



Tel: 096 31809

www.northmayogenealogy.com

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Feature article
Fr. Liam Swords

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BOOK OF THE WEEK

Swinford Spalpeens
by Jack Foley

Hardback edition detailing
aspects of migration and
emigration from the East Mayo
area. Buy it now from our
eBay Bookstore

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Cover image: Brabazon Woods, Swinford (Failte Ireland)

Liam Swords (1937-2011)



Each week we bring you articles that try to illuminate the everyday lives of your ancestors. Our knowledge of these times, traditions and events would be infinitely poorer without the works of Liam Swords, whose anniversary occurs this month.

Liam Swords was born in Swinford on the 1st of February 1937, the son of William Swords and Bridget Hession. He entered Maynooth to study for the priesthood, and was ordained for his native diocese, Achonry, in 1962. He taught in Coláiste Padraig, Swinford, from 1964 until 1975.¹

Swords came into the Catholic clergy at an important time. Ireland had acquired its first television station in 1961, and the world of media and communications became very important to the Irish hierarchy. Liam's talents as a researcher, writer and communicator fitted the bill. Over the next decade, he was central to such programmes as *Outlook*, and the famous *Radharc* series of documentaries for which he researched and wrote scripts. In 1975 he was appointed to the Irish College, Paris. This institution, along with others at Leuven, Belgium; Salamanca, Spain; and in Rome, had been the means of educating Irish priests when the Penal Laws made this impossible at home. Liam Swords occupied the roles of archivist, *proviseur*, (Head Teacher) and Irish Chaplain in Paris.²

He returned to Ireland in 1979 and worked for the Catholic publishing house, Veritas. In 1995 he began a project in which he researched and published, over a series of three volumes, the history of the diocese of Achonry. He also published 'In Their Own Words', a history of the famine period in north Connacht. His Achonry volumes, 'A Hidden Church' (1997) and 'A Dominant Church' (2004) detail not just the religious, but also the social and economic history of east Mayo and south Sligo. Much of the culture and environment he wrote about can be easily applied to a much wider area however.

His ability to research complex events, often with forensic detail, disentangling them before weaving them back into an accessible narrative is unparalleled in the sphere of writing on Mayo history. His style carries the reader along and almost places them at the centre of the event he describes.

One of his best skills as a writer was the use of contrast to make a point. Writing about the problems of establishing a parish structure in the years of the Penal Laws, with priests who had been studying abroad for many years ('the culture shock returning priests experienced can only be guessed at')³, he referenced Thomas Costello. Costello had left Cregane, a townland near Ballaghaderreen to study for the priesthood in Rome. Once there, his lodgings overlooked the Forum and the Coliseum.

His final examinations were held in the 'lavishly ornate' Church of San Ignazio, a building 'as big as a football stadium'.

In 1771 Costello was ordained and sent home to his native parish. There was no church, so he celebrated Mass in an old cabin. With gentle humour, Swords noted Fr. Costello's luck. His predecessors had only a Mass rock.⁴

Fr. Liam Swords died on Friday the 18th of February 2011. His writings have given those with an interest in how ordinary people lived their lives and struggled with the events of their day in 18th, 19th and early 20th century Mayo a level of insight, understanding and anecdote that may never be surpassed.

A brief history of SWINEFORD/SWINFORD

(*Béal Átha na Muice*, mouth of the ford of the pigs)

In the parish of Kilconduff. A central townland to the west, on the Swineford River, ½ mile north of Brabazon Park. It contains 95 acres, 2 roods, 10 perches*. The property of Sir William Brabazon. Let to 19 occupying tenants on leases of 999 years, at 25 shillings per acre, with a yearly ground rent of from 50 shillings to £5 per house in the town. Co. Cess**, 3 shillings per acre.

Soil is good and sandy, producing oats and potatoes. No bog. Tenants:- 7 Protestants and 12 Roman Catholics. Prevailing Names – Durkan, Kelly, Henry and Harkin. There are two schools, attended by 40 boys and 20 girls, of whom 4 are Protestants and 56 are Catholics. There are some young fir plantation in this townland, and a Pound and Swineford Rivers flow through the townland.

In the town of Swineford, which consists of a main street and two smaller streets, there are 158 families pay rent for houses. There are here the parish church, the Catholic chapel, a dispensary, a police station, and a market-house, in which Petty Sessions are held every Wednesday. There is a market every Tuesday, and fairs are held here 5 times yearly.

* There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.

** The County Cess was a form of local taxation. It is derived from the word 'assessment'.

1. Shiel, T. 2011. Death of Fr. Liam Swords, Historian and Communications Priest. *The Connaught Telegraph*, the 22nd of February 2011, p.26.
2. Swords, L. 1997. *A Hidden Church*. Columba Press.
3. Swords, L. 1997. *A Hidden Church*. Columba Press. 219.
4. Swords, L. 1997. *A Hidden Church*. Columba Press. 220.

Images sources:

- Fr. Liam Swords from *In Their Own Words, The Famine in North Connacht 1845-1849*. Columba Press, 1997.
- San Ignazio Church from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>



San Ignazio Church, Rome