The sporting Persses of Moyode

The Persses were very substantial landowners in east Galway holding several thousand acres, with the Moyode clan initially basing themselves at neighbouring Deerpark townland at Tally-ho lodge (in Kilconierin parish), near Athenry. A 'date stone' which remains at the site, albeit not in place, suggests a build-date of 1712.

Moyode House was built by Burton de Burgh Persse (1782-1859) in 1820 to replace Persse Lodge. It was grandly titled Moyode Castle (hence the confusion which sometimes exists with the Towerhouse), and was located in Moyode Demesne. The mansion was famously 'taken' by Volunteers in 1916, a somewhat bizarre target, before a swift surrender and wholesale later arrests. Then, following its burning by the I.R.A. in September 1920, the house was used as a quarry by builders and the council. Despite what is suggested on-line, none of the house remains (a section of a secondary structure survives in the area and is being confused for same).

The Persses were freemen and wardens of Athenry at this time, though without what might be perceived as a 'noble' background. The will of Robert Persse of Roxborough confirms that by 1741 he had acquired Moyode estate comprising more than a thousand acres around the north-west corner of Kilconierin parish. Thereafter, in order to compensate for their 'obscure' background, the Persses adopted as first names, the surnames of families into which they married, such as Burton, Parsons and Stratford.

The most famous head of the family was Burton Persse (1746-1831) who was known throughout Britain for his love of hunting, with the Galway Blazers home on Moyode estate. The Moyode branch of the Persse family, as opposed to the (Lady Gregory) Roxborough strand (they became a seriously divided family), also had an amazing record of producing soldiers for the British army.

It is reasonable to suggest however that the legacy of the family is tarnished, albeit this is in part due to their dual-role as magistrates. Their efforts at 'converting' Papists also skews the reputation, as did unseemly family in-fighting. As with many of their contemporaries among the landed class, the main shadow over the family name resulted from the famine. While some relief was provided (in fact, Burton de Burgh Persse was chairman of the 'Craughwell Relief Committee'), the efforts appear very modest when compared to neighbouring estates. The population of their Moyode estate was the worst affected in the area, more than halving (compared to an average 38% reduction in the parish).

The positive contributions worth noting include the fact that the family name remains inter-twined with hunting and cricket. The Persse whiskey connection is also something their numerous descendants should take pride in. That the towerhouse is still standing is also down to their efforts and the woodland sown in their time remains. The many descendants of the family have found themselves primarily residing in Australia and New Zealand and some have make visits to the site of what their ancestral home and are warmly welcomed by locals.

Pictured are

- 'Miss Persse of Moyode Castle' from Hibernia Venatica by M O'Connor-Morris (1878, Chapman & Hall, Picadilly) and 'Misses Persse' from *The Cycling World Illustrated* of October 21st 1896.
- Henry Seymour 'Atty' Persse (1869-1960). A superb jockey, achieving a third-place in the 1906 Grand National among other successes, HSP then trained several very successful horses including 'The Tetrarch', referred to as 'the spotted wonder'. Persse only retired from training horses at the age of 85.
- De Burgh FitzPatrick Persse (1840-1921), the youngest brother of Burton Persse's sixteen children, founded the areas named Connemara on Farrar's Creek and 'Tally-ho' on the Mayne River in Victoria, Australia. After a distinguished political career in Australia, he returned briefly to take-over Moyode became high-sheriff of County Galway in 1890.

By Steve Dolan