

Time and Place

The Merediths of County Sligo

Historical study of a family in Ireland
c.1629- c.1981

Lex Johnson

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To the people of County Sligo, at home and abroad

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Preface

Family historians investigating recent Irish ancestry describe the exercise as difficult, costly and time consuming. Particularly, this research of the period before the nineteenth century is rarely fruitful because relatively few specific people were documented in those early days. Many valuable documents and records were destroyed subsequently, either in human-driven calamities or by nature, leaving a great void and bringing great disappointment to researchers. However, in certain cases, a rich and diverse assortment of historical and genealogical records awaits the patient researcher. Perhaps through good management but certainly with a generous dash of Irish luck, these records survive to provide a small glimmer of insight for those fortunate enough to be descended from the people memorialized therein.

The Meredith family of Co. Sligo illustrates both ends of the spectrum. On one hand, a surprising amount of information describes one of its major branches. In stark contrast, frustratingly little information survives about numerous family members, to the point where one questions whether indeed they were of the same stock as the well-documented group. As will be shown, they were most likely part of one large family with a very large footprint on the social history of the county during the past 400 years.

This book investigates and presents the origin and progression of the Meredith people associated with Co. Sligo since their first arrival. In most cases, descendants will find enough information to identify their ancestors and learn something new about the family. Some will be fortunate enough to trace their ancestral line back to the early seventeenth century and its arrival from Wales, but others will learn very little. This reflects the often-disappointing nature of Irish family history research.

The resulting compendium represents an immense amount of research, data collection, collation and analysis conducted by the author over numerous years. While it may seem as though no stone remains unturned, this can never be true. Some sources will seem overlooked and others are yet to be exploited to their full extent. Hopefully this book will inspire people with an interest in Irish research.

Introduction

I.1. Abridged historical context

As an island, Ireland lies off the north-western edge of the European continent. To the east, the Irish Sea provides it with some degree of separation from Great Britain. The Atlantic Ocean buffets its western coastline, creating a wild and rugged frontier and leaving Ireland's backdoor otherwise unguarded geographically. A mixture of arable farmlands, unforgiving bogs and spectacular mountains cover its 84,421 square kilometre area. In spite of its small area, Co. Sligo itself has many beautiful natural features. Numerous picturesque lakes and fish-laden rivers flow between mountain ranges, such as the Ox Mountains and the Curlew Mountains, on their way to the sea.

Many physical reminders, such as prehistoric and early historic monuments, adorn its landscape as testimony to millennia of human inhabitation. The land bridge once connecting it with Great Britain has long since gone, but Ireland shares numerous and significant geological, archaeological and cultural links with Scotland in the northeast and Wales in the east. Notably, each of these three nations was a wild frontier and periodically both wooed and threatened by their powerful neighbours. The remnants of the Giants Causeway at Ireland's northern coastline bear geological similarities with the southwestern Scottish coastline and perhaps provided an early forewarning of the subsequent migrations in each direction.

In early days, the kings and high kings of Ireland divided the island into the four provinces of Ulster in the north, Connacht in the west, Munster in the southwest and Leinster in the east. Connacht earned a reputation as the most isolated province, although such a mantle could rest better with the remote parts of Co. Donegal in the far north-western reaches of Ulster.

Little needs to be mentioned here concerning the story of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland who became an integral part of local culture. He began his work in the northern and western parts of the Ireland, but travelled extensively and converted many to Christianity. While upon his mission in Connacht about A.D. 450, he lived for a while upon Inishmulclohy in Sligo Bay. Numerous monastic foundations, including several within Co. Sligo, owe their existence to him. Perhaps his greatest achievement was the encouragement of Christianity to become a pillar of ordinary folk's daily lives. With time, as high kings gave way to local chieftains, the culture surrounding passage tombs, megaliths and dolmens became subsumed by another built around crosses, high crosses and grottoes.¹

With ancient roots in legends and folklore, the Irish have long been recorders of histories and genealogies. Classic manuscripts, such as 'The Great Book of Lecan', 'The Yellow Book of Lecan' and 'The Book of Genealogies', remain today as testimony of the MacFirbises, an historian family who lived near Killala Bay and a short distance west of Sligo. Similarly, powerful local chiefs in the Sligo vicinity commissioned their bards to write historic manuscripts including 'The Book of Ballymote', 'The Book of O'Hara' and 'The Annals of Ireland'. The traditions of poetry, song and storytelling continue. Although not a Sligonian by birth, William Butler Yeats travelled often to his grandparents' home county and gained much critical and popular acclaim for his works about local people and places.²

Great places of learning have dotted Ireland's landscape for centuries. Its monasteries and religious foundations have been a quiet, yet studious and highly regarded, storehouse of the world's knowledge. Some modern scholars suggest these Irish institutions provided a sanctuary for the subsequent revival of early-modern Christianity following the destruction within the rest of Europe during the Dark Ages, although the identifiable relationships are still being debated.³

Ireland has not remained an island fortress during the past thousand years, with its watery barrier breached by numerous waves of invaders and migrants such as the Vikings, Normans, Scots, Welsh, English and French.

Vikings, sometimes known as Norsemen, appeared near the Connacht coastline in A.D. 807. They plundered and sacked monasteries and burned settlements in the region later known as Co. Sligo. While their presence continued until the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, they appear to have presented little more than major nuisance value to the majority of local Irish people. The

Normans arrived in the twelfth century and made a severe and lasting impression upon the social fabric of Connacht. They erected many strategically-placed castles with powerful garrisons in Co. Sligo to impose their order upon the native chiefs. When the Anglo-Norman conquerors built a castle on the banks of the River Garavogue at Sligo during the thirteenth century, the region became a valuable point along the overland route between Ulster and Connacht. In the early fourteenth century, several native Irish chieftains, namely the O'Connors, O'Dowds, O'Harts, O'Haras, MacDonagh and MacSweeneys, managed to regain control of their homelands. The Norman occupation had ended.⁴

With its isolation, Connacht was known also as a wild place where uncivilized folk dwelt despite the harshest farming conditions and climate. Late in the sixteenth century, military advisors recognized this isolation as a strategic advantage to be won and exercised.

The accidental arrival of the Spanish in 1588 raised the English interest in this part of Ireland. History shows the Spanish miscalculated their attack upon southern England. A combination of English naval tactics and calamitous weather conditions forced the remnants of the Spanish Armada to flee eastwards through the English Channel, then northwards through the North Sea in the hope of circumnavigating the British Isles and returning to Spain around the western and southern coastlines of Ireland. Wild seas wrought havoc upon the ships which managed to reach western Ireland. Several vessels washed ashore, including three on the north Sligo coastline. Some of the survivors were captured by local Irish people and handed over to English authorities.⁵

The rise of English power in Ireland heralded treacherous times for the native Irish chieftains, culminating in the so-called Flight of the Earls, when the most powerful and senior Irish leaders abandoned Ireland and fled to continental Europe in the opening years of the seventeenth century. In an intermediate battle in 1599, the O'Donnells managed to decisively defeat the English forces of Sir Conyers Clifford, the Lord President of Connacht, in the Battle of the Curlews near Boyle in Co. Roscommon. Soon afterwards and faced with yet another imminent attack by the English in June 1602, the Irish chieftains destroyed Sligo Town. However, English rule became consolidated further shortly afterwards upon the surrender and departure of the Irish leaders, including the earl of Tyrconnel, and bringing the old Gaelic order to an end.⁶

During a thirty year period of comparative peace, the Irish and English settlers each went about their own business. Unfortunately for the Irish in Co. Sligo, certain influential officials and representatives of the English crown orchestrated the transfer of large tracts of land from Irish title and into the hands of their own supporters. Acting under the guise of governmental surveys and fair business transactions during 1633 to 1634, Thomas, Viscount Wentworth, his secretary George Radcliffe and perhaps also his agent Philip Perceval of Templehouse acquired title to lands previously owned by several families of the county and their various mortgagees. The former owners could do little, except remember their losses.⁷

Tensions mounted. In 1641 and 1642, terrible atrocities took place throughout Ireland. Massacres, probably instigated by Irish and English settlers alike, devastated the population and reduced agriculture and commerce almost to a standstill. It was a complicated affair, with confusion between opposing sides shifting between national and religious divisions. The English parliament funded an army to establish order, but diverted it to fight instead in the civil war in England. Once those were under control, the parliamentary army's attention focussed upon bringing military order to Ireland. Co. Sligo witnessed much action as the opposing forces tussled over its vantage points, with the tide of force shifting first one way and then the other. Eventually, the parliamentary forces led by Charles Coote and Colonel Audley Mervyn and the Lagan Scot forces of Sir Robert Stewart defeated those of Lucas Taaffe and others. By 1653, Ireland was sufficiently at peace for several regiments to disband, but only according to the meticulous planning of the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell.⁸

One serious consequence involved the forfeiture of certain lands by folk not known to have supported the parliamentary army's efforts. Many Irish families were ordered to leave their ancestral lands and relocate elsewhere in Ireland. A few were compensated with land grants at their destinations, these too having been sequestered from others, but most did not. The Commissioners for the Affairs of Ireland established a plan granting their supporters the

productive lands of evictees who, in turn, received allocations of poorer land in Connacht. However, much of Co. Sligo and the adjacent part of Co. Mayo became allocated to the disbanded soldiers. Most soldiers were concentrated within a belt measuring four miles wide stretching along the county's entire coastline, while others were placed at strategic passes, all to reduce the risk of another uprising. In the scramble for the best land, several well-placed governmental officials and others lodged claims to much profitable land.⁹

Religious differences between James II and his son-in-law, William of Orange, each with their supporters, are attributed as a major cause of the conflict brought to Ireland in 1688. Most havoc from this tussle for the English throne took place in Ireland. As expected, the old battlelines formed between Catholics and Protestants, with property and lives lost as each side sought retribution and revenge upon the other. The king's parliament passed an Act of Attainder, effectively outlawing his active opponents and their supporters. Troops from Sligo, many of whom were sons of those who disbanded in 1653, fought at several places within the surrounding region. Following a decisive battle near the River Boyne, the Protestant Ascendancy strengthened its hold over both land and government. The formerly attainted people now held the power.¹⁰

The new French republic enlisted the aid of the disenchanting Irish people, thus opening a backdoor through which they could launch an invasion of Great Britain. They landed in 1798 in the bay of Killala, a few miles west of Co. Sligo. Together with Irish troops, they engaged with English troops at several sites across the county. Reports suggest a contingent crossed the Ox Mountains from Ballina to Tobercurry, capturing numerous hostages and destroying property enroute, before their effective defeat at Carricknagat, a short distance north of Collooney.¹¹

A steady stream of emigrants sought better opportunities abroad from the early nineteenth century, but pales in significance when compared with the effects of the potato famine of the 1840s. Ireland had been caught in a dilemma with a rapidly rising population and economic collapse. Potatoes had become the only affordable food source for much of the population but, when a series of annual crops failed due to disease, the population plummeted as many people, often whole families, died from the effects of hunger. Those who could do so, fled by whatever means possible to Canada, United States of America, Australia and Britain. More than 2100 people sailed from Sligo and Ballina during the first half of 1845. In 1847, almost 12,000 left for Canada alone and about 1100 people migrated to the United States. Not surprisingly, the official population of Co. Sligo fell from 173,277 in 1841 to 121,623 in 1851 and 103,898 in 1881.¹²

I.2. Selected source material available for County Sligo

I.2.1. Common practice

The time-honoured approach for researching one's family history is to begin at the present day and work backwards with the available sources, firstly to confirm known information and secondly to establish new facts. Researchers commence with tools such as certificates of birth, marriage and death, parish registers and censuses to recreate the family tree.

Depending on the particular governmental jurisdiction, civil registration of births, marriages and deaths commenced at different stages of the nineteenth century and recorded different amounts of information. It began in England and Wales in July 1837, Scotland in 1855, but Ireland in 1864. The government recorded some marriages in Ireland, specifically those performed in Protestant churches, from 1845. Similarly, the information contained on civil registration certificates varies greatly between jurisdictions. The systems used in Scotland and Queensland have been exemplary, recording far more detail than most. The Irish system was adopted seemingly from the English and Welsh ones, in which fewer details were collected. Irish birth certificates typically name the child, its parents, the father's occupation and where they lived. Their marriage certificates usually name the couple, their residences, occupations and their fathers' names and occupations. Irish death certificates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contained very little detail, usually only the deceased's name, approximate

age, occupation, where they died and the name of the person who provided the information. Irish certificates seldom contain more information.

Using a combination of certificates, researchers commence with a birth certificate, which would name the child's parents and where they lived. In sparsely populated areas, usually only one such couple lived at any particular place. The parents' marriage certificate would be the next document to locate and indicates where the couple lived at the time, their ages and their fathers' names. People moved about the countryside more during certain periods, so understanding the social history and demographic influences affecting a district becomes essential. Death certificates are not particularly useful for Irish researchers, but can provide small clues regarding locations. People's ages recorded on marriage and death certificates must not be relied upon, but can be indicative at best. Commencing with someone born about 1900, researchers quickly exhaust the use of civil registration certificates because those records commenced mostly only thirty-six years earlier.

Collections of governmental censuses form an adjunct source for researchers in other countries. In some places, such as the United States of America, these took place each five years. In Ireland, as with England, Wales and Scotland, censuses were gathered at ten year intervals from about 1801 onwards. However, the earlier censuses were collations of aggregated data containing no personal information, so only those from 1841 onwards are useful for tracing people. Researchers normally identify the family in successive censuses while developing family trees built from details contained in the civil registration certificates. Governments typically apply a 100-year embargo on the release of specific details contained about people recorded in censuses. For example, in 2008, only censuses taken before 1908 are available. Some governments, such as those in Australia, do not release specific personal details from any census, unless especially authorized by the person giving the original information and, even then, only after the embargo period has passed.

One of the great tragedies of Irish documentation concerns the destruction of most censuses taken before 1901. This occurred during attacks upon government establishments in Dublin in the early 1920s. Very few fragments exist from earlier censuses, with the exception of those covering certain parts of Ulster which escaped total destruction. The normal 100-year embargo should have applied, but the Irish government recognized the need for their people to access the 1901 and 1911 censuses. The 1921 census will be released after the normal embargo. Currently with only two available collection years, 1901 and 1911, Irish censuses do not provide much information for people researching families prior to 1900, but researchers should check whether any family members were mentioned in those censuses, because these occurrences can provide a vital clue about the family's specific location and approximate birth years. Inspection of the 1901 census can reveal an elderly person who was missing from the 1911 census and whose death can be confirmed from the civil registration records. Their geographical location and other people recorded in their households can lead to other branches of their family with a better chance of identifying living relations nowadays.

After gathering as much information as possible from the civil registration certificates and censuses, the next tactic could be to investigate church records. In this case, one would look normally for baptism, marriage and burial details. The civil registration certificates of birth, marriage and death should provide clues regarding the likely date ranges and the specific locations. However, two great challenges arise. One must know both the religious denomination and the particular parish where the event took place. Thorough researchers will check all known denominations, even if family anecdotes suggest their forebears staunchly belonged to one denomination or another. Many reasons explain why people changed denominations or entered into mixed marriages in which some of the children were raised in each of the parents' faiths. Researchers will discover that some registers contain historical details as far back as about 1800, whereas others cover only the period from about 1880 onwards. Generally, Protestant parish registers are more likely to exist from the early nineteenth century, whereas relatively few Catholic registers survive from before 1840. Some parish registers were deposited in central repositories, but many others are still in local protection throughout the parishes of Ireland and may not be available to public researchers. No hard and fast rule determines the location or existence of parish registers, so the wise researcher will check all possible avenues.

More likely than not, the researcher could construct a small ancestral tree which extends back to the middle of the nineteenth century by following those steps. A huge range of other sources, some of which will be discussed here, can augment and extend this knowledge.

I.2.2. Occasional gems of the nineteenth century

Although almost no census returns survive from the period before 1901, a secondary source contains a small amount of suitable replacement data from the 1841 and 1851 censuses. After the Irish parliament voted itself out of existence in 1801, the British parliament at Westminster held all parliamentary power. Therefore, Westminster's Old Age Pension Act, passed in 1908, applied equally to Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England. The act enabled the payment of a means-tested pension to people who could prove they were over 70 years old. Civil birth registration began in Ireland in 1864 and the early censuses were not available yet, so Irish-born applicants had no official way of proving their age. Ingenuity suggested an alternative. Applicants could write to the administration in Dublin, providing as much detail as possible concerning their family members who would have been alive in either 1841 or 1851. If their details sufficiently matched those early censuses, then the applicants were considered for eligibility. A handwritten copy of the household's census details was placed in their old age pension application file. These copies survived the destruction of 1922, whereas the original census details did not. Obviously, the files cover a relatively small portion of the population, but are worth checking. The indexes to the census search forms of Co. Sligo do not contain any people named Meredith.¹³

Since at least the Middle Ages, an intended marriage had to be announced in church on three consecutive Sundays. If no well-founded objections were raised, then the marriage could proceed. For reasons such as wishing to avoid public scrutiny or to hasten a marriage, the wealthier folk could pay a bond to the local church diocese in exchange for a licence to marry without having banns read. The bond was forfeited if a subsequent problem brought embarrassment to the church. Marriage by this method required someone with sufficient financial means to provide the bond, so was not within the reach of most Irish couples. This practice encouraged the separation of social classes, regardless of problems anticipated with the marriage. The diocese typically recorded the couple's names, the bond providers' names, sometimes their addresses and perhaps other details useful for researchers. Sadly, the documents were destroyed in 1922, but indexes remain for most dioceses. These indexes normally give only the names of the bride and groom and the year in which the licence was issued from the commencement of records for the diocese through until about 1845.

Probate of wills and administration of deceased estates were granted by diocesan consistory courts until 1858. Records were held locally for twenty years from the date of finalization and then forwarded to Dublin. In a familiar consequence, the records in Dublin were destroyed in 1922. Some abstracts produced for other purposes have survived, along with documents still held locally at the time. Indexes cover all years, but these provide limited details such as the deceased person's name and some description of their abode. Some wills made their way into document collections held for landed estates and have survived there.

Much like telephone directories of the twentieth century, commercial and trade directories described Irish cities, towns and some rural districts during the nineteenth century. In some cases, payment was required before one's details were added to the directory. For this reason, such directories are not always a useful source of information for the family researcher. They do not normally contain any genealogical information and do not list everyone at a given address.

Some passenger lists have survived from the numerous sea voyages from Ireland to North America, Australia, New Zealand and other places. Passengers on voyages to Great Britain were not recorded. Family historians reaching this point will be happy for whatever scant information is available. The lists may have been recorded at either the origin or the destination. Sometimes newspaper articles contain passenger lists. Crew lists and agreements can be informative, as some men worked their passage, while others took advantage of assisted passages.

Combinations of documents assist most researchers to trace their families backwards until the early nineteenth century. Some families failed to leave any trace in Ireland.

1.2.3. Some eighteenth century sources

Few classes of documents suitable for tracing specific individuals survive from eighteenth century Co. Sligo. Typically, those giving names only partially cover the county and do not contain genealogical information.

In 1749, Edward Synge, bishop of the diocese of Elphin, compiled a list containing details of households within his See. It names the heads of households, but only summarizes the other occupants by their gender, adulthood and religion. Although it was a very comprehensive record for its time and can be useful for placing a named person in a given location, its shortcomings, such as limited coverage, naming only the heads of household and not providing ages, limit its use to family history researchers.¹⁴

The 1798 French invasion left a path of destruction across Co. Sligo. As expected, lists of claimants for compensation survive with names, locations and claimed values, but no genealogical information.

1.2.4. Some seventeenth century sources

Thomas Wentworth, lord deputy of Ireland, and his secretary Sir George Radcliffe undertook a survey of the lands in Connacht, supposedly on behalf of the Crown. Now known as the Strafford Survey, it enumerated the parishes, the quarters of each parish, how the tithe was divided and the name of the incumbent at the time. Its original version contains the name of each quarter, subdivisions, nature of the soil, situation and capabilities, whether wooded or not, name of proprietor, his title to the land, names of the tenants, duties payable and other rights. Its major advantage for family historians is the inclusion of the names of landlords and some occupants of land throughout the county.¹⁵

Peace shattered in October 1641 when the disaffected population attempted to reclaim lands appropriated from them earlier that century. Retaliations and counter-retaliations became increasingly serious. Both the king and his parliament wished to send an army to quell the unrest, but the English Puritans distrusted Charles' motives and feared he may turn his army against parliament. Thomas Wentworth had been impeached by parliament and executed earlier in the year on such a charge. Parliament refused to approve Charles the funds to establish his army, but instead offered confiscated Irish land as security for the establishment of their own private army to subdue the rebels in Ireland. The 1400 or so subscribers were about equally split between members of parliament and others such as guildsmen and merchants of London. The subscribers, known as Adventurers, were given debentures for land in Ireland at different rates for each province according to the funds they provided. Land in Connacht was rated at six shillings per acre, so a £300 subscription would bring 1000 acres there. The army was established, but redirected by parliament before it sailed for Ireland in 1642 to fight instead against the king in England. Parliament released the army to fight in Ireland only after the English civil war ended, some seven years later. The Irish rebellion was quashed by about September 1653. By then, the total subscriptions by Adventurers had grown to an immense amount, but many had not survived the war in England. Existing lists of Adventurers seemingly remain incomplete and fail to distinguish between initial and subsequent investors. Co. Sligo became reserved for payment of arrears to disbanded soldiers. No Adventurer was allocated land in Co. Sligo upon redemption of their debentures. Indexes to the Adventurers' and soldiers' certificates appear in several sources.¹⁶

Wood-Martin (1889), a military man and historian, listed the surnames of men in the parliamentary regiment which disbanded in Sligo about 1655. Containing only surnames and no personal names or ranks, the list provides encouragement only if it includes the relevant surname.¹⁷

The best source of seventeenth century Irish information has been destroyed. It was an important compendium of first-hand information from the mid-seventeenth century when the parliamentary regime ruled Ireland, known as the Books of the Commonwealth. The fifty-six manuscript volumes contained details of land transactions and ownership, appointments, pensions, grants, forfeitures, fines and many other important matters recorded by the administration between 1650 and 1660. It contained the records of the disbanded soldiers and

lands awarded in lieu of arrears to those men. Sadly, these volumes were completely destroyed at the Four Courts in Dublin, home of Ireland's Public Record Office, when it was attacked in 1922.¹⁸

A so-called 'census' was conducted throughout Ireland in 1659, near the end of the Interregnum. The details are organized by county, barony, parish and townland. For each townland listed, typical details include the number of people, broken into separate figures for Irish and English respectively and, if applicable, the names of people who claimed title of part of the townland. These claimants were known as *titulados*, because their claims were titular, or in name only, rather than proven. Typically, *titulados* were people with social standing in the district, noblemen, baronets, gentlemen, esquires, military officers or adventurers. They may have lived somewhere other than the place over which they claimed title. The *titulados* were the only people named fully in the Co. Sligo portion of the 1659 census, so this source carries less overall value than the available twentieth century censuses. Besides the original manuscript of the 1659 census of the Diocese of Elphin, its specific particulars pertaining to Co. Sligo have been published at least twice. Wood-Martin (1889) listed all *titulados* in Co. Sligo in 1659, but omitted the names of the townlands they claimed. He was followed by O'Rorke (1889), a rival historian who included the full census in his history of the county. Pender (1936) followed much later with the recompilation and publication of the entire 1659 census of Ireland.¹⁹

Thousands of people were caught in the crossfire of accusations about their involvement in the Irish rebellion of the 1640s. The court of claims was established in 1661 to hear and deliberate upon their claims of innocence and seeking restoration of land. A list of certificates issued by the court and a more complete abstract of their cases survive. The parliamentary army confiscated numerous houses and lodgings throughout Ireland, but especially near Dublin, to accommodate its officers and men.²⁰

The government established a new tax in 1662. Each household, regardless of size, was taxed according to its number of hearths. Obviously, not all households had a hearth, so the surviving lists of taxpayers are not complete. The records are most complete for the province of Ulster, but those of Co. Sligo are informative too.²¹

The Books of Survey and Distribution are contained among the Annesley Papers held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Organized by county, barony and finally parish, the books outline the key physical features within each notable townland. They were compiled during 1676 to 1680, but only twenty-two volumes survive from the original twenty-three volume set. Each volume tabulates details such as the name of the proprietors in the 1641 Civil Survey, the number of acres distributed, the persons to whom distributed and the annual rent payable to the king.²²

The government of James II passed an Act of Attainder in 1689 which named Irish people believed disloyal to the king. These people were mostly landed Protestants, so include many families of the disbanded Cromwellian officers and soldiers. The list contains some deceased men and also some eldest sons of deceased men, suggesting the government considered their deeds particularly horrific and worthy of remembering beyond their deaths. The Co. Sligo portion names two noblemen, three clergymen, fifty-five esquires and gentlemen, two yeomen and two merchants.²³

1.2.5. Land records as a separate class

Land was a commodity and Ireland used a complex ownership system requiring a comprehensive range of administrative documentation. Under the right circumstances, the passage of a particular portion of land can be traced throughout the past 400 years. Not surprisingly, these documents and records form a valuable source for historians who have mastered their intricacies and subtleties.

Since the days of the old clan system, feudal lordships and kingdoms, the strata of senior landholders and land occupiers have been at opposite ends of the system. The land occupiers held leases from their landlords, but with limitless intermediate landlords between those and the most senior landholders who either leased or held their land in fee simple from the crown.

A fictitious example helps illustrate the complexity. Suppose Person A holds property in fee simple from the crown, but leases part to Person B for a given annual rent, say £50 per annum.

At some time during their occupation of the property, Person B may decide to sub-let some of it to Person C, perhaps at a higher price, enabling continuation of their rent to Person A but still making a living. If they agree upon the rate of £100 per annum, then Person C pays this to Person B who keeps £50 and pays the agreed £50 to Person A. Next, Person B may owe money to Person D as a separate debt and decide to assign certain rights to reduce the debt over time. If the debt is £200, then Person B may agree to assign £25 per annum of their income to Person D for a period of at least eight years to repay their debt, while still enabling them to continue paying their annual £50 to Person A. In this given example, all four parties have an interest in the property. Only Person C is an occupier and only Person B is the immediate lessor as defined by the Valuation Office. Persons A and D are likely to have been named as interested parties in any subsequent lease or sale involving the property.

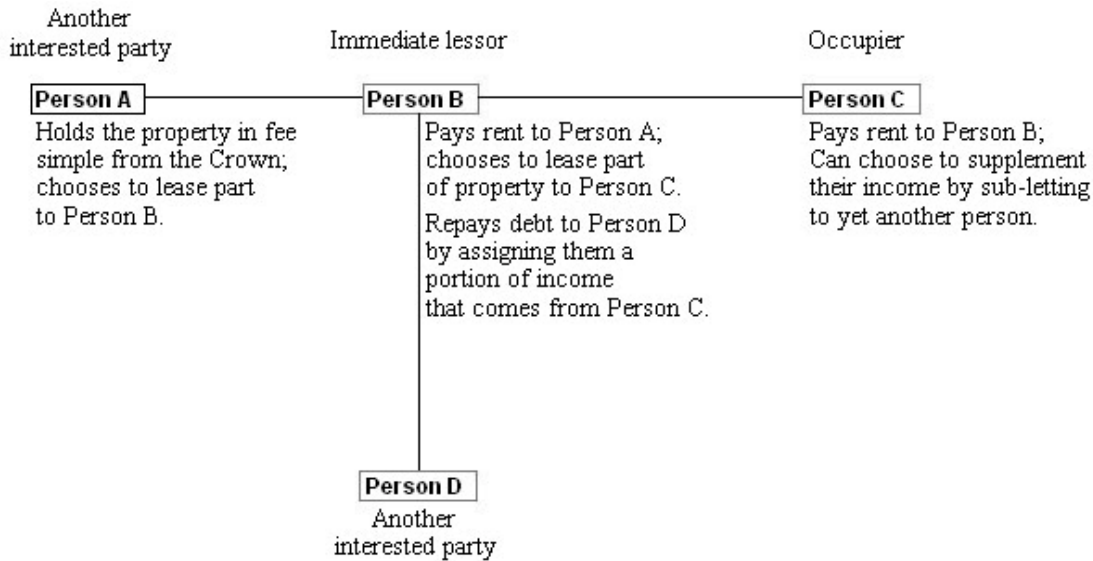


Figure 2. *Simple example of interested parties for a given property*

Each and any of those agreements could have been documented and stored by either party. Larger landlords organized their holdings into estates and usually appointed managers, agents or bailiffs. Their documentation comprised items such as copies of leases, rental agreements, arrears books, property improvements and account books. Some of these estate papers are stored within major repositories throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland, some remain in private ownership and the remainder have been lost or destroyed.²⁴

Any party to a transaction may have chosen, for a fee, to register the agreement with a specially established government department. This Registry of Deeds has housed leases, conveyances, sale agreements, wills, marriage agreements and similar documents since 1708. Searching these documents can be a time-consuming, yet wonderfully rewarding, process. Property transfers would involve a grantor, the person giving the use of the land, and a grantee, the person to whom the land was given, a location, a date on which the agreement was made, a memorial date when it was copied for the registry and sets of witnesses for both the deed and memorial. In many cases, these agreements were memorialized several years after the dates on which they were first signed and sealed. These memorials, sometimes dated more than twenty years after the initial deed, fill more than one thousand transcription volumes, each with about 600 pages, so researchers should consult the indexes first. Two types of index are available. Firstly, the index to grantors' names is arranged alphabetically by surname for a given range of years. Secondly, the index to locations is arranged by the first initial of the relevant townland's name within a given year range and county or corporate town. If the townland name is known, then search the location index first. Cross-checking between the grantors and locations indexes is not usually necessary, although prudent researchers will consult both, in case the desired deed was indexed under an unexpected name. Disappointingly, grantees' names are not indexed, so a full list of transactions where a given person received land can not be extracted reliably.

Similarly, the indexes themselves are not indexed, so researchers must proceed methodically through the available indexes and check each relevant item to find the one they seek. Upon disposal of a deceased person's estate, the executor's name is given as the grantor, so knowing their name is essential for identifying those deeds. Executors did not always have the same surname as the deceased person. Wills, however, are indexed using the testators' names. These indexes refer to the specific items in the volumes of deed transcriptions.²⁵

Electoral changes in the late eighteenth century gave certain people the right to vote based upon their qualification as freeholders. For Co. Sligo historians, the surviving lists of voters and freeholders from 1790 until about 1857 can be informative, although contain no genealogical information.

Before 1823, tithes payable to the Established Church could be rendered in kind, rather than in money, but the Composition Act directed cash would be the only acceptable form henceforth. To monitor receipts of tithe monies, lists were written containing the names of all people liable to pay those land taxes. By definition, these tithe applotment lists are less comprehensive in towns and cities and exclude the labouring class and a vast range of other occupations. However, they are useful for identifying people in rural districts. Land occupiers are listed within as many townlands as they held land, but are mentioned usually only once in each townland regardless of their number of specific landholdings there.²⁶

In a massive undertaking, the Irish government surveyed the entire island between 1848 and 1864, although preliminary work began during the 1830s. For each separate holding, they recorded the occupier, the immediate lessor, the size of the holding, its general appurtenances, unimproved value and similar details. The accompanying maps identify the location and boundaries of each landholding. The survey does not contain details of either a genealogical nature or landholders above the immediate lessor. The Valuation Office regularly maintained records of revisions to those details. Among other functions, these revisions record the year in which holdings changed hands between occupiers or landlords, when buildings were demolished, when holdings were either merged or subdivided and, especially from the 1880s onwards, when occupiers purchased their holdings outright.

The tithe applotment and primary valuation records are effectively snapshots taken at single points in time. They hold little genealogical value on their own. However, they can be combined with each other and similar locational records to form a dynamic view of land occupation and ownership between the 1820s and the current day. For example, occupiers in the tithe applotment records with a given surname in a townland could be related with occupiers with the same surname in the primary valuation records. In turn, those people can be traced forwards through the revisions to the valuation lists. At the point where a person leaves the property, they may have died, migrated or simply passed the land to the next person, but the corresponding records can give clarification.

1.2.6. Local history and family publications

Numerous writers have produced histories of Co. Sligo, with the most comprehensive and notable being those of Wood-Martin and O'Rourke. Each work presents a particular bias which must be understood to better appreciate the underlying facts.²⁷

Owen Meredith Tweedy, a descendant of the Meredith family of Cloonamahon, compiled an immensely readable account of his ancestral families in Ireland, namely the Tweedys, Merediths, Bonds, Gosselins, Kingstones and Owens. Tweedy's family inherited the remaining Meredith estate in Co. Sligo and presumably also custody of numerous early family documents invaluable to family historians. Considering his access to these original sources, his book is a key resource containing a rich tapestry of family anecdotes interspersed with verifiable facts. His narration of the Meredith family commences in the seventeenth century and continues to the end of the nineteenth century. His identifiable errors are few in number and principally refer to early generations of the Meredith family, presumably beyond his reach for verification. Assessing the work upon its own merits, the resource should not be ignored, but rather read in conjunction with other historical publications about the county. It provides the underlying skeleton for the following description of the Merediths of Cloonamahon. Another book by Tweedy was not published until shortly after his death. The sequel does not include information

about the Meredith family, but resumes his story from the beginning of the twentieth century until his own death. Parts of Tweedy's first work were reproduced by other other authors, notably McTernan (1990), from whom others have copied further. Unfortunately, this perpetuates and reinforces some of the earlier errors and encourages a false belief of its total accuracy.²⁸

McTernan produced an excellent collection of works using surviving records and personally obtained anecdotes and family stories. Formerly holding the post of County Historian, he remains actively interested in the history of the local families and places in Co. Sligo.²⁹

1.2.7. Other classes of source material

Numerous archives and libraries throughout Ireland, the United Kingdom and other places hold original documents and manuscripts outlining events in Co. Sligo throughout the period of most interest to family historians. Some of those documents are used in the following discussion.³⁰

I.3. Closing remarks at the outset

1.3.1. Key questions for researchers

Family historians researching Co. Sligo will want to know how the various Meredith people of the county were related, where they came from and where they went. Local historians will want to explore their lifestyles and localities in the context of major contemporary events. Regional, national and international historians will be interested in how larger events affected these people. Social researchers will consider shifting patterns among the social networks evident where these people played out their lives. By remaining firmly focussed upon one family throughout a three hundred year timespan, this work will investigate these major historical themes.

1.3.2. Choice of source material

Astute readers will notice subtle changes in source material throughout this work. Historical works provide the fabric of the discussion when few other sources provide precise clues to the Merediths of Co. Sligo. Although Tweedy's anecdotal work supplies the backbone for information about one particular line of Merediths, numerous primary sources provide both breadth and depth to coverage of the families mentioned. Time-honoured authoritative sources informed the section concerning Meredith heraldic arms.

1.3.3. Standardized spelling variants

Historians studying documentation spanning several hundred years will encounter numerous alternative spellings for people and places. Mostly, these spelling variants are presented here in a standardized format. For example, the surname Meredith and placename Tobercurry sometimes occur as Meredyth and Tubbercurry, but the former variants will be used here. The numerous variants will not be itemized, but will be readily identified as they occur.

1.3.4. Expression of dates before 1752

The English calendar system changed in 1752, after which new years began on 1 January. Before then, dates followed the same sequence as now, but new years began on 25 March. For example, 1616 began on 25 March 1616, progressed through 31 December 1616, which was followed immediately by 1 January 1616, and ended on 24 March 1616. Scholars refer to modern dates using the post-1752 calendar, but sometimes use a special style for describing certain confusing dates before 1752. Specifically, the period from 1 January to 24 March, once bearing the old year's number but now the new, is written sometimes using both the old and new years' numbers. Using the above example, the twelve week period immediately after 31 December 1616 can be described as 1616/17, which indicates the portion of the year called 1616 in the old style but 1617 in the modern style. Pre-1752 dates between 1 January and 24

March mentioned in this book use this composite style. However, some of the accompanying charts use composite years without a specific date to indicate that the events took place within that approximate year range. For example, 1768/69 indicates an event that occurred in either one year or the other.

1.3.5. Expression and tenses

This type of research will never yield an entirely accurate outcome, because many facts will remain unproven. This work uses abrupt differences between statements of fact and possibility. Facts are written in terse sentences, whereas possibilities are expressed more generally and use less accurate terms such as *perhaps*, *could have* and *maybe*. Similarly, established historians adopt a variety of tenses to describe actions in different time periods, so caution is advised for their interpretations.

Women are described typically using their maiden names, rather than their married names, unless referring to a particular source's text. For example, a certain Joseph Meredith's wife was born as Margaret Stinson but remarried John McKenzie after Joseph's death. Certain documents, such as gravestones and deeds, occasionally use multiple surnames, such as *Meredith also Stinson also McKenzie*, but here she is described simply as Margaret Stinson.

1.3.6. Distinguishing similar family groups and people

More than one family of Merediths lived at some locations and are ascribed descriptive names to help distinguish them from each other. For example, several such families were associated with Sessuecommon, a townland in the parish of Achonry on the southern side of the Ox Mountains. The word *branch* describes a family known to be descended from the original Meredith in the county, whereas the term *family fragment* describes a group of people whose connection with the central family is not yet proven. One of the groups is named the *senior branch* to describe their descendancy from the eldest known son of the original family. Similarly, one of the branches at Cloonamahon, a short distance south of Collooney, is described as the senior branch at Cloonamahon to recognize their ongoing ownership of the surrounding land through their eldest sons. As a subtle gesture, the senior branch of Sessuecommon is not described as the senior branch *at* Sessuecommon, as they are said to have lived elsewhere for much of the time. None are labelled as junior branches. Most Meredith groups living in the county are described using their places of residence, such as those at Mullaun, Coney Island, Gortnadrass and Tobercurry.

To help avoid confusion, sometimes individuals are described using their residences, such as Joseph Meredith of Gortnadrass. To distinguish between men at the same place but living in different years, their approximate birth and death years are given in parentheses, such as Joseph (d. c.1741/46) who died about 1741 to 1746 and Thomas (b. before 1769) who was born before 1769.

1.3.7. Sketched illustrations

Some sketched charts showing descendants of family groups are included with the text. These charts primarily focus upon descendants bearing the main surname, such as Meredith, O'Connor-Sligo, French, Naper and Dorrán. Where appropriate, they include the names of men who married daughters of these families, but do not normally show the children born to those couples. These descendant charts commence at the top with a solid line projecting downwards and branching to each known child of the next generation. Most of these charts show only a few descendant generations, but some continue onto other charts. Broken lines represent unproven relationships.

Sketched maps accompany relevant sections of text. These maps are generally not drawn to scale, but sufficiently accurate to identify general location and distances. Although not always labelled, North is always towards the top as one orients the map with placenames and other words readable in the normal fashion.

I.3.8. Completeness

This work will explore, analyse and identify the known and likely relationships between the many Meredith people of Co. Sligo during the period from about 1600 until about 1850. Most, but not all, of these people are described within this work. Certain data sources are omitted by choice because they offer little further information to improve the knowledge base. For example, several Meredith marriages during the early half of the nineteenth century are not described because the available sources do not provide any information to help identify the bride or groom, besides their names. Apologies are extended to readers whose Meredith ancestors from Co. Sligo are not mentioned. Perhaps new sources will provide closure to the many gaps in the existing knowledge.

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The study of local and family history involves a wide range of sources, many out of place in the traditional academic sense. All sources must be questioned, even original materials, and ensuing analysis must incorporate all known knowledge before forming hypotheses. The following list can not aspire to detail all sources used, but nominates the major sources used to form the expressed knowledge and unproven possibilities. On the whole, the unnamed sources used would repeat the expressed knowledge, but without offering strength to the unproven hypotheses.

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County Limerick Genealogical Forum

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Lex Johnson thrives on unravelling complex historical problems and applying results to the local districts, family and social environments of his heritage. He has authored international conference papers and received competitive grants throughout a career spanning medicine, mathematics, information technology and business. Now actively pursuing lifelong historical interests, his method of enquiry reaches deep into the subject matter at many archives and repositories, identifying forgotten facts and postulating credible hypotheses. Already his achievements are both numerous and varied, ranging from the one-time most comprehensive database of Danish nobility, contributions toward the Shakespeare Oxford Society's understandings and in-depth investigations of English Midlands socio-economic conditions and post-Culloden changes. His research into Co. Sligo and Connacht began in 1996, but became focussed upon its Meredith family about 2003. With customary analytical approach and extensive depth and coverage, he investigates an immense range of sources, some seldom used by other researchers, and presents their passage through the entire time span from the early seventeenth century until almost the current day. He is a research academic with CQUniversity Australia.