

Custance Harrievy

IN THE CAUSE OF IRELAND

The Gore-Booth Family



*Detail of Lady Gore-Booth from the painting
'Lady Gore-Booth and her two Daughters'
by Frederick William Burton
© Gore-Booth Family Collection*

London. He was also open to opportunities to expand his estate with the purchase of the Fitzmaurice estate at Ballymote for £130,000 in the 1830's. In 1834 he also assumed control of the Seven Cartons of Ballygilgan and then in order to reduce the number of holdings he offered the tenants £2 for passage to Canada and £4 an acre for improved land or land elsewhere on his estate. Most chose to emigrate. Many stories were told about this event but Sir Robert gave evidence to the Devon Commission and an ancestor of W. B. Yeats accompanied the former tenants on the ship to Canada and oversaw their arrival and settlement and reported back. It was the evidence of Sir Robert and the documentary evidence of the letters concerning the tenants that has survived and the stories told of the events of the time appear to have no basis in the evidence that we have today or at the time of the Devon Commission (1844-45).

The state of the agricultural market in the 1830's in Ireland was vastly different from the opening years of the nineteenth century. The repeal of the Corn Laws ended the trade protection of the U.K. market (of which Ireland was a part) and prices dropped. The opening of the Canadian and American Corn Belt and the introduction of steam on the transatlantic voyage increased competition and reduced prices. The increasing wealth of Britain also meant that profit was now to be found in the rearing of beef cattle, pigs and sheep to supply the market. Ireland had inherited a vast pool of agricultural labour to harvest tillage crops for which there was a decreasing profit. The land would be more profitably farmed for beef production. As it was the in the 1830's the growing population meant that the size of holdings decreased with each generation as holdings were sub-divided and increasingly these people were dependent for survival on a single crop: the potato. Everything else that was produced was sold for cash, to pay the rent and to pay for all the necessities that could not be produced on the farm. The destruction of the potato crop by blight in 1845, 1846 and 1847 reduced the population of Ireland from a high of 8.3 million to 6.3 million. One million died of starvation and disease and one million emigrated. The deaths fell most heavily on the poorest, landless labourers and their families, those who had the least resources.

For tenants the ability to hold animals or crops to take advantage of seasonal fluctuations was a great benefit. The wealth, and the careful management of the Gore-Booth family, based not just on their holdings in Sligo but in Manchester, allowed them the freedom to give their tenants time which many absentee landlords did not or could not do. Absentee landlords also tended to be more ignorant of the conditions on the ground and more dependent on estate agents managing their holdings. The estate agents employed on the basis of a percentage of the rent gathered were therefore less willing to manage the rental collection on the basis of agricultural prices and the state of the market. Many absentee landlords were also heavily in debt and after the Famine the estates bankrupt.

Sir Robert was regarded as a resident landlord but the duties he assumed meant that the family lived with a constant movement between Lissadell, Dublin and



*Sir Henry Gore-Booth
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