

The Barony of Erris (Iorras)

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[I] The History of the Barony

The **Barony of Erris** lies in northwest Mayo. ‘Erris’ is a corruption of the Irish ‘Iorras’, a topographical term meaning ‘peninsula’, which derives from ‘Iar Ros’ or ‘western promontory’. The 11th Century manuscript, ‘**Lebor na hUidre**’ (the Book of the Dun Cow), refers to ‘Irrus Domnann’ - Iorras of the Domnann – who were people related to tribes in Scotland and Southern England, in Roman times (note the name ‘Devon’).

Originally, the Cinel Fedhlinadh, a branch of the **Kingdom of Hy Fiachrach**, ruled Iorras. It is said that Fiachra (son of **Lir, God of the Sea**) was turned into a swan but later retook his human form, on Inis Gluairé island.

The Chieftain, Ó Caithnaidh (anglicised as Canny) died in 1180, as the manuscript called the Annals of the Four Masters records.

The O’Dowd clan were the main rulers of Erris, in the Middle Ages. After the Norman invasion, the Barretts and the Burkes took over, **styling themselves the ‘Barons of Erris’**. In the late 16th century, English rulers formalized the borders of County Mayo: they established ten administrative ‘baronies’.

In 1565, **Sir Henry Sidney** became Lord Deputy of Ireland. He reorganized the lands of Gaelic Chieftains, setting up County of Longford (so extinguishing the O’Farrell country), County Clare (so extinguishing the ancient district of Thomond) and several other counties. Having set aside the Gaelic Laws of ownership, he appointed Sheriffs, who brought in the first English-style landlords. Under the Laws of Conquest, the new owners took estates under grants from the English Crown. Queen Elizabeth gave scant thanks to Sidney for his successes on the battlefield. The cess, an annual levy which he

imposed upon the English gentry to fund his activities, angered the English gentry in Ireland. The Queen took their part.

There is a phrase in Hiberno-English: ‘bad cess to you’ – indicating a wish that a person be burdened by a heavy tax (or other bother).



Oliver Cromwell (Wikipedia)

Irish Confederate and English Royalist forces held sway in Ireland in 1649. In the **Battle of Rathmines**, however, the Parliamentarians secured Dublin Port for Oliver Cromwell to land his New Model Army. The Royalist fleet, under **Prince Rupert of the Rhine**, was blockaded in Kinsale. In 1650, Charles II repudiated his alliance with the Irish and their English Royalist supporters. Guerilla war followed, with heavy civilian loss.

Areas like Wickow were designated ‘fire-free zones’ (US Army parlance): where anyone found would be **‘taken, slain and destroyed as enemies..’**. By 1653, Cromwell had conquered Ireland for the English Parliament. The death toll, since the 1641 rebellion, stood at 40% of the population.

Cromwellian plantations¹. drove whole populations of people ‘to Hell or to Connaught’. Many fled to Erris where, on the bogs they tried to find a living, again as tenants of landlords and of their agents. These latter acted for ‘Absentee Landlords’, who normally resided in England. Sir Arthur Shaen was one of the early landlords. His heirs were Carter and **Bingham**: they married Shaen’s daughters.

The plantations of the 17th century also brought new, planter families to Erris. Starving Catholic people were chased from place to place. The precedent was repeated, during the 1845-47 Famine, when evictions followed the non-payment of rent.

In 1824, William Carter brought a London engineer, Mr P.Knight, to draw up plans for the town of **Belmullet**. It was built on a narrow stretch of land, effectively dividing

¹ In Ireland, mainly during the 1600s, loyalist people obedient to the English Crown, were ‘planted’ on land owned by the native Irish. These latter were variously dispatched.

Broadhaven Bay from the deeper Blacksod Bay, to the south. In the 1830s, Major Bingham established **Binghamstown**, two miles south of Belmullet. This latter had a better location, and took trade from Binghamstown. Bingham put a gate across the road and tolled cattle driven to Belmullet. The Irish name for Binghamstown is '**An Geata Mór**' (The Large Gate). To avoid a toll, people drove cattle through the fields.

During the Famine of 1845 - '47, the death rate in Erris was high. Those who owned fishing boats had often sold them, hoping that recovery was coming. Few could raise the £4 needed to buy a passage to an t-Oileán Úr – the New World. The ships which plied this trade were called '**coffin ships**', because somewhere around one-half of the passengers never made it.

In 1879, the **Land League** was founded, to pursue the reform of land ownership. Under Gaelic Law, there were no tenants² (people owned their land). The League was opposed to violence. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, poor harvests meant that tenants could not pay rent. Unrest followed the inevitable evictions. The Land League was succeeded by The United Irish League. It bought land to redistribute amongst the people. Over time, through the agency of various groups, land was slowly returned to the native population.

The Quaker 'Relief Committees', in the 19th century, produced reports of the pitiful condition of people and of their abandonment into dereliction by Absentee Landlords³.

In 1955, the people of Belmullet finally bought the town back from a Mr. Carter, a resident of London. The ownership of some land in Erris is disputed to this day.

In the 1950s, Rural Electrification brought electricity to Erris, enabling new business developments. A farmers' cooperative, set up in the 1960s, gave access to new markets. In the 1970s, **Udarás na Gaeltachta** (the Gaeltacht Authority) built an industrial estate. The Erris area has now grown and developed, whilst retaining its untouched scenery. It is an un-spoilt wilderness. The once all Irish-speaking, Gaeltacht areas of Mayo are now restricted: Ceathrú Thaidhg, 25 miles west of Belmullet, is the strongest of these.

² Even today, Irish people inherit a wish to own land. House-ownership statistics confirm this.

³ Quakers were Protestants, who suffered under the English Penal Laws in Ireland, because they were not Anglican. The Penal Laws, in the main, removed civil rights from Catholics. The Anglican English ruling class in Ireland, as Absentee Landlords, often preferred the social life of London. See section V below.



The Barony of Erris

[II] An Ghaeltacht (Gaelic Homeland) in Iorras

In the Parish of Cill Chomáin (Kilcommon), in the middle of the Barony, there is a Gaelic community which traces its history and culture back to early Indo-European lore and before, to the inhabitants of the Céide complex, over 5,000 years ago. The placename Kilcommon comes from St Comán, who lived in the sixth century AD. He is said to be buried in the old church yard at Poll a' tSómais (the Place of Ease)- near to where the walls of the old Church may be seen. **[The pronunciation of Gaelic names is easy, once the values attributed to consonants followed by 'h' is learned.]**

Much of Cill Chomáin consists of elevated moorland along the Atlantic coast. It is a wild, rugged landscape with extensive tracts of Blanket Bog, deserted white sandy beaches, towering cliffs, rock stacks and some small villages. Quieter moments are to be enjoyed in a vast, pristine environment. Visitors can fit in to the landscape as readily as did the first inhabitants of the region, thousands of years ago.

The scenery, for thousands of years, has remained unperturbed because the land is both unproductive and remote. Farming is small scale: average farms are about 25 acres (10 hectares). Fishing can provide a good income, though fish stocks are down from overfishing by commercial concerns.

The Blanket Bog dominates the landscape. Its colours change with the seasons – from a summer green to purple, spotted with white bog cotton, - in the autumn. In winter, the golden orange and red turn another page in the endless history of the living soil underfoot. Many species of insects, spiders and plants choose this wilderness for them a perfect habitat.

Cill Chomáin parish consists of two large peninsulas, **Dún Chaocháin and Dún Chiortáin**. Some of the 37 Cill Chomáin townlands are uninhabited. Villages around the **Sruth Mhada Conn** inlet include **Ceathrú Thaidhg**, Ros Dumhach, Poll a' tSómais,

Cill a' Ghallagáin and Béal an Átha Buí. The placenames here are full of correlation and meaning – a study in themselves. There are more placenames per acre here than in any other part of Europe. **Anglicisation produces evidently hideous and meaningless words, which should really be allowed to rest. Some detail on the villages mentioned follows.**

Ceathrú Thaidhg - Carrowteige (an 'Englishy' version)

The townland and village hold **the strongest Gaeltacht community in Mayo**, with some 80% of people having Irish as a mother-tongue. The village is situated near the end of the Dún Chaocháin peninsula. It has a Catholic Church (in which Mass is celebrated in English), a national school and a shop (the name of which is given in English). The co-operative, Comhar Dún Chaocháin Teo, is based in the village. Superb, marked-out cliff walks begin from the **Seanscoil** (Old School – a community centre).

It is in this village that visitors will be given a historic welcome on behalf of the Gaelic community. **This is the first time Gaelic people will have independently represented themselves, for hundreds of years, on an international stage.** It will be a signal for old friends of Ireland that Irish has economic value.

Ros Dumhach – Rosport (not a translation)



Rosport hay field

Rosport has a national school and all-Irish secondary school (Coláiste Chomáin). It has frequently been proposed that a bridge be built to link Ros Dumhach in Dún Chaocháin with the Dún Chiortáin peninsula. Such a short bridge, to the Poll a' tSómais townland, would remove the need for a long journey by road. The people of Ros Dumhach have been pivotal in questioning the propriety of the **Corrib gas** developments, pursued by **Royal Dutch Shell** and the rôle of **State agents** in this.

Cill a' Ghallagáin {the Cell of the Little Foreigner (a Saint) - all sorts of attempts at Englishy forms of this name are found.}

Cill a' Ghallagáin is a coastal townland situated on the extreme north tip of Dún Chaocháin. It is a wild and rugged place of immense beauty overlooking Broadhaven Bay and the wider Atlantic Ocean.

Visitors will be struck by the immensity of Nature's reach or wonder when they step onto the cliffs and face the vast emptiness, on all sides, of an imposing, beautiful and varied design. An ancient graveyard, near the small village, contains the burial mound of St Gallagán, topped by a flagstone with a **Fleur de Lis** carved by Knights from Malta, sometime in the 12th century.

Poll a' tSómais (The Place of Ease) – Pollathomais (an Englishy spelling)

On the **Dún Chiortáin** peninsula, the Poll a' tSómais townland and village has a thriving population. The village has a post office/shop, a hostel, public houses and a national school. The graveyard had a 6th century chapel of St. Comán, which was mentioned in the manuscript called the **Annals of the Four Masters**. When the Normans came to here, they met with stiff armed resistance. In 1585, during the Reformation, the area became the property of the Anglican Bishop of Killala. Under the Penal Laws of 17th century, several religious communities, such as the Augustinians, were driven out.



Estuary of Sruth Mhada Conn

Famine and devastation struck several times during the 19th century - before the Great Famine of 1845-47 – at which time the Quakers won respect and honour for their efforts for the local Catholic people. During bad times, these latter were generally reduced to eating seaweed and seagull eggs. Food cannot reliably be produced in the area for any population of normal density.

Béal an Átha Buí - Bellanaboy

This townland is now enclosed around a natural gas refinery where Shell gas is to be cleaned more profitably than by using better equipment on site over the gas find, some distance to sea. Heavy security against the local fishermen and farmers is maintained. The Aughooose River, also known as the Yellow River, flows through the townland to Carrowmore Lake.

[III] Erris: Topography and Geology



Bangor Way way walking trail

Erris has a rich habitat, which includes Blanket Bogs, salt marshes, beaches, lakes, cliffs, and rocky shores. Bird-watching is an important pastime. Species such as kestrels, goldfinches and herons are common. Brent Geese are seen in winter.

Blanket Bog covers much of the peninsula. The bog grows slowly: there is a heavy annual rainfall. This ensures that ground remains waterlogged. Atlantic Blanket Bog is a suitable habitat for species of mosses, bryophytes, carnivorous plants and delicate flowers, such as the Scarlet Pimpernel. Fauna on Atlantic Blanket Bog, include frogs, insects and several species of bird.



Dolphins at Kilcommon, Erris

Several areas of Blanket Bog are protected under European legislation. Directives on Birds and Natural Heritage Areas cover the Glenamoy Bog Complex, Ballycroy National Park and Bellacorick.

The oldest rocks in Ireland are found on the west coasts of Erris. Pink orange-striped gneisses are found along the beaches of Elly Bay and Annagh Head: they separated from rocks on eastern Canada, hundreds of millions of years ago, as tectonic plates in the mid-Atlantic pulled apart.



Erris Blanket Bog

Kilcommon Parish covers an ancient landscape of glittering schist and pale, creamy psammite, as well as some two-billion-year-old pre-Cambrian, pink striped gneisses.

Psammite is sandstone which contains mica (in Latin, 'mica' means crumb). Mica refers to a group of aluminium silicate minerals, common in igneous rocks. Gneiss is a foliated, metamorphic rock, like granite. 'Foliated' means composed of thin separable layers.

Boulders of snow-white quartz intruded into the bedrock from geological turmoil below, some 450 million years ago (in the Silurian period). They may be seen now in the western side of the parish. The bedrock, exposed when Blanket Bog is cut away, shows that this land has seen geomorphological turmoil over billions of years. Intense heat followed by intense cold. Pressure from the tectonic shifts moulded and remoulded the rocks.

An extensive native forest covered Erris a few thousand years after the last Ice Age (approx 15,000 years ago). Northern and western shores were not colonised by man for a long time, because of harsh conditions. **Fossilised Scots Pine** (often mistaken for Bog Oak) tree trunks feature across the landscape. Where turf (peat) has been harvested, they can be more easily examined.

Some 6,000 years ago, Neolithic people spread through Ireland. Their ancestors came from Erris. These early settlers had cut down trees there, to clear land for agricultural purposes. The soil was thin and was washed away by the rain. As crops began to fail, the people had to clear further inland to farm. The outer land became blanketed by bog and has been that way ever since. When turf-cutters take fuel from the bog, they can make archaeological finds from the Neolithic and early Bronze Ages.

[IV] Folklore – Finnscéalaíocht (the Noble Stories)

The **Children of Lir**, according to tradition, are buried on the island of Inis Gluair, off the northwest Mayo coast. The children were turned into swans by their jealous stepmother and doomed to spend the next 900 years on lakes and waters in Ireland. When they finally reclaimed their human form on Inis Gluair, they were so old that they died and were buried there.

Táin Bó Flidhais is the tale of a Cattle Raid in which raiders came from the Royal Site at Cruachán (Rathcroghan), at Tulsk Co. Roscommon, to Rathmorgan Fort (Iorras Domhnann) in the centre of the Barony of Erris. The remains of Rathmorgan Fort, on top of the mountain, can be seen from the road below.

Brian Rua U'Cearbhain, from Inver, is remembered in folklore as the Prophet of Erris.

The small village of Glencastle has some large mounds, in the narrow valley, which are not naturally occurring. They can be seen on the right hand side, close to the roadside on the approach to Belmullet from the east. These have never been archaeologically investigated. Legend has it that this was the old gateway into the Mullet: a toll had to be paid by each traveller who passed through (or the traveller was never be seen again). In the recent past, Glencastle Valley has been severely scarred by quarrying.

In the tussle between archaeology and economics, progress always wins.

Dún Chaocháin and **Dún Chiortáin** are named after two 'giant' brothers who live on in the folklore of the area. They each had a Dún or promontory fort and folktales relate that they shared kitchen utensils, which they used to throw across **Sruth Fhada Chonn** (Bay of the Long Hound), which divided their quarters. It would be a wise person who could see beneath the allusions and humour to explain the real truth about Ciortán and Caochán. 'Caochán' literally means 'the poor-sighted little person' and thereupon hangs another tale. Here, the 'án' suffix is pejorative.

[V] Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends (Quakers): the Barony of Erris, Co Mayo

Import of the Letters of Edmund Richards, of the Steam-ship 'Scourge'

Belmullet, County of Mayo, 6th of Third-month, 1847

I went on shore and contacted the Relief Committee. The Roman Catholic clergyman is the secretary and the Protestant Minister the chairman. The Committee do not work well together. I could not find that any distribution of food had been made. One soup kitchen was operating, in which an inferior article of soup was sold at 1d. per quart. [This evidence of a casual attitude by Religious, to the welfare of dying people, is cautionary. However, folk memory bears it out.]

Two iron boilers landed at Killybegs from the 'Albert' still remained on the rocks, though all acknowledged them much to be wanted, to supply soup to multitudes of destitutes.

Blacksod Bay, off Belmullet, 10th of Third-month, 1847

The fearful state of starvation and destitution in the Barony of Erris, is such as no language can portray. The population is 30,000, of whom 18,000 have no means of subsistence. Fever and dysentery, with dropsy, are prevalent. I saw families who had subsisted for weeks on the flesh of dead horses and people numberless, in all the stages of starvation, down to that of the last stage of life. Many of the starving objects are many miles distant from soup establishments and, on account of their exhausted state, they are unable to walk to them.

Some are reduced to that state, that they are unable to walk two miles to obtain food. Here, as elsewhere, no crops have been sown. There is no seed, or very little of it, and generally no means to purchase it.

Clifden, County of Galway, 13th of Third-month, 1847.

I have this day been with the local Relief Committee, which appears to work well. Erris and Connemara are equally distressed. To particularise would fill sheets of paper. Dysentery and low fever are everywhere prevalent. No preparation for cropping has been made. There is scarcely any seed to sow the land. The people are heartless and depressed and in many instances lie down and die by whole families.

[VI] Acts of Kindness in our Hour of Need

A)



Moved by news of starvation in Ireland, Choctaw Amerinds (Oklahoma) took up a collection for the starving Irish, in 1847. Despite their own deprivations, they put together \$170 and sent it to a US famine relief organization. As the Irish already in America learned of the unfolding horror, countless people sent money and ship tickets to assist friends and family. Others formed relief committees to solicit donations from the general public.

The Famine was more than a natural disaster. English colonial policy, before and during the crisis, ensured that the potato blight would lead to a reduction in population.

President Andrew Jackson (of Planter stock in the Six Counties), 14 years before the Famine, seized the fertile lands of the so-called five ‘civilized’ tribes (Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, and Choctaw), forcing them into a 500-mile walk to Oklahoma (the Trail of Tears). Of the 21,000 Choctaws then alive, more than half perished from exposure, malnutrition, and disease. The Choctaws had been allies of the then General Jackson, in his 1812 campaign against the British in Nouvelles Orléans. Amerinds often said that the White Man spoke with a ‘forked tongue’.

Amerind solidarity came from their identifying with the loss of life, language and land suffered by the two peoples, at the hands of the same enemy. In 1990, Choctaw officials participated in the annual County Mayo commemoration of the Famine. The plaque on Dublin’s Mansion House honours the Choctaw Nation: “Their humanity calls us to remember the millions of human beings throughout our world today who die of hunger and hunger-related illness in a world of plenty.”



The Stags of Broadhaven Bay, with Benwee Head in the foreground.

B)

Moved by stories telling of famine in Ireland, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, **Abdul Majid**, sent £1,000 and three ships laden with food, to Drogheda, in 1847. He was a man of the character of Salāh ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb (بوي أ ن ب فس وي ني دل ا ح الص) in the 12th century. A film of the event is to be made, both here and in Turkey, by the director Omar Sarikaya.

The Sultan would have provided ten times more money but Queen Victoria would have him send less than the £2,000, which she had given. It was to make up for the shortfall in cash that he sent the ships carrying food. The Sultan’s generosity is remembered with the plaque in the West Court Hotel in Drogheda, unveiled in 1995.

LSSR Laudator Temporis Acti

18/Feabhra/2012

Sources of interest:

i) <http://visiterris.ie/about-3/history-of-erris/>

ii) <http://celticclothing.com/mm5/irish-american/cc07-03-irish-famine.php>