LEITRIM IN BYGONE DAYS

Bríd O'Reilly

A SMALL county of about 420 statute acres with a population of about 140 thousand. According to Ptolemy, the area was first occupied by the Eldini tribe. Later, Leitrim, along with parts of Cavan and Fermanagh formed the territory of Breffni (West or Lower). The name Breffni probably comes from Brian— grandson of Muireadach, first King of Connacht—of Scottish origin.

Cone-shaped, the county was not too mountainous but contained steep hills and deep valleys. The Shannon is the principal river, although the many smaller rivers and lakes—the principal lake being Lough Allen—add to the beauty of the county. The Shannon had been made navigable by means of short canals, but the advent of the railway system made that of little advantage. The coal from the Arigna mines could then be transported by rail instead of water. Other minerals besides coal which were found in the area were mica slate, garnets, clay to be made into Fuller's Earth, copper veins and limestone.

Tiernan O'Rourke was an active military chief who governed Lower or West Breffni in the latter part of the 12th Century. Other notable families in the Mohill and Carrigallen areas were the Reynolds and the McMorrough clans. The princes of Connacht and Leinster combined to try to expel Tiernan O'Rourke from his territory. Dermot McMorrough carried off O'Rourke's wife. Getting help from the High King of Ireland—Turlough—O'Rourke was re-instated in his principality and his wife was returned to him.

When the English, assisted by Diarmuid McMorrough, invaded Breffni, they were defeated. O'Rourke later attacked Strongbow's forces in Dublin, but was defeated. The last of the chieftains of the O'Rourke clan was Brian who, relying on the promises of Pope Sixtus 5th and the King of Spain cast off his allegiance to the English Queen Elizabeth and was forced to flee to Scotland where he was taken prisoner. In London he was executed as a traitor. His lands were taken over by the English and in 1565 Leitrim became a county under the rule of Sir Henry Sidney.

Leitrim is partly in the diocese of Ardash and Clonmacnoise and partly in the diocese of Kilmore. Five baronies—Carrigallen, Dromahaire, Leitrim, Mohill and Rossclogher were created. The borough, market and assize town of Carrick-on-Shannon, the borough of Jamestown and the post-towns of Ballinamore, Mohill, Dromod, Rooskey and Drumsna all formed part of the county.

The largest villages were Keshcarrigan, Carrigallen, Dromahaire, Drumkeerin, Drumshanbo (each of which had a penny post), Kinlough and Leitrim (once the county and assize town). The county jail and courthouse was at Carrick-on-Shannon but there were also jails and bridewells at Manorhamilton and Ballinamore. There were eighteen constabulary stations in the county containing a magistrate, sub-inspector, five officers, twenty-one constables, one hundred and five men and five horses.

The county infirmary was at Carrick-on-Shannon—the lunatic asylum for Connacht was in Ballinasloe and there were dispensaries in Ballinamore, Carrick-on-Shannon, Carrigallen, Drumsna, Kinlough, Kiltubrid, Manorhamilton and Mohill.

Leitrim was by no means an agricultural county, although large tracts of land had been cultivated and the crops sown were oats, potatoes, wheat and flax. The old heavy wooden plough was generally used in the lower areas of the county but, in mountainous districts, the loy (a narrow spade) was used. The light harrow was found only with the gentry and wealthier farmers. Potatoes were dibbled in with a pointed stake called a 'steeveen' or just spread on the manure and covered over with soil. Even on the coarsest and most marshy soil the native cow thrived and the milk and butter were of excellent flavour. Every family, however poor, had one or more cows and the butter, when churned was sold in firkins at the markets. Sheep, pigs and goats were also bred. The horse was a useful animal and a light one-horse cart was used instead of the heavy wheel cart. Leitrim had numerous and extensive forests at one time but these gradually disappeared. Modern plantations appeared round the houses of the gentry. An orchard and a kitchen garden were attached to many farm houses.

The main industry was the spinning of flax and the weaving of linen cloth. This cloth was mainly sold in the open market to the merchants and bleachers of the northern counties. Coarse pottery was made near Dromahaire and Leitrim. Flannels, friezes and woolen goods were also produced.

Roads in Leitrim were numerous but not well maintained, although abundant materials for doing so were readily available. There were two druidical altars in the county—one near Fenagh and the other on Letterfine Demesne. Fifteen religious houses were listed in the county. Castles and fortified mansions were numerous—the ruins of many still remain. The farmhouses were long narrow cabins with shelter for cattle in common with the family, but houses with chimneys, partitions and detached outbuildings became more common. Fuel for fires was turf which was plentiful throughout the county. Food mainly comprised of oaten bread, potatoes, fish and buttermilk. Meat might be purchased at Easter and Christmas. Men wore frieze coats and corduroy breeches. Women wore coarse woollen flannel petticoats, although cotton gowns were becoming more common. The English language was everywhere except in remote mountain districts.