



The  
North Mayo  
Heritage  
Centre

A brief history of  
the townland of

## BALLYCONG



A 'Fair Fight.' Samuel Lover, from "The Neighbourhood of Dublin," by John Joyce. From askaboutireland.ie

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Fairs, markets and patterns were an integral part of our ancestor's lives.

Aside from any commercial or religious activities attached to these events, they were also a chance for merriment, amusement and a break from the cycle of toil and labour. Very often, up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these big gatherings were also the scene of a faction fight: a mass brawl between large groups. These groups could represent different family groups, townlands, villages, or even parishes.

The faction fight was usually preceded by a challenge laid down from one side to the other. 'Some fellow, whose bodily strength, whose boisterous and ferocious temper, gave him such an ascendancy over others as to be chosen their leader, would come forth and, flourishing his cudgel over his head, bid defiance to all who did not belong to his clan, parish, barony or county.'<sup>1</sup>

The weapon of choice was a stick, much like a blackthorn walking stick, in other words, an everyday implement. In west Mayo, as no doubt in other locations, this had a leather strap or 'whang' tied around the top of it.

James Berry described why the 'whang' was so essential in his account of seeing such objects in Louisburgh in the 1840s:

*'When going into action they inserted the hand into the whang, and pulled it up on to the wrist. A wise precaution, for if struck on the hand by an antagonist, although they had to drop the stick, it hung onto the arm, so they didn't lose it but soon recovered it. Some went to battle armed with two sticks, one they used as a shield or buckler, while they assailed and struck with the other.'*<sup>2</sup>

Injuries, and indeed deaths were an inevitable results of such madness, although Berry was clear that this was not the objective:

*'They fought for glory and in fact sometimes for pleasure. They did not fight in order to kill. They used neither jack knives, stones nor bars of iron ... for they were as honourable as Sarsfield and as brave as Myles the Slasher'.<sup>3</sup>* (Myles the Slasher O'Reilly died at Finnea, Co. Westmeath on the 5th of August 1646 while defending the bridge at Finnea against English and Scottish forces).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, many of the original quarrels which lit the touch paper for these recurring battles were very slight, often obscured by the passage of time.

There were several instances where members of two 'factions' would co-exist peacefully for most of the year but turn on each other on the appointed day.<sup>5</sup>

In some cases there was intermarriage between 'rival' factions, while there were even rules concerning farm labourers or servants who might belong to one side, but work for a farmer from the other!<sup>6</sup>

Some faction fights were planned well in advance: one fight, near Portumna in Co. Galway in 1788 was common knowledge to all in the area for a month beforehand.<sup>7</sup> The famous Donnybrook Fair in Dublin 'was used by rival factions as the backdrop for riot.'<sup>8</sup> To such an extent, in fact, that the term 'a Donnybrook' has passed into popular culture as a term for any kind of riot or disorderly event.

But faction fights were a deadly phenomenon. In 1834, a faction fight in Co. Kerry 'left between eighteen and twenty-nine people dead, scandalised the local and national press, required two official inquiries, and resulted in transportation or imprisonment for a number of North Kerry men'.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the Great Famine of the 1840s was the biggest reason for the demise of the faction fight. Some attribute the formalising of sports as another reason why the faction fight dwindled as the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on. But they remained a part of local song, story and lore in many parts of Ireland.

Brief history of the townland of  
**BALLYCONG**  
(*Béal Átha Conga*,  
the mouth of the ford of the strait)

The strait is that connecting Carrowkeribly and Ballycong Lakes, and the ford over it was called Ath-Cunga, the ford of Cong.

Located in the centre of the parish of Attymass and to the west of the village of Bunnafinglas.

It contains 582 acres, 2 roods, 28 perches, including 89 acres, 1 rood, 12 perches of water. The property of Lord Arran, London, and let to Edward Orme, Esq., Ballycarroon, located near Crossmolina, who sublets it to 27 occupying tenants at will in farms or divisions at from 30 shillings to £20 per unit. Co. Cess, 3 shillings 0½d. per acre for the year 1837.

Tithe by Composition, £7 15 shillings 11d. for the townland, but withheld by the tenants. Soil, part light clay and sandy, and part moory, rocky, stony and mountainous. Usual crops, oats and potatoes. Bog plenty.

Prevailing Names – Gallagher and Coleman. Ballycong Lough and the Owenrevagh or Grey River are partly in this townland, and contain salmon, trout and eel.

### SEANFHOCAIL

**Is minic a bhris béal duine a shrón**

Often, a man's mouth broke his nose

**Is fearr rith maith ná drochsheasamh**

He who runs away lives to fight another day

**An té nach bhfuil láidir ní folair dó a bheith glic**

He who lacks strength must have a sharp wit

<sup>1</sup> Bell, R. 1804. *A Description of the Conditions and Manners of the Irish Peasantry such as they were between the years 1780 and 1790*. Charles Barber, London.

<sup>2</sup> The Mayo News, the 26-Mar-1927

<sup>3</sup> The Mayo News, the 26-Mar-1927

<sup>4</sup> From secretireland.ie

<sup>5</sup> From museum.ie

<sup>6</sup> Moraghan, S. 'Days of the Blackthorn: Faction fighting and brutal activity in Kerry'. *Irish Examiner*, the 15-Feb-2020

<sup>7</sup> Swords, L. 1997. *A Hidden Church. The Diocese of Achonry 1689-1818*. Columba Press, Dublin, p.126

<sup>8</sup> Rouse, P. 'How the Fair Day Shaped the Evolution of Irish Sport'. *Irish Examiner*, the 18-Aug-2023

<sup>9</sup> Moraghan, S. 'Days of the Blackthorn: Faction fighting and brutal activity in Kerry'. *Irish Examiner*, the 15-Feb-2020