

# *The Eglinton Canal*

## *William Henry*

The idea of linking the River Corrib and the sea by canal was certainly not a new one when construction of the Eglinton Canal began in 1848. As early as 1498, Andrew Lynch, Mayor of Galway made an attempt to connect the River Corrib with Lough Atalia. However, the work was never completed, and today this effort is often referred to as 'Lynch's Folly'. In 1703, the Irish Parliament began to consider inland navigation in the form of canals. Road conditions at the time greatly hindered the transportation of goods and commodities around the country. The first regulations were passed in 1715 and finance was thus provided for the construction of inland navigation schemes. In 1822, the Scottish engineer, Alexander Nimmo, proposed the construction of a canal between Woodquay and the old mud docks. The route would cut through the present day Eglinton Street and Victoria Place. This was not completed because there was a fear of people losing their lives in a canal running through the centre of the town. However, on 8 March 1848, plans for Galway were realized when work on the Eglinton Canal began. The Commissioners of Public Works were responsible for the project in connecting Lough Corrib to the sea. The plans were welcomed by the people of Galway, particularly as the work would provide much needed employment in a town suffering the ravages of the Great Famine (1845-50).

Work also began on the tidal basin or as it became known, the Claddagh Basin, with large quantities of ashlar stone being prepared for its construction. The 'basin' would act as a dock for boats. Work was also carried out in excavating the River Corrib itself at Newcastle, Menlo and Friars Cut to a depth necessary for the navigation of bigger vessels. Lock gates and swivel bridges had to be designed and set in place; and work on gate-keeper houses at Dominick Street and Cong also got under way. The estimated cost of the work was £27,000. An additional £11,000 was made available for the construction of new 'tail-races' for some of the waterway mills located on various parts of the river. There was much excitement throughout Galway in anticipation to see water flowing through the canal on its way to the sea.

On 15 September 1851, after all the construction debris had been removed from the canal floor, it was opened to allow water to flow through. It was an historic moment as the water rushed along the newly constructed canal. It was a proud moment also for those involved viewing the clear crystal water flow through the newly cut ashlar stone lining on each side of the canal. The canal itself measured some 1,200 meters in length and provided access to the huge areas of Lough Corrib. Five bascule bridges had been erected across the length of the canal. These bridges could be drawn to one side to allow boats to pass through. They were made from timber, set on steel frames and were hand operated.

There was great excitement over the official opening of the Eglinton Canal in August 1852. *The Illustrated London News* deemed it so important that they sent a reporter and an illustrator to record the historic event. The Earl of Eglinton preformed the opening ceremony before the thousands of people who gathered for the event. It was a real novelty in the beginning with people making their way to the canal to view the various boats as they passed on their journey to Lough Corrib. Business was steady and grew over the following years, with some 6,800 tons of goods being carried through the canal in 1857. Nevertheless, by 1881, there was much concern among the people of the town over safety issues surrounding the canal. It seems that the earlier fears of people losing their lives in a canal running along

Eglinton Street became a reality. One local newspaper *The Galway Express* mentioned that over 80 people had already lost their lives through drowning because the canal had been left unprotected. The authorities decided to erect protective railings along the full length of the canal on each side. The erection of the railings also included a protected area where steps led down to the water. These features were utilized by hard-working local women doing the family washing during the late nineteenth century. After the clothes were washed they were usually spread along the railings to dry close to the 'Washing Steps'.

Among the many boats to use the canal were the *Enterprise*, *Fr. Daly*, *Lioness*, *Lady Eglinton*, *Saint Patrick*, *Fairy Queen*, *Countess Cadagon* and the *Corrib Advance*. The river was indeed a busy place when these boats carrying passengers, coal, meal, flour, bran, grain, manure and timber, began making their way to and from Galway. While the canal was a successful venture initially, over time the business began to into decline. To make matters worse, maintenance was required on the gates and bridges to keep them in a safe working order. The advent of more reliable road and rail transport systems answered the question; the canal would have to close. The Eglinton Canal finally closed for business in 1954. The last boat to use the canal was the *Amo II*. Today people take leisurely walks along the canal and are entertained by the wildlife that have taken full advantage of this man-made, now tranquil waterway so close to the heart of the old city.

**Photograph Captions:**

1. The official opening of the Eglinton Canal in August 1852.

All the others photographs are various sections of the canal.