

# Captain Rock and the Limerick Racecourse Riot

by John Hanamy

The early nineteenth century is usually thought of as an age of elegance and refinement. It was the era of Jane Austen, Beethoven, the Romantic poets Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, but it was also a period of revolution and upheaval. Even after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 and the so called 'long peace' that followed the lives of many of Europe's inhabitants were anything but peaceful.

Revolutions erupted in Spain, Portugal and Italy in 1820. The following year the long and bloody Greek war of independence against Turkey commenced and in that year in Ireland, particularly in north Cork and west Limerick a state of near revolution broke out.<sup>1</sup> Numerous armed rebels and large numbers of British soldiers, police and government militias did battle in a series of scattered engagements over an area stretching from Rathkeale and Newcastle West to Kanturk and Newmarket.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic War Ireland experienced a long economic depression. Continental suppliers cut off from Britain for almost two decades were once again free to trade agricultural produce to the British market which since the end of the eighteenth century had been supplied exclusively by Ireland. Now imports flooded in from Denmark, Holland and France driving down the prices of Irish produce with devastating consequences for Irish farmers many of whom were already living at a subsistence level.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that in the year 1822 many of the poor in County Mayo lived on fish heads and that of every death in the nineteenth century before the Famine ten per cent perished as a result of starvation.<sup>3</sup>

Rents rose and the fear of eviction led many to organise and resist the mainly absentee landlords and their agents who profited by the sale and leasing of

properties seized from evicted tenants. The first spark of this rebellion began on the estate of Lord Courtenay in Newcastle West with the murder of the son of Courtenay's unpopular agent Alexander Hoskins in May 1821 by the leader of the local agrarian rebels, Patrick (Paddy) Dillane who used the alias 'Captain Rock'.<sup>4</sup> In the late summer of 1821 the potato crop failed due to unusually heavy rains and this meant almost certain famine, of which the consequences would be felt early the following year.<sup>5</sup>

The desperation of most tenant farmers at this pending crisis drew many of them to support the agrarian societies even though their actions were often extremely violent. The followers of Paddy Dillane soon began styling themselves the 'Rockites' after the pseudonym of their leader and took to dispatching letters to landlords threatening them with dire consequences should they attempt to raise their rents or evict their tenants.<sup>6</sup>

However, in order to enforce their will the Rockites needed weapons and very soon raids for any type of arms were taking place not only in County Limerick but in the city itself. A scheme was even developed to buy gunpowder in Dublin and convey it to Limerick hidden in butter casks to avoid detection. This illustrates the level of planning and organisation of the

Poster for  
Limerick Races  
at Newcastle course

Rockites and how prepared they were for conflict.<sup>7</sup>

By the middle of October 1821 the number of deaths had mounted including that of the local Chief of Police Major Richard Going, who was murdered near Rathkeale on 14 October. Between three and four thousand British troops were drafted into the town of Newcastle West and the whole county was set to ignite.<sup>8</sup> The action now moved closer to Limerick city and to the pastime of horse racing, popular with many of the inhabitants at the time. The Newcastle race course (not to be confused with the town of Newcastle West some twenty miles away) was located on land now owned by Castletroy Golf Club and was in use during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, before it was eventually closed in 1864.<sup>9</sup> It had a reputation as a site for rowdy activities and even faction fighting which was a form of combat where members of



## LIMERICK RACES---NEWCASTLE COURSE.

### STEWARDS.

The Mayor of Limerick	Edward Green, Esq.	James Spaight, Esq.
The Earl of Limerick,	Col. Borton, C.B.	Wm H. Barrington, Esq.
The Hon. Colonel Massy.	Captain Westropp,	Jasper White, Esq.
Sir Richard DeBurgo, Bart.		

### Last Day, Thursday, 3rd October, 1860. FIRST RACE.

HACK RACE of 1 Sov each, 10 Sovs. added.

Mr. Quin's Forgotten. 5 years—catch weights—purple jacket and black cap.  
Capt. Nugent's Katy Flanagan—5 years—green and grey colours.  
Mr. McCarthy's g. g. Bonnie Charlie, 5 yrs—stripe jacket and black cap.  
Capt. Bernard's ch. g. The Flapper—black jacket and cap.

### LAST DAY.—LAST RACE.

A FREE HANDICAP STEEPLE CHASE of 3 Sovs. each, 30 sovs. added.  
Mr. Studdert's ch. m. Miss Margaret—9st 4lb—blue jacket and cap.  
Mr. Harty's b. m. Mavourneen—11st. 4lb—green jacket and white hoof.  
Mr. Westropp's g. m. Queen of Clubs—9st 7lb—blue jacket and cap.  
Mr. McCarthy's g. g. Bonnie Charlie—11st 8lb—stripe jacket and cap.

a faction, often a large gang or extended family would engage in serious fighting armed with sticks weighed with lead or scythes and sickles, against rival factions. However, the so called 'race course riot' would bring levels of armed violence to a new level.

The report of a particularly violent faction fight appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle* on 10 October 1821. The same report appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Dublin Evening Post*<sup>10</sup> a few days later and *The Leinster Journal* a week later.<sup>11</sup> Clearly this event was regarded as quite newsworthy to be of interest to the majority of the newspaper reading public of Ireland in 1821.

On Saturday morning 6 October, a large crowd was seen making its way toward the race course in Newcastle from the

surrounding countryside. They were reported as being heavily armed with guns, blunderbusses (a type of short musket with a very wide muzzle like the opening of a funnel), pistols, swords and scythes. The 'swagger' of this citizen army was noted and they did not appear intimidated by questions from the authorities who demanded to know their intentions.

The purpose of these 'warriors' soon became apparent when they reached the race course and after the first race a signal shot was discharged and they fell upon another faction and a general battle ensued accompanied by the firing of shots and such violence that sent all non-combatants running for their lives. The newspaper reports noted the use of firearms instead of what was referred to as the 'native weapon' probably a stout

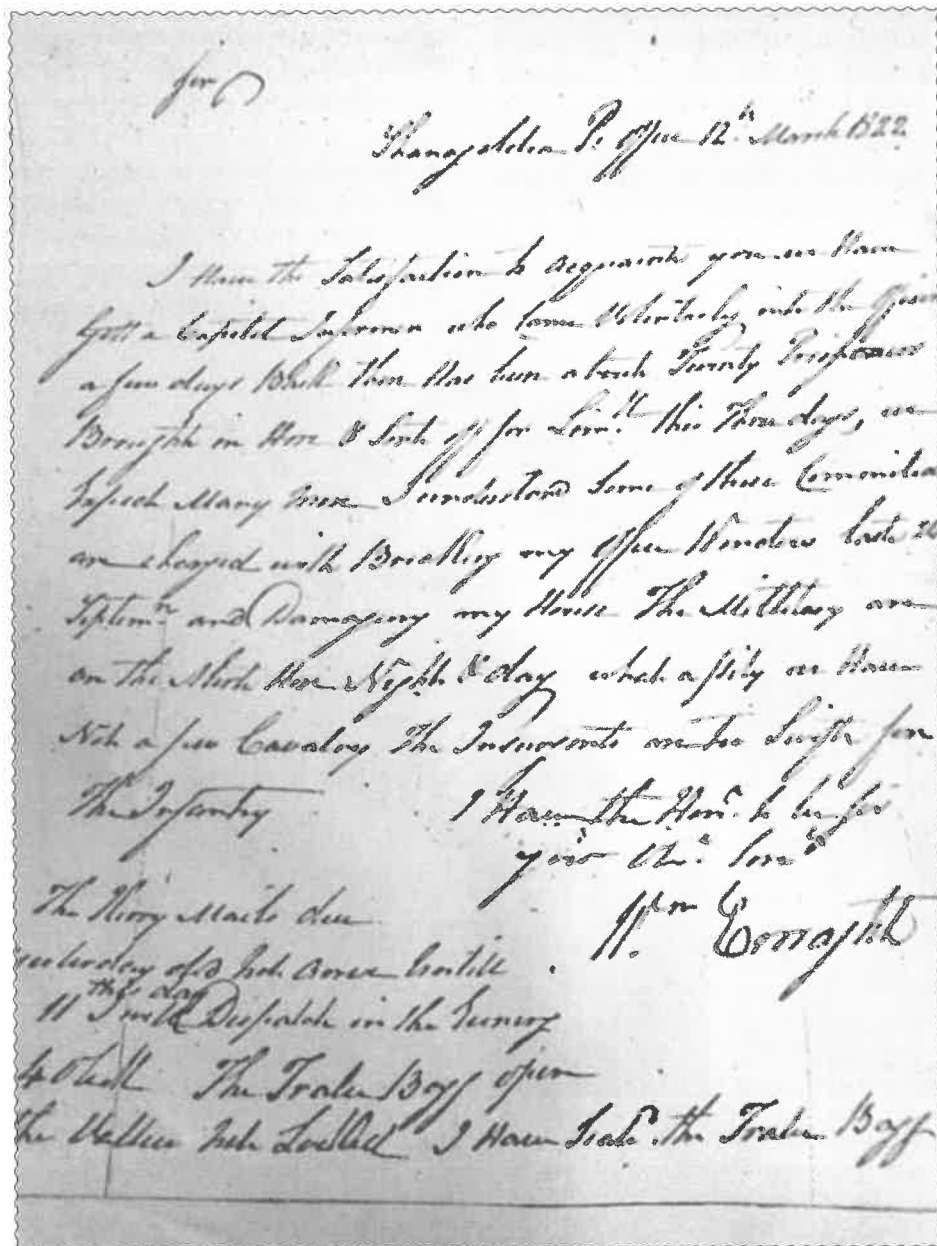


British Cavalry Officer in the 1820s

walking stick. Clearly the faction fighters had the use of some of the weapons stolen over the past few months in the nightly raids on the houses of the local gentry.

Reports of this battle alerted the Mayor of Limerick Thomas Ormsby, who informed the commander of the garrison Colonel Douglas who in turn dispatched a Major Carmichael with a party of the 6th Carbineers (a type of heavy cavalry), to the scene. The Mayor accompanied by the Sherriff and High Constable ordered the cavalry to divide into two units, one proceeded across the hill via the back road to Monaleen the other took a route by the Ballysimon Road. They converged at the race course and almost had the warring parties surrounded, but the well armed groups fell back in the face of superior opposition and took to sniping at them from ditches and hedges and any cover they could find.

It was reported that the cavalry and police led by the Mayor and High Constable Vereker galloped their horses across the race course now a battlefield firing their pistols and being fired at in turn. The soldiers slashed about them with their sabres and one of their horses was shot in the belly and died the following day. Three prisoners were taken, but even the arrival of a party of the 79th Infantry commanded by Alderman Watson could not prevent the escape of most of the armed groups. The soldiers regrouped but the Mayor and the local constabulary galloped after the fleeing rioters across the fields exchanging shots and narrowly missing each other until presumably



Shanagolden Rockite notice

the early autumn twilight made further pursuit impossible.<sup>12</sup>

Amazingly there were no reports of fatalities though it is possible that any faction fighters killed or seriously wounded may have been conveyed to safety by their comrades. While it cannot be certain that this incident was carried out by the Rockites or their allies the impressive array of weapons and the defiant attitude and well organised resistance of the fighters would suggest that there may have been Rockites among their number. Firearms were seldom used in faction fights, stout cudgels or shillelaghs being preferred and often simple sticks and stones.<sup>13</sup> It would have been unusual to have such a well armed party, like the one which participated in the riot. The equally impressive military response of the authorities would suggest that they were well prepared for a fully fledged rebellion.

That the activities of the Rockites in Limerick and Cork and in the surrounding counties of Kerry and Tipperary did not result in a conflagration similar to 1798 is

due to possibly three factors. The dreaded famine did in fact arrive the following year, 1822 and agrarian violence all but ceased in the south west of the country as energies of the people were diverted to simply staying alive. By 1824 the rebellion had run out of steam. Dillane himself turned King's evidence against his former Rockite followers and the astonishment of his followers was compounded by the defection of David Nagle 'the Captain Rock' of Cork city that same year.<sup>14</sup> The third factor may have been the emergence of Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association in 1823 which along with its grass roots' appeal also attracted the assistance of the Catholic clergy most notably the Parish Priests who may have channelled their flock toward a more peaceful form of protest against the establishment.<sup>15</sup>

This incident demonstrates how relations between citizens and authority differed less than two hundred years ago, when a Mayor of Limerick led a party of mounted soldiers to attack his own citizens. It is apparent that, while present day relations may not be perfect, they appear to have changed for the better.

#### References

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Depiction of a woman carrying a stone in her apron at a faction fight



Man inviting a fight by coat-trailing

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