

# Place-names as Memorials in Two East-Galway Towns

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In a comparative analysis of place-names in two rural East-Galway towns – namely Ballinasloe and Loughrea, there is a mixture of what one might call ‘colonial’ and nationalist names. This may indicate that there has been a difficulty in attempting to negotiate a newer identity for some towns, or perhaps just a nostalgia for the older name and its association with families and loved ones now gone.

**Ballinasloe**, located between Athlone town and Galway City, derives its’ name from ‘Béal Átha na Sluaigh’ or the ‘ford of the mouth of the hostings / gatherings (a reference to the gatherings that took place in medieval times along the ‘highway’ that was the local river). At the time of the surveys of John O’Donovan (a renowned Irish scholar whose work was the mainstay of the first major Ordnance Survey in Ireland) in the mid to late 1830s, streets and lanes were recorded such as Soldier’s Row, which was named after a nearby military garrison and Tea Lane, which had previously been known as Back-street and which is believed to derived the name Tea Lane from tea meetings held in the Primitive Methodist Chapel in the lane.

Other names appended to lanes were believed to have derived from the business families who built the dwellings within them. These included: Rutledge’s Lane, Piper’s Lane, Ivers’ Lane, Hopson’s Lane and Reeves Lane. Another lane with wretched dwellings was known sardonically as Paradise Row. Dunlo Street, one of the main thoroughfares of the town of Ballinasloe, was based on the older name Dun Leodha, but at the time of its bestowal, the street name was based on the title of Viscount Dunlo, the heir to the earldom of Clancarty. The ‘Clancarty’ family were more properly known as the Le Poer Trench family, of Huegenot origins and each Lord Clancarty would be the predominant landlord in Ballinasloe for over a century.

Even in 1946, when the Clancarty family were long gone and the local Gaelic League took the bold move of renaming thirteen of Ballinasloe’s streets and avenues after nationalist figures, they opted for conventional appellations rather than names

associated with for instance, the 1916 Rising. These included William McNevin, Patrick Sarsfield, Robert Emmet and Michael Davitt. McNevin was a famed physician and patriot who became known as the 'father of American chemistry' and who was born near the village of Aughrim, where the great battle had taken place in 1691. Sarsfield, Emmet and Davitt were all Irish revolutionaries.

Of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, Eamon Ceannt's name was the only one mooted which was associated with 1916, but was ultimately not chosen and it would be 1966 before it attached to the railway and bus terminal in Galway city. As an aside, the names chosen had little discernible impact on the local populace and to this day older residents will refer not to Davitt-place but to Reeves-lane, the latter being the older name. This is despite the fact that Reeves-lane was completely deserted by 1950 when the last residents abandoned their old homes for new housing.

Furthermore, when this writer questioned a sample of ten locals on the location of 'Hymany Street', another of the names chosen in 1946, only one of those interviewed was aware of its existence. Hymany Street was also the only place-name with old Gaelic connotations as it was derived from the Uí Máine, one of the largest and kingdoms within medieval Ireland and encompassing much of Connacht.

The only local nationalist figure to have his name appended to a civic artery was Matt Harris who had died in 1890. Harris Road runs past the Fair Green from lower Brackernagh to Sarsfield Road. To most in Ballinasloe, however, it is known as 'The Burma Road', a name bestowed by local whimsy at the time of its laying. In renaming the streets, the local Gaelic League went to the other extreme and insisted that the name be appended in Irish without an accompanying translation on wall-plaques. This was only rectified about 30 years ago and led to general confusion on the part of the many non-Irish speaking visitors to Ballinasloe. The reasons for the longevity of the older 'colonial' names is, in this writer's opinion, due to the fact that Ballinasloe was a town of mostly convinced unionists up until the 1916 Rising and the execution of its leaders. This was stated in 1966, at an event commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1916 Insurrection, by the late Mr Paddy Carroll, who was the first man to read the Proclamation of Independence publicly in 1918, for which he was arrested.

**Loughrea** derives its' name from 'Baile Locha Riach' or 'the town of the grey lake'. Loughrea is an interesting comparison as the predominant landlord was the earl of Clanrickard, descended from the De Burgo family who came to Ireland during the Anglo-Norman invasion in the late twelfth century. The Clanrickard family were largely absentee landlords whereas the earls of Clancarty mostly lived in Ballinasloe until the 1870s. In addition, the Clanrickard seat was in Portumna, not Loughrea which was under the supervision of a seneschal or a steward appointed by Clanrickard. Barrack Street derives from the old cavalry barracks which was later configured into what is now known as the Temperance Hall. Barrack Street had been known as O'Finnerty Street, in memory of Peter O'Finnerty, a United Irishman who was a native of the town. The name did not stick, however, and it reverted to Barrack Street. Pigott Street is named in memory of a colonial military figure, believed to have been a Colonel Pigott from a prominent Protestant family while Dunkellin Street is derived from Lord Dunkellin, the title bestowed on Ulick Canning De Burgh of the house of Clanrickard. The area now known as 'The Hill' was once called Weaver's Lane due to the cultural activity that once took place there; Dolphin Street, named after a prominent Catholic family, was once called Cabbage Lane, as produce was sold in the lane. Bróg-maker Lane became Moore Street, though no source pins down the exact 'Moore' it is derived from. Nunnery Lane, deriving its name from the Order of contemplative Carmelite nuns who lived there for some three centuries until recently, became Mount Carmel Crescent in the 1970s. Only two areas in Loughrea town have nationalist names – Mellows Terrace and Donnellan Drive, the former derived from Liam Mellows, a well-known Republican, and the latter from Brendan Donnellan, a local who died in the 1916 Rising, aged 18. The name Gallows Hill referred to the high ground on which Mount Carmel Monastery was later built and on which executions once took place. Bride Street takes its name from St Brigid and a now ruined church building which once held a reliquary of the saint.

Observations: A similar situation is to be found in other towns in East Galway with place-names being a mixture of the colonial, the religious and some nationalistic. One must move out of the urban areas and into the rural parishes that form the hinterlands of the towns to find place-names that resonate with the Gaelic past. Plenty of opportunities arose during the building boom of recent years to name areas after local figures of note. Instead, builders went for bland geographical associations

and this writer is aware, for instance, of an area known as River View where one could not see the local river from the highest window in the estate, even with a set of powerful binoculars.

Local heritage groups have a valuable role to play in examining local place-names, making recommendations about possible changes or at the very least, ensuring that the full history of each name is known by local residents. It is also recommended that local cultural groups avail of new technology to ensure that QR codes be inserted on plaques which can aid the creation of virtual heritage trails. The use of this technology can quickly supply visitors with the former names of places and streets and would be a boost to cultural tourism and to members of the local diaspora seeking out ancestral homes. Aside from the cultural and educational benefits, this would also be an important contribution to local economies.

## **Glossary**

**To derive from** – originate from, to come from something

**Medieval** – relating to the Middle Ages (the historical period between I AD and XV<sup>th</sup> century)

**Lane** – a small street

**Garrison** - a group of troops stationed in a fortress or town to defend it.

**To append** – to add something (e.g. a name) to an object

**Dwelling** – a place of residence, house

**Sardonically** - humorously, but in an unkind way that shows you do not respect someone or something

**Thoroughfare** - a road or path forming a route between two places

**Bestowal** - the act of giving something as an honour or a gift

**To bestow** - confer or present (an honour, name or gift)

**Heir** - a person legally entitled to the property or rank of another on that person's death

**Earldom** - the territory governed by an earl (a British nobleman ranking above a viscount and below a marquess).

**Appellation** - a name or title

**Conventional** – traditional, well-known

**Revolutionary** - a person who engages in political revolution.

**To moot** – to raise (a question), to suggest

**Discernible** – noticeable; detectable

**Whimsy** - a playful or amusing quality a sense of humour or playfulness

**To rectify** – to put right; correct.

**Predominant** – main

**Absentee** - a person who is expected to be in a particular place but who is not there.

**Seneschal** - a governor or other administrative or judicial officer

**Reliquary** - a container that is used to hold holy objects (called relics)

**Parish** - a small administrative district typically having its own church and a priest or pastor.

**To resonate with** - to remind someone of something; to be similar to what someone thinks or believes

**Bland** – uninteresting

**To avail of** - to use; to take advantage of

**Diaspora** - people who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland.