
NORTH MAYO

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BOOKS



COUNTY MAYO

an historical overview

MAG nEo na SACSAN...

Mayo takes its county name from the Irish language *Mag nEo na Sacsan*, meaning 'The Plain of Yew Trees of The Saxons'. The origins of this name lie in the 7th century AD. St Colman of Lindisfarne, an Irish monk from Iona, and Bishop of North England, brought a settlement of monks to Ireland to form a monastery. The majority of these monks were Saxons who found it difficult to live with the more easy-going Irish monks. To find a new location for the Saxons, St Colman travelled from their original place (Inisbofin Island off Connemara). It is storied that he slept one night in a plain of yew trees and dreamed that the local ruler would give him a site for the monastery. (This divination by dreams was much used by the druids - early Christian leaders adopted these practices for their own use). Colman's dream turned out to be true and the monastery was founded in 668AD. After Colman's death the region developed as a major monastic centre. The English historian Bede wrote in 730AD: "Mayo... it maintains an excellent society of monks, who are gathered there from the province of the English, and live by the labour of their hands, after the example of the venerable fathers, under a rule and canonical abbot in much contingency and singleness of life".

...AND THE MODERN COUNTY

Mayo, as a county, owes its origins to the 1570's when Sir Henry Sidney, Queen Elizabeth's 'Lord Deputy' decided to divide Connacht into English-style counties or shires. The purpose was to undermine the native rulers and make it easier to impose an organised administration upon what had become chaotic. Traditional rulers held some areas, Norman settlers 'gone native' dominated others. Two different legal systems, Irish and English, vied for dominance. Rebel bands and

clans, driven out of other parts of Ireland by the English colonization, were moving into Mayo...and fighting with the existing populations. Over all hung the threat, from the English point of view, of Spanish interference. However, in the event, Sidney's effort to anglicise Mayo failed. In the next century large numbers of disbanded Cromwellian soldiers were 'granted' land in Mayo, this land being largely seized from the descendants of earlier settlers! The newcomers included the Brownes, presentday holders of the British titles 'Lord Sligo and Altamont', and families such as Gore, Percival, Webb, Watts and Palmer. (The historic 'Cill Aille' house in Killala was a Gore 'Big House', as was the house opposite known as 'The Lodge'. Palmerstown, to the west of Killala, takes its name from the Palmers.) Interestingly these and other Cromwellian names are still found amongst the wealthy and powerful families of Ireland, whilst the names of those displaced are found among the poorer sections of the community.

However, from this period on, as England prospered, Mayo likewise. The new landlords did not spend all their time "hanging and flogging and evicting tenants"; they did build roads and towns and harbours and encouraged trade. Up to the end of the Napoleonic Wars there was a general relative prosperity. But after that, collapse. The economic woes were compounded by the famine of the 1840's when up to 250,000 people in Mayo died of hunger. The population went into decline and the always traditional emigration became a way of life. Neither the reforms brought about by the Land League of Mayo's Michael Davitt nor the subsequent national independence has significantly halted this decline. Participation in the EU has perhaps compounded problems. After initial boosts to incomes, agriculture has become more difficult. Policies have encouraged gross overstocking and erosion of already marginal land. Forestry threatens land tenure and settlement patterns. Improved communications have destroyed more industry than has been created. Mayo generally, in common with the rest of the Western seaboard, suffers from a neglect and lack of investment from central government. These facts are all part of the harsh reality. And the weather is not great either! Yes, on a bad day Mayo is very bad indeed. But then, on a good day Mayo is beautiful. Quiet, remote, peaceful, far from the chaos, pollution and decadence of the rest of Europe. This is the place to be, or to visit. Perhaps not as fashionable or trendy as other parts of western Ireland, and definitely the better for that. After all the centuries of suffering, Mayo's wildness and remoteness has finally become an asset.

USING THIS BOOK

The listings in the following pages were originally published as part of Morrigan Book Company's series, *Heritage Maps of Ireland*. These were three separate map/guides, based on the North Mayo areas of Tirawley, Erris, and The Mullet Peninsula. This arrangement has been maintained and thus the book is divided into three sections. In each of these is reproduced the map that was used in the original publication. At this book size/format its use would best be described as a 'rough indicator' of location. The intention is that the modern user will rely on more modern maps and/or the technology now available. The *Ordnance Survey of Ireland* is best port of call for ad-free and interactive online maps:
<http://map.geohive.ie/mapviewer.html>

Finding the locations will not be difficult but, as of ever, seeking out 'local knowledge' can always help. People are helpful, and conversations will usually extend well beyond "take the first turn on the left...or right".

Certain particular locations and topics are dealt with separately within the listings.

KILLALA, pages 15-17
(The small town where
the author lives)

WESTPORT, page 51
(And thereabouts, Clew Bay
and Croagh Patrick)

BALLINA, pages 8-9
(The large town where he goes
shopping)

THE WIDE OPEN SPACES,
pages 21-22
(Nature reserves protected areas)

BALLYCASTLE, page 11-12
(Stopping off towards Céide Fields)

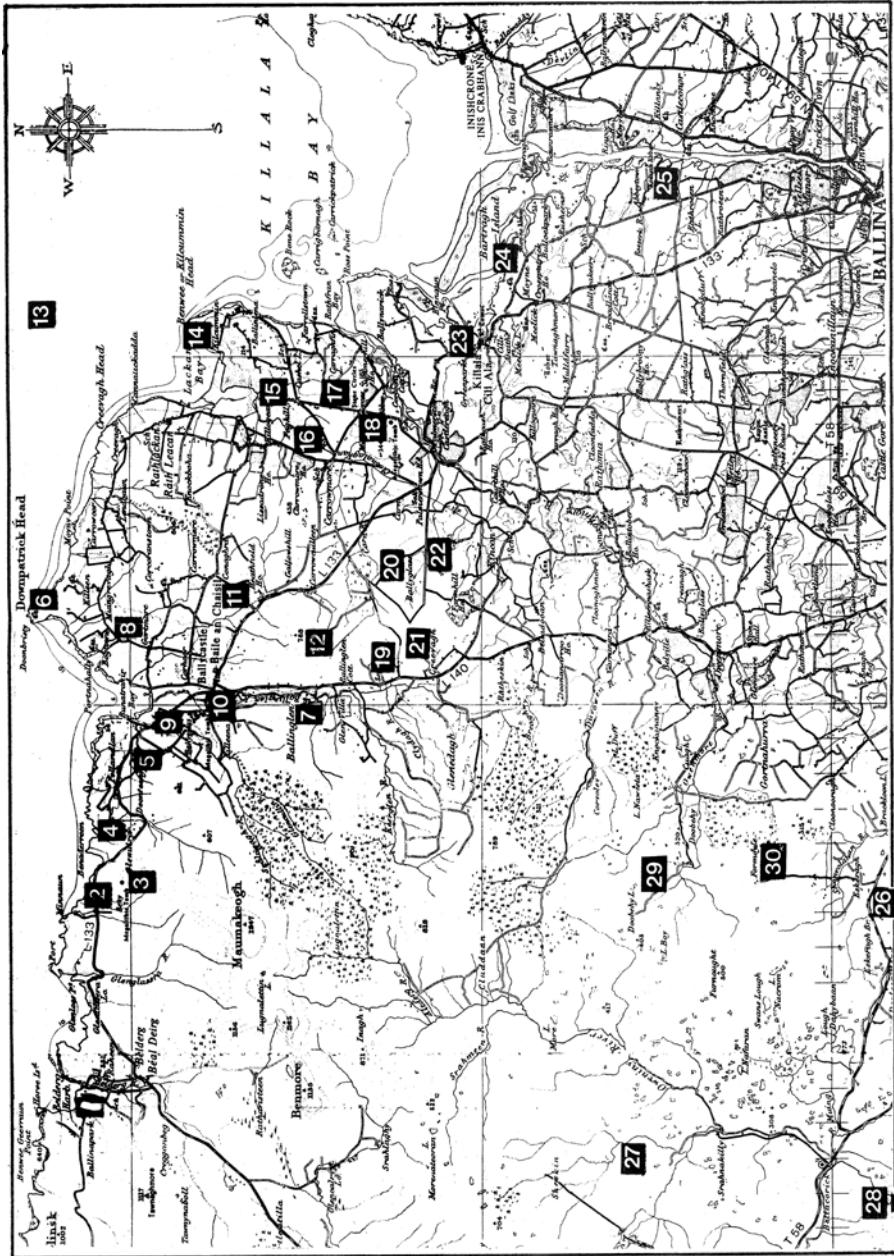
GENERAL HUMBERT, pages 24-25
(The French invasion of 1798)

BELMULLET, page 40
(A long way out, but well worth it)

BALLYCROY NATIONAL PARK ,
page 28
(What it's really all about)

BINGHAMSTOWN, page 48
(Even further out!)

NORTH MAYO



MAP 1

AREA ONE
is that anciently known as
TIRAWLEY

This is a region of North Mayo (formerly a 'barony' in the colonial administration system) which takes its name from Amolgaid, a 5th century ruler. Anciently, Tirawley is part of the kingdom of Hy-Fiachradh. In mythology Fiachra was son of Lir, the ocean God. He was turned into a swan along with his brothers and sisters. In slightly more modern times Hy-Fiachrach was dominated by the O'Dowd family, many rulers being drawn from them. William O'Dowd was Bishop of Killala in 1350 AD. Significant here also were the Hy-Each 'tribe of the Moy'. These are the modern-day McHales and are descended from Laoghair, grandson of Daithi, last non-Christian High King of Ireland. Barretts and Lynotts were important Norman families. A dispute between these two led to the coming of the Burkes, another Norman family. The dispute arose when the Barretts, after overcoming their rivals, gave all the Lynott menfolk the choice between being blinded or castrated. The Lynotts chose blinding, reckoning that thus at least they would have descendants to avenge them. The Lynotts were all blinded and, in due course, their descendants did avenge them by introducing Burkes (as 'pests', the manuscripts say!) into the Barrett territories. In this way the Burkes achieved dominance until dispossession by newer settlers in Cromwellian times.

FACING: Yes, The map is, shrunk within the confines of this book, pretty hard to read. But, as mentioned, it's there merely to give the traveller a preliminary notion. It is centred on the town of Ballina, (top right corner of map) GPS 54.1149 - 9.1551

BALLINA

This town was established on the west bank of the River Moy by settlers in the 1720's. The earlier town was at Ardnaree, on the east side of the river. Formerly called Tullach na Fairsciona (Lookout-Hill), the Ardnaree name derives from the Irish translated as 'Hill of Executions'. Unlike Ballina, this is an ancient settlement and the site of a castle erected in 1240 AD by Anglo-Normans. Now vanished, this castle was situated near the present 1768 AD Church Of Ireland. This strategic location was site of much struggle over the centuries. Nearby up to 5000 Scottish mercenaries and their families, in the service of the native Irish, were massacred by the English Richard Bingham in 1586AD. The importance of Ballina-Ardnaree was its location at a site on the River Moy where it could be forded. The river was only properly bridged in 1836, the quays being built at the same time. The railway arrived in 1873. ESB (national) electricity was supplied in 1934, an earlier limited local system had existed since 1890.

Modern Ballina is the largest town in Mayo, and one of the three largest in Connacht. Ballina is an important commercial, industrial and tourism centre for the region. It is also the railway freight hub for the wider area. Just a few of the places of historic interest in and about the town are mentioned below.

DOLMEN OF THE FOUR MAOLS: A massive neolithic structure taking its name from the story of the 'Four Maols' who were executed (at Ardnaree) after murdering the 6th. century Bishop of Kilmoremoymy. He, Cellach, is 'said' to have also been 'heir to the throne'. Folklore has it that the Maols are buried at this dolmen but this is unlikely. As is much of the story itself.

Location: behind the railway station.

THE FONT: A drinking font dating from Victorian times. The nearby Court House was erected in 1840 at a cost of £1000. It is described as a polychromatic monument erected by public subscription...to the memory of George James Vaughan Jackson [1860-98] of Carramore.

Location: Crossroads entering town from Dublin Road.

ST MUREDACH'S CATHEDRAL: Work started on this building in 1827. The altar was purchased in Rome in 1832 by the noted Archbishop McHale. The spire was completed in 1855, the organ and High Altar Window in 1874. The river opposite here is a noted salmon fishing spot in season.

Location: hard to miss.

AUGUSTINIAN ABBEY: Established by the Augustinians in or around 1400, The Augustinian House of St Mary of Ardnaree The ruins now to be seen date from 1427. The Abbey was founded by the O'Dubhda family of Tিরeragh (the region on this side of the River Moy) and their leader Muircheartach O'Dubhda (d.1402) may be buried here.

Location: Adjoining/part of the Cathedral grounds.

WOLFE TONE MONUMENT: A monument erected in 1898 to mark the anniversary of the 1798 Rebellion and to honour one of it's leaders.

Location: On the roadside between Lidl and Dunnes Stores supermarkets

BOHERNASUP: A road taking its name from the Irish meaning Road of The Straw; along here the inhabitants lit burning torches of straw (cliars,in the Irish) to guide in the French-Irish troops in 1798. Refer page xx here.

Location: An area uphill from above.

ST PATRICK'S HOLY WELL: associated with St.Patrick, who is said to have baptized a local prince, Eochaid, here. Much frequented by inhabitants in former days, now quiet. A Calvary Shrine has been erected at the spot. A rock on the opposite side of the road is regarded as a site from where Patrick preached.

Location: At the other end of Bohernasup, on the Killala Road.



There's a lot more! A free leaflet town map is widely available in shops and there is a full service Tourist Information Office in Pearse Street opposite the Jackie Clarke Museum...which is a huge collection of very interesting Irish historical material...and has a nice garden, well worth a wander. <http://www.clarkecollection.ie/>

Beyond Ballina, a listing of locations to consider

(1–4 on Map 1) These locations are within the major Ceide Fields area and are dealt with separately on page 19 here.

(5 on Map 1) DOONFEENY: The original (before Ballycastle) centre of settlement in this area. A large 5m high standing stone stands here in the remnants of a circular enclosure. On this stone is carved the distinctive design known locally as the 'Doonfeeny Cross'. Lore has it that this stone is on alignments with clefts in neighbouring hills and solar positions. Around here are the remains of an early church, many early gravemarkers and a cemetery still in use. The road bisecting this cemetery is a modern (19th century) military construction. GPS: 54.304784, -9.411179

RATH UI DHUBHDA: (Rath of O'Dowd) A large ring fort close to (5) above. Downhill from the rath there is an underground stream which was formerly accessible and used for curative purposes.

(6 on Map 1) DOWNPATRICK HEAD: A striking headland, standing 126ft. above the sea, on which there are ruins of an early church, and also an ancient stone cross and holy well. These locations were associated with the ancient Lugnasa ceremonies held in August. Lug, a Gaelic sun god, was one of the principal gods of the Tuatha de Danann. Lugnasa ceremonies survived into Christian times as pilgrimages, usually associated with a local saint. Downpatrick Head was visited by pilgrims on the last Sunday of July, 'Garland Sunday'. GPS 54.322535, -9.345520

DOONBRISTY: A 'stack', (headland cut off by the sea), beside (6) above. Accessible by helicopter, there are here the remains of a promontory fort. The name can be translated as meaning 'broken fort'.

(7 on Map 1) BALLINGLEN: Castle ruins and pillarstone.
GPS 54.259068, -9.382892

(8 on Map 1) CABINTOWN: 54.300458, -9.353800 Megalithic site.
GPS 54.300458, -9.353800

(9 on Map 1) BALLYKNOCK: Megalithic site, 'portal dolmen' remains.
GPS 54.284699, -9.418137