

Castlebar: Study of a 19th Century Travelling Community

The county jail for Mayo was located at **Castlebar** from 1834 until its closure on October 26, 1919. The long-term governor was a Captain Disney. Castlebar's surviving records make up a small archive of two reels of microfilm in the National Archives, Dublin. ¹ They are also now searchable by name on the internet. ² They begin at quite a late date - October 1878 - and run continuously to 1919. Entries are detailed, legible and with unusual attention paid to marks on person. There is no index associated with the original register. The inclusion of body weight can also be enlightening as many prisoners come out weighing more at the end of their sentence than when they went in.

An odd numbering system was evident in the Castlebar prison register. From 1882 the prison year was calculated from April to March. This system continued until 1896 when the register began anew on January 1st. There is evidence that other jails around Ireland adopted this practice in the early 1880s too but quickly abandoned it. (Kilmainham tried it briefly in 1881, Tralee in 1883.)

What is noteworthy about the Castlebar records is the frequency of prisoners who were of no fixed abode. Although they made up only a small fraction of the overall prison population, (little more than 1 %) the Travelling Community featured more prominently here than in any other jail researched in this collection, including Sligo. These individuals were invariably described by the prison clerks by the then commonly-used term, 'Tinker'.

In the light of this unique opportunity, a survey was done of the Traveller population of Castlebar prison from 1878 to 1898. The survey concerned itself with surname gathering and frequency, migration patterns and family relationships. One hundred and fourteen individuals were identified. The prison service's diligence in recording age, marks and scars was useful here as it helped to differentiate between the many people with the same first name. (Traveller communities have tended to stick rigidly to the traditional system of naming first child after paternal grandparent and so on, leading to a very high incidence of individuals with the same name. ³)

All the Travellers surveyed in Castlebar jail were Catholic. The oldest was John Moran (Mohan?) of Cappagh, Castlebar, born in 1794. Eight percent bore small pox scars. Unlike the settled population, crimes committed among relatives tended to be among in-laws rather than blood relations. This was especially the case for mothers and daughters-in-law.

Twenty-seven surnames were identified in this survey. The predominant surname was Mc(Mac)Donagh. It was over four times more common than the next numerically strongest surname, Cawley. There is some evidence from the general records that the McDonaghs, Sweeneys and Wards intermarried frequently. Several collaborative crimes involved these surnames. An example would be the 'uttering of base coin' - a popular offense of the period. The following table lists number of individuals with a particular surname over the twenty years.

¹ National Archives, Dublin, MFGS 51/003-004.

² "Ireland, Prison Registers, 1790-1924." FamilySearch. <https://familysearch.org> : Accessed Jan, 2013.

³ Sharon Gmelch. *Tinkers and Travellers*. O'Brien Press 1975. Page 39.

Table 1: Traveller Surnames

McDonagh 36
 Cawley 8
 Sweeney 5
 Casey 5
 Joyce 5
 Noon/ Noone 5
 Reilly 5
 Ward 5
 Mohan /Maughan/ Moughan) 5
 Murtagh 4
 Burke 3
 Moffatt 3
 Mongan 3
 Murray 3
 Skiffington 3
 Collins 2
 Daly 2
 Quinn 2
 Stokes 2
 Cassidy 1
 Enright (Ainright) 1
 Gallagher 1
 Hynes 1
 Kerrigan 1
 McCawley 1
 Moran? 1 (might be Mohan)
 Power 1

In spite of their migratory life, all Travellers seemed to know precisely where they were born and there was remarkable consistency over the twenty years in recorded place of birth for each prisoner. 39% were recorded as being of no fixed abode at time of imprisonment, although this figure may have been higher as townships were often given as place of residence. Only one individual, Martin McDonagh (b 1874) could not specify his birth place. 15% of the population were still living where they had been born.

Table 2: Documented place of birth of Traveller prisoners, 1878-1898.

Location	Numbers	Location	Numbers
Castlebar	11	Boyle	3

Location	Numbers	Location	Numbers
Swinford	8	Frenchpark Roscommon	3
Sligo (McDonagh)	7	Kiltimagh (Casey)	3
Roscommon Town	6	Birr (McDonagh)	2
Ballina	5	Caltra Galway	2
Strokestown	4	Galway Town	2
Westport (Noone)	4	Longford (Stokes/ Quinn)	2
Claremorris (Sweeney)	4	Ballinasloe	2
Athlone	3	Dunmore, Galway	2
Bellaghy(Skiffington)	3	Tuam, Galway	2

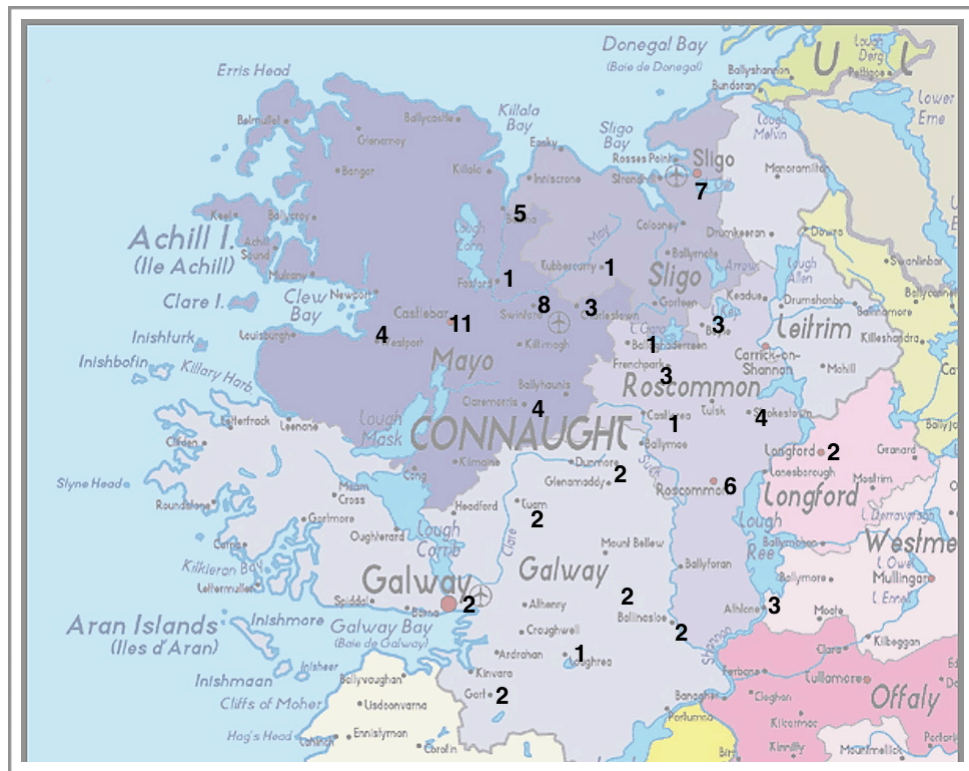
Table 3 : Breakdown of Place of birth by County

Mayo (52)	47%
Roscommon (23)	21%
Galway (12)	11%
Sligo (10)	9%
Longford (5)	5%
Westmeath (3)	3%

Twelve Travellers were from Leinster. Drogheda, the birth place of a John Cawley, sticks out as the only east coast location. 101 Travellers were from Connaught. The distribution of birth locations describes approximately an eighty mile circle of migration, with the McDonaghs having the widest range of migration . At 47 % , Mayo birth places were perhaps lower than expected.

Physical descriptions reveal that tattoos were popular among the Traveller population of the time, especially among the McDonaghs. Indeed Traveller women appeared to be unique among groups of females in Nineteenth Century jails to bear them. The fashion was for blue spots, and occasionally a set of initials or a cross, tattooed usually about the left hand near the thumb.

Map of Connaught showing places of origin and the numbers of Traveller prisoners born there



Data on educational standards revealed that 22% (15 out of 69)of the Traveller men could read and write. Most of these were born in the 1860s. 33% had some literacy skills. It is quite possible that these skills were picked up in prison. Literacy was rarer among the 45 females surveyed. Only one female could read and write and this individual , Catherine Murray (b 1859), was recorded as illiterate until 1890. 13% of women had some literacy skills, however. A comparison with the wider population may be found by using percentages of illiteracy for Mayo for relevant census years. In 1881, for instance, 42% of males and 50 % of females in the general population could not read and write. ⁴

Table 4: Names and Birth Dates of Travellers with Literacy Skills.

Male literacy: total surveyed 69.

Read & Write:

Martin McDonagh (b. 1858) Patrick Noone (b. 1859). Martin McDonagh (b. 1860). David Joyce (b. 1846). Martin Murray (b. 1864). Michael Casey (b. 1866). William Cassidy (b. 1865). Charles Daly (b. 1835). James Noone (b. 1860). Samuel Power (b. 1867). Martin McDonagh (b. 1860). Pat Reilly (b. 1875). John Collins (b. 1867). Thomas Joyce (b. 1869). John McDonagh (b. 1863).

⁴ Proquest. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online. <http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk> 1882 [C.3268] Census of Ireland, 1881. Part I. Vol. IV. Province of Connaught. Page 409. Accessed May 1st 2011. Institutional subscription required.

Read:

John Murtagh (b. 1844).

Alphabet:

Martin Hynes (b. 1859). John Moran (Mohan?) (b. 1794). John Cawley (b. 1823). Martin McDonagh (b. 1813).

Female literacy: total surveyed 45.

Read & Write : 1 Catherine Murray (b. 1859. Referred to as illiterate until 1890.)

Read: Bridget Casey (b. 1856) Ellen Joyce (b. 1869) and Catherine Murtagh (b. 1867).

Alphabet : Winifred Joyce (b. 1840) and Catherine Forde (b. 1819).

The prison officials were careful to distinguish between ‘tinkers’ and ‘dealers’ , some of whom were also of no fixed abode. But did they intersect at any point? Surnames were noticeably different . Typical dealer names included Morrison, Lacey, Daly, Hastings and Bolingbroke. (The latter is an interesting English toponymic confined in Ireland almost entirely to Swinford, and with faint royal echoes through Henry IV.) Other cases showed the presence of dealers with names now associated with Travellers : Collins, Forde, Ward and Sheridan. On one or two occasions there was complicity between the two groups in perpetrating petty crime. Otherwise there was little evidence to link them.

Several surnames which seem to have died out among present-day Travellers were noticed in these records. One is Skiffington, (variation Skeffington), found mainly in Ulster and thought to be an English toponymic derived from Leicestershire. ⁵ The name is recorded in the Annals of the Four Masters for the year 1532 with the arrival of Henry VIII’s Lord Deputy, Sir William Skeffington. ⁶ The surname here is represented by a family from Bellaghy, near Charlestown. What is surprising about this surname, apart from the fact that it is not of Irish origin, is its rarity. (Matheson recorded only eight GRO births for the whole country in 1890. ⁷)

Another unusual Traveller name in the survey, again not of Irish origin, was Moffatt(variations Mofat ,Moffett, Moffitt, Mefet, Muffett), represented by a couple from Kilmain, subsequently living near Cong. It is a name found mainly in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and is said to be derived from the Gaelic version of a place in Dumfries. ⁸ There are fourteen Moffatts (and variations) listed in Griffith’s *Valuation* for Mayo, primarily in Tirawley but also in Kilmain (where the Moffatt Travellers originated). Moffitts of Tirawley were also listed in the *Tithe Applotment Books*. ⁹

A feature of both families was their use of distinctive first names - ‘Mark’ for Skiffington, ‘Peter’ for Moffatt. These names were rarely used among the wider Travelling community and may provide clues to wider ancestral connections. ‘Arthur’ was also uniquely popular among the Sligo McDonaghs. ‘Martin’ was by far the most popular first name in the survey (1 in 3). This compares

⁵ Patrick Hanks & Flavia Hodges. *Dictionary of Surnames*. Page 495. Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.

⁶ John O’Donovan, *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, Vol V ,1501-1588. Page 1413.

⁷ Sir Robert E. Matheson, *A Special Report on the Surnames of Ireland with notes as to Numerical strength etc*. Alex Thom & Co., Dublin. 1909. page 71.

⁸ Patrick Hanks & Flavia Hodges. *Dictionary of Surnames*. Page 370. Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.

⁹ National Library of Ireland, *An Index of Surnames of Householders in Griffith’s Valuation and Tithe Applotment Books Co. Mayo*. NLI 1964.

with only 1.3 % for the population at large for the 1901 Census, for instance.¹⁰ There was a narrower range of female first names in evidence, with traditional stock predominating, apart perhaps from the disproportionate prominence of ‘Winifred’. ‘Mary’ was the most popular female name (1 in 3).

Table 5: Traveller First Names in order of popularity.

Male		Female	
Martin	18	Mary	13
Patrick	11	Ann	7
John	11	Ellen	7
Thomas	9	Catherine	6
William	4	Margaret	5
Arthur (McDonagh)	3	Winifred	3
James	3	Bridget	3
David	2	Rose Ann	1
Michael	2		
Terence	1		
Mark (Skiffington)	1		
Bryan (Skiffington)	1		
Peter(Moffatt)	1		
Samuel (Power)	1		

The reason why the Skiffington and Moffatt names died out among modern Travellers is worthy of speculation. Was it due to lack of critical mass? Were they absorbed into the more dominant surname groups. Or did they marry within the settled population? The Skiffingtons in particular were well integrated among other Traveller families, as there is evidence from databases available on the *Familysearch* website that they intermarried with McDonaghs, Reillys and especially Noons. But they also seemed to have been resident in the one place, namely Bellaghy, for a long time, effectively becoming settled early on.

GRO marriage records confirm that in 1875 Patrick Moffatt married a non-Traveller, Mary Naughton, daughter of a Ballinrobe carpenter, Thomas Naughton. The couple’s 1901 Census return had them living in Church Lane, Ballinrobe, with their six daughters. Their dwelling was third class

¹⁰ Census of Ireland 1901, <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901>, Accessed June 3rd 2011. (Forenames only entered in search box.)

with a stable and piggery.¹¹ The same year their only surviving son, Peter, married Bridget McInerney, again the daughter of a non-traveller. In the case of the Moffats it is suggested that a combination of marrying into the settled community and giving up the migratory life led to their disestablishment.

A more recent survey of Traveller surnames from 1981 indicates that the McDonaghs made up only 20.9 % of the population in the Western region , losing ground to names such as the Wards (69.9 %), Sweeneys (67.5 %), Mongans (47.5 %) , Maughans (41.5%) and Collins (28.9%) .¹² While Collins was more commonly seen among the dealers, the name did not feature particularly prominently among the Travellers surveyed from 1878-98. The difference suggests that migration by these families into the area gathered apace in the Twentieth Century.

The familiarity gained with Traveller families from the Castlebar records allowed the study to be widened to the older **Longford** and **Sligo jail** records, taking in a previous generation or two in some cases. Longford Jail's records start in the 1850s but don't provide physical description or occupation, so they are unreliable if studied in isolation.¹³ Sligo Jail is more detailed, adopting the term 'Tinker' from 1860 and providing data on education and physique. Sligo Jail has been particularly useful in advancing information on the origins of the Skiffingtons.¹⁴ A Martin Skiffington (b 1816), from Rivertown Sligo, likely grandfather of the Skiffingtons mentioned in Castlebar, was convicted of assaulting Thomas Feenaughty in 1848. In a later entry he was said to go by the alias of Martin Feenaughty. (Feenaughty, a name closely linked with the Clanconway area of Galway and Roscommon, underwent extensive anglicisation to Finnerty throughout the Nineteenth Century .¹⁵). A family link with Feenaughty is therefore suggested , possibly through marriage. Older Sligo sources such as the Census of Elphin ,1749, lists a Thomas Skivinton and his wife, Protestant, Cottier, living in the parish of St. John's, Sligo Town.¹⁶ Also, intriguingly a Mark Skiffington was listed by Griffith's *Valuation* as leasing land at Tintagh, Boyle, not ten miles from Rivertown, Sligo, in 1858.¹⁷

The Sligo records also established that one Traveller surveyed , Samuel Power, had a grandfather named Edward Power, a Protestant bell hanger, born in 1814. Other unexpected Traveller names to crop up in Sligo included **Clyne**, **Weir** and **Heaney**. At the same time a family of Protestant Travellers from Sligo town was represented by **William** and **Charles Wilson**, born in 1840 and 1844 respectively.

The Castlebar prison records used revealed a great diversity of Traveller surnames in Mayo as recently as the mid-Nineteenth Century. They provided solid information on patterns of intermarriage, close family ties and migration. They also show that longevity was a surprising feature of some major Traveller families like the McDonaghs .

¹¹ Census of Ireland 1901, <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901>, Accessed June 3rd 2011.

¹² David B. Rottman, *The Population Structure and living Circumstances of Irish Travellers: Results from 1981 Census of Traveller Families*, ESRI, Paper No. 131, July 1986.

¹³ National Archives , Dublin, Longford Jail General Register, Jul 9 1856- Dec 23 1868. MFGS 51/158.

¹⁴ Ibid, Sligo Jail General Register, Oct 13 1837- Dec 23 1857. MFGS 51/094-5.

¹⁵ Edward MacLysaght, *More Irish Families*. O'Gorman Ltd. 1960. page 108.

¹⁶ *Origins. Census of Elphin 1749*, <http://www.origins.net>. Accessed Feb 12, 2011. Commercial site.

¹⁷ Ibid. Griffith's *Valuation*, <http://www.origins.net>. Accessed May 10, 2011.

Castlebar Jail . (Robert French. 1841-1917) The Lawrence Collection. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



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