

THE BACKGROUND TO EMIGRATION FROM MAYO IN THE 19TH CENTURY.

by GERARD M. DELANEY.

As far back as the early 18th century some wealthier Mayo people sought to enhance their fortunes or find adventure in the United States, South America and throughout the British Empire. Among these were two Mayomen who signed the American Declaration of Independence, one who received a French title and another who founded the Argentinian navy.

THE ECONOMY OF MAYO IN THE 18TH CENTURY

For the vast majority who stayed at home, the 1700s were relatively prosperous and peaceful times - when compared with the upheavals of the previous two centuries and what was to follow in the next century. Despite the political changes of the 1600s rural Ireland had, partially, a feudal-based economy. The social order had two classes; landowners and peasants. About 95% of the population fell into the latter category. The landowning class had a number of different origins; Elizabethian English, Cromwellian English, Williamite English and Scots, Native Irish and Norman-Irish. The peasantry of Mayo was Irish, Scottish and Norman-Irish in origin and included many dispossessed and transplanted families who a century earlier were powerful and wealthy. Exclusive control of political and economic life rested with the 'Ascendancy', as the landowning class were called. This power led to the exploitation and demoralisation of the peasantry. Writing in 1745, Lord Chesterfield, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland stated "The poor people in Ireland are used more than negroes by their lords and masters".

The 1700s saw a number of natural and political disasters in Mayo including partial famines in 1728, 1739, 1740, 1741 and 1770, a typhus epidemic in 1739-'40 and the failure of the French Invasion of 1798. The ruthless suppression of the French Invasion and the subsequent union of the Kingdom of Ireland with that of Great Britain confirmed the Ascendancy's - and Britain's - domination of all aspects of Irish life.

The estates of the Ascendancy, the road network and the towns of Mayo were constructed and trade and industry were developed throughout the 18th century. The 1765 Road Act led to the further improvement of the roads. The town of Newport was established in the 1720s as a textile centre. Ballina was founded in 1729. Westport was laid out to the design of James Watt in the 1780s and Swinford was founded about the same time by the Brabazon family. The new towns of Ballaghaderreen, Louisburgh, Belmullet, Kiltimagh (Newtownbrown) and Bellaghy (Newtowndillon) began to spring up along the newly constructed routes. In 1776 Arthur Young, a Suffolk landowner toured Ireland, and reported that Castlebar, Mayo's main town, and its environs boasted two hundred spinning looms. Linen production was a sizable income earner for tenant farmers, urban dwellers and their landlords from the 1760s onwards. The trade was considerably enhanced by the provision of grants for looms and wheels in 1796 by the Irish Government and by the arrival of four thousand migrants from Ulster following the sectarian 'Battle of the Diamond' in the same year. Young also noted that the roads of Mayo were superior to those of England. Employment opportunities were available while the infra-structure of Mayo was being developed. In the same period, pasturage, which required little labour, was the main use of agricultural land. Its chief products were store cattle