



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

A picturesque location: a view of Athlone from 1897



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During previous articles, we discussed accounts of Athlone written at various points during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In 1709, a traveller named Samuel Molyneux referred to Athlone as 'a handsome large town, situated on ye noble river Shannon'. Almost ninety years later, Joseph Boruwlaski, a Polish entertainer and writer, gave a different opinion, describing Athlone as 'an indifferent town' containing little other than small thatched cottages.

In 1819, the Reverend Annesley Streat wrote about the multitude of 'beggars from every county in Ireland, and even from England and Scotland' who crowded around the town's military barracks. Fifteen years later, Henry D. Inglis, a Scottish travel writer, described Athlone as an interesting but 'remarkably ugly town'.

These accounts, with the exception of Streat's, were written by travellers who spent only a short time in Athlone. They lack a wider historical context and can be considered as snapshots of the area at particular times. However, in 1897, Thomas O'Neill Russell's book, 'Beauties and Antiquities of Ireland', offered a wider perspective, highlighting changes in the locality across a span of over fifty years.

Ireland's hidden heartland

Russell was born near Moate in 1828, before moving to Dublin in 1850. It was there that he began to contribute articles to 'The Irishman' newspaper and where he became an advocate of the Irish language.

In 1867 (some accounts say 1865), Russell emigrated to the United States, seemingly to avoid arrest by the British crown forces who believed him to be involved with the Irish Republican Brotherhood, more commonly known as the Fenians. He lived in the US for thirty years,

although he made regular visits to Ireland during that period. In 1876, for example, he visited Dublin and formed, along with others, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language.

Apart from newspaper articles, Russell wrote numerous books, both fiction and non-fiction, including 'Beauties and Antiquities of Ireland', which carried the subtitle: 'A tourist's guide to its most beautiful scenery and an archaeologist's manual for its most interesting ruins'.

Russell was particularly enamoured with Lough Ree, which he described as 'little known to tourists'. Indeed, the section of his book that covers Lough Ree and Athlone resembles the modern efforts of Fáilte Ireland, who market Athlone and the Shannon as 'Ireland's hidden heartland'.

Russell devoted many words to the lake's numerous islands, such as in his depiction of Hare Island as 'the most beautiful island' in the lake: 'The trees grow on it so thickly that they dip their branches into the water almost all round it. Lord Castlemaine has a charming rustic cottage on Hare Island, and the pleasure grounds attached to it are laid out with very great taste and skill. It is one of the most beautiful sylvan [wooded] island retreats in Europe.'

Of Lough Ree, he wrote: 'It is strange that it is not more generally known, and it lying almost in the geographical centre of Ireland, and surrounded by some of the richest land and most beautiful scenery to be found anywhere.' He bemoaned the fact that people 'rush to Killarney, Connemara, Achill and many other places, and almost totally neglect this noble expanse of the king of Irish rivers, the Shannon'.

Before and after

The lack of interest shown by tourists in Athlone and its hinterland was a result, Russell believed, of 'the unfortunate commercial state of Ireland'. Russell traced this state of affairs to the Great Famine which had devastated Ireland and caused a huge reduction in the country's population.

Russell compared the situation in the mid-1890s with that of 'half a century ago'. The Shannon, he wrote, had a teeming population on its shores during the early 1840s



and 'twenty thousand people might be seen at the annual regatta that used to be held every autumn on its waters.' At that time, 'passenger steam-boats' sailed 'almost daily in the summer season between Carrick-on-Shannon or Lanesborough and Killaloe'.

Russell recalled that, around 1860, he travelled in one of these boats between Athlone and Killaloe, describing them as 'large side-wheel steamers that would carry over one hundred passengers, and on which excellent meals could be obtained at a moderate price'. Yet those boats were no longer profitable, due to the 'decline in the population, and the consequent decline in trade' that followed the famine. By the 1890s, that section of the river was 'practically closed, not only to tourists, but to the public in general'.

Russell then turned his attention to Athlone, which he labelled 'one of the most picturesque and interesting inland towns in Ireland' and 'one of the few towns - perhaps the only one - on the Shannon that is not decaying at present'. He explained that: 'For many years after the famine it decayed rapidly, but some thirty years ago a woollen factory

was established; now there are two woollen factories and a saw-mill that give employment to some hundreds of hands'.

Russell noted, also, that the town 'has recently become a great railway centre'. He welcomed those developments but he believed that they 'cannot bring real prosperity to any country in which the population is declining'.

Decline and revival?

Russell described this decline as 'something frightful'. He recalled attending markets in Athlone 'when a small boy, about the year 1841 or '42 and saw more people there in one market than could be seen in twenty markets there now'. So many people travelled to Athlone for the market that the 'town was too small to contain much more than half of them; they flowed out into the fields surrounding it'.

The crowds 'were so dense that it would take hours to jostle one's way from one end of the town to the other...' Russell's recollections corresponded with the account of Henry D. Inglis, the Scottish travel writer who visited Athlone in 1834. Inglis wrote that Athlone town centre was so busy 'on a market-day, it

frequently happens that one can pass in no other manner than by jumping from cart to car and from car to cart'.

Russell also charted the concurrent decline of the Irish language in the area, writing that, although it would 'hardly be credited by those whose memories do not go back fifty years', there were 'certainly three persons speaking Irish for one who spoke English'.

By 1897, however, 'one might attend markets in Athlone now every week in the year and not hear a word of any language but English'. Irish, he wrote, 'has completely died out of the country surrounding Athlone, save in the south-western corner of the county Roscommon, where some old people still speak it'.

Yet Russell saw signs of hope: 'In spite of the awful decline of population in the rural districts of Ireland during the last fifty years, there is much to be seen in them to gladden the heart of the philanthropist.' The situation of what he called the Irish peasant was 'rapidly improving since he has had a barrier put between him and the generally cruel treatment he was wont to receive from his landlord'. It was a sign, he hoped, that Ireland was undergoing a revival.

