



Five Centuries of 'The Land' in Irish Society

Sligo Field Club's 9th annual conference, "The Rise and Fall of Landed Estate in the Northwest" will treat of the place of 'the land' in Ireland of the northwest over five centuries.

Land and cattle had been the riches of Gaelic Lordship into the 16th century when Tudor ambition began to undermine that lordship; undermined by the cost of military obligations and fines associated with 'surrender and regrant', resultant mortgaged property, confiscation following rebellion and the transfer to the crown of lands previously gifted to monasteries and churches.

Such changes were accompanied by the arrival of Elizabethan officials and adventurers who, on receiving grants of or on purchasing confiscated properties, formed the basis for the almost total transfer of Gaelic lands through the 17th century. Despite restoration of some confiscated lands with the return of the Stuarts, any trace of Gaelic lordship was practically eliminated following the Williamite Wars of the late 17th century. In Sligo the Taaffe family and the only Catholic barrister in Ireland, Terence McDonagh, were the sole Catholic owners of land.

New owners consolidated possession through the 18th century, with legal and social structures that made impossible its re-possession. Local and national administration was held exclusively in the hands of the new landowners, their confidence reflected in the consolidation of great estates and the construction of fine houses.

However, the 19th century came with many threats to the viability of such possession. The ravages of the Great Famine, the subsequent loss of rents and, in not a few instances, extravagant spending brought about the collapse of many estates and sale through the Landed Estates Court system. Growing agrarian agitation by the National Land League and a series of land acts were a preliminary to the near revolutionary repercussions of Wyndham's Irish Land Act of 1903. By 1909, 70% and more of Sligo acreage had been purchased by its tenants.

Much of Sligo, for three centuries the possession of the descendants of English adventurers and conquerors, reverted by purchase to the descendants not of the Gaelic lords but of their retainers.