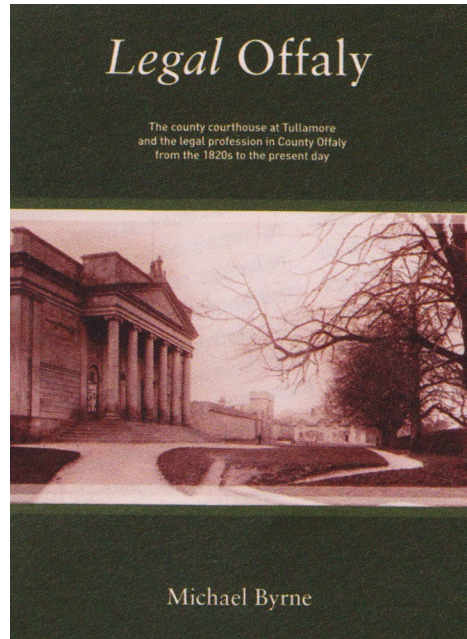


BOOK REVIEW by Dr Eamonn G Hall



Legal Offaly: The County Courthouse at Tullamore and the Legal Profession in County Offaly from the 1820s to the present day

Michael Byrne, Esker Press for the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society, Tullamore, Co Offaly. ISBN 978-0-9548720-1-4. (2008) Price €30 hardback.

Patrick Kavanagh, parish poet and national poet laureate, observed the parish was the universe. The history of Ireland has emerged and will continue to emerge from the parish. The county in Ireland is one of the most treasured units of governance composed of parishes and baronies. It is proper that a person should have pride in his or her county of origin. Such a pride encompasses a sense of 'belonging' which often is a noble sentiment.

So we greet a county law history written by Michael Byrne, a solicitor and partner of the solicitors' firm of Hoey and Denning, Tullamore, County Offaly and secretary of the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society.

The Taoiseach, Brian Cowan, a solicitor by profession, in a foreword notes the timeliness of the book coming as it does after a period of sustained expansion in the Irish economy and in the legal profession. The Taoiseach notes that the interplay between law, the judges, barristers, solicitors and clients whilst always fascinating at the national level, has greatest impact at the local level. This is an apt illustration of the Kavanaghese doctrine of the parish as the universe. A history built on the parish or county illuminates the history of the nation. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (celebrated over the world) records the events of a single Dublin day. *Ulysses* is local and universal at the same time and so is *Legal Offaly*.

John Shaw, president of the Law Society of Ireland, in his preface notes that the book comes after a decade of major expansion of legal personnel and change, not just in the way lawyers do their business, but in the composition of the profession itself, its gender profile and youthfulness.

The author informs us that the book was prompted by the refurbishment of the county courthouse at Tullamore in April 2007. Now, the courthouse is a venue for original High Court proceedings. This is another link between the county and the nation. Noting that the memoirs of Offaly judges and lawyers are almost non-existent (and the same is true nationally), the author observes that a solicitor or barrister, having spent many years at his or her vocation could pass away unnoticed by his or her hard-pressed colleagues. Your reviewer adds that not even the *Gazette* now mentions one's passing! Terence de Vere White, solicitor in McCann FitzGerald and subsequently

literary editor of the *Irish Times*, in the words of his Stephen Foster, a solicitor in the novel, *Mr Stephen*, surmises that the life of the average solicitor would be forgotten in five years. 'A hotel porter in a large hotel had more fame in life and as long in memory.' Many memories and persons will survive because of the literary work of Michael Byrne.

There are eight chapters in the book. There is a chapter on the architectural history of Tullamore courthouse (a story full of intrigue and replete with excitement that only the law can provide). The chapters on the visiting and regular judges of the assize, home circuits and midland banisters allow the author to introduce many fascinating characters who have achieved prominence on the national scene. There is a detailed account of the quarter sessions, county courts, petty sessions and the district court. Of great significance is the biographical sketch of some three hundred Offaly solicitors over the period 1824 to 2007 - many with photographs. There are also many pen pictures of various other legal luminaries. There is also a very helpful index.

A unique and totally fascinating feature of the book is the author's collection of photographs of lawyers, accused persons and buildings that make the book such a pleasure to read. You can almost 'read' the mind of a person when you see his or her photograph.

I deeply regret that as a Monaghan-bred 'Ulsterman', Offaly is a 'foreign' country for me. Sadly, most of Ireland, south of Dublin, is largely unknown to me. I am sure

many Offaly lawyers could state Monaghan is a 'foreign' country to them! But Michael Byrne has whetted the appetite of your reviewer to visit the rich pastures of his illustrious county.

A great strength of Michael Byrne's book is his original research into material that has been previously unexplored and the skilled presentation of that material to the wider community. The book is an entertaining, eminently readable, eloquent insight into a county that reflects legal life in the wider Ireland. One consolation that Michael Byrne will hopefully enjoy, taking account of the many hours of research and writing, is that he has brought life to many lawyers who have gone before us. There is a degree of immortality about the printed word. I think of the words of Crabbe in *The Library*:

*With awe around these silent walks I tread,
These are the lasting mansions of the dead:
"The dead", methinks a thousand tongues reply:
"These are the tombs of such as cannot die."*

You will enjoy *Legal Offaly*. I did as a Monaghan-bred Ulsterman:

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[This review was published in vol 103 *Gazette of the Law Society of Ireland* i(March 2009) p.47]