

The blessing of the poor

Paul Cantwell re-searches the story of the Irish horse who won the Chester Cup at the height of the Great Famine

IF Aidan O'Brien saddles the sole Irish entrant El Salvador in next Wednesday's Chester Cup, he will follow in the footsteps of many Irishmen before him who have tried to win Britain's early season staying championship. The record of Irish horses in the race is quite poor but there lies a rich history in the story of the greatest Irish victory of this race.

On May 6th, 1846, George Henry Moore brought his horse, Coranna to the Roodee to compete in what was then known as the Tradesmen's Cup. The ambition by the Mayoman lay in the fact that, at the time, the Tradesmen's Cup was the third most prestigious race in the British racing calendar behind the Derby and the St Leger.

The journey Moore took that day from Carnacon in Co Mayo to the old Roman city of Chester was a result of a national catastrophe at the time and an attempt to overcome personal tragedy in the Moore family.

Born to George senior and Louisa Browne in 1810, George Henry Moore was one of three sons in the family who previously settled from England in the west of Ireland during the reign of Elizabeth I in the 16th century. George Henry Moore's father George II inherited the Moorehall estate on the death of his grandfather George Moore I, who built the mansion on the fortune he made in Spain in the late 18th century.

George Henry Moore was educated at Oscott, an English Roman Catholic school and Cambridge up to 1827. On his return to Ireland, he and his brothers developed a love and passion for horseracing and gambling. It was a passion that would result in despair and triumph rarely seen since in Irish horseracing folklore. His brother John was injured in a riding accident and died in 1829 at the age of 18.

After a period of grieving, Moore returned to London to study Law and travelled extensively, particularly in the Middle East including southern Russia, Turkey, Syria and Palestine, until his return to Ireland in 1837.

The surviving brother, Arthur Augustus forged a stronger bond with George Henry on his return and they devoted their time to hunting and racing. But further tragedy was to follow, when Arthur Augustus riding Mickey Free in the 1845 Grand National was killed when the horse fell during the race.

Moore retreated to Moorehall in the depths of despair and it would seem the incident focussed his mind to channel his energy into the looming crisis which was to take hold in the country.

According to the play, *Coranna* written by Dr John Langan, Moore had been talking to the local priest, Fr James Browne of Ballintubber, as both men became increasingly concerned about the welfare of many local people as the Famine took hold. One traveller was quoted as saying he saw "a woman dead on the side of the road and her mouth green from eating grass".

Fr Browne confided in Moore saying: "I'm afraid it's only the beginning. Ev-



Racing at Chester

ery other year, the potatoes kept sound in the pits. This year they rot. The whole country's facing famine, George."

Upon hearing the conversation with Fr Browne and Moore, the butler Joseph Appleby suggested to Moore that Coranna should be trained for the Tradesmen's Cup and that Mickey Walshe should be given the job of training the seven-year-old mare "up against the hill at Drimeenashina".

The play continues to a scene of the thronged racecourse at Chester on the day of the race, with George Henry accompanied by Keville, his blacksmith who is tasked with securing the best odds for Coranna. Keville obliges by getting 66/1 for the mare as the race begins.

In the play, Coranna's jockey Frank Butler is attributed with the lines during the race:

"We're almost at the trees Coranna and it's there the master said you're to make your effort. You heard what he said, you're racing against famine and plague and death! We're almost there. NOW Coranna! NOW! For Drimeenashina and Moore of Moorehall!"

Coranna finishes in front at the line and according to legend, sparks wild cel-

ebrations among the small group who travelled from Carnacon.

Moore wrote a telegraph to his mother after the race:

My dearest Mother,

Coranna won the Chester Cup this day. We win the whole £17,000. This is in fact a little fortune. It will give me the means of being very useful to the poor this season. No tenant of mine shall want for plenty of everything this year; and though I shall expect work in return for hire, I shall take care that whatever work is done shall be for the exclusive benefit of the people themselves. I also wish to give a couple of hundred in mere charity to the poorest people about me or being on my estate, so as to make them more comfortable than they are; for instance, a cow to those who want one most, or something else to those who may have a cow, but want some other article of necessary comfort; indeed I will give £500 in this way. I am sure it will be well expended, and the horses will gallop all the faster with the blessing of the poor.....

In Moore's mind, the work only started with Coranna's win as he busily set

about the task of further relieving his tenants' plight. Part of the effort was chartering the ship *Martha Washington* with the help of the Marquess of Sligo and Robert Blossie to deliver 4,000 tons of maize to Westport.

Moore's mission to aid his fellow countrymen led to his election as MP for Mayo in Westminster in 1847, where he relentlessly pressed the English government for the immediate relief for the starving population in Ireland.

Moore continued his racing exploits including winning the Stewards Cup at Goodwood in 1861 with Croagh Patrick and also proceeded with his political crusade in England for the remainder of his days up to his death in 1870.

Moore's victory in Chester is largely forgotten but should be celebrated and remembered next Wednesday, and considered a source of pride and inspiration for all of Ireland during the country's darkest days.

Paul Cantwell is a freelance racing journalist working on a book and documentary on this subject. Contact paul@mediapoint.ie for details.