

# BODYKE EVICTIONS AND AN GARDA SÍOCHÁNA'S MCNAMARA'S

On 20 June 1887, Queen Victoria, then Britain's longest-reigning monarch, celebrated her Golden Jubilee at Buckingham Palace. The lavish affair featured a royal banquet attended by 50 foreign kings and princes and the governing heads of British overseas colonies and dominions. However, two weeks earlier, a much different event took place across the Irish Sea in East Co. Clare, writes Christopher Warner.

**D**istressed tenant farmers clashed with a combined military and police force in what became known as The Bodyke Evictions. In addition to losing their homes and livelihood, 26 people (all but four of them female) were arrested and charged with obstructing the law, including a 14-year-old girl named Bridget McNamara.

Although she would never wear a crown or dawdle inside an opulent castle, her noble display of courage and fighting spirit served as a harbinger of things to come in Ireland's struggle for political freedom. Furthermore, her

family's bloodlines can be traced to the formation of An Garda Síochána.

During the second half of the 19th century, a series of agrarian protests erupted between impoverished farmers in rural communities and wealthy landlords. In response, the Land League was formed in 1879, adopting the slogan 'The Land for the People'.

The organisation, co-founded by Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell, sought to establish fair rent, free sale and fixity of tenure for tenant farmers – as well as the



*Eviction at Moyasta a village between the towns of Kilkee and Kilrush in Co. Clare.*

opportunity to secure ownership of the soil they worked. Many historians consider the movement as part of the progressive rise of Fenianism.

#### LOCALS RETALIATE USING 'BOYCOTT'

The Land League initially achieved some of its aims through the widespread use of civil disobedience. Irish farmers also introduced a new word into the English language: 'boycott'. In 1880, Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott, a landlord's agent in Co. Mayo, demanded excessive rack rents following an abysmal harvest season.

Locals retaliated by withdrawing labour on any lands under Boycott's purview and refused to serve him at nearby shops. The practice soon became a powerful weapon to combat the British landlord system and later conveyed a broader definition: shunning those in violation of human rights.

Irish politicians also turned to 'obstructionism' (aka filibustering) in the House of Commons at Westminster. Additionally, parliamentary actions resulted in the formation of the Irish Land Commission in 1881. Though some demands were granted in subsequent Land Acts, several leaders protested, asserting the law didn't provide nearly enough.

Consequently, both Davitt and Parnell were arrested and jailed on charges of sedition, thus empowering landlords while also setting the stage for a dramatic showdown in the foothills of the Sliabh Aughty Mountains.

The parish of Bodyke had been founded in the early 18th century as an amalgamation of the southern section from Tuamgraney parish and the medieval parish of Kilnoe. Historically, prominent landowners in the area included the McNamara family (records show that a 'Daniel McNamara' owned nearly 2,000 acres in 1641), but many holdings would be lost during the Cromwellian era, taken over by newly-arrived Anglo-Irish owners such as the O'Callaghan-Westropp clan.

#### ONLY MEANS OF ESCAPE

By late spring 1887, the combination of declining agricultural prices, bad weather and crop failures created severe distress for the poor throughout the country.

Although not as deadly as the Great Famine four decades earlier, the situation had become increasingly dire for many families, a nightmare in which emigration or death provided the only means of escape.

Ironically, people in search of a better life in America often found themselves worse off than before – or never even made it ashore. Passengers crossing the Atlantic in so-called "coffin ships" faced appalling conditions,

forced to endure cramped, disease-infested boats without sufficient food or water to survive the journey. Mortality rates as high as 30% were common – an alarming statistic and considerably higher than slave ships making longer voyages.

Meanwhile, the well-heeled gentry on the Emerald Isle continued to thrive. As one of the more powerful figures in Co. Clare, Colonel John O'Callaghan served as commander of the Clare Militia, headquartered in Ennis.

The British Army regiment had initially formed as an infantry unit (Clare Militia Regiment of Foot) before converting to artillery in 1882, making it the last artillery militia ever raised by British Home forces. Known locally as "Colonel Jack", O'Callaghan matched his high-ranking stature with an equally imposing personal fortune. His fiefdom included Mary Fort House, an ornate three story manor in Tulla, overlooking his family's sprawling estate comprised of 4,842 acres.

#### WIDESPREAD EVICTIONS

The beleaguered tenantry in Bodyke pinned their hopes on a new political strategy hailed as the Plan of Campaign. The measure called for withholding all rent payments from landlords who refused to lower their rents.

A collective fund was created from which evicted tenants could draw. While some landowners agreed to negotiate in the wake of recent calamities, O'Callaghan refused, claiming any further abatements of rent would result in financial ruin. He then chose to flex some muscle and wreak havoc over a fortnight of abject cruelty.

Eviictions commenced on 2 June 1887, carried out by members of the RIC, the 2nd Royal Welsh Fusiliers, bailiffs, and 14 emergency men. O'Callaghan selected the date, knowing that most of the town's residents would be away at the fair in Scariff, leaving the defence mostly in the hands of the elderly and womenfolk.

One of the first victims to be removed was Margaret McNamara, an 80-year-old widow. The local parish priest, Fr. Murphy, and his curate Fr. Hannon, attempted to intervene, as did Michael Davitt, who held nightly meetings to rally support for those targeted.

Several of the tenants barricaded their houses with available materials such as furniture and tree trunks, but ultimately were no match against a force armed with rifles, bayonets, picks, axes and huge iron crowbars. After the men ransacked the homes, they rounded up and confiscated the livestock. Eventually, church bells rang and horns blared attracting large crowds from the surrounding areas to harass and delay the 'crowbar brigade.'

The London-based 'Pall Mall Gazette' dispatched journalist Henry Norman to cover the events unfolding in Ireland. Norman, who later became famous for exposing

the truth behind the Dreyfuss Affair, telegraphed daily reports back to England...

*“Each night as we drove back these families were in the ditch or the road, their cottages ruined by the crowbar, their furniture smashed to bits by the sledge-hammer, their goats and chickens and pigs driven off the land, the mothers and daughters and sisters noted down in a constable’s book for summons and the fathers and brothers in handcuffs on their way to prison — and all for what?”*

*“Simply from inability to perform the miracle of squeezing from the land a yearly sum of money which is admittedly in the majority of cases beyond its physical power to produce. That is, in other words, the tenants are evicted, robbed, maltreated, and imprisoned, that the landlords may be protected from losses due to the irresistible operation of natural laws.”*

RESISTANCE FROM UNLIKELY SOURCE

On the morning of 7 June, the troops arrived at the farm of Francis McNamara. The young farmer had recently become head of the household following his father’s passing and shouldered the responsibility of raising five younger siblings.

As expected, the men began attacking the walls – but they soon encountered resistance from an unlikely source: Bridget and Anne McNamara. The two sisters (aged 14 and 16 respectively), launched a surprise counter-attack from the rafters above, scalding the invaders with kettles of boiling water, oil, and porridge.

Similar tactics were employed by other families facing eviction, making life miserable – if only temporarily – for O’Callaghan’s henchmen. The McNamara girls were tried in Ennis Court for their actions and each punished with one-month of hard labour. Francis, who was severely beaten during the ordeal, received a three-month sentence.

Ennis Court, as approved by the Lord Lieutenant (with the advice and consent of the Privy Council),  
County of Wick.

No.	Name	Address	Charge	Verdict	Remarks
147	Francis McNamara	Bodyke	Obstructing the execution of a law	Guilty	Three months imprisonment
148	Bridget McNamara	Bodyke	Obstructing the execution of a law	Guilty	One month imprisonment
149	Anne McNamara	Bodyke	Obstructing the execution of a law	Guilty	One month imprisonment

Court Record for Francis McNamara.

In the end, 28 tenants out of 57 in the Plan of Campaign’s combination had been displaced during the brutal – albeit legal – exercise. The widespread international press coverage also drew harsh criticism of the Tory Government and ‘Queen Victoria’. Moreover, landlordism had further exacerbated feelings of mistrust and resentment towards the English – friction that would only grow in the years to come.

Davitt later returned to Bodyke for a tribute commending select members of the community: *“I sincerely hope that every woman in Ireland who may have to undergo the trial, the injustice and the suffering of eviction will emulate the brave example of the girls in Bodyke to whom I now have the honour of presenting these medals and money in commemoration of their pluck and patriotism.”*



The inscription reads Francis McNamara – ‘For Defending the Homesteads of Bodyke 1887’.

Ennis Court, as approved by the Lord Lieutenant (with the advice and consent of the Privy Council),  
County of Wick.

No.	Name	Address	Charge	Verdict	Remarks
147	Anne McNamara	Bodyke	Obstructing the execution of a law	Guilty	One month imprisonment
148	Bridget McNamara	Bodyke	Obstructing the execution of a law	Guilty	One month imprisonment

Court Record for Anne and Bridget McNamara.

In 1909, the Land Commission acquired sections of the O’Callaghan estate, and tenants were finally allowed to purchase their farms. In his book ‘The Bodyke Convictions’, historian John S. Kelly wrote: *“Back in Bodyke, the church bells were now silent and the clatter of military boots on its streets was quickly becoming an echo of the past. The newspaper reporters and politicians were gone and so too were the throngs of people who had been such a feature of those eventful days of 1887.”*

**BODYKE FAMILY TREE**

Shortly after the formation of An Garda Síochána in 1922, a familiar surname kept appearing on its Register, courtesy of one family from Bodyke. Five sons of Francis McNamara and his wife Johanna (née Conlan) eventually joined the Force, starting with Frank McNamara (Reg. No.



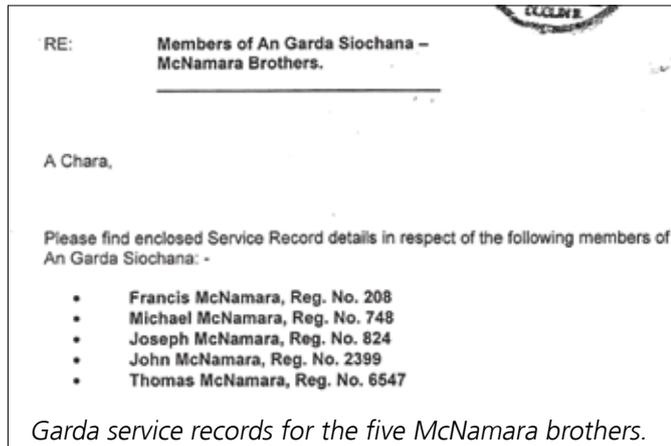
John McNamara’s Garda Belt.

The McNamara family tree would also produce other Garda members — a tradition kept alive today by Sergeant Brendan Duffy [24621B] of the Garda Mounted Unit. As for that young female warrior from County Clare, Bridget McNamara later married a man named James Driscoll and raised a family of eight children.

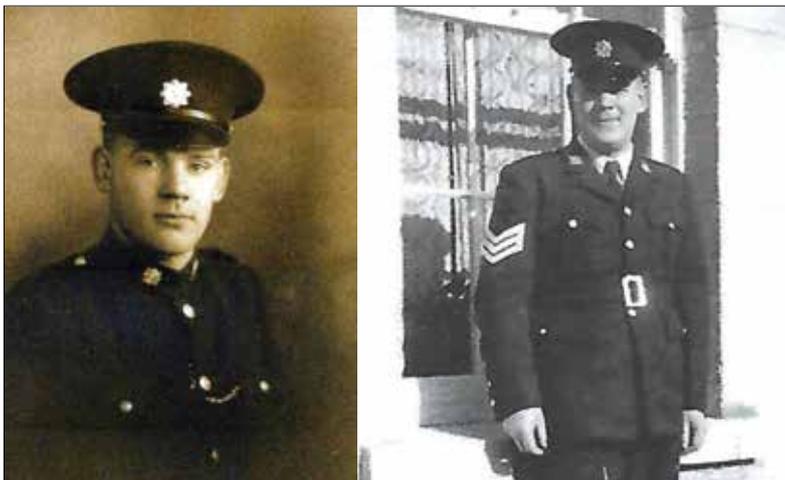


Sergeant Brendan Duffy is a member of the Garda Mounted Unit.

Her grandson, Jim Driscoll, recently spoke with ‘Síocháin’ about the enduring legacy of his remarkable ancestors. *“My own grandmother, at 14, went through all that in Bodyke ... I’m just so proud of her.”* So are we, Jim. So are we.



208). Subsequently, his brothers Michael (Reg. No. 748), Joseph (Reg. No. 824), John (Reg. No. 2399), and Thomas (Reg. No. 6547) all followed suit, combining more than 193 years of service in An Garda Síochána.



Frank McNamara in 1922 and at Rathangan Garda Station in the 1960s.

**About the Author:** American actor and freelance writer Christopher Warner has written a number of articles for Síocháin in 2020, while his other articles have appeared in several magazines and websites across multiple genres, including Military History Matters, Portland Monthly, Fly Past, WWII Quarterly, Aviation History, and Irish America. He currently resides in Co. Kerry with his wife, Maureen, and their brood of cats.