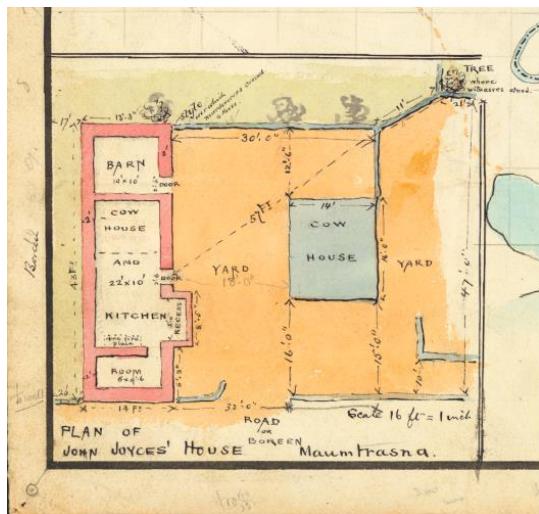


Maamtrasna murders: Wrongful detention and execution in a divided Ireland

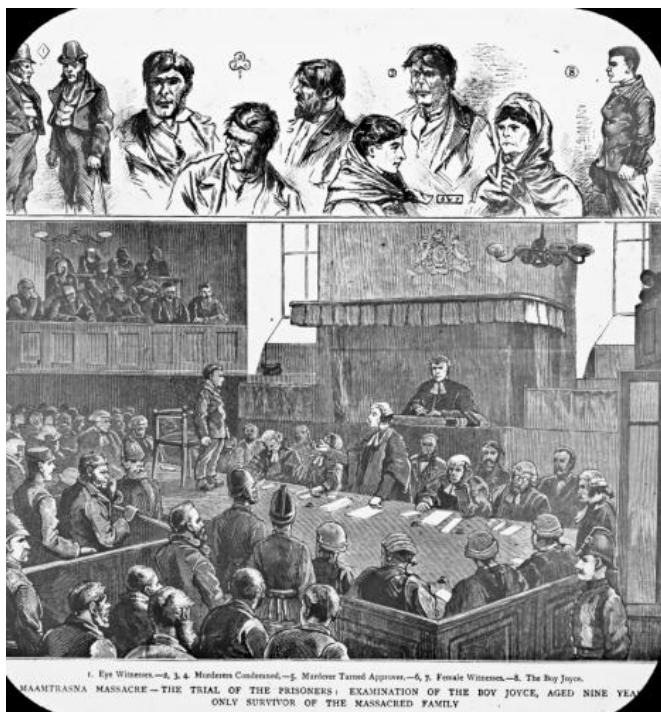


ON 17 AUGUST 1882 five members of a family in Maamtrasna Co Galway were murdered.

Eight local men were convicted of the crime based on what later emerged to be perjured evidence. Informers and alleged eyewitnesses were given compensation amounting to £1,250 (€160,000 today) for giving the perjured evidence.

The men were tried in English despite the fact that they were native Irish speakers. Three of the eight men were executed and the others were imprisoned. In 1884 one of the witnesses confessed his part in the wrongful conviction of one of the hanged men, Myles Joyce [Maolra Seoighe], and four of the men imprisoned.

President Michael D Higgins issued a pardon to Myles Joyce on 4 April this year. In the first presidential pardon relating to an event predating the foundation of the State, Higgins said Joyce was "wrongly convicted of murder and was hanged for a crime that he did not commit".



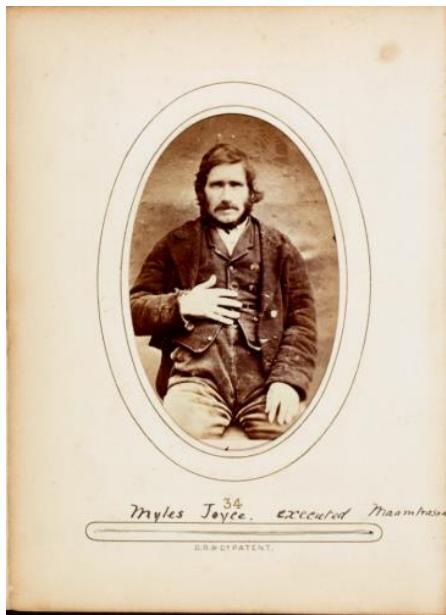
Source: National Library of Ireland.

This trial has been described as an example of the poor treatment of Irish-only speakers at a time when language in Ireland was going through a period of rapid change and society was divided by language.

A new book, *The Maamtrasna Murders*, written by UCD professor Margaret Kelleher highlights the impact on communities of this transition from an Irish-speaking country into one that was bilingual.

“With Myles Joyce, he spoke Irish-only and he famously was wrongfully convicted in a court that didn’t extend to him the use of an interpreter, even though there was one in the courtroom.

She said Joyce’s legal counsel, who did not speak Irish, did not argue on his behalf for an interpreter.



"It is a real travesty. When his guilty verdict was read out, suddenly the judge began to realise he didn't even understand the verdict and the constable who was being used to interpret with witnesses was brought back in."

My own spin in the book, or what I hope is new, is to see the plight of Myles Joyce but at a time when cultural changes were happening quite quickly. Some of the accused men could speak some English but he couldn't. In the barony of Ross where Joyce lived in 1881 90% of people spoke Irish and half of those spoke Irish-only. It was very much a living language of a community.

Kelleher said she has been complimented on "casting more light" on the lives of the characters in this story as she dug through newspaper coverage, prison records for the men who were jailed and petitions from the time to have them released.

She said she hopes this book tells not just the story of these men and the injustice done to them, but also "a larger story about our society".