Emper: A Westmeath Rural Parish and its People in 1901

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The publication online of the original census return forms for the 1901 and 1911 censuses, while primarily a source of demographic information, also provides some insights into economic and social conditions in Ireland in those years. The censuses gathered information on age, occupation, religion, literacy and marital status. Information was also collected on housing, particularly on the 'class' of house, number of rooms, and number of families per house in the case of multiple occupancy dwellings. Information on 'out offices' which included stables, coach houses, cow houses, piggeries barns etc gives a fuller picture of the extent of each household's property.

This paper uses the information in the original household census returns for the parish of Emper in County Westmeath to build an economic and social profile of a rural parish as Ireland entered the twentieth century. By examining the information on occupation, family structure, age, literacy and housing a socio-economic profile of this rural community can be created and information from sources other than the census is used to give a more detailed account of everyday life in Emper in 1901.

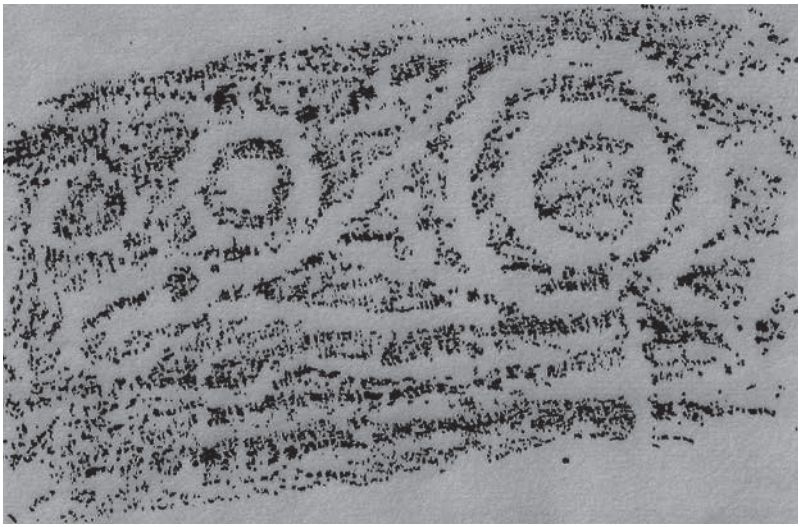

Figure 1: Inscribed stone from a Bronze Age souterrain in Rathduff, Emper. This stone may have been re-used from an earlier tomb of the Neolithic period (4000–2500 BCE), like those at New Grange and Lough Crew in Co Meath. (*Photo from Peter Wallace, A History of Ballynacargy, Sonna and Emper (Mullingar, 2014) by kind permission of the author*).

Emper in the northwest of Westmeath is a District Electoral Division (DED) and a Catholic parish. The DED encompasses nine townlands: Ballymaglavey, Castelgaddery, Ballynacarrow, Churchtown, Conlanstown, Emper, Lakingstown, Rathcaled and Rath (Malone). All the townlands are in the Catholic parish of Emper, except Conlanstown, which is in the Catholic parish of Ballynacargy and Ballymaglavey which is in the Catholic parish of Moyvore.

Emper has been inhabited since at least the Mesolithic era (15,000 to 5000 BCE) as evidence of settlement from that time has been found along the river Inny, which forms the western and northern boundaries of the parish.[1] There is a ringfort and souterrain from the Bronze age (2000 BCE to 500 BCE) age in the area known as Rathduff (the black fort) close to the Inny. Before the Norman Conquest Emper was part of the Kingdom of Teffia which included much of Longford and Westmeath[2].

Origins of a unique place name

The place name Emper is unique and its meaning is uncertain. John O Donovan, who surveyed the parish for the Ordnance Survey in 1837, surmised that the name must be derived from the 'magnificence of the far-famed castle' which once stood in the parish.[3] A more plausible origin of the name is given by Eamon Mac an Fhailigh, a scholar of the Irish language who was born in Emper.[4] Mac an Fhailigh argues that the name is derived from an old Irish word 'imbithe' which means 'enclosed' because the townland, which also gives its name to the parish, is enclosed by bogs. The western border of the townland of Emper is a bend in the River Inny, a tributary of the Shannon which forms the border between Westmeath and Longford for much of its course.

The parish is first mentioned in written records in a Taxation of 1302 (Ecclesia de Imper).[5] The Annals of Lough Key for 1401 state that Muircheartach occ mac Muircheartiagh moir meg Eochacan was killed 'i mbeol Atha Impir' (at the ford of Impir) by Garrett Mac Roberd Dalatun. A fragment of an annals for the year 1405 states 'Caislen Impir do dhenamh

Figure 2: Map of Emper. The bogs which may have given the parish its name, are now largely planted with trees. (*Map courtesy of Logainm.ie*)

Figure 3: Ruin of Emper Castle built in 1405 by Henry McNicholl Dalton. (*Photo from Wallace, A History of Ballynacargy, Sonna and Emper by kind permission of the author*).

le Annruidh mac Henri mic Nicoll Dalatun' (The castle of Impir is built by ... Dalatun).[6] An annal of 1406 states 'tempull Padraic a nImper do loscudh la clainn Milis Dalatun' (The church of St Patrick in Impir was destroyed by Milis Dalatun).[7] Mac Firbis's Annals for the year 1451 state that 'the Castle of Imper fell downe in the heads of Nicolas Dalton and his wife, Daniel boy o ffeargail's daughter' killing both.[8] The castle was rebuilt, and the Dalton family continued to live in it until the eighteenth century. The rebuilt castle was very extensive, covering about an acre. A fragment of one wall remains. According to local folklore the mortar for the castle was mixed with cattle blood. O Cleirigh's book of Genealogies refers to the Daltons as 'muintir Impir' (the people of Emper). The Daltons were descendants of Norman knights who first settled in England taking their name from Alton in Derbyshire. [9] They were given extensive lands in Westmeath by Henry II and were known as Barons of Rathconrath. The Daltons, like many

Anglo-Norman families became Gaelicised and married members of Gaelic families, particularly the O'Farrells of Teffia. Some men of the family fought with James II in the Williamite wars and fled to Europe after the Treaty of Limerick. One member of the family, Richard Dalton became a general in the army of Empress Marie Therese of Austria and Count of the Holy Roman Empire. He returned to Ireland and built Mount Dalton House around 1785 on the site of a Dalton castle.[10]

The Fiants of Henry V111 of 1539–40 refer to the 'church of Impere'.[11] This reference relates to the dissolution in 1540 of the Priory of Tristernagh in the neighbouring parish of Ballynacargy. One of the priors of Tristernagh, Thomas Barnwell, who converted to Protestantism, was given the parish of Emper with a pension of twenty-six shillings and eight pence. Barnwell cannot have been a successful proselytiser as there is no record of any Protestants ever having lived in the parish at this time. In 1562 the lands of the Priory of Tristernagh were granted to William Piers, whose tomb in the ruins of Tristernagh Abbey is adorned with angels wearing Elizabethan ruffs. The Fiants of Elizabeth 1 of 1564 refer to a 'grant to Gerald, Earl of Kildare of.... Imper...'[12]

The Irish Language in Emper

Irish as the spoken language of the people of Emper declined precipitously after the Famine and by 1901 the census recorded only two people, Ellen Reilly and Matthew Ledwith, both of Churchtown, as speakers of both Irish and English. But the English spoken in Emper, as in most parts of rural Ireland in 1901, was what scholars call Hiberno English, which was strongly influenced in terms of vocabulary and syntax by Irish. Eamon Mac an Fhailigh,[13] a scholar of the Irish language born in Emper in 1907, compiled a list of almost 300 Irish words used in Emper during his childhood. J. J Cusack (1935–2020), who was principal of Emper school in the 1960s and 1970s, noted that the children from Emper townland had a greater Irish vocabulary than children from other townlands in the parish. This suggests that some spoken Irish may have survived for some time after the Famine in Emper townland which was relatively remote and did not have roads until

they were built as Famine relief in 1847–48.[14] Until the 1960s many older people may not have known, or if they did would not have used, the English terms for such everyday objects as 'traithnín' (a blade of grass), 'fear breaga' (scarecrow) or 'grainneog' (a hedgehog). The syntax of the English spoken in Emper also showed the influence of Irish.[15] In Irish there is a continuous present tense which many Emper people transferred to English ('He does be here every day').

The Tuite Family of Sonna[16]

Until the Land Acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enabled tenant farmers to purchase the land they rented, all but the landless labourers in Emper were the tenants of the Tuite family, whose seat was Sonna Hall about five miles from Emper. A map of the Tuite landholdings in Emper in 1770 gives the names of tenants and the acreage they rented.[17] The 1901 census returns show that most of the families living in Emper in 1770 were still farming the same land in 1901. Several still live and farm in Emper, showing a high level of continuity in the parish.

The first Tuite to settle in the midlands was Richard de Tuyte, a baron who accompanied Hugh de Lacy when he set out to conquer Ireland for Henry II in 1172.[18] De Lacy was granted the lands of O'Maolsheachlainn, King of Meath, and he granted some of those lands in Westmeath and Longford to Richard de Tuite. Around 1199 Richard built a Motte and Bailey near Granard, which is one of the best surviving examples of an Anglo-Norman fortification. It was built within an existing ringfort or rath which probably belonged to the O Farrells, chieftains of Anally, a region which incorporated Longford and much of Westmeath. The Tuites held on to a substantial area of land throughout the invasions and land redistribution of the next 500 years and some members of the family played a significant role in Irish history. Sir Rickard Tuite, with John Bermingham, killed Edward Bruce, brother of the King of Scotland at Faughart, Co Louth in 1319.[19] (Edward Bruce, who had royal Irish ancestors, had been declared King of Ireland by a group of provincial kings in the north of Ireland but was defeated by a coalition of Norman lords, including the Tuites and their

Irish allies). Rickard Tuite was knighted in 1326 and was known as Lord of Sonnagh. His descendant, John Tuite, was styled 'of Sonnagh and Emper'.

In the list of estates confiscated by Cromwell are the lands of Sir Oliver Tuite of Emper and Dame Mabel Tuite of Sonna.[20] A branch of the family who converted to Protestantism recovered some of their lands. Father James Tuite was deported to the Caribbean on the slave ships with other Irish by Cromwell's English forces in 1650–51 for his part in the Irish rebellion. Richard and Thomas Tuite both defended Bective Abbey in Meath in 1650–51 against Cromwellian forces. A grandson of Sir Oliver, William Tuite, was a Brigadier in the army of James II and was killed at the Battle of Aughrim in 1691. The Tuites were relatively benign landlords. During the Famine, Hugh Morgan Tuite gave £1,000 in money, food and clothing to his starving tenants. He also helped several families to emigrate

Figure 4: Tuite Family Mausoleum in Churchtown cemetery. The Tuites owned all the lands of Emper from the twelfth century until 1909. Churchtown cemetery contains the ruins of a medieval church. (*Photo from Wallace, A History of Ballynacargy, Sonna and Emper by kind permission of the author*).

to Australia. He resigned from the Board of Guardians of the workhouse because he disagreed with the very harsh provisions of the 1847 Poor Law Amendment Act which required starving tenants to surrender all but a quarter acre of their land to qualify for relief, including outdoor relief given outside the workhouse.[21]

The impact of the Great Famine on Emper

The population of Emper was 664 in 1901, comprising 363 males and 301 females. In 1841, when Ireland's population reached its maximum of eight million, the population of Emper was 1,664. Famine deaths and emigration reduced the population to 1,125 in 1851, a decline of 32 per cent. In the same period the population of Westmeath had fallen by 21 per cent while the population of Ireland had fallen by 13 per cent. The impact of the Famine on Emper was therefore more severe than on Westmeath or Ireland overall. It is difficult to know why Emper was so severely affected. The population density of the parish in 1901, at three persons per acre was the same as for Westmeath and slightly above the 2.6 acres per person for Ireland as a whole. Some of the land in Emper is, however, of poor quality. The rateable valuation of its 4,839 acres Emper was £2,987 in 1901 while the rateable valuation of the 3,707 acres of land in the parish of Dysart in the more fertile east of Westmeath was £3,086. O'Brien notes that the areas of Westmeath worst affected by the Famine were the western margins of Mullingar Poor Law Union which included the parish of Emper.[22] O'Brien also notes that in 1847, 39 percent of the population of the Ballynacargy Poor Law district, which included Emper, were dependent on food from soup kitchens, which was as high as the rate of dependence in the most distressed areas of the west of Ireland. In September 1848, 389 people in the Ballynacargy district were receiving outdoor relief from Mullingar Workhouse, only eight fewer than the 397 people receiving relief in the much more populous town of Mullingar.[23] A significant number of people in Emper were still living in poverty in the 1860s. In 1868, forty-five people in Emper were receiving outdoor relief from Poor Law Guardians in the form of food and clothing. By 1874 only ten people were receiving outdoor relief.[24]

Population and family structure in Emper in 1901

The table below gives the population of the parish by townland for the years 1841, 1851 and 1901 and shows the immediate and the long-term impact of the Famine on population. By 1901 the population of Emper had fallen by 60 percent from its 1841 level, while the population of Westmeath had fallen by 57 per cent and the population of Ireland had fallen by 45 per cent. In the decade between 1891 and 1901 the population of Emper fell by 110 and the number of occupied houses in the parish fell by ten.

The most significant demographic impacts of the Famine were mass emigration and strictly enforced inheritance of land by one child, usually the oldest son. This in turn led to late marriages and a high proportion of the population never marrying. In many of the households in Emper comprising a married couple and their children, the husband was significantly older than his wife. In one household the husband was sixty while his wife was thirty-eight. In another family the husband was aged sixty and the wife aged fifty while their youngest child was aged five. These ages may be correct but one man who signed the census form in clear, firm copperplate, claimed to be 103, to have a wife of eight-six and a son of twenty-six. While it is possible that a man of seventy-seven could have fathered a child, his wife's recorded age is clearly incorrect. Many old people in 1901 would not have been certain of their ages as state registration of births only began in 1864 and most people would have had no need to produce evidence of their age.

In 1901 16 percent of the population of Emper aged over 50 had never married. This high percentage of people who never married was due to the demographic impact of the Great Famine. Before the Famine, Ireland had a high rate of marriage and a low age of marriage, which among the poorest farmers and labourers was facilitated by the subdivision of land. After the Famine a rigidly enforced system of inheritance of the family farm, by one child, usually the oldest son, was enforced. Sons who did not inherit either emigrated or remained on the farm as unmarried 'relatives assisting' while daughters who did not marry also remained as 'relatives assisting'. [25]

Table 1: Population of townlands in Emper DED, 1841–1901.

Townland	1841	1851	1901
Ballymaglavey			56
Ballynacarrow	132	104	35
Churchtown	231	152	89
Conlanstown	89	94	42
Emper	507	349	199
Lakingstown	170	97	83
Castelgaddery	152	97	61
Rathcaled	199	126	90
Rath Malone			9
Total	**1480**	**1019**	**664**

The impact of the Famine on Emper was recalled by Patrick Farrell in his recollections collected for the Folklore Commission by pupils of Emper School in 1938.[26] Farrell, who was aged ninety in 1938, was born in 1848, during the height of the Famine. He stated that the numerous ruins of houses in Emper showed that the area had once been more densely populated, and he also recalled hearing of evictions during and after the Famine.

Robert Mulleady, aged eight-four in 1938, was also interviewed for the Schools Collection and recalled that three roads in Emper has been built as Famine relief. These roads, known colloquially as 'The Long Boreen' (boreen means 'little road' in Irish), 'Boreen Reilly' and 'The Mearn' (a mearn or mearing is a boundary ditch), were the first paved roads extending into Emper beyond Emper school which had been built in 1833. Mulleady recalled that the men who built those roads were paid in Indian meal which was wetted when it was given to them so that they had to cook it immediately

and could not sell it. Mulleady also recalled that in his youth (he was born in 1854) a much larger acreage of potatoes was grown on ridges (also known as 'lazy beds') which were cultivated by spade. But by 1900 potatoes were largely grown in drills cultivated by plough. While the more prosperous farmers were using ploughs by 1901, the farmers with small farms and the labourers would still have sown potatoes in ridges. This method of growing potatoes was used by small farmers and labourers until the 1960s.

Of the nine townlands in the parish, the most populous was that of Emper, with a population of 199 in 1901, while the least populous was the tiny townland of Rath (Malone), which had one household of nine people. There were 153 households in the parish and 63 of those households, or 41 percent had children under the age of 16. As the oldest child in Emper school was fifteen, those under the age of sixteen could be regarded as children. The total number of children so defined was 189 and the average number of children per household with children was three. Five of the children aged between thirteen and sixteen whose fathers were agricultural labourers, were working as servants. In many farming households the children aged over sixteen were described as 'farmer's son' or 'farmer's daughter'. The 1911 Census shows that most of those adult children were no longer living with their families and had most likely emigrated, though some of the young women may have married men from neighbouring parishes. The households without children consisted of elderly couples and adult children, or in some cases elderly single people, the remaining member of families whose siblings had emigrated or died.

Agriculture

Agriculture was the principal economic activity in Emper in 1901, with most of the people being farmers or agricultural labourers. While most farmers were subsistence farmers growing food to feed their families and selling any surplus on local markets, the structure of agricultural output had changed significantly since the Famine. Before the Famine, the smaller farmers grew potatoes to feed themselves and produced pigs and in some cases a cow to generate a cash income to pay their rent. Agricultural labourers subsisted

almost entirely on potatoes and would have relied on the sale of a pig and casual agricultural labour to pay their rent[27].

Agricultural statistics are not available at parish level for 1901 but the statistics for the county of Westmeath show that the acreage under potatoes had fallen by 40 percent between 1851 and 1901, while the acreage of oats had fallen by 80 percent. In the same period, the number of cattle in the county had doubled and the wheat acreage had tripled. The area under hay and pasture had increased by 30 percent.[28]

Occupations

As in much of rural Ireland in 1901, most of the people of Emper were subsistence farmers or agricultural labourers. Ninety-four heads of households, or 61 percent, gave their occupations as farmers while forty-six, or 30 percent, gave their occupations as agricultural labourers. From the 1880s onwards many labourers had been provided with a Co. Council cottage and an acre of land, which gave them minimal food security as the acre was enough to grow potatoes to sustain a family and to fatten a pig. Four labourers were renting their house and a small area of land from farmers, while eight were renting from Mullingar Rural District Council which had been set up under the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898. Two men were herds whose work would have involved the care of cattle. They were employed by farmers who might be regarded as commercial in that they produced cattle for sale to dealers, while smaller farmers wo sold their cattle at a year-old to larger farmers for fattening.

In many farming households there were children aged over sixteen whose occupations are given as 'farmer's son' or 'farmers daughter'. They ranged in age from sixteen to seventy-nine and could be described as 'relatives assisting,' a term used in published census reports in the post-independence era. The total number of such 'relatives assisting' in the parish was ninety-one in 1901. Most were under the age of 30 and the 1911 Census shows that many had emigrated in the ten year interval.

Seventeen people gave their occupations as 'servant' or 'farm servant'. Most were under the age of twenty and two were aged thirteen. One

prosperous farming family employed a governess and a nurse to care for their seven children. There were five dressmakers/seamstresses, four carpenters (one of whom also had a small farm), one stonemason, two shoemakers (a father and son) and one blacksmith. The Royal Canal flows through the parish of Emper and in 1901 was still a significant means of transport. One woman gave her occupation as lock keeper while a man gave his occupation as 'bank ranger'. Both lived in houses provided by the Royal Canal Company. The bank ranger's work entailed patrolling the canal to ensure that goods unloaded from boats, whose time of arrival was not predictable, were not stolen.

Two young men gave their occupations as 'gentleman's servant'. They were probably employed in Mearescourt House in the adjoining parish of Moyvore. Three women gave their occupations as 'housekeeper' but only one of these was employed in a house other than her own. There was one egg dealer, a 'vegetable gardener' a sacristan and a primary school teacher. One woman aged fifty-five, living alone, claimed to have 'no occupation'.

Literacy

The census form included a question on whether people in the household could read and/or write. Thirty-six people over the age of twelve could neither read nor write, while thirteen claimed they could read but not write, giving a total of forty-nine people who were not fully literate. This gives a literacy rate of 92 per cent which was above the national average of 80 per cent in 1901. Of the forty-nine people who were not fully literate, thirty-eight were over the age of forty, of whom twenty-six were over seventy. Most were labourers, but a few were elderly farmers.

The community of Emper clearly valued education as 90 per cent of children of school going age (5 to 15) were in school at the time of the census. The high literacy levels were of considerable advantage to the many young people in Emper who would be forced to emigrate. Irish emigrants to the USA who were literate in English were able to obtain jobs for which literacy and numeracy were the main qualifications.

Housing

The census collected information on the 'class' of house in which people lived. Houses were classified according to the material of which the walls were constructed (brick, stone, timber, clay), the roofing material (slates, tiles, thatch), the number of rooms and the number of windows to the front of the house. A 'first class' house was built of brick or stone with a slated or tiled roof and with five or more rooms and five or more windows to the front. A 'fourth class' house was a mud walled cabin with a thatched roof most of which were windowless though some had one window.

Of the 153 houses in Emper only two were first class, 106 were second class, 42 were third class and 5 were fourth class. Two of the fourth-class houses had a window but three were windowless. In one of these single room, mudwalled houses without a window lived a labourer with his wife and six children. 92 houses or 60 percent were thatched. The 'third-class' houses were built of rough stones and lime and sand mortar and were whitewashed. Interviewed by local schoolchildren in 1938 for the Irish Folklore Commission, ninety-year-old Bernard Molphy described how houses in the parish were built of stone and sand and lime mortar or stone and yellow clay.[29] Most of these houses were of a type found throughout rural Ireland, consisting of a kitchen/living room with a clay or sometimes stone flagged floor, a parlour and two bedrooms, opening off the kitchen and a loft above the kitchen. Most houses had two-part doors which allowed the lower half of the door to be closed in fine weather to keep out poultry and pigs while admitting light and air. Some houses had a parlour and porch and as their owners became more prosperous a ceiling was installed beneath the thatch, but until the 1960s many houses still had the roofbeams and thatch exposed.

Under the Labourers (Ireland) Act of 1883 which had been championed by the Irish Party at Westminster under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell, a programme of cottage building was introduced in Ireland. These cottages, with masonry walls and slated roofs, and with an allotment of at least half an acre, greatly improved the lives of landless labourers and were sometimes referred to as 'Parnell cottages'. Some labourers were therefore

Figure 5: A single room mud cabin or 'fourth-class house' as classified in the 1901 census. Four families in Emper lived in such houses in 1901. (*Photo courtesy of the National Library of Ireland*).

better housed than the smaller farmers, many of whom lived in thatched houses built of rough stone or rubble and clay. There were eight 'Parnell cottages' in Emper in 1901 and five are still occupied today, having been extended and improved. These cottages were rented from Mullingar Rural District Council.

Diet and lifestyle

The living standard of most of the people of Emper improved significantly over the fifty years, 1851 to 1901. Many the 1,664 inhabitants in 1841 were landless labourers living in mud walled, windowless cabins on a diet of potatoes and buttermilk. This group were the hardest hit by the Famine and their numbers dropped sharply in the period 1850 to 1901. By 1901, the Land Acts had given many farmers security of tenure and most of the remaining labourers were now housed in stone cottages with an acre of land on which

to produce food. But their economic prospects were so poor that most of their children would emigrate and as an occupational group, farm labourers had fallen from two thirds of the labour force in 1851 to one fifth by the time Ireland gained independence in 1922.[30]

All the farms were mixed, with one or more dairy cows, pigs, some cattle and sheep and crops of potatoes, turnips, cabbage barley and oats. Almost all households, both of farmers and labourers, kept poultry, mainly hens. Many farmers produced ducks and geese. Some of the geese were eaten by the families at Christmas with the remainder sold at street markets in Mullingar.[31]

Some of the oats was milled locally into oatmeal for porridge, while some grown by the more prosperous farmers were used to feed their horses. Almost all households, including those of the labourers, kept pigs fed on potatoes, turnips and cabbage stumps and pigs were allowed to forage in the fields. Pigs were killed in early winter and the carcass salted and hung from hooks in the kitchen where the bacon was smoked by the smoke from the open fire. Bacon and cabbage and potatoes was the usual main meal of the farmers who would kill several pigs. The staple diet of labourers was potatoes and cabbage with some bacon. Porridge or 'stirabout' was also a staple food and most households had their own eggs. Bread was mostly homemade, from wheat flour or oatmeal milled locally from grain grown on the farm. The staple homemade bread was 'griddle bread' which was a flat bread cooked on a griddle, a flat rimless pan on legs which was placed over turf embers on the hearthstone. The griddle bread was made from oatmeal, salt and water with wheat flour sometimes being added. Robert Mulleady, aged eighty-four in 1938, the year of the Schools Folklore Collection, recalled querns being used to grind wheat up to the end of the nineteenth century.[32]. A type of potato bread called 'boxty' or 'rasp' (from rasp, an old word for a grater), was made by grating potatoes, squeezing out the moisture, adding flour and salt and cooking the mixture as a thick pancake on a pan or griddle.

Most farmers kept cows and produced butter for sale. The smaller farmers sold calves to the larger farmers who fed them for two to three years and sold them on at local fairs or to cattle dealers. Only a small number of

farmers with farms of over fifty acres were engaged in fattened cattle. The fattened cattle were bought by dealers, mainly for export live to the UK.

Interviewed in 1938 for the Schools Folklore Collection, Bernard Molphy, then aged ninety, who was aged 53 in 1901, recalled that in his youth, breakfast for most people consisted of porridge and buttermilk[33]. Breakfast was eaten at 8am and in spring and summer many people worked for two hours before breakfast. Dinner was eaten at noon and consisted of smoked bacon, potatoes and buttermilk. A supper of potatoes, salt and buttermilk was eaten at 6pm. and most people went to bed at 8pm. In some houses the dining table was hung from the wall when not in use.

Though Emper was a remote rural community, dependent largely on subsistence agriculture, Ireland in 1901 was part of the British Empire with its global markets. Many imported goods could be bought in the nearby village of Ballynacargy.[34] James Moughty's Grocery, Tea, Wine, Spirit, Hardware and Provision Stores offered all the goods listed of 'the highest class at prices unheard of in this locality previously'. Carberry's Hotel, in addition to selling groceries and alcohol, offered 'first class'[35] accommodation where 'every attention will be given to Travellers and Cyclists on Sundays especially catered for'.[36] For those arriving on horseback, 'good yard and stabling accommodation' was provided. Connolly's 'The Irish House' supplied a 'large selection of Irish Tweeds and Suitings, Dresses, Blankets, Flannels, Shawls, Men's' and Boys Ready Made Clothing, Hats, Caps, Shirts, Ties etc. Ladies Jackets and Blouses, Shirts, Corsets, Furs, Belts etc. Men's, Women's and Children's Boots in great variety'. John Magee, a general merchant in Ballynacargy, advertised in the *Westmeath Examiner* in 1901 that he had supplies of 'The Czar's White Port – the same as supplied to the Court at St Petersburg'. Byrne's Commercial Hotel offered 'toys in great variety' and also supplied Christmas and New Year cards 'in the latest designs. Byrne's also offered the interesting service of 'Machine Knitting, done on the Premises.[37]'

Fairs and Festivals

A fair dating from the Middle Ages was held on the Fair Green in Emper on 31 May. The first patent to hold a fair in Emper was granted to Theobald de

Figure 6: The Inny river from Ballynacarrow Bridge. The Inny forms the border between Westmeath and Longford for much of its length and is also the boundary of Emper parish. (*Photo from Wallace, A History of Ballynacargy, Sonna and Emper by kind permission of the author*).

Verdun in 1338 and further patents were granted to Oliver Tuite of Sonna in 1620 and to Henry Tuite in 1738.[38] While primarily a livestock fair, there were stalls selling alcohol, sweets and trinkets and entertainers, including the 'three card trick man'. Faction or 'party' fights often took place at the Fair. Anna May Drew (1919–2016) of Lakinstown recalled that her father, who was aged forty-three in 1901, had seen a man waving a blackthorn stick and shouting 'Twelve o clock in the day and not a drop of blood spilt' at Emper Fair around 1900. The Fair was discontinued around the end of World War I.

Another day of celebration was Pattern Day. ('Pattern' derives from 'patrún' the Irish for patron). This was held on the feast day of the saint after whom the church was named and who was patron of the parish. In the case of Emper, the patron saint was St Matthew whose feast is held on 21 September. The religious element of the pattern consisted of the

celebration of Mass followed by a visit to a holy well. In Emper the holy well is in Ballynacarrow and associated with St Patrick. People walked clockwise around the well (or in the direction of the sun) reciting the rosary. This was a Christianised version of an ancient Celtic rite known as the 'deiseal' where people walked around a sacred spring. People sprinkled water from the well on themselves to guard against illness and took bottles home to bless their houses and animals. Traders would set up stalls selling sweets and fruit. One trader at Emper would shout 'Apples and plums to suit auld women's gums'. [39]

Figure 7: The' Big Tree' of Emper with the first Emper National School, opened in 1833, and the Fair Green on which the school stands. (*Photo from Wallace, A History of Ballynacargy, Sonna and Emper, by kind permission of the author*).

The principal form of social interaction consisted of people visiting each other in their houses in the evenings and exchanging stories, including fairy and folk tales. Some houses where the householder had a reputation as a storyteller were called 'rambling houses. Lacking much formal education, most people were superstitious and believed in fairies and ghosts, as shown by the tales narrated to the children of Emper School who collected such tales in 1938 for the Schools Folklore Collection. These tales were passed from generation to generation on winter evenings around household fires. Most people believed in the banshee ('bean sí' or fairy woman) whose wailing was believed to presage a death.

House dances were held to celebrate weddings and when people were emigrating. The 'American wake' consisted of a night of music and drinking on the eve of the emigrant's departure. Relatives and friends of the departing emigrant contributed to the purchase of a barrel of porter and a night of singing and dancing would take place in the emigrant's house. While the porter and singing suggested celebration, the event was in fact a drowning of sorrow as in many cases the emigrant would never return.

Family and Social Life

The trauma of the Famine had led to a dramatic reversal of the pattern of early marriage and high rate of marriage which had been the norm before the Famine. Primogeniture, whereby one son inherited a farm and the other children were expected to leave, was strictly enforced. Some farmers' daughters married local farmers while others emigrated. Some of the sons of the more prosperous farmers received second level education enabling them to leave the land for jobs in Ireland. Many rural Catholic priests were the sons of farmers.[40]

On many farms, sons who did not find work in Ireland or emigrate and daughters who did not marry locally or emigrate, remained on farms as 'relatives assisting'. In most cases ownership of farms was passed to a son only when the father died. Usually, the son could only marry when he inherited on the death of his father or sometimes of both parents. Often, this did not occur until he was middle-aged. If there were unmarried

brothers or sisters in the family, it would be difficult for the farmer to persuade a potential wife to enter such an extended family. Based on the census returns, of the households without children in Emper in 1901, most consisted of unmarried siblings, some with one or both parents.

Most marriages between farming families in Emper in 1901 were arranged and dowries were paid with the marrying daughter. Marriage was only possible between people of the same economic and social status. Robert Mulleady recorded his recollections of marriage customs in his youth in the late nineteenth century for the Schools Folklore Collection.[41] He stated that most marriages were arranged and that all marriages were held before Shrove Tuesday. The marriage ceremony took place early in the morning in the church and a wedding breakfast was provided at the bride's house. After the breakfast there was music and dancing and some young men of the parish would disguise themselves and go the house where the wedding breakfast was taking place and dance with the bride.

Religion

Emper was part of the Catholic parish of Milltown and tin 1901 the parish priest and two curates lived in the parochial house at Milltown. For a short period in the 1880s one curate had lived in a house near Emper church which was rented from the Tuite family of Sonna. However, a dispute arose with the landlord and from the 1880s the three priests lived in Milltown.[42] Adherence to Catholic practice was universal in Emper and all parishioners were baptised, confirmed and married in Emper church and their funerals were held there. Some parishioners were buried in a cemetery, dating from the Middle Ages, in the townland of Churchtown until it was closed in the 1950s. In 1901 most people died in their homes and the funeral, following a three-day wake, took place from the house. The practice of mourners leaving funeral 'offerings' for the bereaved family had begun in the early nineteenth century when poor people could not afford to fund a funeral. When people became more prosperous and funerals began to be held in churches, the offerings were given to the priest. This practice continued in Emper until the 1980s as the Diocese of Meath was the last diocese to abandon it.

The practice of celebrating Mass in private houses or 'stations', as they were known, was still being observed in Emper in 1901 and continued until the 1960s. This practice had originated during the period of the Penal Laws when priests were forced to operate clandestinely. Only the relatively prosperous households could afford to hold a 'station' as the hosting household provided a breakfast for the priest and congregation.

In 1901 the Catholic clergy in Ireland was expanding rapidly with large numbers of young people becoming priests, religious brothers and nuns.[43] The abundance of priests is shown by the fact that the parish of Milltown/Emper, which had a combined population of 1,100, was served by a parish priest and two curates.

As in many rural communities in 1901, the people of Emper regarded their priests with greater fear than affection. Some people even believed that priests had the power to cure illnesses or inflict curses. Priests exercised considerable power over their communities and were often obsessed with 'company keeping'. One priest who ministered in Milltown/Emper in the early years of the twentieth century, patrolled the lanes and byways of the parish with an 'ash plant' (a cane) to beat any young couples he found.[44]

Crime

There was relatively little crime in Emper or other parts of Westmeath in 1901. There were only seven prisoners in Mullingar jail and only two in Athlone jail in that year.[45] At the Petty Sessions of April 1900 in Ballynacargy several young men were charged with kicking football on the Fair Green in Emper.[46] Michael Fay was charged with stealing a bag of hay which he stated he wanted as a bed for his pig. Peter Kelleghan, a British Army veteran who had fought in the Second Boer War (1899–1902) in South Africa, was charged with being drunk and disorderly. Peter Lynn of Churchtown charged James Kearny, a labourer, with using threatening language towards him. In the week of 6 April 1901, Joseph Teige from the neighbouring parish of Abbeyshrule was fined 2*s*. 6*d*. for being drunk and disorderly. Teige, had returned from the Boer War a few days before. The court was told that a 'well-worn khaki suit was the only trophy he had brought back from the land of carnage'.[47]

An indication of the poverty experienced by some of the labourers was the charging of a man for ferreting rabbits on the lands of William Halion in Emper, while a man named Kiernan charged a woman neighbour with stealing cabbages which he valued at 3*d*. per head. Goods were still being transported by horse drawn barge in 1901 and timber which was awaiting shipment to Dublin by one the boats plying the canal had disappeared, but the thief was not identified.

In April 1901 the *Westmeath Examiner* reported that the Earl of Granard had sued Dugdale, a former RIC constable, for £2 rent arrears. Dugdale stated that he had not paid the rent because he had had to leave the house as it had no windows and had not been thatched for years, despite his asking the agent for Lord Granard to have it repaired. The court awarded a decree for the outstanding rent and the solicitor for Lord Granard stated that he would accept the £2 'in satisfaction of all outstanding claims'. Dugdale replied 'I know you will if you get it'. As he had abandoned the hovel rented from Lord Granard he could not be evicted.[48]

Some defendants at the January 1901 Petty Sessions in Ballynacargy attributed their misdemeanours to 'a dhrop o dhrink', some of which had been given to them free by the publicans as a 'Christmas Box' in appreciation of their custom throughout the year. James Lynn of Conlanstown was fined one shilling for leaving his ass and car on the main street of Ballynacargy on Christmas Eve while he too was enjoying the publicans' 'Christmas Box' of free alcohol. John Fay was fined ten shillings or fourteen days in jail for a drunken assault on a neighbour.[49]

The impact of local government on Emper

Rural District Councils (RDC) elected by rate payers were established by the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 to replace the Grand Juries, which had been self-selecting committees of the local landed gentry. The RDCs were responsible for housing, rural sanitation, roads and public works. The provision of labourers' dwellings was one of their main functions.

A meeting of Mullingar RDC, which was responsible for Emper, in April 1901 was asked to consider building a stretch of road and bridge over a river

in Piercetown, a townland adjoining Emper.[50] Colonel Digby, a member of the RDC, said he knew the area where the proposed road would run and that it was 'surrounded on all sides by swamps, bogs, morasses and quagmires and that people were obliged to carry turf, potatoes, oats and anything they required into it on their backs.' A decision of the road was postponed.

At a meeting of the RDC in Ballymahon, a town in Longford ten miles from Emper, the cost of building roads and labourers' cottages was raised by a Mr Conlon, a councillor[51]. He argued that the priority of the RDC should be 'to provide every labourer who needed them with a house and plot'. He pointed out that the Council had borrowed £21,000 from the Board of Works under the Labourers' Act and that this had added 6*d*. in the £ to the rates.

The building of roads was an important function of RDCs and was a subject of considerable tension in the rural councils. In April 1901, a meeting of Mullingar RDC discussed increasing spending on road building in what the *Westmeath Examiner* called 'Uproarious Proceedings'.[52] Mr Thomas Leonard was a member of the RDC representing Emper. He was described as 'a very eloquent and flowery speaker' who 'gave a brilliant display of his oratorical powers when urging the council to fund a road from 'below the Fair Green of Emper to the County Road at Churchtown'. Mr Leonard stated that the townland of Emper was 'practically without road accommodation'. He pointed out that the division was bounded on the west by the River Inny and was intersected by six bad roads or 'boreens'. Mr Leonard argued that there were about sixty ratepayers in the area who would benefit from the road and claimed that the Division he represented was undersupplied with roads.

At the same meeting, Mr Moughty, owner of a large farm near Ballynacargy, the local village for Emper, expressed concern that the increased spending on roads would have to be funded by increases in rates largely paid by the owners of bigger farms. Moughty also believed that RDC officials, and particularly the County Surveyor, were overpaid. Moughty's comments elicited an angry response from Councillor Scally who asked 'Is it because your father appropriated the land up there and exterminated the

people that you stand up there? It is a disgrace to see a landgrabber's son up there next the chairman when he should be down among the general public'.[53] Mr Moughty not only objected to increased expenditure on roads, he also questioned the council's provision of water pumps. He opposed the provision of an improved water supply for the village of Ballynacargy which he claimed would impose too great a burden on the rate payers. Earlier, in April 1901, Moughty had been accused of polluting the spring supplying water to Ballynacargy by slaughtering cattle near it.[54] Moughty stated that more pumps were not needed as there were adequate wells in the areas where pumps were proposed. He claimed that he had 'spoken to several people in reference to the Ballynacregha pump and have been told by three fourths of the inhabitants of that district that no such thing is required as spring water sources are abundant and more than sufficient for requirements[55]. Moughty was ignoring the fact the RDC had undertaken the provision of public pumps because many labourers and some small farmers depended for their supply of drinking water on the good will of farmers on whose land spring wells were located,

The Land Question in Emper

The issue of landlordism was a major source of political debate in rural Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. The United Irish League, which had begun as the Land League, was the most significant political organisation in Ireland and supported the Irish MPs elected to Westminster. While the Land Acts of 1881 to 1896 had given tenants some security of tenure, and the Irish Land Commission had advanced loans to 70,000 former tenants to buy the land they farmed, most farmers, particularly small farmers, remained tenants. To add to the discontent of small farmers, the main beneficiaries of the 1881 to 1896 Land Acts had been occupiers of larger rented farms. Many of these occupied grazing land for cattle and were in a better position to repay the loans they had taken out from the Land Commission in purchasing their farms. Some of these larger farmers had rented or bought land from landlords who had not renewed the leases of smaller tenant farmers in order to consolidate holdings. Others purchased

land from which tenants had been evicted during the Land War of 1879 to 1882, This led to some of the larger cattle farmers being termed 'land grabbers. Some of the graziers were not full-time farmers but businessmen who bought or leased grazing land as an investment. Owners of smaller farms now saw not only the landlords but the graziers as their adversaries. The United Irish League had taken up the cause of the smaller farmers and sought the breakup of the large grazing farms which had emerged from the implementation of the Land Acts of 1880 to 1898.[56]

Each of the four editions of the *Westmeath Examiner* for April 1901 report on meetings of the United Irish League in Westmeath and give details of subscriptions to the League. The *Westmeath Examiner* of 20 April 1901 reported on a meeting of the United Irish League held in Killucan in April 1901 which was attended by members of the League from several neighbouring parishes including Milltown and Emper. The meeting, which was addressed by the local M.P.s, J.F.X. O'Brien and Laurence Ginnell, passed several resolutions which illustrate that the economic and political issue which most concerned the people of Westmeath at that time was land tenure. One resolution stated: 'we earnestly and indefatigably condemn the action of a certain man in this parish in grabbing a piece of land that was in the occupation of the former tenant and his father before him for close on sixty years, the rent being paid up to the last gale day'. In this case the landlord had presumably refused to renew the lease of the existing tenant and either rented or sold the land to a grazier. In his address O' Brien stated that the Irish M.P.s at Westminster were campaigning for legislation 'to enable the occupiers to become the owners of their farms'. He argued that the Irish MPs would insist that in any legislation 'converting the farmer occupier into the owner of his ground that the labourer will also be afforded facilities for becoming the owner of his cottage and plot of ground'. O'Brien spoke of 'getting back for the people the land confiscated from them' and argued that 'only for the grabbers assistance to the landlords there would be very little difficulty in bringing about a proper arrangement'. He stated that 'public opinion should be stirred up against grabbers' who he described as the 'most shameful robbers in the country'.

O'Brien must have had some knowledge of what the British Government were considering, as a final solution to the Irish land question, namely generously compensating landlords for the sale of their land to tenants. He stated that 'people were willing to give the landlords the best terms and to devise a system by which they will get the full value of their interest in the land'. This statement was greeted with a cry of 'They are not worthy of it' to which O'Brien replied that he agreed, but that' in the interest of peace and good order they were willing to give the landlords the best terms'.[57] Two years later, in 1903, what O'Brien proposed was enacted, when under the Wyndham Land Act, money was advanced to 124,000 tenants to buy 7.3 million acres of land from their landlords. The terms of the Wyndham Act were, as O'Brien predicted, very generous to the landlords who were paid in cash an average of 25 years of existing rents for their land with a further inducement of a 12 percent bonus. Within three years of the Census of 1901 most of the farmers of Emper had bought the land they farmed from their landlord, Sir William Tuite of Sonna. The Tuite family, who in 1876 had owned 9,000 acres of land in Westmeath, by 1928 owned only 628 acres of untenanted land which was subsequently bought by the Land Commission for redistribution.[58] The Tuites had been in Westmeath since the twelfth century. Their eighteenth-century house, built on the site of a medieval castle at Sonna, was burned on 23 June 1921 by a party of thirty IRA men who claimed it was about to be occupied by Crown forces.[59] The house was unoccupied, the owner, Henry Maurice Tuite, having died in February 1921 and had been put up for sale in April 1921.[60] Ennis considers that the burning of Sonna House was motivated by a desire to have the remaining 628 acres of land divided among local farmers as the demesne walls had been broken down and cattle driven onto the road on 22 May 1920.[61] The *Irish Law Times* of 11 February 1922 reported that Sir William Tuite was awarded £25,000 in compensation for the destruction of Sonna House which was described as 'one of the finest residences in the midlands'.[62] Shortly afterwards the family left Ireland for England where their descendants still live. The only reminder of their 700-year tenure as owners of Emper is a small family mausoleum in Churchtown cemetery in Emper parish.

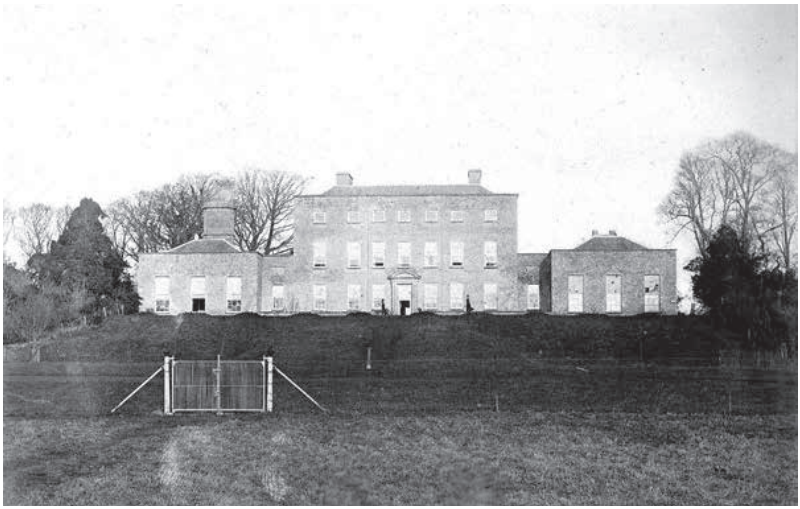

Figure 8: Sonna House, seat of the Tuite family, owners of the land of Emper until 1901, was built in the eighteenth century on the site of a medieval castle. It was burned by the IRA on 23 June 1921 during the War of Independence. (*Photo courtesy of Tuite Family website http://www.tuites1.com/424199725*)

Emigration

The continuous decline of the population of Emper from 1841 to 1901 was because during that period, the natural increase in population was offset by emigration. The high number of children per marriage more than compensated for the low marriage rate and relatively high age of marriage but the flight from the land saw the population fall from 1,480 to 664. While the trauma of the Famine led to a sharp reversal of the pre – Famine pattern of early marriage, facilitated by ever increasing subdivision of land, a pattern only made possible by the fact that a very small area of land could produce enough potatoes to feed a family. After the Famine, a strictly enforced system of inheritance of land by one child, usually the oldest son, was enforced. In the absence of non -farm employment the only option available to the children who would not inherit land was to emigrate. With the increasing mechanisation of farming from the end of the nineteenth century, the demand for farm labour declined sharply and with it the

population of landless labourers. In the case of labourers, sometimes all children or whole families emigrated.

The population data for Emper in the Census of 1911 shows a decline in population of 33 from 1901. This decline was due to the migration of one third of the people aged 16 to 30 in the 1901 census most of whom were in the category of relatives assisting on farms or farm labourers. Some of the women in this age group who were no longer in the parish in 1911 may have married men in neighbouring parishes and were still in Westmeath in 1911.

While most emigrants from Emper went to the UK or the USA, a significant number emigrated to Argentina between 1830 and 1900. Before the Famine, most Irish agriculture was tillage based and only a few areas of the country, including Westmeath, had large numbers of cattle grazing farms. The opening of the vast pampas grazing lands of Argentina in the early nineteenth century offered opportunities for the sons of Westmeath farmers who had experience of cattle husbandry, to acquire land for cattle production in Argentina. An account book found in the house once owned by Patrick Halion (1839–1917), an Emper farmer and an elected member of the Poor Law Board of Guardians, lists births marriages, deaths and emigration in Emper in the period 1873 to 1891. Between 1873 and 1888, 34 people form Emper emigrated to Argentina.[63] Between 1900 and 1903 the *Southern Cross* newspaper 3 lists the deaths of three people born in Emper but the surnames of some of the 15 people whose deaths are recorded in the *Southern Cross* in those years, and described as being from the neighbouring village of Ballynacarrigy, suggest they were from Emper.[64]

A parish in decline

Emper, like much of rural Ireland in 1901, was a parish in decline. Its population in 1901 was only 37 per cent of its 1841 level. The decline would continue throughout the twentieth century and by 2016 the population had fallen to 209, one eight of its pre-Famine level. While the population of Ireland and that of Westmeath began to increase from 1961 onwards, the increase in Westmeath was concentrated in the east of the county. The population of the area west of Mullingar continues to decline and in 2006

this area received support under a rural development programme aimed at areas whose populations had fallen by more than fifty per cent from its level in 1926, the year of the first post-independence census. The first national school in Emper was opened in 1833 on a site donated by Hugh Morgan Tuite of Sonna who owned the land of Emper. When the school opened, so many children sought a place that a considerable number had to be turned away.[65] A new school opened in 1966, but by the 1980s the number of pupils had fallen to nineteen and the school was threatened with closure. Happily, the number of children enrolled increased a little and closure was averted. While the living standard of the remaining people of Emper has improved in ways that their ancestors in 1901 would have found unimaginable, the parish and three surrounding townlands in Westmeath and Longford have never recovered demographically from the disaster of the Great Famine.

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