



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## Athlone: mud and anarchy



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

For Samuel Molyneux, who travelled through the region in 1709, Athlone was ‘a handsome large town, situated on ye noble river Shannon’. Joseph Boruwlaski, a Polish entertainer and writer, was less impressed, calling Athlone ‘an indifferent town’.

Boruwlaski, who visited in the 1790s, described the town as containing little of note, apart from the military barracks, and he was glad to escape to Longford, where he had a much happier time. Many writers followed in Boruwlaski’s footsteps, including Leitch Ritchie, who visited Athlone in 1836. The town, in more ways than one, would leave a deep impression on Ritchie.

### ‘quenched in blood’

Born in Scotland around 1800, Ritchie took up a literary career as a young man, subsequently writing four novels and many short stories. He was a prolific author of non-fiction, especially travel writing, and he lived in France during the 1820s and 1830s, from where he made numerous journeys across Europe. These were recorded in books that, occasionally, became a source of controversy. His account of a journey to Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1835 was subsequently banned from sale in Russian territory by its emperor, Nicholas I, presumably because Ritchie had written about Russia’s serfdom and the slow pace of reforms to that system.

Ritchie was a man of strong opinions, whose self-confidence prevented him from seeing his own prejudices. He was prone to lashing out at a range of targets and his writings are often anti-Semitic. Yet, in other aspects, he was an astute observer of social

and political life in those countries he visited, highlighting incidents of poverty and poor governance. He visited Ireland in 1836, beginning in Dublin and travelling through all four provinces. Ireland, he believed, was a country in which ‘insurrection after insurrection was quenched in blood, till the spirit of the people was broken’. That history, he wrote, had left its people ‘too timid to unite in vengeance, and too sharply goaded by insult, oppression, or mere hunger, to unite in peace’. The ‘Irish peasant’, as he put it, had been left without ‘hope’.

Ritchie found much to admire in Ireland, from its ‘ladies and gentleman’ to the beauty of its varied landscapes. He also found much to criticise, as can be seen in his description of Athlone. On arriving at Athlone, he found it ‘to be an irregularly built, confused, huddled, but withal substantial-looking town’. He told his readers: ‘The Shannon runs through the middle, the two sides being connected by a narrow, antique bridge. On the right bank are the citadel and barracks; and as boats cannot ascend the rapids of the Shannon, this side is formed into an island by a canal for their passage, over which are two bridges.’

### ‘inconceivably dirty’

Ritchie’s account of Athlone had one dominant theme: dirt. ‘You cannot walk in the streets of Athlone’, he wrote, ‘you must wade’. Warning to his theme, he continued: ‘So inconceivably dirty a place does not exist in Europe, and the broad streets are as filthy as the narrow ones.’ Not only was it a dirty town but it was also a crowded one.

Ritchie’s stay in Athlone coincided with market day, an event he described as presenting a ‘scene of confusion’ that was ‘without parallel in Ireland, or, I believe, in Europe’. People, cattle and horses congregated in the town centre and the ‘narrow way’ was ‘barricaded by several carts, which lay there without horses’. Ritchie spent half an hour ‘up to my ancles in mud’, trying to find a way between the carts and the horses. He could see ‘some of the police in the crowd, making the best of their way through it, and leaving everybody else to do the same’. Ritchie decided to abandon



A sketch of an ‘Irish market girl’ from Ritchie’s tour of Ireland

the market and struggled through the multitudes, heading back to his lodgings, where he was ‘informed that there were still more impatient travellers than myself on the other side of the bridge’ since the market had blocked all coach travel between Galway and Dublin.

Ritchie then ‘walked up the main street, through which the country carts were crowding, four abreast ... and it may be imagined that, even by tacking from side to side, and creeping under the horses’ necks, I made but slow progress.’ Ritchie’s description of market-

day in Athlone corresponded, at least partially, with those of other visitors, including Thomas O’Neill Russell, whom we discussed in an earlier article. Russell, a writer from Moate, recalled attending markets in Athlone ‘when a small boy, about the year 1841 or 42’. The crowds, he recalled, ‘were so dense that it would take hours to jostle one’s way from one end of the town to the other...’

### ‘whisky and water’

Ritchie eventually succeeded in ‘wading across the bridge’, where he encountered the castle: ‘one of

the most beautiful little fortresses I ever saw either at home or abroad’. He described ‘ascending an inclined plane’ before crossing ‘a drawbridge, which appeared to have fallen into disuse’, and entering through the gate. Although contemporary regulations prohibited townspeople from entering the castle without a pass, Ritchie ‘walked through the place, addressing the soldiers, and one of the officers, without being questioned’. He wrote that the castle walls ‘are of immense strength, and are fortified by round towers at the angles’. Its beauty, however, was intermingled with a threat: ‘Cannons point in all directions into the streets; and, in case of insurrection, this section of the town could be laid in ruins in a very short time.’

On leaving the castle, Ritchie continued his explorations, mentioning the ‘larger and more commodious barrack’ near the castle and ‘a fragment of the ancient walls, covered with ivy’. Ritchie was still walking the streets of the town when night fell. While ‘prowling about in the dark’ he was ‘knocked down by some one of the inhabitants, who came behind, and struck me so earnest a blow on the back of the head with a bludgeon, that my hat was cut through, as if with a knife’. Ritchie received several more blows as he lay on the ground before his attacker disappeared into the night. Ritchie believed that the beating was ‘intended for one of the officers of the garrison’ and he may well have been correct. During the early nineteenth century, local newspapers provided occasional reports of attacks, or attempted attacks, on officers in the town’s British army garrison.

Ritchie returned to his inn, whose owners wanted to call a local doctor. He refused their offer, writing that ‘I understood too much of surgery to comply’. Instead, he went to bed with ‘with a glass of whisky and water’. The following morning, ‘notwithstanding a very respectable loss of blood’, Ritchie set off on horseback for Shannon Harbour. He would not return to Athlone. Ritchie’s account of his time in Ireland would be published in two volumes, the first in 1837 and the second in 1838. The segment on Athlone was titled, ‘Athlone and its anarchy’.

