

VIEWPOINTS

A blue moon over Milltown

BY now many of us have heard that there was a Blue Moon last week. Until very recently I thought a blue moon was just a figure of speech for a rare event, but now I know that such a moon is a full moon that occurs twice in the same calendar month.

Not only that, but the moon was blue on Hallowe'en, for the first time since 1974, and it will not happen again until 2039. May some of us be around to see it: for me that date would be the 202nd year of *The Tuam Herald*. Here's hoping.

Blue moons are not that uncommon: they occur every two or three years, so there is no doubt that plenty of them were seen over Milltown 150 years ago.

But only one man in Milltown at that time is likely to have taken much notice of the phenomenon – John Birmingham of Millbrook House, the village's most illustrious son and a frequent writer to this paper.

John Birmingham was a minor landlord, unusually for the time a Catholic, who in 1866 discovered a new red star and for whom a crater on the Moon is named.

He was an astronomer, a geologist, and a linguist who corresponded with fellow astronomers in several languages. His telescope is preserved in St Jarlath's College, and for a few years an annual award was given in his name to the student from a Tuam

The village's greatest son wrote an epic poem in 1863



Omnibus
with David Burke

school who did best in Leaving Cert science.

His other talent was in writing – epic poetry, to be precise. In 1863 he published a poem entitled *Anglicania*, subtitled "Or England's mission to the Celt" which ran to 139 pages, not including five explanatory notes which add another 25 pages.

I knew of *Anglicania* – Paul Mohr devoted a chapter to it in his exhaustive biography of John Birmingham (2002) but the idea of reading it was far from my mind until Frank Glynn (Mr Milltown, although he was born in Kilkerrin) lent me a copy.

The original is very rare – there may be one or two copies in Galway – and this is a reprint, scanned from the original and digitally printed.

At first glance it is daunting. The verse form is the heroic couplet, in which each pair of lines rhymes. Students of English will

associate it with Alexander Pope, the eighteenth century satirist, who proved to us all how the word tea was pronounced in his time when he wrote *Here thou, great Anna, whom three realms obey Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea.*

The first two lines of John Birmingham's epic, which was a broadside against the proselytising mission by English evangelicals to convert the Irish peasantry to the Anglican religion, run

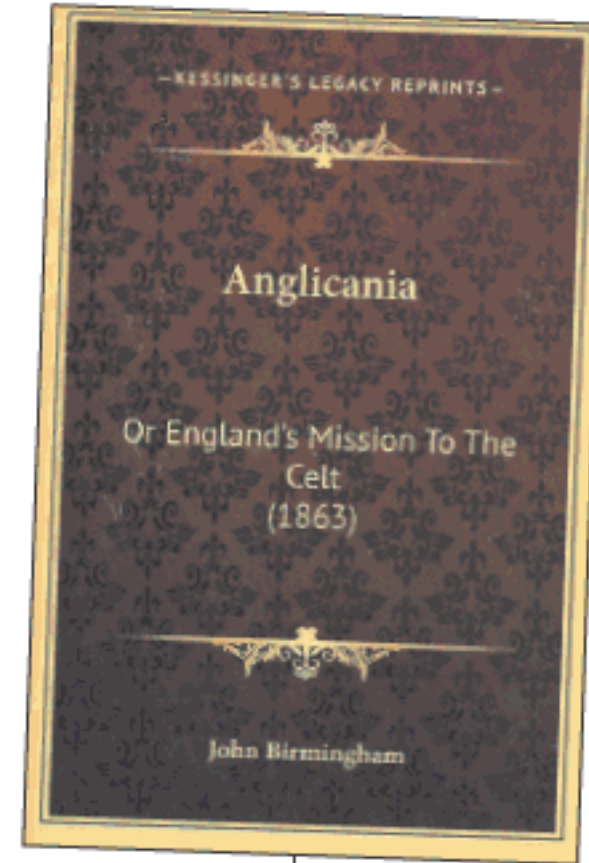
When the Reformers, in a pious fright, Found that the spirit had withdrawn his light –

Unfortunately there is not the space to give the rest, but already you get the sense of fun in the words "pious fright".

The background to the poem is the evangelical movement that started in England around 1830 with the aim of converting all, but especially the Irish, to what we would now call Protestantism.

It's hard to understand from the modern perspective, when most Christian denominations respect and support each other. The daily Mass in St Mary's Church of Ireland Cathedral while the Cathedral of the Assumption is being renovated is an excellent example of inter-church solidarity.

But two centuries ago attitudes were very different. The Anglican mission was aimed at the poorer classes in what was an agricultural economy, and we have the folk memory of it in the phrase "He took the soup". That harks



back to a time when starving people were fed in soup kitchens which also shoved the Established Church version of Christianity down their throats. Naturally there was a strong reaction to this among the Catholic clergy, and harsh words and sometimes blows were exchanged.

It must be said that the evangelicals were to an extent the lunatic fringe, and Birmingham pays due regard to the Protestants and Catholics who lived in peace and tolerance of each others' beliefs.

However, the missions had friends in high places, and among them was the Protestant Bishop of Tuam, Lord Plunket, who became notorious for the eviction of Catholic tenants in Partry and thus indirectly responsible for the arrival of Martin S Walsh to Tuam (*Tuam Herald* Sept 30 and Oct 7).

In the last lines of *Anglicania* Birmingham takes a swipe at Bishop Plunket's eviction of the Christian Brothers from their school at Prospect.

The intervening 139 pages cover the beauties of Connacht, theology, doctrine, current affairs and England's colonial history. It sounds like a mouthful, but *Anglicania* repays careful reading and raises many a smile.

I've ordered a copy, and if I were a student looking for a thesis subject in History or English I would seriously consider this.

The Tuam Herald

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Commission's report is welcome but questions still remain

THE final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes is now in the hands of Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman and the Attorney General.

It is the conclusion of five years' work carried out by the commission, work that all came about because of one woman's determination to find an answer as to why she could find 796 death certificates for babies and infants who died at the Tuam Mother and Baby Home but no burial records.

Five years later, local researcher and campaigner Catherine Corless still doesn't have an answer to that question. Investigations carried out over the past five years have led to further questions about other sites of former mother and baby homes. Excavations carried out as part of the Commission's investigations found "significant" numbers of remains of babies and infants in a concrete tank at the site on the Dublin Road.

Over the past five years, countless visits have been made

to that site which is located behind homes and adjoining the children's playground. It has been the focus of national and international media attention and is a place where many adults who started their lives there have returned, paused and wept. Some have looked at the grass which was tended by locals for many decades and wondered if the remains of their siblings lie beneath.

Minister O'Gorman paid tribute to the survivors of the institutions for having the courage and determination in coming forward and recounting their experiences. He hopes that this has given them a voice and that they have been heard. "Difficult though this report will be, I hope that this can assist the healing process," stated Minister O'Gorman.

The final report is one of the longest reports produced by such an inquiry in Ireland.

Campaigners and survivors await the publication of the report and while it's accepted that it has to be scrutinised from a legal perspective, the sooner its contents are made

public the better. It will be another step in progressing an arduous campaign that has taken much longer than ever anticipated.

The chaos, confusion and hurt that was caused regarding the sealing of records pertaining to the Mother and Baby Homes can't be repeated when the next piece of legislation is debated.

While the government has agreed that the Tuam site must be excavated and the remains exhumed, this cannot proceed until the necessary legislation is in place. Some might feel that the past is the past and that nothing good can come from digging up the site. Leaving things as they are isn't acceptable.

Former residents have given their experience was of the home and what happened to them afterwards. There is no account of what happened to the 796 babies and infants. The commission's final report is welcome and significant but the only hope of final answers will come once the site is excavated.

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