

North Mayo Heritage Centre

# NEWSLETTER

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Feature Article

## THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

Read about the

**most destructive storm**  
ever recorded in Irish history.

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### Book of the Week

#### **THE FAMINE IN MAYO**

Buy it now from our eBay Bookstore  
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Cover image: Huge wave breaking at Downpatrick Head  
Photograph supplied by Mr. Paul Doran

The North Mayo Heritage Centre is dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich heritage of the region

## THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

**As we endured the inconvenience of three storms in a matter of days, let us remember our ancestors who lived through, or indeed lost their lives on, the Night of the Big Wind over 180 years ago.**

The Night of the Big Wind was the most destructive storm ever recorded in Irish history. Known as Gaeilge as “*Oíche na Gaoithe Móire*”, the hurricane of 6th and 7th January 1839 made more people homeless in one single night than all the sorry decades of eviction that followed it. [1]

The morning of the 6th was unusually warm, almost clammy. At approximately 3pm, rain began to fall, and the wind picked up. By 6pm, winds had gathered speed. Church bells chimed and dogs began to whine. Fishermen turned their ears west; a distant, increasingly loud rumble could be heard upon the daunting horizon. By 10pm, Ireland was in the throes of a savage cyclone that endured relentlessly until 6am. It hit Ireland’s west coast with such force that the waves scaled over the top of the Cliffs of Moher. The noise of the sea crashing against the rocks could be heard for miles inland. The earth quaked under the attack; the ocean tossed huge boulders onto the clifftops of the Aran Islands.

“The winds of Heaven were indeed let loose, and it seemed as though they had all united to wreak vengeance on earth”. [2]

Neither rich nor poor evaded the wrath. As the wind grew greater, it ripped the roofs off houses. Many of those who died that night, estimated between 300 and 800, were killed by falling chimney pots or hurtling masonry. Houses, factories, and barracks were destroyed. Fires erupted in the streets of Castlebar, Athlone and Dublin.

Farmers were hit particularly hard. Hayricks in fields were blown to pieces. Wooden fences and dry-stone walls collapsed, allowing fearful livestock to run away. Sheep were blown off mountains or killed by tumbling rocks.

Fishermen vanished and never returned;

“Twelve fishing boats left Killala on Sunday, and every one of them, with their mate crews, have been lost.” [2]

Country gentlemen reported that their landed estates lost tens of thousands of trees. In Co. Mayo, “The town of Ballina has also been injured. The fine elm trees surrounding the residence of Thomas Jones, Esq, Ardnaree, are nearly all uprooted.” [3]

On January 6th, 1839, timber was a valuable commodity. 24 hours later, so many trees had fallen that timber was virtually worthless. Millions of wild birds were killed, their nesting places smashed, it was a country without birdsong that spring.

However, among those to profit were the builders, carpenters, slaters, and thatchers who rebuilt the fallen buildings. Perhaps the most unlikely beneficiaries were those old enough to remember it when the Old Age Pensions Act was legislated 70 years later, in January 1909.

The Act offered the first ever weekly pension to those over 70. The Irish Pensions Committee decreed that if someone’s age had “gone astray” on them, as few births were registered prior to 1865, they would be eligible for a pension if they could state that they were “fine and hardy” on the Night of the Big Wind. People may have had difficulty recalling their actual age, but not that one night of ferocity. It left a deep scar on the collective memory for many decades that followed.

Sources:

[1] The Irish Times, 16th October 2017

[2] The Connaught Telegraph, 9th January 1939

[3] Sligo Champion, 9th January 1939

### Brief history of the surname

## DILLON

Dillon, Díolún, A Hiberno-Norman family which has three branches. It has always been prominent in Irish history.<sup>1</sup>

This surname arrived in Ireland at the end of the 12th century with the Anglo-Norman settlement which accompanied the invasion. These Dillons acquired a vast territory which comprised much of Co. Westmeath whence they extended westwards into Connacht, branches taking root in Co. Mayo and Co. Roscommon. The name is now widely distributed.<sup>2</sup>

Diolmhain, Díolún, Dylun, Dilloun, Dillon; ‘son of Dillon’ (a Norman-French person name formed from an old Teutonic personal name Dill, Dillo, Dilli, by the addition of the French diminutive termination ‘-on.’ Dille appears as a surname in older English records, now written Dill; and Dilkok, another diminutive of the same name, now represented by the surname Dilcock in England, is found in the Patent and Close Rolls of Ireland, Henry II-Henry VII. Díolmhain, the older Irish spelling of the name, may be due to an attempt to assimilate it to the Irish word díolmhain).

The Dillons came to Ireland at the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion. Sir Henry Dillon received from King John large grants of land in Westmeath and Annaly, known in later times as Dillon’s Country, and his descendants were barons of Kilkenny West. A branch of the family also settled in Co. Mayo. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dillons were distinguished in the service of continental powers.<sup>3</sup>

Of the 117 Dillon births in Ireland in 1890 – including variants – 52 occurred in Leinster, 27 occurred in Munster, 19 were in Ulster and 19 in Connacht. The surname was principally found in Counties Dublin, Limerick, Antrim and Galway.

1. ‘The Surnames of Ireland’ by Edward MacLysaght.
2. ‘Irish Family Names’ by Brian de Breffny
3. “Irish Names and Surnames” by Rev. Patrick Woulfe.

### A brief history of the townland

## KILLYBRONE

(*Cill Bron*, church of Bron).

Nearly central in the parish of Killala. Bounded on the north by the high water mark; west by Croaghan; south by Killala Town Plots West; and west by Leadymore. It contains 101 acres, 2 roods, 1 perch\*. The property of Sir William Palmer. There are 5 petty landlords, who hold this townland at £1 per acre, yearly, and they have it sublet to 7 tenants at 45 shillings per acre, yearly. Soil, heavy clay, producing oats, flax and potatoes. Houses are of stone, and the inhabitants are seemingly very poor.

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