

The tragic Maamtrasna case - Language, life and death in Connemara

Language played a vital role in the tragic Maamtrasna murders case, writes Professor Margaret Kelleher



An artist's impression of the trial of Myles Joyce for murder in 1882

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This month sees the 136th anniversary of the sentencing of Myles Joyce who was convicted in 1882 for the infamous Maamtrasna murders and awarded a posthumous pardon earlier this year. In August 1882, five members of the Joyce family were brutally murdered in their home near Lough Mask; the ensuing trials and executions continue in notoriety due to the miscarriage of justice involved.

My book *The Maamtrasna Murders: Language, Life and Death in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, just published by University College Dublin Press, examines the role that language played in the unfolding and reporting of the case and in the events that followed.

My interest in this subject began some years ago when the treasure-trove of 1901 and 1911 census data became available online from the National Archives.

Like countless others, I discovered family information I hadn't known. In 1911 my great-grandparents Michael and Mary Kelleher, living in Dromahane, Co Cork were, to my surprise, bilingual speakers of Irish and English, but their son Michael, my paternal grandfather, spoke only English.

Five miles away, Margaret Ahern (future wife of Michael and my grandmother) was listed as "scholar" and as speaking "Irish and English"; this was clearly a matter of great pride to her parents, listed as speaking English only.

Too often, the story of language change in Ireland is told as an inevitable shift from Irish to English, but cultural changes are never experienced as inevitable by those who live through them.

In many families like mine, bilingualism - inherited or acquired - continued into the early 20th Century.

In many regions, monolingual speaking of Irish was prevalent still in the closing decades of the 19th Century.

Myles Joyce spoke only Irish in 1882, as was the case at that time for just under half of the population of Ross barony (on the border of counties Galway and Mayo) where he lived.

As I researched the case of Maamtrasna, I discovered a startling range of language competence among the accused, with fateful results.

Patrick Joyce, the first man convicted and later executed, spoke English well, as did Patrick Casey, the second man tried.

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However Patrick Casey's brother, John, and his uncle Michael spoke Irish only, as was the case for Myles Joyce and his two brothers, Martin and Paudeen.

Most significantly for the outcome of the trial, two of the 10 arrested, Anthony Philbin and Thomas Casey, were fluent speakers of English, having spent time working in England.

They turned "Queen's evidence" and became State informers against their neighbours.

At the end of the trial, three men were sentenced to death and five to life in prison.

Most famously, or infamously, Myles Joyce was denied the services of an interpreter during his trial. When sentenced, the eloquence of his protests in Irish, translated into English for the court by a RIC constable, made a remarkable impression on those present.

On the eve of their execution, Patrick Joyce and Patrick Casey confessed to having been part of the murder party, but emphasised that Myles Joyce and four of the men sentenced to life were innocent of any part in the crimes.

This was not considered enough to stop the hanging and Myles Joyce was executed in Galway jail on December 15, 1882.

But what of the other five men? In my research into the conditions they experienced in prison, I discovered that here, too, language played a large part in their gross isolation.

In Maryborough jail (now Portlaoise) where the men spent a large part of their prison lives, far from their western homes, only one Irish-speaking warder was on the staff.

In 1891 the Roman Catholic chaplain (who spoke English only) wrote to the Dublin prison board asking for the assistance of an Irish-speaking priest to attend to the men's spiritual needs; his requests, made repeatedly, were refused.

The Maamtrasna case, both in the events that made headlines and in the hidden stories, is a salutary reminder of what can transpire when a judicial system fails to recognize linguistic diversity or to ensure that its proceedings can be understood by all.