

No Mercy

The Story of a Limerick Hanging

by Michael Fitzgerald

Recently, Limerick Museum acquired a very interesting letter, written in 1834, in which the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland rejected a plea for mercy for a condemned criminal facing the death penalty in Limerick city.¹ In this letter, Richard Wellesley, 1st Marquess of Wellesley, refused the appeal for clemency on behalf of Edmond Dwyer, who was convicted of rape. The appeal of innocence had been issued by Rt Hon Edward G Stanley, later 14th Earl of Derby, a former Secretary of State for Ireland, and a prominent member of the Conservative Party.

The letter, written by Wellesley in Dublin Castle, curtly explained how he did not see fit whatsoever to grant the 'Royal Prerogative of Mercy' in the case of Mr Dwyer, and that he received no other such request from any other personage or indeed from judge and jury on the trial. Stating that, as far as he could see, 'the trial was carried out with all proper conduct, even if he did accept Stanley's request for leniency, it would be a fruitless gesture, seeing as his decision would not be supported by the Justice of the Sentence, whose judgement would prove paramount, if not the ultimatum, in Dwyer's fate'.

Wellesley goes on to undermine any hope of freedom that Dwyer may have had in the form of testimonies regarding the convicted man; Wellesley wrote: 'Testimonies to character, even from respectable persons, are easily obtained in this country, where the unpopularity of the Law renders every convict an object of compassion & even of Affection'. A man deeply involved in Irish political matters, and a supporter of Catholic Emancipation, Wellesley nonetheless did not seem to hold the Irish people in high regard in this instance. An aristocrat and native of County Meath, he was a foremost figure in the Protestant Ascendancy of the time.



Richard Wellesley, 1st Marquess of Wellesley

The letter continues to detail his inability to grant mercy for Mr Dwyer, as seen thusly: 'It is a very dangerous practice to grant a respite, except with an intention of granting a final pardon; which, in this case, cannot safely be contemplated. The Crime is frequent in the South of Ireland, & is generally connected with the worst species of outrage, and violence.'

Wellesley ends the letter again reaffirming that his interference with the trial would be 'contrary to every rule.... by which the discretion of the Lord Lieutenant is usually governed', and therefore inappropriate, and in this trial, unnecessary, due to his affirmation of Dwyer's guilt. He informs Stanley that 'it is with the most painful reluctance' he would not grant any pardon to the unfortunate accused.

This letter poses many questions, regarding the incident of violation itself, and as to why Stanley, a man of high status, sent an appeal for the man accused of it. Concerning the latter question, we can only assume that Stanley, a man of public importance and influence, was approached by someone sympathetic



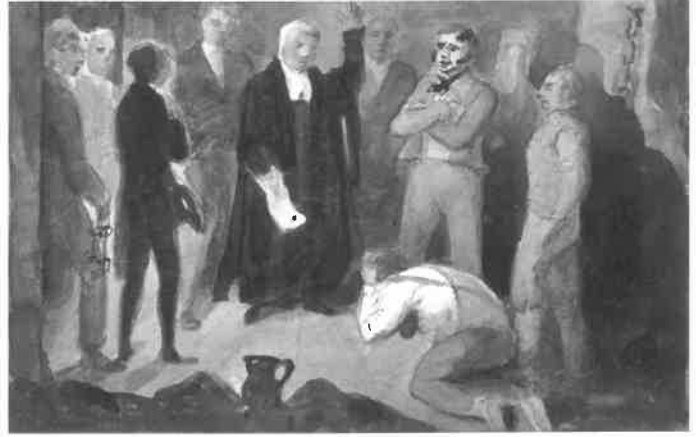
Edward Smith-Stanley (1799-1869), 14th Earl of Derby

to Dwyer who requested an appeal. A number of references regarding the trial and execution are found in newspapers such as the *Limerick Chronicle* and the *Freeman's Journal*. A number of articles concerning the offence appear before the execution on 19 March 1834. The following trial report was carried in the *Limerick Chronicle* dated 4 March:

Edmond Dwyer, Patrick Dwyer, and Richard Rafferty, were tried for feloniously assaulting and violating the person of Bridget Carey, a young woman of 19 years, on her way home from Limerick to Tipperary last September. She was travelling on a car by night when the assailants dragged her to the road side near the village of Oulah [Oola], and where the outrage was committed in the view and hearing of her younger brother, and despite his and her cries and entreaties. She positively identified Edmond Dwyer, but would not swear to the others, and he was apprehended a few hours after by the police, under circumstances of very strong suspicion. Verdict – Edmond Dwyer guilty – the others not guilty.



Prisoner awaiting execution in his cell



Condemned man gets a final blessing

Formally condemned at the Assizes in the following days, Dwyer was sentenced to death alongside Daniel Dooly, who was accused of arson – specifically, of burning the house of Redmond O'Connor of Kilagree; His accomplice, Cornelius Ryan, initially expected to be executed, was instead to be transported for life. One wonders which fate is the less fortunate; toil, torture and labour in incarceration, in some foreign land, or the certainty of death.

On Wednesday, 19 March, Dwyer and Dooly were to be executed by hanging; the *Limerick Chronicle* of the 22 March notes that:

From the day of conviction to the moment of their sudden and awful exit from this life the demeanour and resignation of both convicts was pious and edifying; but they... distinctly disclaimed any knowledge or part in the crimes for which they were sentenced.

Having received the sacrament of Holy Communion on the morning of the execution, with the counselling of attendant priests, they were reported to be in a calm accepting state, ready to 'shake off the mortal coil'.

In the *Freeman's Journal* of the 25 March, it was reported that on the day of the execution:

... Long before the hour appointed for the execution, the space in front of the gaol was crowded with some thousands of persons, anxiously waiting to view the solemn spectacle that was shortly to be presented there. A troop of the 4th

Dragoons attended to preserve order. At ten minutes past three o'clock, the culprits came from the condemned cell in the criminal prisons... Dwyer was supported on the right by the Rev. Mr Clarke and on the left by the Rev. Mr Quin. They were preceded by the Rev. Mr Harrigan, who bore in his hands a crucifix. The procession moved slowly along the entrance of the jail... The clergymen, who attended Dwyer, then desired him to speak his mind as to the crime for which he was about to suffer, which he fell backward in doing, but requested them to declare his innocence, which they declined. He then, said that he did not commit the crime for which he was about to suffer.

According to the *Freeman's Journal*, Dwyer had shown a resignation to his faith, in contrast to Dooly, who displayed boldness and surety. In the press-room, while being prepared for execution, Dwyer kissed the executioner, telling him that he felt happy in leaving this world, as he did so innocently, and he was sure the Lord would have mercy on him. Dooly, before being executed, prided himself on his courage and shook the attendant priest's hand. It is written that Dwyer was

'rather a slight man, and about forty-five.' This interesting story, despite its grim and unfortunate scenario, depicts a starkly accurate glimpse into the life of nineteenth century Limerick, and it garners information on both social and judicial aspects of the society of that time. The story is made all the more intriguing if one refers to the letter from which the investigation was begun; Edmond Dwyer, accused of the rape of Bridget Carey, was executed on 19 March, 1834. The letter written by Richard Wellesley, 1st Marquess of Wellesley, refusing the appeal for clemency, was written on the same day – Wednesday the 19th. It is indeed fortunate, in its own, macabre fashion, that Wellesley did not grant forgiveness to Dwyer, for by the time he replied to the letter, regardless of the decision, the man had been executed. It would indeed be unfortunate if he had decided to pardon the man, for by the time the letter would have arrived in Limerick, Edmond Dwyer would be dead and buried.

Footnote

1. Limerick Museum manuscript [LM 2016.0067]. Letter from Richard Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to Edward Stanley, Chief Secretary of Ireland, dated Dublin Castle, March 19th 1834.

Scene of a public hanging



At the time of writing this article, **Michael Fitzgerald** was a Transition Year student on a work placement in Limerick Museum. He is a student of St. Joseph's Secondary School, Tulla and lives in Sixmilebridge, County Clare.