replied cheerfully that his only regret was that he had not been able to find a harder sod of turf to give the gobadán a longer holiday!
When he ran out of ground, Andy would turn him out onto the road to turn over the roadside margins for a mile or more in both directions.

Of course, Andy was delighted to see that he had extended his operations to the poet’s “cabbage patch,” as he termed his brother-in-law’s farm. The fact that Andy once trapped a dog badger and sent a portion to the poet with an assurance that it was a pig badger and therefore edible, did not lessen the deeply rooted animosity between them.

Rooting or “hoking,” as the boar’s system of land reclamation was called, was a familiar sight down to recent years. The pigs would be turned out to graze and hoke to conserve the potato crop in times of scarcity. To curb their natural tendencies, pigs had iron or steel rings inserted in their noses.

The earliest device I can remember mis-called a pig ring was a sliver of iron wrought by a blacksmith. It was about the length and shape of a large needle. When this missile was inserted through the unfortunate pig’s nose, the two ends were drawn together and twisted around each other.

Andy owned a boar which did not help his popularity or help

Early in the present century, a new type of pig ring came onto the market. This was a semi-circular steel device that could be clamped to the pig’s nose in a couple of seconds with a pincher type tool called a pig ringer.

This method was hailed as a great American invention. Lesser potato famines dogged the Irish economy for 30 years after the great famine of 1845-1848 at irregular intervals. One time Andy found he had to preserve his dwindling stock of potatoes. His brother-in-law was a man Andy felt was getting very “eisleach” or dainty in his choice of foods.

Andy felt that this “tuppence happeny” poet was getting too far above his station in every way but felt he would take him down a peg or two.

With this end in mind, he got the boar killed and salted, with the exception of a portion laid aside for a roast pork supper for Seán and his wife. He felt it would be a wonderful coup if he could give Seán a feed of the boar and then confess what he had done. Seán had shown his dislike of Andy’s boar, which was known as Jack in a poem called “Rooting Jack the Ploughboy.”

Andy felt the boar’s demise would help spare his supply of potatoes and be the means of humiliating his brother-in-law at the same time.
On the night of the feast, he had a goodly supply of poteen and when he
deemed Seán to be nicely soaked, he ushered Seán and his wife to the table with
himself and his wife to follow. Unfortunately for the success of Andy’s plan, his wife
had told Seán’s wife who was her sister of the boar’s fate the day before.

When they had seated themselves at the table, Andy suggested that Seán
would say the Grace before the meal. He added sarcastically that since Seán was the
best-educated of the company he could intone the prayer in verse if he had a mind to
do so.

Seán gazed up at the ceiling in mock piety and then in a solemn tone he spoke
the words:

“O Man on high, who rules the sky
Look down upon us four
And give us meat that we can eat
And take away the boar.”

Needless to say, Andy was not pleased at the unexpected turn of events! When
Seán was nearing ninety, he was persuaded by a younger generation to compose (or
transpose) a poem on a hotly resented British tax of the time.

This order imposed a tax of five shillings annually on every dog in the
country. When all opposition to this unwelcome levy failed, there was a steady stream
of people heading to bog holes with unwanted dogs.

Seán was asked to compose a poem about this matter. He wrote eight or nine
verses of the doggerel variety based along the lines of one of Moore’s Melodies, “Let
Erin Remember.”

“On the wild bog bank as the turf cutter strays
With the heat of the day declining,
He sees dead dogs of other days,
In the mud beneath him shining.
Thus shall optics often in dreams sublime,
See the dogs, whose days are over,
And sadly see through the mud and grime
The Prinsheens* and Towerseens they cover.”
* It may be added that Prince and Towser were popular names for dogs in those days.

The suffix, “een” was often used to denote lack of size or affection. Thus the term “ladeen” could be used for a small lad or child.

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