

Murder. Mystery. Maam.

130 years ago Myles Joyce was wrongly executed for his alleged part in the Maamtrasna Murders. Next month, he will be recalled at a commemorative event in Galway. CRÓNA ESLER reports.



An illustration of Myles Joyce from the book, Maamtrasna, the murders and mystery.



The ruins of a house belonging to one of the men arrested in connection with the Maamtrasna Murders in 1882.



A cross in the car park beside Galway Cathedral in memory of all the people who died or were put to death at Galway Gaol.



A solitary tree stands on the site of John Joyce's house, where the Maamtrasna Murders took place in 1882.

THE conviction and subsequent hanging of Myles Joyce 130 years ago will be recalled at a commemorative event in Galway next month. Myles was one of 10 men charged in connection with the slaughter of a family in a remote valley on the Mayo-Galway border in 1882. The case, which became known as the Maamtrasna Murders, was debated across the length and breadth of Ireland in the years that followed and was discussed and examined in the media all across the English-speaking world.

It is largely accepted that Myles was 100 per cent innocent of the crime but even when this fact was brought to the attention of the authorities prior to his execution, it was ignored and Myles was put to death outside Galway Gaol, on the site where Galway Cathedral now stands. His body – like all the others who died or were put to death at the Galway Gaol – was buried on site and remains under the tarmac in the Cathedral car park.

A native Irish speaker from the Gaeltacht, Myles had no English. Charged with the multiple murders, he was brought before Dublin's Green Street Court and defended by a solicitor and barristers who spoke no Irish. The evidence Myles offered in Irish was ignored, while evidence which might have helped his defence was withheld. In addition,

informers gave false evidence against him.

The judge and jury who convicted him had no Irish and the jury deliberated for less than six minutes to decide on his guilt before sentence of death was passed. On November 13, 1882, the sentence was passed down and exactly 130 years later – last Tuesday – details of the commemorative event were announced at Galway Cathedral.

The initiative is being jointly organised by the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga, Galway City Museum and Conradh na Gaeilge. It follows on from a campaign in the British Houses of Parliament – led by Lord Alton and Lord Avebury – to persuade the authorities in the UK to review the case of Myles Joyce; to declare him the victim of a miscarriage of justice; and to concede he was falsely convicted and executed.

The event itself will take place on Saturday, December 15 – another important anniversary and the date Myles was hanged exactly 130 years earlier. The day will begin with a Mass 'as gaeilge' in Galway Cathedral in memory of Myles, followed by the laying of wreaths on the spot where the gallows on which he was hanged stood and where his body lies buried beneath the tarmac.

Later, a symposium in Galway City museum will hear contributions from historian Professor Gearóid

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Ó Tuathaigh and Lord Alton from the British House of Lords – whose mother was a native Irish speaker from the Tuar Mhic Éadaigh Gaeltacht, bordering Maamtrasna. There will also be a contribution from Johnny Joyce from Dublin – a descendant of the Joyce family whose murder in Maamtrasna led to the conviction of Myles Joyce. An exhibition, readings from historical material and an RTE film about the Maamtrasna murders will also feature on the day, while further elements of the event will be announced closer to the date.

Of course, Myles was not the only one to come before the courts. Of the 10 initially charged, two allegedly became informers and gave evidence against neighbours and friends, in fear of execution or in expectation of reward. Of the eight convicted, three were hanged but it is generally accepted that Myles was innocent.

Five others were sentenced to penal servitude for life and two of those died in prison. Four of those prisoners were also believed to be totally innocent. In 1902, the three surviving prisoners – two brothers and a nephew of Myles Joyce – were freed, having spent 20 years in jail. However, official state records portray them all as convicted murderers.

Speaking ahead of the December 15 event, An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, said

Myles Joyce's case, historically, was one of most significant and distressing cases concerning the denial of language rights.

“At a time when the public's language rights are confirmed in law, we shouldn't forget cases such as that of Myles Joyce which remind us of the difficulty of getting justice under the law in the past if you didn't have English,” he said.

Breandán Ó hEaghra and the team at Galway City Museum are pleased to be involved in the commemorative event. “What happened to Myles Joyce is part of the history of the city, the county and the country. Like any museum, we have an important role to play in presenting that history to the current generation and conserving these memories for future generations,” he noted.

Peadar Mac Fhianachadh from Conradh na Gaeilge said it was difficult now to imagine the injustice suffered by Myles Joyce and others.

“This Gaeltacht case led to a furious debate which raged for many years in the Westminster Parliament and was one of the reasons William Gladstone's Liberal Government fell in 1885 when the Irish MPs under Charles Stewart Parnell withdrew its support and sided with the opposition Tories under the leadership of Randolph Churchill,” he said.

AN INJUSTICE THAT ECHOES DOWN THE AGES

THE MURDERS



MAAMTRASNA is a Gaeltacht area located on the shores of Lough Mask on the border between Galway and Mayo. Up until August 17, 1882, it had never been in the media spotlight. Locals went about their business in the tranquil and picturesque spot and Irish was – for the most part – their first and only language.

The tragic event which became known as the Maamtrasna Murders took place on that fateful August evening 130 years ago when a family of five were slaughtered in their mountainside cottage – John Joyce, his [second] wife Bridget, his daughter Peigi, and his mother Margaret were murdered. John's son, Michael, was badly wounded and died the following day as a result of his injuries. The youngest of the family, Patsy, was also injured but survived. The only other member of the family to survive the tragedy was his son Martin who was absent from the home as he was in service in Clonbur at the time.

THE MOTIVE

The authorities claimed John Joyce was treasurer of one of the local secret societies, Ribbonmen/Fenians, which opposed the landlords at that time. The authorities suggested the household was attacked because John was alleged to have misappropriated money belonging to the association.

However, a more common theory was that John Joyce habitually stole his neighbours' sheep from the hills and that this was the prime motive for the attack. Others suggested his mother Margaret was the principal target because she had allegedly informed the authorities about the location in Lough Mask where the bodies of two missing employees of a landlord had been dumped. Still others believed the murders related to the overly-close friendship between John's teenager daughter Peigi and a member of the RIC – a relationship that wouldn't have been acceptable at that time.

THE ARRESTS

Ten men from the surrounding area were arrested and charged – Myles Joyce, his brothers Martin and Páidín agus his nephew, Tom from the townland of Ceapach na Creiche; Pat, Michael and John Casey from the same area; Pat Joyce from Seanbhaille Chathail; Tom Casey from Gleann Sáil; and Anthony Philbin from Ceapach Dubh.

THE TRIAL

Although most of the men spoke only Irish, they were tried in Dublin before a judge and jury without a word of Irish. Two of them, allegedly from fear of execution or in expectation of reward, became informers and gave evidence against their neighbours. The first three who were tried, Pat Joyce, Pat ‘Pádraig Shéamuis’ Casey and Myles Joyce were found guilty and sentenced to death.

The other five decided – on the advice of their priest, Father Micheál Mac Aoidh from Clonbur – that they would plead guilty in order to avoid the hangman. They were sentenced to death but the

queen's deputy in Ireland, Earl Spenser, commuted the sentences to penal servitude for life. It was reported that Queen Victoria herself wished all eight to be hanged.

THE EXECUTION

The three who were to be hanged were brought back to Galway Jail to the prison that then stood on the site of Galway Cathedral. Shortly before they were hanged, two of them admitted separately that they themselves were in fact guilty but that Myles Joyce was innocent. This appeared to be insufficient for the Earl Spenser to postpone or revoke the execution and he confirmed in a telegram to the prison's governor on the eve of the hanging that “the law must take its course”. The three men were hanged on the morning of December 15, 1882, and their bodies were buried in the grounds of the prison, in what is now the Cathedral carpark.

On his way to the scaffold that morning, it is reported that Myles Joyce said: “Feicfidh mé Iosa Críost ar ball beag – crochadh eisean san éagóir chomh maith...Ara, tá mé ag imeacht...Go bhfóire Dia ar mo bhean agus a cúigeir dílleachtaí.” [“I will see Jesus Christ in a short while – he too was unjustly hanged ... I am going ...God help my wife and her five orphans”].

William Marwood's (the hangman) efforts didn't go according to plan; that Myles Joyce died from strangulation rather than hanging; and that his death was slow and painful.

THE TRUTH

Two years later, one of the informers who had given sworn evidence against Myles Joyce, presented himself before the Archbishop of Tuam, Dr MacEvilly and the congregation during a Confirmation ceremony in Tourmakeady Church. He confessed that the evidence he had given under oath had been false and that there was no basis to his contention to the court that Myles Joyce was involved with the murders. The British authorities refused the full inquiry into the case sought by the Archbishop of Tuam, and by journalists and politicians, including Charles Stewart Parnell.

As more information came to light in subsequent years. It appeared that evidence which could have helped prove the innocence of some of the men, had been concealed from the defence. Allegations were made that the authorities tried, in as far as possible, to restrict the number of Catholics on the jury. It also appeared that evidence in Irish was ignored and that very little of it was translated into English in court. A policeman had been assigned the duty of interpreting the words of the accused men to English.

THE INNOCENT MEN

It was widely accepted that one of those in prison was guilty of taking part in the murders – along with two of those that were hanged – but it was also believed that the other four prisoners were as innocent as Myles Joyce. It is also thought that three others who did take part in the murders – including the person who planned and directed them – were never charged.

The Maamtrasna case was debated the length and breadth of Ireland and throughout the English-speaking world. There were long debates in the Houses of Parliament in Westminster – one lasted four days. A refusal to hold a public inquiry was among the reasons that the Liberal Government of William Gladstone fell in 1885 when the Irish MPs, under the leadership of Parnell, defected and supported the opposition Tories under the leadership of Randolph Churchill. That coalition was dubbed ‘The Maamtrasna Alliance’.

THE JOURNEY HOME

Two of the five men convicted of the crime died in prison and the other three – two brothers and a nephew of Myles Joyce – spent 20 years in custody. Their wives appealed for their release to the queen's deputy, Lord Dudley and his wife when the couple visited Connemara in 1902. When the men were at last released on September 24, 1902, they were put on a train from Dublin to Ballinrobe. They walked the final 18 miles home to Ceapach na Creiche under the shadow of Maamtrasna, in the darkness and rain.