

Local History Series: 3



Ordnance Survey Memoirs

In 1824 a House of Commons Committee recommended a survey of Ireland at a scale of six inches to one statute mile to facilitate a uniform valuation for local taxation purposes. The survey was directed by Colonel Thomas Colby who had available to him officers of the Royal Engineers and three companies of sappers and miners. In addition to this, civil servants were recruited to help with sketching, drawing and engraving maps, and eventually, in the 1830s, the writing of the Memoirs.

The Memoirs, compiled between 1830 and 1840 under the general direction of Lieutenant (later Sir) Thomas Larcom, were written descriptions intended to accompany the Ordnance Survey maps. They are a unique source for the history of the northern half of Ireland before the Great Famine. Arranged on a parish basis, they generally follow a particular pattern and record - natural features (hills, lakes, bogs, woods, climate, etc); modern topography (towns, public buildings, mills, gentlemen's seats, bridges, roads, markets and fairs, etc); the social economy (local government, dispensaries, occupations, the poor, religion, emigration, habits of the people - dress, food, customs, etc); and ancient topography (antiquities and ancient monuments). They therefore document a great wealth of information about the landscape and about society in the 1830s and provide much more detailed information on the daily life of the inhabitants than any census could hope to do.

However, the detail recorded in the memoirs varies enormously. They are particularly extensive for Counties Antrim and Londonderry but for parts of Cos Armagh and Down the information is very scanty and there is no memoir at all for Belfast or Armagh city. The memoirs for parishes in Counties Londonderry and Antrim will even record, for instance, the names of individuals known to have emigrated, including the townland they lived in and their occupation and age. This was at a time when the pressures of growing population, reduced employment opportunities and especially the decline of farmers' income from domestically-spun yarn (which was now being done mechanically) induced many people in Ulster to emigrate. The majority of those recorded in the Memoirs are cited as having gone to Canada, though many subsequently migrated from there to the United States. The variation in detail arose not only from the pressure of combining surveying with memoir writing, but because individual reporters were not always very conscientious and some ignored their memoir writing duties entirely.

It became obvious fairly early on that the detailed memoir work could not be sustained along with the surveying and eventually the work virtually ceased in 1840. By this time only the Province of Ulster had been covered (included some parishes in

Counties Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan) as well as some parishes in Counties Leitrim, Louth and Sligo.

The original copies of the Ordnance Survey Memoirs are in the Royal Irish Academy but PRONI holds microfilm copies for Counties Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone as well as for Counties Cavan, Donegal, Monaghan, Queen's County, Roscommon, Sligo and Tipperary (PRONI Reference **MIC6C**). Complementing the Ordnance Survey memoirs are the Name Books of John O'Donovan containing details of the origin and meaning of townland names arranged by parish. These are available on microfilm (PRONI Reference **MIC6A**) for Counties Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone, with some material for Counties Cavan and Monaghan. This is an invaluable source for the student of placenames. Researchers should also consult **T2383** which includes copies of topographical drawings that were originally prepared in connection with the projected publication of the Ordnance Survey Memoirs at the time of their compilation.

It was intended that once the memoirs had been compiled they would then be published but only one was ever published before the whole project came to an end in 1840, that of Templemore Parish, Co. Londonderry. However, in recent years all of the memoirs have been published by the Institute of Irish Studies and a set of these is available for consultation in the PRONI Library.

