

Mayo: an English Noble Family (1500-1800)

In the British Isles, having a peerage means being a member of the English nobility, often with connections across the old Empire. The five titles of the peerage, in descending order of rank, are: duke, marquis, earl, viscount and baron.

In the 1800s, the native Irish were Catholic and the Colonial Rulers and Settlers, from England, were Protestant. The struggle for freedom was not related to levels of sanctity. Religious division, in those times, bears no relevance to anything today.

The Browne Family moved to Mayo from Sussex, in 1580, and integrated well into Irish society.

Colonel John Browne III (1638-1711), a lawyer and also a Colonel in the army of the Catholic King James II, during the war here (1688–1691), between Catholic and Protestant pretenders to the English throne. He supplied cannon balls and weapons from his iron mines near Westport. After the defeats at Aughrim and Limerick, in 1691, he was prominent in drafting the 1691 Treaty of Limerick, which ended that war.



He married Maud Burke, daughter of Theobald, 3rd Viscount Burke of Mayo. Colonel Browne took possession of vast estates, previously owned by the Gaelic O'Malley clan. He built Westport House on the site of a castle, one of many ruined castles, once belonging to the O'Malleys. Theobald Burke was a descendant of the so-called 'Pirate' Queen, Grace O'Malley (1530-1603). The English called her a 'pirate' because she levied taxes on English merchant vessels in her waters. Browne's son, Peter Browne (1670 to 1724), built Westport Harbour. But dark clouds were gathering.

The anti-Catholic **Penal Laws**, which followed (1695-1829), bade Peter's son, **John IV** (1709-1776), to be a Protestant, to avoid the crushing, savage laws against everything Catholic. His sisters, though, remained Catholic. He matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, in July 1725. He married Anne Gore, sister of the 1st Earl of Arran, in 1727. Browne was the High Sheriff of Mayo in 1731. He was created **1st Baron Mount Eagle** in 1760 – and later **1st Viscount Westport** (1768). He was again honoured in 1771 to be made the **1st Earl of Altamont** (1771). He was an active and improving landlord, with particular interests in both livestock and crops. His family was gaining status in the English nobility.

John IV had a son, another **Peter Browne** (1730-1780), who inherited his father's title as the **2nd Earl of Altamont**. In 1752, He married Elizabeth Kelly, the only child of Denis Kelly, Chief Justice of Jamaica. Peter so took over Jamaican sugar plantations, as well as the Lisduff and Spring Garden estates. [Note Spring Garden Road in Dublin 3.]

Peter's son, **John Denis Browne** (1756 to 1809) held the courtesy title of Viscount Westport as the heir of an Earl. He was so later known as John Browne, **3rd Earl of Altamont**. He built the town of Louisburgh. During his lifetime, the French-inspired but ill-fated 1798 Rebellion occurred. It brought together a coalition of Catholics, Presbyterians (ie Scottish Settlers, descended from Catholic, Gaelic-speaking Scots) and upstanding Church of Ireland Protestants. Presbyterians today are still learning that their acculturated influence in the London is not what they or their forebears thought it might be.

The 3rd Earl, to keep his estates, voted for the 1800 Act of Union of Ireland with England. He was so appointed a Knight of the Order of St Patrick in 1800 and became the **1st Marquis of Sligo** in that year (there being *already* a Marquis of Mayo). He had married Lady Louisa Catherine Howe, daughter of Admiral Richard Howe, 1st Earl Howe. After their marriage, she was first known as the Countess of Altamont and then as the **Marchioness of Sligo**.

John Denis Browne had a son, Howe Peter (1788-1845). Sophia-Charlotte, his mother, was the daughter of Richard Howe, First Admiral of the Fleet, giving her son an entrée to the English Royal Family. Howe Peter Browne, Viscount Westport, received his MA in 1808 in Cambridge, as Lord Altamont. **The Earl** so became **2nd Marquis of Sligo** in 1809, on the death of his father, and was also appointed a Knight of the Order of St Patrick.



Wikipedia

Howe Peter was a true ‘regency buck’ (rakish and extravagant). In 1810, at the height of the **Napoleonic War**, he kidnapped English Navy Seamen in Malta, to steal 1,000 antiquities from Greece, a crime punishable by death. Found guilty, he was just fined and spent four months in jail. During the trial his mother had become **amorously attached to the Judge** and had married him - for just a year. Peter’s affair, with a **French courtesan** Pauline 'Chérie' Pacquot, produced a son. His paternity was questioned as she had had many clients.

In 1816, Howe married the **16-year-old Hester Catherine**, daughter of John de Burgh, 13th Earl of Clanricarde. She reformed him. He became an advocate of Catholic Emancipation. **Lady Sligo** (1800-1878) was a cultured woman. She patronised the arts, partied with monarchs and moved in the highest circles.



Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847 – called the ‘The Liberator’ for advocating also for Catholic emancipation from the Penal Laws) said of Howe Peter, in the House of Commons: “I do not think, Sir, the landlords of Ireland ever did their duty towards their tenants. If they did what Lord Sligo is doing now, the country would not be reduced into a vast lazarus house.” [A lazarus is a poor, diseased person.] By O’Connell’s time, speaking Irish was neither fashionable or profitable, of which he said: ”I can witness, without a sigh, the gradual disuse of Irish”. At one stage, he was invited to dinner in London. Anti-Catholics had some access. A serving girl, from Ireland, whispered to him in Irish “Oh Daniel O’Connell, there is poison in the cup” – so saving his life.

Howe later became Governor of Jamaica (1834-37) with the task of seeing to the emancipation of slaves – against total resistance from Plantation owners. **Sligo** found the savagery of slavery abhorrent: from flogging slaves with cart whips, branding them with hot irons, to whipping female slaves (and worse).

With her husband, Hester Catherine campaigned to abolish slavery. He freed the slaves on his own plantations. The first ‘free village’ in the world, was, and still is, called **Sligoville**, in his honour. By 1836, the Jamaican Assembly had blocked his attempts to emancipate Black Jamaicans and forced him to resign. The couple returned to Ireland.

Lady Sligo had a well-formed character. **She** was instrumental in bringing the **Sisters of Mercy** to Westport, to help the poor. Lord and Lady Sligo often went from Westport to their regal London home in Mansfield Street, before he became ill with gout. When he recovered, Hester returned to London, where she became a high society hostess. She and her husband held parties and entertained individuals like the Duke of Cleveland, the Marquis and Marchioness of Lansdowne and the Earl and Countess of Rosebery. Her letters are kept in Ireland’s Great Hunger Institute at **Quinnipiac University of Hamden, Connecticut**.



Quinnipiac University

George John Browne (1820-1896), **3rd Marquis of Sligo** and son of Howe Peter, outlived three wives over 30 years (1st - a daughter of the 6th Viscount of Strangford, 2nd - a daughter of the 9th Earl of Westmeath and 3rd - Isabelle Raymonde, born in Trinidad, the youngest daughter of the Vicomte de Peyronnet). *It has been said he had no male issue.* [In the 1980s, the 10th Marquis of Sligo, the late Jeremy Ulick Browne, opened the house and grounds to the public.]

Mayo: the Famine

Just before the Great Famine struck, George John Browne (1820-1896), had cleared away many Catholic tenants for Protestant ones. The vast numbers of Catholic tenants whom he, and Lords Lucan and Oranmore, evicted at the height of the Famine, must wander the roads like unwanted farm animals, and die from thirst, hunger and disease. Or retreat, in destitution, to remote areas and try to stake out an acre or two of infertile bog. There would be room for some, in the immense Westport Workhouse, useful only as a place in which quietly to expire. The *London Times* editorial of 21/12/1854 said of the Famine generally, in an aside:

“As for the Irish, troublesome at all times, they have gone – that is, the surplus is gone – gone with a vengeance.”



<https://www.irishmemorial.org/learn/voices-of-an-gorta-mor/>

The famine was caused by potato blight, which infected potato crops throughout Europe. Here, the English ‘economic policy’ of **laissez-faire capitalism** (do nothing to alleviate starvation) made matters worse. Tenants were allowed a hectare of land to grow a potato crop, in return for labour. Absentee Landlords in England were far from the dying people.

The worst affected areas were in the West and South, where the Irish language persisted. This period is called *an Drochshaol* (The bad Time) *in Irish*. 1847, known as ‘Black ‘47’, brought most horror. Overall about 1 million people died - more than 2 million fled the country. Many, it has been said, were not seen as worth counting.



Phytophthora infestans

Allotment Garden

A potato infected with blight would have a foul odour.

From 1845-52, the entire county became a death camp, as starvation and disease laid the countryside to waste. The ruling classes only wished to see a reduced population for new agricultural practices.

There is a harrowing account of the thousands of Lord Sligo’s evicted tenants, from around Louisburg, forced to walk 16 miles for paltry outdoor relief. Many simply died trying to walk home. The Marquis could reach out, however, when he saw a return. On his **114,881-acre** estate, he spent £50,000 and borrowed more, to alleviate suffering (and keep up output). He wrote to London for help. In 1854, he was offered the ‘Order of St. Patrick’, held by his father and grandfather. He replied: “I have no desire for the honour.” [All Christians here honour St Patrick – he lived before the Reformation of Henry VIII.]

In 1847, the worst year of the Famine, 4,000 vessels carried food from Ireland to the major ports of Britain: Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and London. In the first nine months of 1847, 75 ships sailed from Tralee to Liverpool (most carrying grain) and 6 vessels sailed from Kilrush to Glasgow, carrying a total of 6,624 barrels of oats. Ports in some of the most famine-stricken parts of Ireland sent cargoes of foodstuffs to Britain via Ballina, Ballyshannon, Bantry, Dingle, Killala, Kilrush, Limerick, Sligo, Tralee, Westport and elsewhere. Throughout 1847 both corn and potatoes were exported. Most certainly they did not care.

Mayo: the Clergy after the Famine (1827-1932)

a) Catherine McAuley was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1778. In 1824 she **used her inheritance** from an Irish couple she had served for twenty years to build a **House of Mercy** where she and other lay women would shelter homeless women, reach out to the sick and dying and educate poor girls. The House, in Dublin, opened in 1827. Better to secure these efforts, Catherine and her co-workers founded a new religious congregation. In 1831, she and two others professed their vows as the first **Sisters of Mercy**.



[|... sistersofmercy.ie](http://sistersofmercy.ie)

Lady Sligo (1800-1878), a local noblewoman, was instrumental in bringing the **Sisters of Mercy** to Westport. Ballinrobe had been founded from Westport in 1851. Sisters from the Westport and Ballinrobe convents formed a new community in 2008, in Árd Bhríde, Castlebar, Mayo.

Before her death in 1841, Catherine had founded convents and works of mercy throughout Ireland and England. The Very Rev. Dean Burke, then P.P. of Westport, had asked her for Sisters to found a house in Westport but her death in 1841 intervened. His wish was granted in 1842, when three Sisters of Mercy came from St. Leo's, Carlow, to establish the first Mercy Community in Westport. One of these was a **Mother Francis Warde**. She founded more religious communities in the US than any other woman.

The Sisters administered to the needs of Famine victims. Mayo was one of the hardest hit areas. It had been intended that **Sister Xavier Peppard** would return to Carlow but she contracted **Famine Fever**. She was, at the age of nineteen, amongst several Sisters to die. Despite many trials, however, the Sisters increased in number, as young girls aspired to their loving lifestyle.

b) The local landlord, George John Browne, 3rd Marquis of Sligo, noted above, had started a market at the end of the 1800s, which later became the village of Kiltimagh.

The event which had the greatest impact on the village was the appointment of **Fr. Denis O'Hara** as Parish Priest in 1887. He had spent time in the Parish after his ordination in 1873 and was keenly aware of the inhuman conditions in which impoverished people were living. The Parish Priests of the Diocese chose him as the next Bishop of Achonry but, thankfully for Kiltimagh, the Vatican rejected his appointment. His good works for repressed tenants were not universally admired.

Within two years, Fr O'Hara (1888-1922) had replaced the old wooden church with a magnificent new building - *still in use*. Whilst building six new national schools, he organised successful fund raising events. In 1897, he invited the **Sisters of the St. Louis Order** to Kiltimagh. With their help, schools were set up to provide instruction in household management, sewing, carpentry and horticulture and to foster a sense of **self-sufficiency**. Throughout the 1900s, the St. Louis Convent Secondary School, Kiltimagh, became famous for its educational standards, including the high standard of Irish taught.

Fr O'Hara became a member of the Congested Districts Board (set up in 1891) and so could affect improvements in living conditions and farming methods. The town today is mainly the product of his hard work, initiative and imagination. He was responsible for the town's comprehensive circular roads, sewage and gas systems, the Town Hall, the Cottage Hospital and the 'People's Park'.



Fr O'Hara was not shy of begging for the poor - to do this he wrote to local and foreign newspapers. He

stirred up considerable interest in the plight of Kiltimagh. He defended local tenants against the tyranny of another demanding local landlord a Mr. Ormsby, whose estate had been gifted by Queen Elizabeth 1st, in the 16th century. **The Priest** became a strong supporter of the Land League, founded in 1878, which worked for the introduction of fairer land ownership .

c) Also to be mentioned is Agnes Morrogh Bernard (1842–1932). In 1849, her parents **inherited an estate** in the County Kerry. The family moved to Shehersee House, on their new estate. In 1854, she went to school in Laurel Hill Convent, in Limerick. Later, she went to Paris, to complete her education at the *Couvent des Dames anglaises*, where she chose a religious life. She became a novice at the **Religious Sisters of Charity Convent** in Dublin when she was **21 years old**, taking the name **Sister Mary Joseph Arsenius**.



As a nun, she founded convents, schools and a woollen mill in Foxford, near Kiltimagh. She sought advice for this from a Protestant and Freemason, from the County Tyrone (now part of Northern Ireland). He was surprised at the request from a nun and he was only too willing to help. Foxford blankets were the most eagerly sought after, throughout Ireland, for many decades.