



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY



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A journey to Connaught, 1709

In previous articles, we discussed accounts of Athlone and Moate written at various points during the 18th and 19th centuries - one of those travellers was Samuel Molyneux, who kept a diary of his journey from Dublin to Galway in 1709.

At the time of that journey Molyneux was a graduate student in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). He was born in 1689 in Chester, England, but his childhood was marred by the death of his mother in 1691 and his father in 1698. He then moved to Dublin to live with his uncle, entering TCD in 1705, where he received private tuition from the philosopher George Berkeley. Molyneux's interest in natural philosophy led him to exchange letters with an array of academics, including the renowned scholar Roderick O'Flaherty who resided in Galway. Molyneux was keen to meet with O'Flaherty and so, in April 1709, began a journey to Connaught.

Heading west

At about 10am on Tuesday 5 April, Molyneux left Dublin by coach, passing through Chapelizod, Palmerstown, Lucan, Leixlip, Maynooth, and Rodanstown before reaching Kilcock 'in ye county of Kildare', about 2pm. The weather was good, as were the roads, and his coach made smooth progress.

On the next day, he left Kilcock, passing through Cloncurry, Clonard and Kinnegad, which Molyneux described as 'a pretty new built town'. From there, his coach moved through Gallstown, arriving in 'Beggarsbridge' after an eight-hour journey. Beggarsbridge, in which Molyneux found 'a good inn' is modern Rochfortbridge - a local tradition states that the town derived its earlier name from a beggar who died in the town but who whose pockets were filled with enough money to fund the construction of a bridge. By this point, the quality of the roads had deteriorated and Molyneux noted that as the coach 'went farther from Dublin no enclosures or trees' could be seen with the predominant feature being 'little scrubs in ye bogs here and there'.



The White House at Kew, the former residence of Samuel Molyneux, as sketched around 1763. His wife Elizabeth Capel inherited the house in 1721

On Thursday 7 April, Molyneux's coach left Beggarsbridge and proceeded through 'Tyrrel's-pass, Ballygore [Ballynagore] and other sad towns'. His destination was Moate, which was reached around lunchtime. Moate, according to Molyneux was 'a pretty little clean-built town,

of a different air from the generality of the Irish villages in this part of Ireland'. Molyneux's account, although brief, corresponds with that of A. Atkinson, an English traveller who published 'The Irish Tourist' in 1811. We followed Atkinson's journey in an earlier edition and, like Molyneux, he was impressed by Moate, describing it as 'remarkable for its cleanliness and public order'.

Athlone and beyond

After a day in Moate, Molyneux left for Athlone along 'indifferent coach roads, wild sheepwalks, and scrubby hills and bogs'. Molyneux reached Athlone, which he described as 'a handsome large town', after a three-hour journey. There he 'saw ye miserable ruins of ye castle, which was some years ago blown up': a reference to the destruction which

occurred in October 1697 after a lightning bolt struck an arms storeroom in the castle. Not only was the castle devastated by the subsequent explosion but much of the town was set ablaze.

Athlone's recovery from that disaster seems to have been well underway by the time of Molyneux's visit although, as historians such as Harman Murtagh have noted, the castle remained in ruins for much of the 1700s. Indeed, a portion of the castle collapsed in 1752, destroying three adjacent houses. Apart from the castle, Molyneux had little else to say about Athlone. He noted the presence of the nearby 'horse and foot barrack' adding that Athlone 'is famous for ye manufacture of felts, which are here sold from 2 to 4 shillings price'.

Molyneux spent about twenty-fours in Athlone before 'crossing ye Shannon' and entering Connaught. His coach went as far as Killeglan, a short distance north of Taghmaconnell and about twenty kilometres west of Athlone. The journey from Athlone to Killeglan was slow and Molyneux had ample time to gaze upon the local countryside: 'I observ'd

scarce any corn or enclosures but old ruin'd ones of stones heap'd along in rows...' Overall, he judged the area to be 'bad country', noting in his journal that, along this leg of his journey, 'I think I observ'd many more beggars everywhere than is usual...'

Molyneux reached Galway around 20 April, having been delayed by bad weather and forced to stop at Killeglan for eight days. After meeting with Roderick O'Flaherty, Molyneux left Galway for the return journey to Dublin during which he makes references to passing through Brideswell in Roscommon, site of 'a well and chappell dedicated to St. Bridget' and 'a Poor house' where 'some poor people are yet maintain'd by ye alms of Roman Catholics.' It appears that, for the most part, Molyneux travelled the same roads as on the outward journey, except that he seems to have taken a different road from Athlone to Moate, stating that on this occasion he passed through 'a well improv'd, well planted country, with trees and orchards...'

Politician and scientist

Three years after his journey to Connaught, Molyneux returned to

England. He was later appointed secretary to the Prince of Wales (the German-born George Augustus) and became a member of the English house of commons in 1715, serving until 1722 and again from 1726 until his death. In 1727, he also became a member of the Irish parliament, for TCD, a role he retained until his death.

Molyneux was a noted amateur scientist, with a particular interest in astronomical observation and the design of optical instruments. His most famous work was carried out in collaboration with James Bradley, an English astronomer, during which they attempted to detect a phenomenon called stellar parallax. Although they were unsuccessful, Bradley later used the method that emerged from their joint efforts to discover the aberration of starlight - the apparent difference between the observed position of a star and its true position - a result of the combined effect of the earth's motion through space and the finite speed of light.

Molyneux's reputation took a brief battering in 1726 during the remarkable affair

of Mary Toft, an English woman who claimed to have given birth to a litter of rabbits. Molyneux, along with a Swiss surgeon named Nathaniel St. André were assigned by the Prince of Wales to investigate the case. St. André subsequently published 'A Short Narrative of an Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbits' in which he claimed that the births were real. However, the hoax (in which St. André may have been implicated) was soon exposed and Molyneux's proximity to the affair's central protagonists meant that he was subjected to widespread ridicule.

He died two years later after collapsing in the house of commons, a tragic end that sparked a new controversy. On the night of Molyneux's death, his wife, Lady Elizabeth Capel, eloped with St. André, leading contemporaries to suspect that the doctor had used poison to hasten his colleague's demise. Over a century after his death, Molyneux's account of his journey to Connaught, one of numerous journeys that he took across Ireland, became more widely known through its publication by the Irish Archaeological Society.