

Christmas Markets

North Mayo Heritage Centre
14th & 15th December

Seán na Sagart The Priest Hunter



Seán na Sagart, the 'priest hunter' is buried at Ballintubber Abbey. Pictured is his grave with a tree growing through it, splitting it in two.

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Seán na Sagart – John of the Priest (1690-1726)

Penal laws were introduced into Ireland to establish the economic, social and political supremacy of Protestantism over the Catholic majority.

The laws hoped to end Catholicism and sought to banish bishops and clergy, and to ensure that no new priests were allowed to enter the country. Despite the harshness of these laws the majority of the population remained Catholic, and Mass was still celebrated at secret locations such as Mass Rocks. While Mass was being said, watchers kept a look out for soldiers, and for the widely hated priest-catchers.

John Mallowney was born in Derrew, near Ballyheane in 1690. He grew up with a love of horse stealing, and heavy drinking. In 1715 he came before the court in Castlebar on charges of horse stealing, for which he was almost certain to hang. However, his low character was perfect for the role of a priest-hunter and Bingham, the Sheriff of Mayo, struck a deal with him. His freedom for an annual 'rent' - the head of a priest. It was not long before Mallowney became known as Seán na Sagart or John of the Priests.

Priest hunters operated in a similar way to bounty hunters, with bishops worth £100, priests £20, and a monk £10 when caught. These men would be executed when caught, if they did not pledge allegiance to the Crown. The hunters were considered the lowest of human form, and it was not unusual for a mob of Catholics to chase them through the streets and attack them.



Seán na Sagart on the lookout for priests (amayodruiddblogspot.com)

Sean had a reputation as an expert priest hunter. Every member of the clergy he killed, he cut off their heads and brought them to Bingham who would give them back. The Schools Folklore Collection tells of Seán then throwing these heads into a lake. The lake was called Lochán na gCeann, reputed to be in Aille, near Aughagower. By 1726 priest hunting was in decline in some parts of the country but Seán still worked with a passion.

Despite his efforts he couldn't locate two priests in Mayo. He resorted to trickery to catch them.

He murdered with steady success until he had killed all but two of the area priests.

Right: Ballintubber Abbey where Seán na Sagart is buried (askaboutireland.ie)

He went to the home of his sister, Nancy Loughnan, a widow and devout Catholic and told her he was dying. He wanted to confess his sins before his death, and a priest was sent for.

Father Kilger arrived at the house in disguise. As he knelt down beside Seán to absolve his sins, Seán jumped up and plunged a knife into his neck. Seán knew that the priest's nephew, Friar Bourke, would be at the funeral for Father Kilger. He was there, in disguise and acting as a pall-bearer.

As the funeral procession commenced, Seán jumped out from behind a tree and grabbed hold of the friar. He shouted "*tá mo chíos íochta agam*" - my rent is paid, meaning the bounty he would receive. The friar however was a match for Seán, and managed to break free and run off. Seán pursued him and eventually caught up near woodland in Partry, where a confrontation took place. Friar Bourke wounded Seán with his own knife, and he was then fatally stabbed by John McCann, who had followed the two men.

Seán na Sagart was buried in Ballintubber Abbey. However, furious locals dug him up and threw his body into the nearby Lough Carra. Friar Bourke, who Seán had tried to kill, ordered that he be reinterred in Ballintubber, although in unconsecrated ground, facing north so he would never see the sun again. An ash tree later grew out of his grave splitting it in half.

The tree can still be seen in the grounds of Ballintubber Abbey, known as the Seán na Sagart tree.

Sources:
ballintubberabbey.ie
ronangearoid.blogspot.com
cpht.ie
duchas.ie

