



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Not pretty but interesting: Athlone in 1834



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During 1834, Henry D. Inglis, a Scottish author and editor, travelled through Ireland as part of his latest project.

Inglis had published many popular books detailing his travels in Europe and he was keen to provide a British audience with information on Irish towns, writing that 'even yet, our ideas of Kilkenny, Clonmel, Athlone, Mullingar, Mallow, Fermoy, Cashel, Thurles, Tipperary, Ennis, Galway, Sligo, and a host of others, are of the vaguest description'.

'Dublin is not Ireland'

The resulting book, which was published in 1835, is a travel journal and it contains an eclectic series of observations. In one chapter, Inglis praises Irish inns for their high quality, in another he comments on the physical characteristics of the people he meets.

For example, Inglis informs readers of his appreciation for 'Irish females, whose generally high foreheads, and intellectual expression' he never fails to notice. Inglis began his journey in Dublin, which he describes as, 'for its size', a 'handsomer city than London'. He was particularly impressed by Stephen's Green, Merrion Square, the Phoenix Park, the Custom House and the Bank of Ireland in the city centre with its 'magnificent and yet classically chaste colonnades'.

He took time to mention the poverty that was evident across large swathes of the city, as he would do in other locations throughout his Irish

journey. However, Inglis rarely considers the reasons behind such poverty. He often suggests that it is caused solely by the indolence of individuals, although he also blames corrupt landlords and officials.

After spending an enjoyable time in the capital, Inglis became anxious to head into the countryside, telling his readers that 'Dublin is not Ireland – and it was Ireland I had come to see'. He travelled through Wexford, Waterford and Kilkenny, which he found to be 'a large, well-built, beautifully situated, and very interesting town' – one of the most 'picturesque' that he had ever seen.

Inglis then moved through Cork, Kerry, Clare (which he found to be an especially violent and poverty-stricken county) and Limerick. From Limerick, Inglis headed towards Athlone, reaching Banagher in the summer of 1834.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Banagher had only one hotel, described as 'excellent' by Inglis, and he soon departed for Athlone. Although a 'steam vessel' travelled the Shannon between Banagher and Athlone twice a week, Inglis decided to hire a carriage. For some miles after leaving Banagher, the road kept close to the river; and then passed 'through the station, called Shannon harbour, where the Grand Canal to Dublin connects itself with the Shannon'. Inglis noted that, from Shannon harbour, there was 'regular communication daily; both to Dublin, and, by steam, on the Shannon, to Limerick'.

Inglis found the next stage of his journey unenjoyable, as his carriage entered a 'wide tract of bog land' that extended 'on both sides of the road, as far as the eye



The Elizabethan Bridge of Athlone

could reach'. He explained to his readers that, while the landscape was 'dreary', the turf taken from those bogs provided locals with 'an abundant and cheap supply of fuel'.

Inglis judged the road between Banagher and Athlone to be 'one of the worst I had seen in Ireland'. The road was in such a poor state, Inglis believed, because 'few gentlemen's seats are in its neighbourhood; and therefore, it is nobody's interest to make a job'. Conditions improved as he moved closer to Athlone and he described 'the immediate neighbourhood of the town' as 'finely diversified and well cultivated'.

However, on reaching the town, his mood soured once again. Athlone, he wrote, was an 'ugly town'. Actually, he described it as 'a remarkably ugly town'. It was 'so deficient' in good streets, he wrote, that 'after I had walked over the whole

town, I still imagined I had seen only the suburbs'. He was perturbed by the state of the bridge which was 'extremely ancient' and 'in a disgracefully ruinous condition'.

In many places the parapet wall had crumbled away and the carriage road was so narrow that, 'on a market-day, it frequently happens that one can pass in no other manner than by jumping from cart to cart and from cart to cart'. The bridge, he claimed, was 'altogether a disgrace to the town and the kingdom'.

It's just business

Despite this inauspicious first impression, Inglis concluded that Athlone was 'both an interesting town, and an excellent business town'. It stood 'in the midst of a well cultivated and thickly peopled country; and, both in its export and general trade, is rapidly improving'. According to Inglis, 'at least eighty tons, chiefly corn, are

sent down the Shannon, on a weekly average'.

Indeed, Inglis arrived in Athlone during a period in which the river was being commercialised to a greater extent. The Shannon Commission was established in 1831 to report on the condition of the river from its source to the sea. A year after Inglis visited Athlone, the Shannon Navigation Act of 1835 was passed and a single navigation authority, the Shannon Commissioners, was appointed.

Of course, no account of Athlone could ignore the town's status as 'a great military station' for the British army. Earlier in the century, 10,000 soldiers were stationed in Athlone and the town was still heavily garrisoned in 1834.

Inglis described the 'extensive barracks, both for foot regiments and for artillery' and he noted that 'on the Connaught side, a line of fortifications has been

erected': those fortifications were the Batteries, which the British army had constructed to defend Athlone in the event of a French invasion. Inglis also described the 'ancient castle, with a strong central tower, and massive bastions'. The castle, he wrote, was 'fully garrisoned'.

Inglis stayed in Athlone for one week, meaning that he could gain little more than an impression of the town and its hinterland. Yet his book – Ireland in 1834 – would prove popular in Britain and it would influence subsequent accounts of Athlone, such as James Fraser's Guide Through Ireland in 1838.

Like Inglis, Fraser would describe Athlone as an unattractive but business-orientated town. Over subsequent decades, the growth of Athlone Woollen Mills, the Shannon navigation works and the arrival of the railway would transform the town that greeted Inglis in 1834.

