

IRISH FEUDAL BARONIES AND WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

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Media Taken in by Bogus Baronies

‘Barony’ was the Irish term for the former administrative subdivisions of the county, corresponding to the English ‘hundred’ or ‘wapentake’ and, like the county, was part of the Anglo-Norman administrative system. In Meath and Louth the term seems to have been employed from the beginning. In the south of Ireland, however, the term ‘cantred’ (from the Welsh cantref, a similar administrative division) was standard. Cantred gave way to barony during the course of the fifteenth century, although only in a few cases is there a direct continuity in identity and boundary between the earlier and the later unit. The Tudor conquest of Ireland extended the county system over the whole country with baronies as their administrative sub-divisions. In most cases the baronies represented the existing areas ruled by particular Irish lords, but where these were too large or too small a more arbitrary division was sometimes imposed, as in counties Wicklow and Longford. In one of the last and best documented examples of the process an enquiry in County Wexford in 1606 recommended that the small Gaelic lordships of North Wexford should be grouped in three new baronies, Gorey, Scarawalsh and Ballaghkeen and this was accordingly done. The units created in this period survived in general unchanged down to the administrative reform of the 1830s, when the larger baronies were subdivided (Upper and Lower, East and West, etc.) while some baronies, such as Uppercross and Nethercross in County Dublin, or Barretts in County Cork were so changed in boundary as to bear little resemblance to their former selves. The Poor Law Unions which were erected about the same time, however, rapidly displaced the baronies

as the essential units of administration, and today few—even in rural areas—will be aware of which barony their home lies in.

Feudal baronies

Feudal baronies were another thing altogether. The term in Ireland seems to have been applied to those lordships (manors) which had lesser lordships dependent on them. The use of the term, however, was very much a matter of custom. Feudal baronies only occasionally coincided with the administrative baronies or cantreds mentioned above; in Meath, while the feudal baronies of Slane, Skreen and Delvin coincided with the administrative baronies of these names, the feudal barony of Galtrim did not give its name to an administrative barony at all, and other administrative baronies—such as Fore and Moyfenrath—did not have a feudal barony of the same name. The le Poer barony of Dunhill in County Waterford straddled the boundaries of three cantreds. With the emergence of the Irish House of Lords on a formal basis in the fifteenth century, some of these feudal baronies—such as Slane and Delvin—were recognised as parliamentary baronies, giving their holders the right to sit in Parliament—yet a third use of the term, to denote the lowest rank of the peerage. The majority of feudal barons, such as those of Navan, Skreen or Galtrim, never achieved peerage rank and already by 1462 the distinction had progressed so far that Sir Christopher Preston was recognised as parliamentary baron of Kells-in-Ossory although the actual feudal barony of Kells, County Kilkenny, from which the title was derived, had been in the hands of the Butler family since before 1413. In the case of those feudal baronies—the majority—which did not achieve the status of peerages the title became a purely honorific one enjoyed by the heads of the families which held them, and was used in this way by the Husseys, barons of Galtrim, down to 1803. Elsewhere it was notable that where there was a change of ownership of the estate to which the title was attached, even by marriage (as in the case of Skreen in 1581), the title was never used by the new family.

Imaginary titles

In the last few years, as an extension of the trade in ‘lordships of the manor’ in England (and, to a lesser degree, Ireland), a London business enterprise, which trades through a number of ‘shell’ companies, has conceived the idea that every Irish barony (i.e. administrative division of the county) must carry the title of baron, and is marketing these imaginary titles to gullible purchasers. ‘Lordships of the manor’, although now purely nominal, were real enough, although they were in fact jurisdictions, carrying limited judicial and local government powers over a particular area, and were never until the present generation, conceived of as titles

(Scottish baronies—yet another confusing usage of the term—were much the same thing, although possessing until 1748 much wider judicial powers). The Irish baronies which are now being marketed, however, are purely fictitious. In marketing them, the practice has been to find the holders of genuine peerage titles who are prepared to lend their names as ‘vendors’ to the sale. In one case known to me, an Irish peer was amazed to receive a letter out of the blue informing him that the firm in question had discovered that he was entitled to two ‘feudal baronies’ (in fact the names of two administrative baronies) and enclosing a cheque for £500 and a contract binding him to the company, with a promise that he would be paid £7,000 more on the sale of each barony. After being assured by me that the titles were fictitious he returned the contract and cheque. Other holders of titles, perhaps in more need of cash, have been less cautious. The use of titled persons as vendors is not merely to impress potential purchasers but also to avoid questions as to why, for instance, the ‘Barony of Gorey’, recently sold for £30,500 to an English businessman (who thereupon qualified for a respectful interview on RTE’s Morning Ireland), had not been previously heard of: it could be claimed, in this case, that it had been merged in the Earldom of Courtown. The sole claim of the Earl of Courtown to the title, as set out in the sale prospectus, rested on the fact that an ancestor of his had been granted lands in the barony in the Plantations of James I; he might just as well have sold the title of Count of Wexford on the grounds that they were in County Wexford! But in some cases the titled ‘vendors’ have had only minimal family connections with the baronies in question. The ‘Barony of Leyny’ in County Sligo, whose proud purchaser merited a full-page interview in the Sunday Independent, was sold not by the O’Hara family of Annaghmore, representatives—although in the female line—of its last Gaelic lords, but by Lord de Freyne, whose family connections with the region are, to say the least, tenuous. If you already have a genuine title, it is enough apparently for an ancestor of yours to have held a few acres in a particular barony to qualify you to sell the title of baron! What is particularly depressing about these absurdities is how the Irish media have fallen, hook, line and sinker, for these bogus baronies. It hardly encourages one to place reliance on their coverage of issues of genuine public concern or importance if our journalists can be so easily taken in on a trivial matter like this. It might be cruelly suggested that this credulity is a consequence (in the South) of our republican ethos: nature, it is said, abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of genuine titles bogus ones will fill the gap, while we lack an authority to distinguish one from the other. And it could well be argued that in inventing and selling titles the London entrepreneurs are only following the example of kings and British Prime Ministers. But, as an Irish historian, I wish they would not try to give them a spurious Irish historical

background.

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