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A monthly review of Irish Books

When Loughrea was a 'den of infamy'

BY DES KENNY

WITH ALL the attention being given to the run-up to the 1916 Rising, the event itself, and its aftermath, little if anything has been written in relation to the Land War, which took place some 35 years before Pearse stood in the steps of the GPO and read the Proclamation.

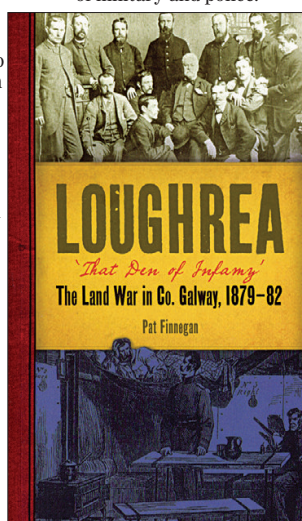
There is a general perception that the Land War was something of a minor blip on the landscape of Irish history. Whereas there may be some grounds for this perception on a national level, the descendants of those who lived in the areas where the Land War was enacted will bear testimony to the contrary; more especially those whose ancestors lived within the so called 'murder triangle' of Loughrea, Ardahan, and Athenry.

From 1879 to 1882 this region was virtually besieged by the police and army as they attempted to quell the rising tide of agrarian discontent.

On the blurb of *Loughrea 'That Den of Infamy' The Land War in Co. Galway, 1879-82*, published by The Four Courts Press, author Pat Finnegan writes:

"During the Land War of 1879-82, Galway was regarded as 'dangerously disturbed' because of the large number of agrarian incidents reported. These included murders, wounding of persons and animals, arson and widespread boycotting and intimidation. In an attempt to restore public order, the authorities implements repressive legislation in the form of two Coercion Acts in 1881 and 1882. The result was the arrest and internment without trial of 166 individuals, the majority in the Loughrea and

Athenry police districts. In Loughrea, there was a sense that the town was under siege because of the intimidating presence of military and police."



Finnegan's book is informative and enlightening. His research is meticulous and detailed, his approach to the subject painstaking and clinical. From the beginning we are made aware of just how much the area was a hot spot of agrarian outrage, Finnegan telling us that between May 1881 and June 1882 eight people were killed in the police districts of Loughrea/Athenry - a landlord and his bodyguard, a land agent and his servant, a policeman and three men whose deaths were related to land disputes.

After a general introduction to the foundation of the Land League, we are told how it was formed in Galway and that tactics that were used to further the tenants' cause such as 'Stopping the Hunt' and the curious 'Land League Hunts'. Then gradually as the struggle for land rights intensifies and the authorities react strongly, the situation becomes more fraught and tense. Arrests and imprisonment without trial occur daily, while

evictions are resisted more strenuously and the boycott a frequent and sometimes successful weapon used against "landgrabbers" and those tenants who in any way transgressed the Land League's rules.

As we move through the story, the multiple arrests (11 per cent of the national total were made in the area); the introduction of the portable police huts which could be moved and set up at will; the introduction of armed soldiers and the appointment of Special Resident Magistrates who implemented the Coercion Acts (especially the most notorious of these, Clifford Lloyd), all add to the tension and the sense of siege that prevailed in the area over the three years.

The book is imbued with a sense of darkness and fear, not to mention uncertainty. These were indeed dark and evil days but perhaps the book's greatest achievement is Finnegan's depiction of the strong resilience of the people themselves who, despite the huge forces amassed against them - at one stage there were 16 portable police huts stationed around Loughrea and the streets were continuously patrolled by armed police and army - the continuous arrests and imprisonment, the extra costs they had to suffer as the expenses of the extra police were levied against them, managed to achieve at least some of their goals and maintain their human dignity. It was a resilience that was to serve them well during the ensuing Plan of Campaign.

Loughrea 'That Den of Infamy' is an important book in that it brings to light one of the most extraordinary chapters in Galway's, indeed in Ireland's, struggle against oppressive landlordism.

Connemara's Answer To Ken Bruen

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

THESE DAYS, if an aspiring author is a good editor of his/her own work, and has a talent for self-promotion, it is possible to flog as many copies of a self-published effort - with a little help from Amazon - as the average first book of literary fiction from a mainstream publisher would sell the traditional way.

A downside is many writers who take the self-publication route are simply reserving for themselves the Beelzebub-given right to be bad writers. Another is that, oftentimes, the final product - the first book every writer desires as desperately as a teenage boy wishes to be rid of his virginity - looks so amateurish: the pages too shiny, the fonts just wrong.

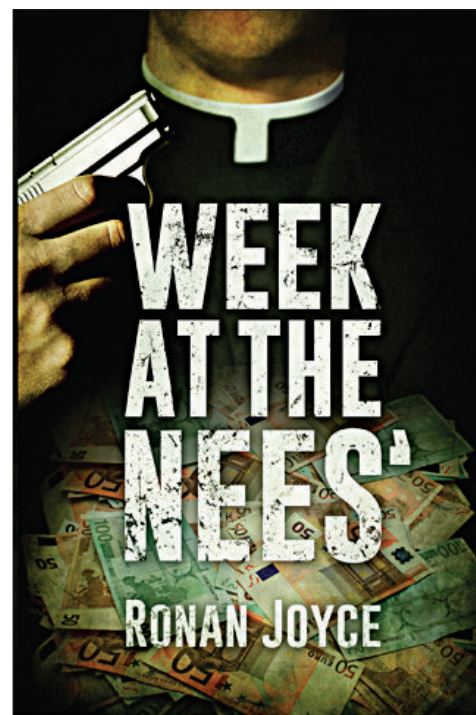
Connemara's Ronan Joyce is exceptional because his novel, *Week At The Nees*, is well made in both senses. The book looks great and *Week At The Nees* is a lively story economically told. It takes place on "a remote Irish island", which is clearly Inis Mór.

The central character is a permanently cash strapped priest, Marcus Nees, whose "business ventures" tend to bring him into contact with crime world entrepreneurs, the sort of people who'd as soon nail you to a pool table as look at you. There is a dark comedy to some of the storytelling. During a tense moment in the mayhem unleashed by Fr Nees' fundraising ventures, the charming Lucy accidentally shoots him, though not fatally, thinking him to be a member of An Garda Síochána.

To be fair to Lucy, it was dark and there was a lot going on in that dark. She was a bit stressed, having spent some time guarding a group of hostages: "Marcus peered through the side window and saw that Lucy was still standing in the living room, pointing her gun at the hostages...He consoled himself with the fact that the hostages seemed to be sitting comfortably."

Sure, it's a situation any of us could find ourselves in, if we took a wrong turn, but Fr Marcus Nees takes more wrong turns than most, and Lucy is the sort of young lady best avoided by anyone who hopes to pass away peacefully, at a great age, in his own bed.

One noticeable thing about Ronan Joyce's telling of this twisted story is that it hammers home to the reader what a wet place the West of Ireland is. The first three chapters all start with water. In chapter one, "the waves pound into the rocks"; in chapter two, "The



condensation made it almost impossible for Dykes to see through the windscreen; and in chapter three, "The priest struggled to make his voice heard above the loud dripping noises emanating from the various buckets festooned across the [church] floor."

Week At The Nees is one of a series of Marcus Nees novels. So, this questionable priest Ronan Joyce has imagined into being, might yet become the Aran Islands' answer to Ken Bruen's detective Jack Taylor.

The film version of *Week At The Nees* would surely star Brendan Gleeson as the beleaguered Father Nees, with Lucy being played perhaps by one of the Continuity IRA's more charismatic female members.

Yvonne King - exhibitions in Galway and Clifden

BY KERNAN ANDREWS

THE ARTIST Yvonne King is holding two exhibitions this month, one as part of the Clifden Arts Festival, the other in the Galway City Library.

I Love Connemara features paintings, photographs, and limited edition prints, celebrating the artist's love of her native area. There is a selection of freshwater pearl jewellery designed and handmade by Yvonne. It runs in the Galway City Library, St Augustine Street, until September 27.

The second exhibition, *MAPI*, is part of the Clifden Arts Festival, and opens on Friday September 19 at 6pm. The guest speaker will be engineer, Shane Joyce.

This exhibition is informed by both landscape and historical references to the Clifden area. Paintings and photographs are inspired by the site of the Marconi Wireless Station in Derrygimla near Clifden, which was used by Italian inventor, Guglielmo Marconi. *MAPI* runs until September 28.