

Take the only ticket out of town

Memories of terrible times past brought back to life at Connemara conference

BY MÁIRTÍN Ó CATHÁIN

ALMOST 400 people in various stages of deprivation and desperation gathered in the village of Carna with one single objective - to get out of Connemara in whatever way possible.

It was February 27 1883 and the crowd was clamouring to get an interview with James Hack Tuke and his assistants - because Tuke's 'assisted emigration' schemes were the only hope they had of escaping their wretched conditions.

Tuke was an Englishman from a background of business and wealth. He was born 200 years ago in 1819. He might have lived a more sedate and uncomplicated life. But he chose otherwise.

He dedicated much of his life to the betterment of mankind. He had visited and helped out in Ireland as a young man during the Famine of the 1840's.

Now, as hunger stalked the far west of Ireland in the 1880ies, James Hack Tuke, distributed relief among communities but concluded that radical solutions were needed.

On that February day in 1883 in Carna, James Hack Tuke - a Quaker by religious persuasion - was trying to provide a way for people to get to America and Canada.

He believed that the grinding poverty that haunted Connemara was so entrenched that the only real option for many people was to emigrate.

Tuke, with support from the Quaker community and other financial contributors in England, raised tens of thousands of pounds to pay the liner fares for people from Connemara and northwest Mayo across the Atlantic.

There were some conditions: the emphasis was on family units in totality emigrating and at least one member of that family was required to be able to speak English.

On the street in Carna that early spring day in the 1883 many of those present were already suffering from malnourishment and hunger in a situation that was bordering on a Famine.

People on the western coasts of Galway and Mayo were almost as dependant on the potatoes at that time as they were when the Great Famine of the 1840ies had hit.

The potatoes failed to one degree or other over the decades but the year 1879 saw a wipe out of the crop. Communities bore the brunt of that failure during the following years.

On the street in Carna on February 27 - at a location close to where Mac's Pub is now - the



Riona NI Chonaire and Mairead UI Dhomhnaill at the Tuke Emigration Conference in Carna.



Prof. Christine Kinealy, Dr. Gerard Moran and Rosemarie Geraghty at the Tuke Emigration Conference in Carna.



Brid Balread and Mary Kyne at the Tuke Emigration Conference in Carna.



Marie Mannion, Mairtin O' Cathain and Leslie Thomas at the Tuke Emigration Conference in Carna.



Susan OCathain and Eileen Davis at the Tuke Emigration Conference in Carna.



Caitriona Canavan, Aoife Dowd and Marie Mannion at the Tuke Emigration Conference in Carna. PHOTO SEAN LYDON

desperation, fear and tension boiled over. The police were called to placate the people and to regulate the crowd.

That scene of human torment - which would create international headlines nowadays - happened about one kilometre from where the Tuke Memorial Emigration Conference was held last weekend, in the Emigrants Commemorative Centre in Carna village.

And it was far from ancient history; the grandparents of some people present were born at that time, or in the immediate years afterwards.

But Dr Gerard Moran, who gave the keynote address, ex-

plained that similar scenes occurred in places such as Roundstone, Cleggan, Maam and Clifden where Tuke and his team set up meetings.

The years prior to that February day was filled with examples of humiliating hardship. A letter to a newspaper from the Carna Priest, Fr Patrick Greally, on the January 3 1880 read as follows:

"On Christmas Eve several poor, virtuous women - mothers of large, helpless families - came to me in tears asking for God's sake to give them even the price of one meal for their starving children, that they had not even a morsel of the coars-

est food for the little ones on that great night of Universal Joy, when the angels proclaim 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good-will', that they had neither money nor means to procure it, and would not get a shilling's worth on credit if they travelled all Connemara; and, finally, that their husbands were gone for the last fortnight to England or Scotland to try and earn something to support their families at home".

Dr Gerard Moran suggested at the Conference, which was organised by the Heritage Section of Galway County Council, it would be timely - this is the

200th anniversary of James Hack Tuke's birth - that a permanent memorial would be established to his memory in Connemara.

Dr Moran said a series of information points are erected in the Erris and Mullet Peninsula of North West Mayo honouring Tuke's contribution to that area. The Conference in Carna was officially opened by Professor Christine Kinealy, who founded the Great Irish Famine Institute in the University of Quinnipiac in Connecticut.

An authority on the Great Famine, Professor Kinealy said that there is evidence to suggest that the effects of a catastrophic

Famine can diminish the genetics of a race for anything up to five generations. She suggested that the middle aged Irish people are now the last of those five generations.

Marie Mannion, Heritage Officer with Galway County Council said the Conference had been very successful and had shone a light on a period which has been forgotten or ignored over the decades.

She said the Emigrants Centre in Carna had provided a fitting and appropriate setting for the occasion and she noted the attendance of a number of people from various parts of the United States.