

Olann agus Caorigh - The Wool and Sheep Project



In the last few years there has been considerable co-operation between those working in the cultural sector in East Iceland, in County Donegal and in Vesteralen in North Norway. Since the spring of 2007 Museum Nord in Norway, Donegal County Museum and East Iceland Heritage Museum have worked together on a project, which brings together museums and contemporary artists. The theme of the project is Sheep and Wool, a subject common to each region. Exhibitions have taken place in Iceland and Norway and a joint website has been created www.woolandsheep.com.

Caorigh agus Olann is the project organised by Donegal County Museum as part of this international project. Donegal County Museum chose an important event from our history, The Gweedore Sheep War, as the theme to create a contemporary picture quilt, using Donegal wool and tweed as the main materials. Donegal County Museum invited the Letterkenny Irish Countrywomen's Association Guild members and a Donegal based artist Deborah J Stockdale to work together to design and create the quilt.

This contemporary piece will form part of the Museum Collection and will be permanently displayed in the First Floor Gallery of the Museum. Under the guidance of Deborah J Stockdale the group met in the museum over a number of months and the quilt took over 150 hours to create.

The Gweedore Sheep War



In the 18th century landlords owned most of the farming land in Ireland. They leased their lands to local tenants to generate revenue. Following the Great Famine the loss of revenue among landlords encouraged them to increase rents.

By 1855 some landlords in Donegal had allocated large areas of land to English and Scottish farmers for the purpose of mass sheep grazing. It was around this period that the Scottish Black-faced breed was introduced. Local tenants were either forced to move or evicted. Fines were imposed on local tenants if their sheep were found grazing in these large enclosures.

The Gweedore Sheep war began in December 1856 when around forty local men raided the house of a Scottish shepherd and ordered him to leave the country within eight days. Raids followed on the large sheep enclosures. By August 1856 almost 1,000 Black-faced sheep had been reported missing or killed in the Gweedore area.

Media reported the resulting conflict across Ireland, the United Kingdom and even the United States. Claims of missing sheep were investigated with force and in some cases the blame was laid on the shepherds as a result of negligence, combined with the harsh environment. Police presence was increased in the area. A tax known as the Police Tax was imposed on the local populace. By late 1857, numerous arrests were made, and the taxes and police presence had taken its toll on the local population. By summer 1858 the Gweedore Sheep War was effectively over.