

The United Irishmen and Limerick

In February 1793, the new French Republic found itself at war with Britain and some neighbouring countries that wanted the monarchy restored in France. The French Revolution that had established the Republic, together with the American War of Independence, had inspired many Irishmen to push for an independent Ireland with a separate parliament. In November 1791, the Society of United Irishmen was founded to strive to achieve this aim, and with French military assistance if required. The British authorities were well aware of the Society's links with France and of plans for a French invasion of Ireland. In April 1798, Major General James Duff of Limerick issued a proclamation warning people that the French had plundered every country they invaded and that anybody involved with them would be put to death and their property destroyed. He stated that people opposed to a French landing a year ago were now less attached to the Government, possibly through being seduced by wicked men and bound by oaths.¹ British military intelligence led them to believe that a French landing was more likely to be made on the west coast of Ireland in order to avoid the British fleet and to avail of a body of disaffected Irishmen who would join them once they landed.

The Shannon estuary provided several harbours and landing places suitable for landing troops and unloading artillery and stores. The waterway known as "Tarbert Roads," in particular, provided shelter by means of Tarbert Island to the west and north-west. Wolfe Tone was well aware of this, and when the French failed to land at Bantry Bay in 1796, he advocated that the ships remaining in the bay should attempt a landing in the Shannon Estuary. In fact, a French force of over 4,000 men landing at Tarbert, or even Limerick, would have met with little resistance. Most of the local garrisons were already two days march away on their way to Bantry to oppose the anticipated French invasion there. The British authorities were well aware of their vulnerability.² In April 1793, Lord Pakenham sailed downriver from Limerick to survey the estuary with a view to erecting fortifications.³ In February 1797, shortly after the attempted landing at Bantry Bay, Pakenham sailed down the estuary again, this time to review the fortifications.⁴ The only permanent fortification at this time was at Tarbert. As early as 1781, Limerick merchants had petitioned to have the defences of the estuary improved in order to protect

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shipping. By 1783, Tarbert had a battery of eight 24-pounders constructed. In June 1794, after Pakenham's survey, this battery was replaced by two batteries each having eight 24-pounders commanding the river. Six 6-pounders were also provided for landward defence. This stronghold at Tarbert appears to be the only permanent means of defence on the estuary until after 1808, when five further batteries were erected. Three of these sites were in County Clare at Kilcredaun Point, Doonaha and Kilkerrin Point, one on Scattery Island in the middle of the estuary and one at Carrig Island, west of Tarbert. It is possible that some of these permanent batteries replaced temporary earthwork structures, such as one sited on Foynes Island.⁵

If the various French expeditions that sailed to Ireland had chosen the sheltered Shannon Estuary rather than more exposed locations along the west coast, the whole story of the United Irish rebellion, and indeed Irish history, may have had quite a different outcome.

The Rebellion and Limerick

Limerick has been largely ignored in studies of the United Irishmen and the 1798 rebellion. While it certainly did not have an organised rebellion, as in Wexford, the level of outrages and violence in 1798 led the authorities to proclaim the County and Liberties in a state of insurrection as early as March 28th, and by May 30th, martial law was proclaimed in the city. Various reasons have been offered for the failure of the United Irishmen to take root in Munster. While the organisation tried to assimilate long-established agrarian and Catholic secret societies, such as the Defenders, it laid heavy emphasis on the printed word. This meant that its most effective penetration was in the literate and anglicised east coast. The main publishing houses were in Belfast and Dublin, and United Irish strength was greatest in the area stretching from Antrim to Wexford. The weakness of the United Irishmen lay in their inability to penetrate significantly Irish-speaking areas. Counties which were predominantly Irish-speaking, such as Limerick, remained largely impervious to the new radicalism.⁶

This lack of organisation meant that a lot of the violence was more easily suppressed and it all seemed to lack a

single purpose. The Gaelic poet, Micheál Óg Ó Longain (Langan), whose family came from West Limerick, was scornful of his fellow Munster men for failing to join the fray, in the last verse of his poem "Maidín Luan Cincise" (translated as follows):

*Bad Cess to the Munster Men who did not answer our call to arms
Under a well trained army, we could strive gallantly at the enemy
They left us weak with the strength of the enemy around us
But thanks from the heart to the Leinster men, for it was they who kindled the fire.⁷*

United Irish Leadership

Despite the disappointment voiced by the poet, it was espionage rather than lack of leadership which defeated the rebellion in Limerick. The United Irishmen in County Limerick appear to have been organised in the east of the county by James Baggot, a schoolmaster from Ballingarry, and to the west by Captain Gerald Fitzgerald, brother of the Knight of Glin and ex-British Army officer. Both men were visited by Lord Edward Fitzgerald when he secretly toured Limerick early in 1798. Baggot, despite being watched closely by Colonel O Del, managed to avoid capture. He was described by the authorities as a "cunning fellow who was head of all which is carried out in this county and too cunning for O Del." He was also described as "that rascal Bagot [sic] who can neither be frightened nor bribed."

The presence of Captain Gerald Fitzgerald in West Limerick led the authorities to declare Glin "the centre of sedition in the County."⁸ In contrast, his brother John Bateman Fitzgerald, the Knight of Glin, appeared to be less committed, if not opposed, to his brother's activities and a strong upholder of law and order. In late December 1798, he committed at least five men to the County Gaol.⁹ When the Knight heard of the death of his friend, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, he assembled his tenantry and incited them to rebel. The parish priest and some locals reminded the people that a short time previously he had wanted them to fight the French and now he wanted to fight the English. In fact, it was Gerald who convinced his brother that it was the English, and not the French, who were the enemy.¹⁰

After 1798, Gerald continued to be involved in United Irish activities. He became a close friend of Robert Emmet and he visited his house a week before the



New Bridge, Limerick, detail from a painting attributed to William Turner de Lond, c.1820.

Courtesy of the Knight of Glin.

1803 rising. He was also in constant contact with Baggot and Thomas Russell in Dublin, even after Robert Emmet's arrest. After the failure of the rising in Dublin, Gerald was reluctant to proceed with the rebellion in Limerick. This reluctance was seen as timidity by some of his fellow rebels. The authorities were well aware of all the activities of the United Irishmen in Limerick and even had their letters intercepted. They saw the friction between Gerald and his comrades as an opportunity to make friends with him, as they knew "he could reveal all that was going on in the County, he being a shrewd and clever man."

The fact that Gerald was not charged with sedition, despite the authorities being aware of his activities, led to his being suspected of collusion. There is no evidence to support this theory, and it is more than likely that the authorities continued to hope that he would co-operate with them. An English agent named David Fitzgerald masqueraded as Gerald around this time, with the result that information could be collected and confusion caused to the local rebels. In such a situation, Gerald was more valuable free than under arrest.¹¹

The ease with which the authorities infiltrated the activities of the United Irishmen was not peculiar to Limerick, or in fact to this period of history. In 1842, a generation later, the damage inflicted by informers still rankled the *Limerick Reporter* newspaper. It gave vent to the feelings towards people who betrayed their country in 1798 by stating: "Patriotism is too weak for avarice - love of money is more potent than love of country

except in noble and unselfish hearts. The Irish informers were about the most wicked race of men the world ever saw. Whatever the faults of the United Irishmen, they were at least generously faithful to the cause they undertook and they proved their faith by their sufferings. Treason alone defeated them."¹²

Floggings, Transportation and Hangings

Despite having a well organised network of informers, the military found it more difficult to infiltrate the various regiments of militia, which for the first time were composed of a majority of Catholics. In June 1797, two members of the Louth Militia were shot and several more flogged or transported on charges of administering the Defenders Oath. Two men, James O'Neill and Peter Murneen, were executed at Adare. It is obvious that they were to be made an example to other members of the militia, who were marched from stations as far away as Ennis and Tarbert to witness the execution.¹³

In the following year during the rebellion, two privates of the Kildare Militia, Thomas Lyons and Peter Coghlan, were also executed in Limerick. Lyons, a Catholic, was marched to King's Island and shot by eight men of his own regiment.¹⁴ The militia needed to be reminded that they were not above law and order in their conduct and loyalty.

The militia themselves, in conjunction with the yeomanry and military, were merciless in their treatment of the rebels. Floggings, half-hangings and the use of pitch-cap were some of the methods used

to suppress the United Irishmen. The number of people executed or transported during the rebellion will never be known. By early October 1798, there were ten documented executions of insurgents by hanging in the Limerick area. The following is a list of the ten men who died at the hands of the hangman¹⁵ -



Wolfe Tone in French uniform at Bantry Bay, 1796.

Name	From	Charge	Hung at
Stephen Dundon	Not known	Not known	Not known
John Hayes	Bilboa	Being a United Irishman. Attempt on life of John Lloyd C.P.	Not known
Matthew Kennedy	Doon	Taking arms at Ashroe	Limerick
Thomas Kennedy	Doon	Taking arms	Doon
Thomas McSwiney*		Being sworn official of Defenders	Limerick
John Moore	Not known	Being rebel captain	Limerick
Thomas Mullally	Not known	Not known	Not known
Patrick O'Neill	Askeaton	Swearing people to assist French	Askeaton
William Ryan Stephens	Caherconlish	Taking arms & swearing people	Caherconlish
Patrick Wallis	Kilfinane	Plotting assassination of Mr. Oliver	Kilfinane

*Lenihan's History of Limerick refers to McSwiney, while contemporary documents list his name as Thomas McInerney. An interesting note is that on June 6th, 1798, a Michael McSwiney was sentenced to 600 lashes for being a United Irishmen and after 100 lashes he was taken down and had the remainder of his sentence remitted, promising to make some useful disclosures. A week later, Thomas McSwiney was hanged on the new bridge for being a sworn officer of the Defenders. Another man was acquitted on a charge brought on the evidence of Michael McSwiney.

The people exacted their own retribution on informers. In June 1798, two brothers, Michael and Thomas Kennedy of Doon, were hung for taking arms. Thomas was convicted on the basis of evidence given by a George Fitzgerald. That July, Fitzgerald was murdered in the mountains near Bilboa.¹⁶ In the fall-out after the execution of Patrick "Staker" Wallis in July 1798, at least six more people died. In March 1800, Roger Sheedy, who captured the 65-year-old Wallis, was shot, together with his father, James, by a group of six masked men. In November 1800, John O'Donnell, Timothy McMahon and Denis Healy were hung for the murder of the Sheedys. A fourth man named Dwyer was also convicted of the murders but escaped from Limerick Gaol. He was re-arrested in 1803, but his fate is unknown. Finally, a man named Casey, who assisted in the arrest of Wallis, was stoned to death about two years later.¹⁷

In addition to those executed, many more were flogged and transported. An official record puts the number transported at forty in October 1798,¹⁸ but contemporary newspaper accounts would indicate that the number was much higher. It was not only those who were convicted who were treated harshly. Once arrested, prisoners were kept in dreadful conditions. A contemporary account of life as a political prisoner in Limerick Jail is given by the Gaelic scholar and schoolmaster, Richard Pierce McElligott. The account is in an extract from a letter which he smuggled out of the jail by pasting it to the bottom of a plate with a piece of potato.

"What shall I suffer walking up and down this dismal place from light to light, with no companion but a man, who (three times flogged) lies dying in a corner a still breathing corpse; and the legions of rats of all ages, which have forgotten the timidity of their species, and lord it here with hereditary sway:

"There were three happy fellows on every lamp on the bridge, as I was

crossing here; the lantern hoops were breaking; so I must wait till some kind friend drops off. They nearly took up (or occupied) all the little footpath, and the toes of some of them were touching it."¹⁹

McElligott was reprieved, however, and released on bail of £2,000, which was later reduced to £200.²⁰

The account of rebels hanging from lamp-posts refers to the bridge linking Rutland Street and Quay Lane (Bridge Street), which was used a central location in the city for public floggings and executions. The unfortunate men who were hung from the lamp-posts were left suspended as if standing 'on the flagway, exposed to the public gaze, until through time their bodies dropped to the ground.²¹ When this bridge was being removed in 1845 to make way for the new one, dedicated in honour of Fr. Mathew, the contractor, Mr. Duggan, retained one of the lamps from the old bridge as a memorial to those who died in Ninety-Eight. The *Limerick Chronicle* of March 29th 1845 recalls "an occurrence on the site of painful and harrowing spectacles in '98. Several men were hung and many flogged on that central and conspicuous site, for participation in treasonable practices. One unhappy incident was strikingly illustrative of the gallant and humane spirit of the late Lord Gort, then Colonel Vereker, so honorably distinguished as the Hero of Collooney. An old peasant, amongst others, was ordered for execution, under sentence of martial law, and his son vainly implored Cap. Lidwell, of Jocelyn's Horse, who was to superintend the punishment, and then commanded the guard, to spare his father, for whom he offered himself as a victim to the executioner. This, of course, the officer had no power to entertain; but so annoyed was he at the continued solicitations of the man, and subsequently at the comments of a country gentleman's servant, that he ordered the latter to be tied up under the scaffold for a flogging, and the poor man received a couple

of dozen for being too free in his commiseration. Such arbitrary and cruel treatment as this was soon reported to Colonel Vereker, who forthwith repaired to the New Bridge, where he reproached Captain Lidwell in strong terms of indignation for his tyranny, and sent him a message immediately after. A meeting took place, and shots were exchanged without effect. Col. Vereker then challenged his opponent to a contest with the small sword, which was declined, and the parties left the ground. This noble instance of heroism and humanity stamped a lasting impression on the minds of his fellow-citizens."

In September 1798, Colonel Vereker was in charge of the Limerick City Militia at Collooney, Co. Sligo. Despite having inferior numbers, he is reputed to have diverted General Humbert's march to Sligo and into the trap set by General Lake at Ballinamuck. Other accounts attribute luck rather than valour to Vereker's exploits.²² It was during the passing of the Act of Union in 1801 that Vereker won over the hearts of the Irish people. Despite being offered bribes and inducements, he opposed the Union and said. "Having defended my country with my blood, there is nothing that could tempt me to betray it with my vote."²³

The executions on the bridge were not confined to 1798. In April 1799, two men, Patrick and James Mangane, were executed there for the murder of a James Mangane near Shanagolden. At the same time, James Lacy, John Sullivan, Pat Kelly, John Cavanagh, John Kelly and Pat Kelly (Junior), son of John Kelly, all of Ballingarry, and convicted by court martial of robbing the house of a Mr. Carmody near Knockferney [sic], were brought out for execution. They were informed at the foot of the gallows that in consequence of the youth of Pat Kelly (Junior) and being supposed that he acted under the influence of his father, his sentence would be remitted to transportation and also that the same mercy would be extended to three more of them, but as they were all equally guilty, they should decide by lot



Lord Edward Fitzgerald by Hugh Douglas Hamilton
National Gallery of Ireland.

which of them were to suffer. When the lot having fallen on John Cavanagh and John Kelly, they were launched into eternity with the two Manganes.²⁴ One can only imagine the thoughts of the young boy, Pat Kelly, being banished to a foreign land leaving his father behind, hanging from a lamp-post.

In 1800, the executions continued. In addition to the three men executed for the murder of Patrick "Staker" Wallis's captor, Francis Hannon, Patrick Russell, Noble Croker and Andrew Carroll were also sentenced to death that year. A visitor to Ireland in the latter half of 1801 remarked that "the principal outrages during this time were committed in Limerick."²⁵

At the end of the eighteenth century, Limerick was a heavily garrisoned city and it was during the period of the rebellion that New Barracks, now Sarsfield Barracks, was built. Consequently there is little record of rebel activity in the city compared to the surrounding rural districts. One exception was an attempt to capture the Castle of Limerick on January 3rd 1803 by United Irishmen.²⁶ The project

was aimed at capturing the city in support of Emmet's proposed rising in Dublin, but on learning of preparations to oppose them, they dispersed.²⁷ The fact that the attack was made in the city caused much anxiety to local military authorities.²⁸

Apart from the destruction of the revolutionary movement and the suppression of the people, an immediate result of the rising in 1798 was to increase pressure for union between Ireland and Britain.²⁹ It is ironic that, with the passing of the Act of Union, Ireland was more closely drawn to Britain than ever before.³⁰ Over a century later, the poet W.B. Yeats still lamented the losses of '98 in his poem September 1913, unaware of another revolution which was about to happen and which would draw so much from the spirit of the United Irish leaders and their ideals:

"Was it for this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave."³¹

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