

LEGENDS and  
FOLKLORE  
of  
MOUNTMELICK

By  
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# INTRODUCTION

*Since this booklet was first printed in 1976, so much has happened to sadden the hearts of all who love this town.*

*Odlums Seed mixing mill closed down and the huge buildings have been reduced to half size, and divided into units in the hope of encouraging some industry.*

*Somers' bakery and Shiels' bakery have closed shop.*

*Denny's Bacon factory which was famous for its bacon, was bought over by the Kerry Co-op Group, and closed down.*

*Ennis's food mixers, down the flax yard, closed down and the mill sold, and in the past few weeks, this massive building has been knocked, and the Cornerstones sold in England.*

*The Canal having been successfully closed by C.I.E., and the Stores sold, and now no more. This site has been surrounded by a high and tasty wall, by Conleth Ward, who runs a very busy scrapyards behind these walls.*

*There is now nothing left of the great industrial Mountmellick's old buildings but the Maltings and the Bacon factory and Stores.*

*Built in 1828, St. Paul's Church is lovely since it was re-roofed and renovated. The old school, built in 1866, is now a church hall. The new and beautiful St. Paul's School is on a site beside the old school. This school is one of the few sensibly designed two-teacher schools, with two big classrooms, an activities room and teachers room and a well laid out playground, under John Baker and Noirin Pratt. The Fire Brigade is beside that school.*

*The Main St. of the town is so changed from the original. Long Barn, as did Harbour St., gave people shelter in one-roomed houses, originally thatched, and later slated when the Killaloe slates could be brought in on the Canal barges. These houses had yellow clay floors, and no lighting except candles or oil lamps. There was no heating but the open hearth fire and no water supply. Water was carried from the nearest well or pump in buckets and used sparingly. Now these houses are replaced by a style and standard of housing, only available to the very rich of the 'old days'.*

*Lyons foundry is gone, but their home is well restored and a couple of houses built into one. Across the road, Metcalf's home from about 1830 who had bought it from Nathan Gatchell is now safely restored. In*

1834 T & D. Roberts from Anglesea came and set up a foundry on land owned by Metcalfs. Tom, it is said, fell out with David who wanted to be the boss., so Tom returned to England. Now is it not a coincidence that Margaret Thatcher's grandfather is a Tom Roberts? What was then Deegan's corner and John Butler's shop is now Dick Fitzpatrick's Grocery and General Supplies and beside that is Jim Dempsey, Stationery & magazine shop and tobacco, etc.

Then over the bridge which now still has its up-stream Stone parapet and down-stream the new steel bar railing to where the old Convent School was built in 1886, called St. Joseph's Benefit school on the site of Conroy's mansion and Distillery which Bishop Healy and Fr. Healy P.P. had bought with great local help.

St. Joseph's Church built by Fr. Murphy, P.P., 1878 and the Clock Tower was erected in 1912. The clock and bell weighing 16 cwts were installed. This Church was extended by the Patriot Priest, Fr. Burbage P.P. in 1965. When St. Joseph's church opened its doors, the church in Graigue, built 1824, became the boys school.

Mr. Fennelly, now deceased R.I.P., told me that his father started his teaching in the old boy's school — now the C.Y.M.S. Hall Billiards room. He moved to Graigue, 1878. While there, an Inspector came into the room after lunch and found crumbs thrown by one lad on the floor. The Inspector fined Mr. Fennelly £2.00 out of his £24.00 per annum. He left Graigue and went to Barnashrone as Principal. He retired in 1935 on a salary of £62.00 per year.

In 1909, Fr. Lalor P.P., as a first priority, had a new school built on land he bought from the Society of Friends, where Fr. F. McNamara P.P., now lives in the new Parochial house built by the late Fr. C. Crowley, P.P. Mr. Arthur Curran was the last principal in Graigue and the first in Davitt Road School. He had four sons priests and lived where Dr. C. Flood now lives.

In 1935, Fr. Bennett, C.C. uncle of our new Vet. Surgeon to town, Canice Bennett, had a Handball Alley built. Lt. Tomas Culleton and Sgt. Johnny Conroy and the members of the F.C.A. built the first basketball court in the town and County in 1965. These were all in the field given by Ger Donnelly. Fr. C. Crowley, had all pulled down to be replaced by the new Parochial House.

In Sarsfield St., then called Market St., is Roberto's Take Away. Here was Bergin's bakery. The Bergin women used oven pots to do their baking in. Further on was Pops Street, where Seamus Farrell had his forge, poor old Mags the Basket Whelan lived; and Pa Dowling had the last horse drawn hearse. Next we come to the Cinema, John Twomey's bicycle shop — with the wheel spinning over the door — had to go to make way. Beside and behind was Slaughter lane, also gone.

Then we have Cecil Thompson's houses, which includes Scott's pub and the first house in Parnell St., now a clothes shop. Tommy Meredith's house is built on the site of the Police Barracks, burned



down during the fight for freedom. Then we have Fletcher's Hardware. This house was owned by Mr. Odlum. Back in 1786 Ms. Rebecca and Eliza Jellico ran a finishing school for girls here. Girls came from Europe for this training. The school operated there until Mr. Odlum decided that he was going to get married. The school then moved to Drogheda House in the Square. The last headmistress was Ms. Peacock.

Moving on the same side of the street one comes to what was Morgans Home and business now owned and run by George Harris. Sadly his Printing Press ceased to operate some years back. Beside that was the school now the Owenass Hall and C.Y.M.S. Billiards room. Then on the corner was the Bank of Ireland which circa 1973 amalgamated with the National Bank and moved over. This room has been so altered, opened out and brightened in a lovely way beyond recognition, yet the features of the external building is the same. There is now a Pharmacy run by Miss Phil Gildea, where the Bank of Ireland did operate under the last Manager, Mr. J. Macalester.

Back down opposite the cinema you will find the new Credit Union office under the Management of Mr. Tom Walsh. It is now hard to believe that before 1966, Credit Union was unknown and unheard of in the town. In 1966, the I.C.A. asked Mary B. Culliton to help find out about it. She invited the wonderful Miss Nora Herlihy N.T. to give a talk. This was very successful.

Then in February 1968, she invited a number of interested people to her house at Davitt Road and the General Secretary of Credit Unions, Michael O'Doherty came and really got things moving. In May of that year, the first general meeting was held and a committee elected. Today, Michael Feeley, N.T. is President, and Mary Culliton is working as hard as ever for Credit Unions. She is also a Commissioner for Girl Guides and a Chief Leader for Foróige and a very active member of I.C.A. plus other sidelines like tourism and Laois Association in London, where founder Peter Dunne is so important and Brian Milmo of the Rock, an active treasurer. Margaret and Ann Culliton are very active P.R.O.'s for that association. Margaret has made her own bit of history, being the first woman to stand for election in Hownslow, London.

Beside the Credit Union, P.J. Payne has taken over Honner's shop and is busy there and in Tullamore.

Then we come to Shaw's drapery. The story of this firm is fascinating. Over 150 years ago Henry Samuel Shaw married Annie Smith of Enniscorthy and settled down. They were both interested in cloth and clothes, so they brought the cloth on the ass and cart around the countryside. The standard of their cloth and colours became famous and added to this, their natural joviality caused such a demand that they had to decide to open a permanent shop. This they did in Mountmellick. But Annie Shaw loved her people so much that she

stayed on the road even taking one of the assistants from the shop to help her. Not only did she sell good cloth, but she was one who would be aware of people sick or in trouble and make it her business to call on these. As they said, she would come knocking on their door to see if all was well. They also said that she was very generous in her help for those who needed it. So it is no surprise or wonder that her little enterprise has grown to almost nationwide.

What is left of Market St., Smith's & Pim's Hardware, has been taken over by Avonmore. What was Smith's Grocery and Butchery is now F. Henty's Grocery. That butchery is replaced by McDermott's beside the Collie Bar, and Dermot Morris has rebuilt and refurbished what was Dickenson's Harness shop and "Rabbit" Dowling's sweetshop into a big bright butcher stall. Then beyond that on the corner of the square, what used to be D. E. Williams Pub later converted to a Pharmacy by Paddy Murphy now gone to Cappoquin. Now J.A. McElwee has taken this shop and altered and renovated it so richly and artistically that it could become a tourist attraction in itself. Around the corner from this Hugh Farrell and his wife's restaurant where they are so busy. Then we come to where Pim's Bacon shop was, now Willie and Nora O'Reilly are making a great name for themselves for their cakes and snacks. To those interested, the late Pat Fennelly of the gifted singing voice was manager of the Bacon shop when he died.

Pim's butcher shop was run to the last by Peter Graham. Now Victor Cox and his wife have a Sportswear shop there, and also a general drapery. But Victor being an experienced sportsman himself is the ideal person to go to to get rigged out. Cleland's have taken over what was Pim's grocery and drapery, a very big spacious area and can now compete with the biggest self-service in other towns. Beside that is Drogheda house of its own history, then the Bakery once O'Connells, then Grahams, then Shiels now closed. Beside that the one time Scully Hotel is now in flats. On the corner is the rather new facility of the A.I.B. When the Munster & Leinster Banks and others amalgamated into the new A.I.B. it was noted that they had very big demand in this town and area, so the management responded. Now area Manager, Pat Ward and local Manager, Mrs. Mary Booth are looking after their happy customers.

Beyond the Post Office is Tom Cullen's Mellick Inn. This in the old days was O'Connors Commercial Hotel. Proprietors O'Connors and Cushen's to Cullens, Tom is keeping that touch with time. If you call between 12.00 and 3 o'clock any day you can get your fill while sitting into history.

Back across the road again on the North side of the Square, you can hear the buzz of business in P.J. Conlon's Self-Service. This was D.E. William's Grocery and Bakery, bought by Dick Somers, who separated the bakery from the Shop. In the room over the shop door, Michael Mills, our now famous and beloved Ombudsman was born. J.J. Berry



who became famous as secretary in the Dept. of Foreign Affairs and played the first game of handball in Croke Park, came from around here.

Looking back from here through Church Opening, one can see the steeple of St. Paul's Church built 1828, replacing the chapel of ease mentioned as far back as 1665.

Looking the other way down Patrick St., you can see what was Mungo Bewley's Hotel, then Chambers, now it is the Jewellery Shop of Fennellys. At the other end is the Hairdressing Salon of Ann Delaney's, where 'Gandy' Walsh's chemist was. Around the corner is Dowling's pub & Butcher Stall, this is the third generation of Dowling's in this business.

Patrick St. was Henry St. on the old maps. Where the St. Patrick's N.S. and St. Joseph's N.S. is on these maps, is shown as the Society of Friends Sportsfield, with a cricket crease and grounds, also a racing track.

The country south west of the River Owenass was Hy-Regan country, ruled by the O'Doyne or O'Duanes or O'Dunnes. The chief of the Hy-Regan in 1640 lived where St. Paul's Church is now. He moved because of enemy harrassment to the Castle in Coolamony on the Slieve Blooms. But that was in bad state of repair so the family moved to their hunting lodge in Brittas above Clonaslee. Later they built that beautiful Brittas house accidentally burned down in 1940.

The story goes that the General Dunne here sold his soul to save his lands and it was predicted that the time would come when the name of Dunne would not be found on the Estate!

But General Dunne of Castleknock would not surrender, but the burden of heavy rates forced him to take his family to America. It is said that his grandson was responsible for saving the demise of the community of Trappists in Gethsemony U.S.A. and bringing a surge of youth into the order.

There is so much local folklore in people's heads, as I found with Mrs. A. Mundy (nee Shaw). Among the many snippets, she told me that Henry Samuel Shaw died 1873. Later Annie Shaw married John Morgan. She was then known as Mrs. A. Shaw-Morgan.

The Rock school was built as a hedge school 1827. It was built on the lands of Patterson's Rock Dairy farm. It was the first developed National School from a hedge school 1831. It was a gift of the Quakers to the Catholic workers of the area.

In 1914, the late Mrs Murray became Principal of the school until 1950. Then Joe Deffew became principal but had to retire soon afterwards because of ill health. 1955, Tomas Culliton became principal.

1915, the late Miss W. Kavanagh of Emo was appointed assistant at a pay of about £8-12-0 per year. She cycled to work five miles — everyday of her life until she retired about 1970. Mrs. Murray's son

*Dominic, played hurling and football for the Laois Senior teams 1949. He is now a Superintendent of the Gardai in Donegal where his son Brian is one of Donegal's key senior players.*

*1830, Daniel Williams came to Mountmellick. He bought a farm at Clontagar and sent his children to the Rock N.S. One D. E. Williams went with his father to Tullamore where they took over a Distillers and established Tullamore Dew. Then the D.E. Williams retail chain was established (covering many parts of Ireland).*

*Paddy Brophy, another past pupil became one of Laois's stalwart senior footballers in 70's and 80's. Tomas Culliton became Principal of the Rock N.S. when Joe Deffew retired because of illness 1956 and is a famous Masseur.*



# *Legends and Folklore of Mountmellick*

by

*Tomas Culliton, B.A., N.T., H.D.E.*

I was born in one of the oldest dwellings in the town of Mountmellick, Grange Lodge—a three storey building, built I am told in 1686, by John Pim who was one of the founding fathers of the town.

Some years ago, when Paddy Kearns was repairing one of the chimneys I climbed up to help him. I sat up on the chimney stack. From this vantage point I could see that this area had hills or mountains North, South and East, and the bogs of Allen & Clonsat to the West. Looking down at the town and townlands below my perch I remembered stories told of things that happened, of people who lived here and of how the town of Mountmellick grew up where it did on marshy land beside the Owenass River with the River Barrow bounding it to the North East and the Triogue River bounding it to the South West.

One feature which is very striking from an aerial view is the long narrow Ridge Road running east to west from the Town. What history there is crushed into those piles of sand! About 30,000 B.C. Ireland was separated from England on the Eastern side while in the South a land link with France remained open and continued open for many more thousands of years. During this period, known as the Glacial or Ice Epoch, the land was covered over with an enormous layer of ice, in some places approximately 2,000 feet thick, more massive in the North than in the South. A column of ice 1,500 feet thick having a cross section of one square foot would exert pressure of about 93,000 lbs. per square foot on the surface supporting the column. This gives us some idea of the weight which pressed down on the land for some 24,000 years, though it was not a stationary mass.

About 18,000 B.C. there was a softening of the climate and movement of very large masses of ice took place. This movement of ice spread drift soil or boulder clay over the country creating fertile land. About 6,000 B.C. the ice began to melt, the climate having become very mild. It was then that the hills we know today as Eskers or Sand-Ridges were formed, and one of the most famous of these is that which runs from Mountmellick to beyond Portlaoise. The benefit of this sand and fertile land to this area is due to our position at the end of the Ice Epoch. When the ice melted the land mass became elevated. We find the land link with England restored from about 6,000 B.C. to 4,000 B.C. when all land links disappeared and we became an island. It is thought that the first migrations came to Ireland before 6,000 B.C. travelling across the land links.

After the ice had gone the land around my home developed naturally. A name like Derry, (i.e. Oak Forest) is found in Derryguile, Derrycloney, Derrydavy, Clonterry—Oak Forests abounded in the area. The word Cluin (translated as Meadow) gave us Cluin na Sli, Clundahurc, Cluin da Gamhan, Cluincostney, Clunsaughey. Words like Graigue and

Grange indicate farmed land. The word IRE, an original name for Ireland, translates as fertile land. The townlands of Accregar, Derryguile, etc. was the townland of Irry and Camira—the crooked fertile land. Neire—the fertile land. In spite of the marshy associations we have with the town these names indicate a rather beautiful scene.

The name—Mountmellick, according to some, is derived from Mointeach Miclic—translated by name as the bog land of the marshes, and by others as the bog house of the marshes. I prefer that given to me by 98 years old Jer Donnelly of Strahard in 1969. Jer told me that the name should translate as the Green Island of the marshes. In fact during my research I did come across the name Mou-Cha-Milic and that translates as “the green island of the marshes”.

Looking down from the height I could see the glistening waters of the rivers and rivulets. The Barrow comes down from the exquisite Glen Barrow of the Slieve Blooms where it rises between the Cappard cones and Tinnahinch Mountains. The sources of the Barrow seems to have been a lake at one time. On a fine day it is a lovely walk from the Cut to the Barrow Basin.

The Cones and Cappard bring to mind the stories of the youth of the mighty Fionn McCumhaill and how he got his name. While being reared in this mountain, a refugee from the High King and his supporters, he came to play with children attending a school and they named him Fionn. The story is that the same Fionn when about the age of nine fought and killed a wolf barehanded, while its foster mother was away seeking food. These two bits of information tell us that people and wolves inhabited this area as far back as the second and third centuries. Ballyfin (Baile Fionn) reminds us of this history.

The Triogue river rises in the conical hills to the East of the town—the renowned Hill of Killowen. The sight of those hills, The Heath and Coolbanagher makes me realise how young my own town is. If proof were needed Dr. Bannon, our President, showed me some very old maps which he has and Mountmellick is not shown. The settlement was not worthy of mention until after 1659. Coolbanagher was however, a focal point from early history, and was inhabited before the Celts came to Ireland. History reports Eremon, the son of Millisus the leader of the Celts, as having captured this area from the Mescill who were an ancient and learned race. Eremon established his kingdom on Coolbanagher. It is said that Eremon's father and his tribe originally lived near the Red Sea. But because they helped the Israelites to escape the Celts became victims of the wrath of Pharos and Egyptians. Milesus and his people moved to Greece and from there to Cartage. In Cartage they organised the defences and army of that City, and the City went on to power and fame and greatness. Having heard of these islands in the Atlantic from sailors, the Celts moved through Spain to Inisfail—to Coolbanagher.

Another interesting point is that made by a German archaeological team who said that the ancient peoples of Ireland were of very low stature and very cultural (both learned and musical). The Celts were an ex-



tremely tall race and a warlike people so when the Celts arrived on the scene the little people took to hiding in whatever cover they could find. Thus began the Fairy legend of Ireland and leaves us with names like Shee-an.

To the south of the Great Bog which lies to the west of Mountmellick is Geashill. It was here that the two sons of Milesius fought a fierce battle on Bri-damh. Emhear's side won, but Emhear being killed, Eremon assumed sovereignty. There was a grave opened there many years ago and a skeleton of a man of giant proportions about nine feet tall was found and it was believed that these were the bones of Emhear. It was also in Geashill that the synod of 550 A.D. met and excommunicated Columcille. Brendan the Sailor attended this Synod and fought the Columcille case.

The bogs reminds us of the great march of the Princes of the North in 1603. The well named O'Neill's Well reminds us that the huge army camped in Glandine en route.

Looking to the north across the Bornass where the Owenass river joins the Barrow, one can see Cloneyhurke, the home of the O'Dempseys, descendants of Ros Failge, Son of Cathaoir Mór (High King—Ard Ri 120-123 when slain by Conn Cead Cathach). Ros Failge gives us that kingdom across the Barrow—Ui Failge. The O'Connors of Uibh Failge, the O'Dempseys of Clann Maolughra Clanmaliere and the O'Duinns of Iregan are his descendants. There was a suggestion in one note I read that Rosenallis—popularly translated as the Clear River in the Woods derived from Ros Failge.

Looking to the east in the sunlight the famous white Rock of Dunamais lights up like a lamp. It was in this area that Conall Cearnach, the Red Branch Knight, Comrade of Cuchulann and Firdia, set up his home. He is reputed to have been a Roman hostage in Jerusalem where he saw the soldiers brutalise Christ. From Dunamais he established Laois as the stronghold of the O'Moores, with seven Clans or Septs. It was William De Braosa who in 1245 took the stronghold and built the castle on top. His wife was grand-daughter of Strongbow and great grand-daughter of Diarmaid na nGall McMurrough. Their one daughter married Roger Mortimer—Lord Wigmore—who built seven castles—Shaen, Morette, Ballymanus and four others. The history of Dunamais reads as follows:

The O'Moores established it as a stronghold.

The Danes fought to have it.

The Normans captured and held it.

The Confederates took possession of it.

Owen Roe O'Neill held it.

Cromwell destroyed it.

John Parnell, an ancestor of Charles Stuart Parnell, tried to restore it as a home but failed.

Dysert Hill under Dunamais is an area renowned for holy men. The famous St. Aengus lived there. The story is told that one day while look-



ing across at Coolbanagher Hill he saw an Angel hovering over what turned out to be the grave of a soldier. Aengus asked an old man about the holiness of the dead soldier and was told that the only claim to holiness the man had was that every night he called the name of all the Saints of Ireland he could remember. Because of this Aengus decided to write a rhymed list of all the Irish Saints. This he started at Clonenagh and finished at St. Mochua's Monastery, Tullaght. This litany is known today as Feilire Aengusa.

Of Clonenagh it is said that Columbanus with twelve followers, having visited Aengus, passed where is now Portlaoise and Mountrath. They were crossing the Tinnahinch Mountains by what is now known as the "Cut". Looking back Columcille saw a vision of Angels making signs back some way. He sent St. Fintain and a companion back to see what was meant and to carry out the wishes of the Angels. The result was the founding of Clonenagh. Columcille then went on to found Durrow.

Dr. James Lalor, Archbishop of Dublin, who was put to death by order of James I, was born at Dysert. He was buried in the little graveyard in Railway St. opposite the Vocational School, Portlaoise, where also are buried members of the Parnell, Fitzgerald, Butler and Meehan families. Also buried there are members of the Jacob family responsible for the establishment of the hospital in Portlaoise. In the Church that was on that site Cardinal Rinucinni celebrated Mass in 1641, which was attended by Owen Roe O'Neill and Sir Phelim O'Neill. It was here in later years that John Wesley founded Wesleyan Church.

The name Reary probably derives from the fort or residence of a Chief Rearymore. It first comes into historical mention because here the Battle of Raéire was fought, when Eithrial, son of Irial Faidh, son of Eremoy was killed in battle by Conmhael, son of Emer. Much later St. Fionan erected a church here, and later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries some 22 priests were buried in the graveyard there. In my father's youth in Rearymore, a Fr. Keating, (his uncle) lived there and translated the Bible. This was transcribed by my father. Unfortunately when the work was completed it was inadvertently destroyed.

St. Patrick visited this countryside, Morett and the Heath, getting special attention. He travelled from the West of Ireland in a chariot driven by St. Odran. Odran was the only man killed during the mission of St. Patrick. It is said that Odran had discovered that the Ui Failgeans were intent on killing Patrick. It was a pagan Ui-Failghian Chief named Berraidhe who planned to kill the saint. When driving around the Slieve Blooms, Odran asked Patrick to drive as he wished to rest. Sometime before he reached Morett Patrick looked back to see how Odran was resting to find him dead with a spear in his back. Would this have happened in Mountmellick? Remembering that Iregan of Ui Duinn and Clanmalier of O'Dempsey took up much of what is today Mountmellick and was then part of Ui Failge, it is possible.

The story reminds me that Mountmellick has a certain history in this field. The kidnapping of Dr. Herema gave the town some notoriety and



*Mr. Tomás Culliton R.I.P.*



fame of late. It is less known that the worn clothing for Sir Alfred Beit came from a shop in Mountmellick. As far back as 1452 the area was in the news, though Mountmellick town did not then exist. The Earl of Ormond, Lord Justice of Ireland, having captured Lea Castle passed on to Irry, to rescue the kidnapped son of Mac Teorais (Birmingham) who was held in Derryguile Castle which he then burned to the ground.

Irry has its religious side. There the "Ivy Chapel" graveyard is sited. The name "Irry Chapel" is only about 150 years old. The church that existed here seems to have been a chapel of Ease to the Priory at Kilmainham (Brittas) and connected to it by a Togher or wooden road. The original name of the chapel is of interest. The name Kilmorgan by some is translated as the Church of St. Morgan but there does not appear to be any St. Morgan. But in ancient Irish the letter L & N were interchangeable and Kill Molgan would translate as the Church of the Little Summit, a very suitable name. There is some suggestion that this hill was actually a burial ground in Pagan times. The Priory of St. Maignead (the founder of Kilmainham, Dublin, circa 606 A.D.) at Brittas was named Kilmainham by the Knights Templars. The monks of this priory were massacred by maurading Danes on one of their escapes in this neighbourhood.

St. Patrick passed from Killowen to Sleaty, Carlow to meet Dubtach. Dubtach was chief poet and had shown great respect and against High King Laeghaire wishes saluted the saint when he arrived at Tara, after the Slane fire lighting incident. Dubtach was the teacher of St. Fiacc of Sleaty who was made Bishop of Leinster at a later date. One would need to have access to old maps to identify what area Leinster then covered.

Further west about a mile is Portnahinch Church of great antiquity and the Castles of Cloneyhorke and Cloneygown. It was here that Dr. Ross McGeoghan (whose mother was O'Dempsey) and Dr. Edmund O'Dempsey—the former was Bishop of Kildare and the latter Bishop of Leighlin—were born. It was the O'Dempseys who built the Monastery for St. Evin—now Monasterevin.

Across the Barrow is Tinnekill Castle built by Clann McDonnell 1450 A.D. who also built a castle at Raheen, Portlaoise. Hugh Bay McCallagh McDonnell was granted rights to Tinnekill on condition that he maintained 12 Galloglass for the King and that he or his family or servants did not wear Irish dress, encourage Irish customs or speak the Irish language.

Not very far from Portnahinch is Portarlinton, very marked today by the huge cooling tower of the E.S.B. Originally this was the village of Cul an tSudaire and the village of Ley. Charles II granted Henry Bennett a grant of this area and made him Lord Arlington. He renamed the area Port. because of a small quay there—Arlington. The new town was granted a charter and made a Borough. Lord Arlington lived at Emo Court and the title and lands changed hands until eventually they came to the Dawson family. It was Aileen Dawson, wife of Lord Portarlinton, who was responsible for the lovely church in the village of Emo. The house of Emo Court is today being beautifully restored by Mr. Harris



who now owns it. At Coolbanagher, up the hill from Emo, is another beautiful unique church designed by the well-known Gandon. The area which was "the Green Island in the Marshes" surrounded by flooding rivers was sited between a number of very focal points of community or social interest. It had its holy men—and not so holy men—but the ordinary people, under the feudal system of the time, were but serfs of the chieftains or of men granted overlordship of the area by various English kings.

In 1440 the Pale was under great pressure and soldiers of Henry VI are said to have set up a frontier post on the banks of the Owenass River, at the spot it is said where the Square of Mountmellick now stands. Gradually Irishtown—the home of the Irish servants to the Camp—grew. But in the year 1659 under the direction of William Edmunson, (founder of Quakers in Ireland) John Edmunson, Richard Jackson, John Pim and others settled in this area. The Industrial Town of Mountmellick was founded.

These men were responsible for many of the industries which made the town famous. Let us start where the town started in O'Connell Square, formerly Drogheda Square and originally Church Square. This is said to be one of the finest squares in the country. The houses in it and in the streets leading from it are in fine repair and have been unspoilt. Only two houses were demolished to make way for the extension of St. Mary's College. The town is a Museum of the craft work of Masons of 1660 and onwards. The College to the north west of the Square is a continuation of the School started by the Society of Friends in 1786. The nuns bought the property in 1921 with the financial help of D. E. Williams, a former pupil of the Rock National School and owner of the Tullamore Dew Industries. Originally what is now the College opened as a boys' school. Subsequently it became a boys' and girls' school, then reverted to being a girls' school—the boys going over to Newtown. The nuns opened it as a girls' school. Today it is a Co-Educational school of renown.

Beside the College is Somers Bakery. This bakery was originally owned by D. E. Williams. It now employs about 30 people. Mr. Dick Somers lives in a beautiful restored house at the head of Milner's Yard at the south west corner of the Square. Down the laneway to Milner's Yard was the cotton mill of Henry Milner. It eventually employed some 2,000 persons in and associated with the mill. The thread for the mill came from Mountrath. Further down the yard Smiths had a glass factory and made bottles. Over the wall we had a woollen mill owned by a Mr. Nevitt. He subsequently sold out to Milner. Some 2,000 persons were also employed in the woollen trade as were in the cotton. A branch factory was built by 1827 at Barkmills (original name Monardree). The water wheel was erected by Kemmis of Shaen.

In these factories cloths of varying value were made. Flannells, frieze and material of coarser but more durable nature for the making of clothes for the peasantry was manufactured. Much broad cloths were woven in Mountmellick for the Dublin market. A broad cloth line called Durants

was manufactured in Mountmellick and Portlaoise. This line was highly popular for a long time before the trade died. The use of serges was superseded by cottons. The serge coats made in the factory at Barkmills were said to be very tough and water proof. I was told that the bark from trees was the raw material. I believe that the late Joe Kane, the last porter of the Railway Station in the town, had one of these coats.

In the north east of the Square is Shiel's Bakery. This bakery is sited where the original bakery of the O'Connell family was established in 1817. The O'Connells developed a new bread—a nutty kind of bread made from oatmeal which became so popular all over the county that asses cart loads of bread could be seen leaving the bakery every day. In San Francisco today there is a bread sold and on the polythene wrapper is an acknowledgment that the bread is made from the original recipe for oatmeal bread in Mountmellick, Ireland.

Crossing the Square past Pim's shop, now under new management, we come to Denny's Bacon Factory employing about 50 people. Denny's bought the factory from Pims. Pims smoked bacon was famous all over Ireland. A laneway, now private, was in early days known as Church Lane. Down this lane Pims had a Tobacco Factory, a Glue Factory, a Snuff Factory, a Candle Factory and a Blue Mill. This lane leads around to Irishtown where there is a Seed Milling Co. and where William Beale once had a Woollen Factory. Bradley & Gee were Smiths and in their workshop in Irishtown they were busy forging combs for Beale's factory. William and Joshua Beale established a Steam Mill Flour Mill on the banks of the Owenass. This was near where the Steam Mill Bridge now is but this was a later arrival. Sam Sheane built the mill and was part of the management. Subsequently the mill was rented to Thomas Neale & Co.

Further on the Irishtown Road we come to the Mountmellick Products. Established 1945. This industry was established where Mr. Codd's Malthouse was. The first malting and a brewery here were owned by Kennys. From the malting we go back to town by the Old Road down past the lovely new Geriatric Hospital. This was formerly the County Home built in 1843 as the Union for paupers. It had facility for 800 inmates but in 1848 it was cramped full by some 1,500 souls. It was intended by rules to make the Union unattractive as possible so it was a fearsome place where the Christians in charge separated husband from wife and children from parents. The food for the inmates consisted of potatoes and buttermilk. Past the Union on the road to the junction with the Ridge Road was the Long Barn. This consisted of small poorly constructed houses in which many large families of the poor Irish were housed. At this junction, on the right the present Textile Factory is obviously flourishing. This industry is on the site of and the front part forms what was the Bat Leather Goods Factory of 1944. The textile factory and the modern National Schools complex are built on what the Ordnance Maps describe as the Society Sports Field.

The road is now known as Davitt Road. About the year 1700, the left hand side of the road consisted of a row of comfortable houses stretching



down "Mags Lane" to Derrydavy and extending to near Maryboro (now Portlaoise). These houses were occupied by Weavers and at the time home spinning industry prospered. The house on the right hand side was the home of White Smiths. The last of the White Smith family died about 1938. He was John Twomey after whom Twomey Terrace is named. His workshop stood on part of the site of the present cinema.

Returning to Foundry Street we can see "Foundry House" owned by Jack Young. This house belonged to Metcalfes and was bought by brothers named Roberts. David & Tom Roberts came to Mountmellick from England to build an engine for Conroys Distillery in 1834. They were so attracted to the town and pleased with the local labour that they rented part of the field at the back of Metcalfes and started the Hibernian Foundry. This industry was managed by David Jones, whose sister was an accomplished harpist and lived in the house next to Grange Lodge. The Hibernian firm was responsible for the iron structure work on the Clarahill Bridge which was rebuilt some years ago only because it was too narrow. The stamp of the company was clearly to be seen on the girders removed. I am told that the sewers of London are framed by girders stamped "moulded in Mountmellick, Ireland", so that we can claim that London is upheld by the skill of Mountmellick men.

Moving on from Foundry House we pass Lyons Foundry, Down Lord Edward Street the red brick houses were built at the beginning of the century. Further down, Harbour Street derived its name from the Canal Terminus at the hill of the Harbour. In 1831 a branch of the canal from Monasterevin to Bracklone, Portarlinton was extended to Mountmellick. The directors were John Warburton, Henry Smith and John Tibeaud. The stones excavated were used in the building of Portarlinton Catholic Church by Fr. Terence O'Connell, P.P. All the boats were horse-drawn and that explains the footpath on one side of the canal under each bridge. The first motor boat operated in 1911. The houses of Harbour Street were originally mudwalled thatched houses. The thatch was replaced about 1850 by Killaloe slate brought in by canal. The people who occupied these houses mostly worked for the Canal Company. But I remember old Pat Cunningham lived across the road. He was reputed to have been one of the finest tradesmen and smithys of his time. Pat and his wife Elizabeth (Liz) would be the grandparent or great grandparents of the Cunninghams of Tullamore and Portlaoise. From early days the canal had a beneficial effect on trade in the town. The passenger boats came loaded with visitors and shoppers and trade boomed. The merchant boats came crowding the harbour taking away beer and textiles to be sold on the Markets of Dublin and other towns.

Back up Harbour Street to where the Convent now stands. This was the home of Edward Conroy. Conroy's had a busy distillery where St. Joseph's Church is now sited. At their peak, 1831-1838, they produced some 120,000 gallons of whiskey annually. Conroys built a big store in 1831-32. Today Ennis Animal Foods is produced there. In 1866 after the distillery had long been closed Humphry Smith bought it and set up a



flax scutching industry there hoping to create badly needed employment. The yard is still known as the Flax Yard to older citizens.

A second of the town's three breweries was owned by Tierneys who rented premises from McEvoy's. Sean O'Higgins rebuilt this factory and produced Mineral Waters there. Today it is the centre of Macra na Feirme who bought it from the present owner who is by coincidence also named Tierney.

Gatchill also had a brewery but I am not sure of its siting.

Forge Street got its name from all the smithys that operated there. Particularly the White Smith, who produced Bits and Stirrups for the Cavalry. This trade ended when cheap products were brought in from Birmingham.

Travelling through O'Moore Street we come to Garoon. Many cottages here were occupied by weavers also. Across the fields by the stony stile we come to Chapel Street, and Graigue. Graigue also had a big population of weavers. There was a pottery kiln in Graigue owned by Mr. William Fletcher. He produced milk pans, crocks, tiles, etc.

Coming up to 1800 Mountmellick was a busy town of great wealth. It was said that there was more gold and silver in circulation in and around the town than in any other town in Ireland. General business was carried on in the common currency of a Dublin Bank. In 1835 the Bank of Ireland opened a branch in the town. In 1825 Robert Goodbody made the first purchase that was to develop into the Goodbody Industries of Clara. Robert Goodbody was a Mountmellick man. The family had come to Mountmellick in the 17th century from Yorkshire. John had a weaving interest in Mountmellick 1678 which he lost because he refused to pay tithes. In 1749 we find Mark Goodbody, busy with a tanyard, the second in the town. Robert was born 1781 and eventually married the wealthy Margaret Pim and in 1825 they moved to Clara. The Act of Union was brought about by Pitt of London to bring the wealth of Ireland into Britain, to help pay for impoverished England's wars. He planned to bring it about by causing the native Irish to rebel. The method used was to develop the scourge of bigotry. A Rev. Rigby of Geashill seems to have led a bigoted trail and caused much suffering and bloodshed in Mountmellick. Because of bigotry the fact that the Orangemen of Laois and the native Irish were on the same side was never known by the people. The following resolution was passed at the Orange Lodge meeting in Mountmellick, 4th February, 1800:

"Conscious as we are of our loyalty to his Majesty, George III and our attachment to the happy Constitution of his Kingdom as established in 1782 we have beheld with surprise and concern an address from the Grand Lodge to all Orangemen entreating them to be silent on a question whereby the Constitution is vitally attacked, and whereby the loyalty of the most valuable part of our countrymen is shaken or endangered. We cannot think it the duty of Orangemen to submit implicitly in all cases of the utmost moment to the directors of the Lodge, and which is principally exerted against the rights of Ireland, and while a Lodge under this in-

fluence shall give the law to all Orangemen we fear that our dearest interests will be betrayed. We therefore protest against this injunction to silence and declare, as Orangemen, as freeholders and as Irishmen that we consider the extinction of our separate legislature as the extinction of the Irish nation. We invite our brother Orangemen without delay to erect a Grand Lodge which shall consist of men of tried integrity, unplaced, unpensioned and unbought, and who shall avour their best qualification for such a station that they will support the Independence of Ireland and the Constitution of 1782.

Signed: Henry Deery Master;  
John Robinson D.M.;  
Abraham Hyland Secretary."

The bigotry bug succeeded, the town was taken and eleven Catholics hanged. Because of this turn in the history of the town every member was to suffer.

The trade taxes brought about a gradual closing of the textile industry. This was also helped by the moving from the garrison of Irishmen and their replacement by English men who were dressed from home. The garrison was in fact moved to the Heath. Because of the loss of the cavalry trade and the competition from Birmingham the White Smith emigrated.

By 1847 Mountmellick was a disaster area. Almost all of the weavers' houses in Acragar (Davitt Road) had been demolished and the weavers had either emigrated or, worse still, become inmates in the Union. At this time of need Lord Adare of Limerick, in order to help employment, ordered quite a bit of Mountmellick quilts done on Mountmellick cotton with Mountmellick lace. Some of these quilts are still to be seen in Adare Castle.

Another project undertaken to help give work was the building of the Irishtown or Steam Mill Bridge to replace the footbridge in 1837.

In 1849 the first Sugar Factory in Ireland was established down Church Lane. The Irish Tourist Guide 1852 refers to the sugar factory and its success in Mountmellick and stresses that there was no reason why it should not succeed. Sugar beet processing was new in Europe. It started about 1800 and had a continuous, though gradual, growth. The factory in Mountmellick was designed by Mr. Ashenhurst. The sugar content of the beet was 7% compared with 16%-17% today. Yet, though the firm paid more to the farmers for the raw beet than the farmers on the Continent got, the Mountmellick firm produced sugar more cheaply. It cost £7 per ton to produce sugar in the factory against £9 in Europe. The total cost per ton was £17 whereas in Europe it cost £17. 15s. 0d. The factory failed after a few years. Arthur Griffith in his paper, I think of September, 1912 said that the factory was doomed to failure as part of the London Government's policy that Ireland could not be industrialised. Some of the facts he gave were that the raw beet although delivered in November was not processed until February. Also that the beet had been left open to frost and snow during that time and that the engineer in



charge of the sugar processing was inexperienced at the job. The boiler was placed a long way from the sugar processing room so that it was too cold to be efficient when it arrived at the sugar room. So the sugar factory failed. The flax failed and only the bacon and maltings continued. The population of the town fell from 4,577 in 1837 to 2,500 today and today's figure is augmented by the patients in St. Vincent's Hospital.

All the industrial action was not confined to the town. The farming community arranged to have a travelling Weaver visit their homes to teach their children the trade. At the Rock we had the Kilmainham Quarries and Kiln. The limestone from these quarries gave a great white lime. This lime was used on the cottages in and about the town with excellent results. The limestone was burned by material brought in the horse-drawn carts from Castlecomer. The yellow carts were part of the scenery. In Castlecomer and the surrounding area there were 64 pits employing some 700 men. Though the coal they produced sold at between 17s. and 20s. a ton the miners could not buy it. On top of the Kiln at the Rock a 28" x 14" pan was placed and Rock Salt brought from Carrickfergus outside Belfast by barge through the canal to Mountmellick and carted back to the Rock. The Rock salt was filled into the pan and covered with water. The water was pumped from the supply canal to the pan by windmill, still to be seen. In the morning the salt would be scraped up and filled into bags. The "column" men would buy the salt and lime and sell both on their way home. The pay at Kilmainham was not great either. The last manager of the industry, Mr. Ned Whitford, Kilnacash House, told me that in 1912 having paid some 30 men he had money left out of £5.

At New Mills Mr. Dugdale built a mill in 1852. Flour Milling at different stages was a big employer around the area. There were Flour Mills in Mountmellick, Maryboro, Coolrain, Castletown, Abbeyleix, Donaghmore, Stradbally, each producing large quantities annually. A bolting mill existed in new mills and grist mill at Tinnahinch. In that area too we find the peculiar quarries at Capard which produced a siliceous limestone that was soft and very suitable for chimney pieces and hearth stone and flags and which hardened solid when left naked in the air. These products were in great demand. The quarry closed because of the peculiar way a man was killed by a collapse of section of the quarry.

Beyond and above Clonaslee the Troy's were cutting crosses in the reddish brown Clonaslee sandstone. One of the beautiful Celtic Crosses is still to be seen in the old graveyard around the ruin of St. Fionan Church in Rearymore.

Copper and Manganese was also found at Capard, where also potters clay was met with and used.

Iron Ore was in Mountmellick Potteries near Mountrath and Iron manufacture was carried on both in Mountrath and in Mountmellick while the supply of timber to fire the furnaces lasted.



Slate quarries were opened at Roundwood and Offerlane and at Capard.

Of the farmers a report says that the implements and carriages employed in the rural economy are generally of the most improved description. Both bullocks and horses are used in ploughing—generally in pairs. Where the soil is very deep, two pairs of horses are used.

The rambling house was the chief centre of entertainment in song and story. A centre of community communication. Irish was spoken by the old. The young associated success with the language of the overlords. A favourite sport in and around the town was that of cock-fighting. The principal area being at the Stony Stile in Garroon. In 1930's there was point to point horse racing on my father's land at Grange Lodge. In 1932 the newly elected Taoiseach De Valera was coming to one of these meetings when he was intercepted at the Curragh by a bearer of urgent news and he had to return to Dublin. Greyhound racing was also held in Smith's field. The imitation rabbit was pulled by a rope wound around a revolving drum which was hand turned.

Tom Shannon opened a Carmons stage in Rosenallis and called it the "Red Lion"—now the Post Office.

As for schools, it seems that there were hedge or pay schools in Mountmellick from time immemorial. Doctor Doyle in 1819 mentions 34 reports on Schools in the area giving a big number of small schools generally with only one teacher—the curriculum included reading and writing, arithmetic, geometry, algebra, Goldsmith and grammar, Davis English Grammar, Children's Guide to Heaven, Jackson's Book Keeping, Goldsmith's History of Rome, Geography, Scott's Lessons, Universal Spelling Book, Natural History of Birds and Beasts, Pennsylvania Spelling Book. The average attendance at these schools would be approx. 15. One of the largest being the Rock between 1827 and 1848. Dr. Ross McGeoghan reported of schools in this area before 1640. Today this tradition has continued with the official opening of the St. Paul's National School, Church of Ireland at Mountmellick. Every child in the town now has the facility of education provided. In 1830 a very large section of the population were without this opportunity.

A visiting Mr. Keith Armatage of Lexham, London some years ago said this of us:

"The Laois people appear to take not the slightest interest in their history".

We have a heritage worth preserving and needing to be preserved. The Laois Heritage Society is committed to this task but needs the help and co-operation of the community. Let us all do a little bit together.

Mr. Culliton is Principal of the Rock N.S., Mountmellick. This is the text of a paper which he read to the Laois Heritage Society on the 8th December, 1976.



A special presentation was made to Thomas Cullaton at the last meeting of the Mountmellick Town Commission to mark his service to the Town. Pictured are Mary and Thomas Cullaton after the presentation.

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- (15) Some reminiscences of Mountmellick by C.C. Hutchings (1896).
- (16) Topographical Index by C. Lewis.
- (17) Matty Tuohy's Historical Notes.
- (18) Jer Donnelly (Old Citizen), Strahard, Mountmellick.
- (19) Jim Fennelly (Old Citizen), Forge Street, Mountmellick.
- (20) Kathleen Troy—my mother—from Glebe, Clonaslee. As a young girl she used to visit Brittas House, mansion of the O'Doyne's of Irgan. Her father, Tom Troy, introduced the threshing steam engine. He had the first car in the area and had water on tap by syphoning it down the mountains.

References to the Sugar Factory: Mr. Dan O'Mahony tells me that the machinery of the Sugar Factory was bought by the Mormon Governors of Salt Lake City; through agents in Liverpool. The machinery was shipped to New York and by ass and cart transported across the States to Salt Lake City.

Reference to Lyon's Foundry: Ceased to operate around 1976. The late Bill Lyons was the last manager of the tannery at the back of Pims Hardware, now Donaghmore Co-Op.

Reference to Farriers: The last of the top class blacksmiths in the area were George Malcolm whose forge was where W. Forrestal store is now. Seamus Farrell who had a forge in Pops Street, off Sarsfield Street. Jack Delancy, whose forge was in Tac Lane. Jim Fennelly, whose forge was near the Flaxyard, now Ennis Animal Food. Jim Kavanagh operated in the Commons, and George Callaghan had his forge in Kilcavan. The last man to have worn a leather apron is Mick Flynn of Rynn, Rosenallis, who has now changed his business to the manufacture of many other products.



# Council holds special session to pay tribute to colleague



The late Tomás Culliton.

GLOWING tributes were paid to a former cathaoirleach of Mountmellick Town Council, Tomás Culliton, at a specially convened meeting of the body this week.

Members from all sides of the house referred to his great commitment to the community and his involvement in many organisations.

Cathaoirleach Cllr Michael Gormally said the late Tomás had been "a great man for Mountmellick. He had the town of Mountmellick at heart and was respected all over the county."

He added: "His involvement in the local community was something else," referring to activities in the FCA, basketball, boxing, athletics and the GAA.

Tomás had a great love of the land also, he said, and was involved in the ploughing association, and had put a lifetime's work into the Slieve Bloom Association.

"He will be sadly missed in the town because of his involvement in and love of the town. All he wanted was to see Mountmellick prosper and was always willing to give of his time for organisations in the town.

"He also did tremendous work at The Rock Primary School," he added.

Cllr Mark Connolly added that Tomás "never failed to represent the Mountmellick Cumann as a speaker at the

Ard Fheis and was a great speaker".

Cllr David Conroy said he served with Tomás in the 60s and 70s "and always found him deeply interested in issues to do with the town and Laois". He added that Tomás was always known for his charitable work.

"When you look back it's difficult to see how he packed so many things in. It wasn't unknown for him to attend three or four meetings a night and get his point of view across."

Cllr Denis O'Meara: "You could almost say he was the father of the town council here."

Cllr Ger Doody said he remembered Tomás for his involvement in the FCA and boxing. "Very few people in the town didn't have some association with him in that he was involved in so many activities. People who are willing to make sacrifices like that don't emerge that often."

Cllr Tony Kirwan: "I admired him and he's still doing good for people at the minute."

Cllr Helen Hansen said Tomás had been very helpful with his advice when she was elected. "He had a word for everyone," she added.

Cllr Pat Bowe said he had "given freely of his time to all the organisations he was involved in, from public life to sport to other organisations."