

# The Limerick City Militia 1798

by Kieran Kennedy

**L**nspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, the leadership of the United Irishmen, a society founded in 1791 to promote better relations between Catholics and Protestants, appealed to the revolutionary French government for assistance in overthrowing British rule in Ireland. In February 1793, France declared war on Britain, and two months later, fearing invasion, the government passed a new Militia Act for Ireland. The earlier Volunteers formed in the 1770s had grown to a strength of 100,000 unpaid men who, after the waning of the Continental military threats, had turned their attention to political reform, achieving legislative independence for the Irish Parliament in 1782. Their influence waned afterwards, and by the mid-1780s they were no longer a significant force in Irish politics. The government was unwilling to risk a resurgence of Volunteer activity, and set out to establish a proper militia.

The militia was created as an auxiliary to the standing army, and the principal duty envisaged for them was to provide the initial opposition to an invading force. They also acted as a quasi-police force in the suppression of insurrection and agrarian crime by secret societies such as the Whiteboys.

The militia was divided into 38 regiments, of which 30 were county regiments. In Cork, Down and Mayo there were north and south regiments, and the remaining regiments were recruited in the cities of Cork, Dublin and Limerick and in the town of Drogheda. The officers were invariably propertied local magnates, although there was a significant number of English non-commissioned officers, and the rank and file were mainly Irish peasants and artisans, recruited on a voluntary basis or compulsorily through the drawing of lots in each parish. The officers were usually Protestant, but overall Catholics were in a majority of almost three to one. To help with discipline, units were quartered away from their county of origin, and the quarters were changed frequently.

The initial strength of the militia was 15,000, but this number was increased to 22,000 in 1795 and to 31,000 in 1802. When the immediate threat of a French invasion was removed by the Peace of Amiens in 1802, the force was disembodied. The militia was called upon again in 1803 for varying lengths of time until 1816. The Crimean War necessitated re-embodiment for its duration, and in some cases for a further period to cover the Indian Mutiny.

In 1881 the militia regiments were affiliated to the regular regiments of Irish infantry, and during the Boer War supplied units to serve in Gibraltar, Malta and even South Africa to release regular troops from peace-time garrison duty. In 1908 the militia regiments were transferred to the Special Reserve. During World War I, they again did garrison duty, releasing the regular soldiers, although fit militia men could be transferred to the fighting units. The Irish Militia in the South were disbanded in 1922 at the same time as the parent regiments. Those in the North were suspended in 1921 while still carrying the title Militia, and were finally disbanded in 1953.<sup>1</sup>

In 1796, in response to doubts about the loyalty of the militia, the government set up a part-time yeomanry force of about 37,000, which was mainly made up of landlords and their own tenants, and was largely Protestant.

The City of Limerick Regiment of Militia was raised early in 1793, consisting of 469 men under the command of John Prendergast Smyth, MP (afterwards first Viscount Gort), who was appointed Colonel by the Lord Lieutenant on 14th April. The County Regiment was also raised, its strength being 612 men with Lord Muskerry as commandant.<sup>2</sup> Their uniforms were almost identical to those of the regular infantry, consisting of scarlet cloth with facings (collars, lapels and cuffs) of differing colours to distinguish one regiment from another. The facings of the City Regiment were yellow, while those of the County Regiment were blue.<sup>3</sup> They were armed with the Brown Bess flintlock musket, of which there were several variations.

The other officers of the Limerick City Regiment in May, 1793, were: Lieutenant-Colonel, Hon. Edmond Henry Pery (afterwards Earl of Limerick); Major, Charles Vereker (afterwards second Viscount Gort); Captain, George Gough; Captain-Lieutenant, Samuel Tomkins (afterwards major); Adjutant, Henry Horsfall, Lieutenant, 39th Foot; Lieutenant, John Waller (afterwards adjutant); Ensigns, Hugh Gough (afterwards Field Marshal Viscount Gough), David Nash (afterwards captain) and Exham Morony (afterwards lieutenant).<sup>4</sup>

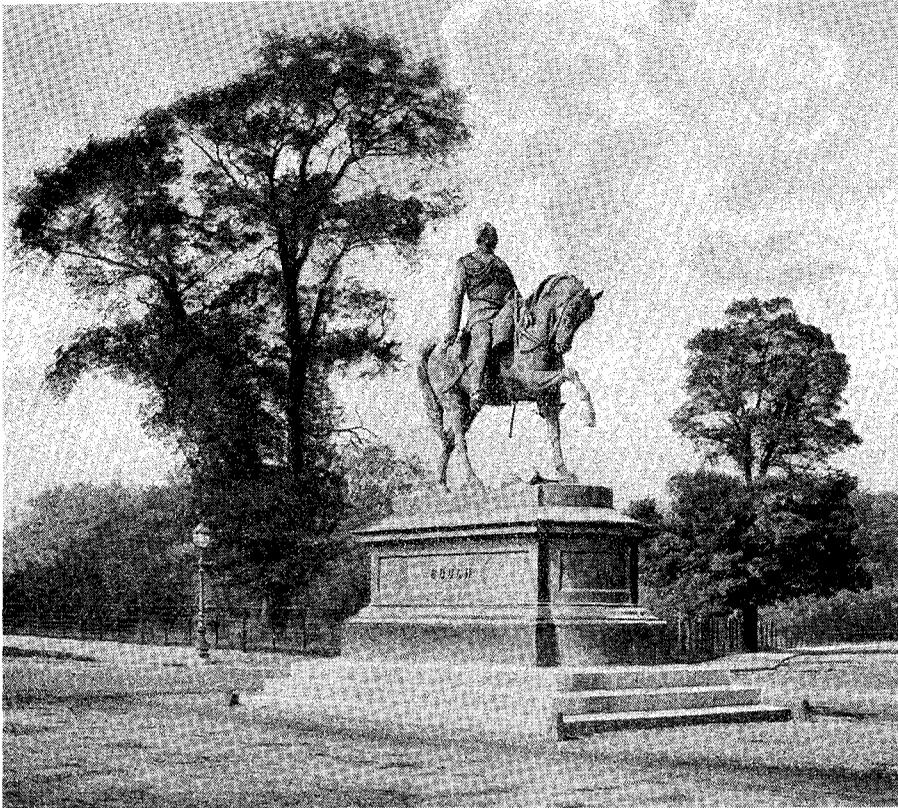
At the outbreak of the 1798 Rebellion, the regiment was stationed in the province of Leinster and was constantly employed in quelling disturbances there. A letter

from Lt.-Col. Gough of the City Militia, dated Edenderry, June 7th, is quoted in Lenihan<sup>5</sup>:

*"I take the earliest opportunity of informing you that General Champaigne ordered me to march out at 11 o'clock last night with 100 of our regiment, and 60 cavalry, to attack a rebel camp within six miles of this town. At five o'clock in the morning we arrived there, and found the rebels posted behind an amazing strong quickset ditch, and a bog in their rear. I ordered a troop of cavalry to get round them on the right, and so to be between them and the bog, which they could not effect, the country being so much enclosed. In the meantime the Infantry attempted getting round the flank of their camp, which they were so lucky as to effect, though they had to get over ditches strongly barricaded with strong stakes interwound with white thorns. The moment we entered the Rebel Camp they ran into the bog, to the number of 3 or 400, where they found we directly advanced, upon which they fired a general volley at us, accompanied with a loud huzza, and began to retreat. Finding that they would not stand, I ordered a general discharge, with such effect that they set running like furies; we pursued them across the bog to an island on which they had a post; this they abandoned on our getting near it; we still pursued until we got near the dry ground at the other side of the bog, where I knew General Champaigne and Colonel Vereker had taken a position, with a strong body of our detachment. Unfortunately some houses were set on fire, which caused the Rebels to change their course into the Great Bog of Allen; had it not been for that event every one of them must have either surrendered or been cut to pieces. In our pursuit of five miles we found ten dead, but am convinced numbers more were lying in the long heaths; for the first two miles they fired many shots, all which went over us.*

*"It was surprising to see how regular they had their outposts. Four miles from their camp we fell in with an advanced sentinel, capitally mounted and armed; on his attempt to join the rebels he was shot. We fell in then with their advance Piquet, who received so warm a reception that they were scampered off with the loss of their arms and some horses.*

*"We found in their camp 48 fat sheep, 20 cows and horses, which I am going to cant for the benefit of our men, who are*



Statue to General Gough in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, c.1900.

Limerick Museum.

also returned loaded with great coats, blankets, shoes, pikes &c.

*"Nothing could equal the ardour of our Limerick lads; they would have burned down every house, and killed every man they met, had I not restrained them; they are the most desperate fellows I believe on earth, and I am sure loyal; not a man received the slightest wound."*

The following morning Gough received a letter from General Champaigne at Dublin:

*"Sir, I am this moment favoured with your report of the affair of Tuesday morning, for which I return you many thanks. I have not only acquainted the Commander-in-Chief, but the Lord Lieutenant, of your conduct and success, of which I was an eye-witness, and your not having lost a man in the action was a proof that your disposition of action was not only planned with judgement, but conducted with spirit."*

A letter from an officer of the City Militia stationed at Edenderry and dated 1 July 1798 reads in part:

*"I have just returned in after giving the rebels a good drubbing. I marched against 300 of them with 60 men (infantry); I sent some cavalry to surround the hill where they were posted, but the moment I appeared they fled, keeping up hot fire on us in every direction; However, we routed and drove them to the cavalry who gave them a warm reception. I am certain upwards of 300 of them were killed. There was a Priest and a Captain Casey at their*

*head, who were both killed; the latter being this townsman we brought him back where he now remains hanging."*<sup>6</sup>

On the arrival of the French under General Humbert at Killala Bay on 22 August, the Regiment, under the command of Col. Charles Vereker, was ordered to Sligo. They had reached Carrick-on-Shannon when the defeat of government forces at Castlebar on the 27th August occurred, and carried on to Sligo.

The small French expeditionary force under General Joseph Humbert was primarily an infantry force composed of the 70th Demi-Brigade, but did include artillerymen and some cavalry from the 3rd Hussars, the whole amounting to about 1,000 men.<sup>7</sup> After taking Castlebar, Humbert, on the advice of his Irish allies, moved northwards, Sligo town being the next objective, where Col. Vereker's 600 men of the Limerick City Militia was the principal garrison. Vereker was then 30 years of age. He was born in 1768 in the old mayoralty house in Limerick, his father being mayor at the time. In 1782, at the age of 14, he was entered as a midshipman in HMS *Alexander*, a ship of 74 guns, and saw service at Gibraltar, then under blockade by a combined French and Spanish fleet. The *Alexander* was one of three British ships laden with provisions that managed to pass the blockade, and Vereker was reported as being the first to leap ashore. On putting to sea again, his courage in the action between the two fleets earned him the public acknowledgement of the commander, Lord Longford. With the peace of November 1782, the size of the navy was

reduced, and Vereker retired from the service and took a commission in the 1st Royals, which regiment he left on coming of age in 1789. He was promoted to Colonel of the City Militia in 1797.<sup>8</sup>

At about 9 o'clock on the morning of the 5th September, Captain O'Hara of the Liney yeoman cavalry, who commanded Vereker's advance piquet at Tubbercurry, reported to him that he had been driven back by an advance force of the French after a short skirmish in which he had one man killed and another wounded. Vereker considered that it would be better to attack rather than wait to be attacked, and marched out of Sligo with 250 Limerick City Militia, two curricule guns, 30 yeomen infantry and a troop of the 24th Regiment of Light Dragoons towards Collooney, about five miles from Sligo.<sup>9</sup>

Two rivers, the Owenmore and Owenbeg, join a short distance from Collooney and at the village itself flow into the River Arrow. These rivers, over a rocky bed, plunge over ledges forming numerous rapids. A long range of well-wooded hills up to 900ft. high extends from close to the river at right angles eastwards. The road from Collooney to Sligo passes by the side of the river for about a mile and a half, turning around the extremity of the ridge at Carricknagat, and then over open level ground to Sligo.

General Humbert's force at Collooney consisted of nearly 3,000 men, 1,000 French, 250 men of the Longford and Kerry Militias who had changed sides, and about 1,300 Irish insurgents of dubious quality. The basic weapon of the insurgents was the pike, but some had captured swords, pistols and muskets, and indeed some were actually supplied by the French, and they also had nine pieces of cannon.<sup>10</sup> When General Humbert's force arrived at Collooney on 5th September, its intention was to rest, as they had been harried constantly by crown forces for eight days since they left Castlebar. One French eyewitness account says:

*"having arrived there, the men had just piled arms and dispersed, and were busy procuring provisions and firewood to make a meal, when suddenly the sound of the cannon and the shot that were flying into their encampment warned them of the enemy's approach. The soldiers had only time to abandon, some their loads of firewood, others their provisions such as potatoes &c, and to hasten to get under arms."*<sup>11</sup>

Col. Vereker picked his position well at Carricknagat, his left protected by the river, his right resting on the hill, with his guns placed on the high road. His men were so disposed as to make the most of the little force as possible and at the same time conceal the smallness of their number. An advance guard of 100 Limerick City Militia under Captain Vincent was sent out to watch the rebel movements, while Col. Vereker moved on with 20 of the 24th Dragoons, 30 Yeomen Cavalry, 250 Limerick City Militia, 20

Essex Fencibles and 30 Yeomen Infantry. When the advance guard came near the French, they received a smart fire which checked them a little, when Col. Vereker ordered Captain Waller and the Limerick Light Company to advance and support them, while he formed his line and arranged his plan of attack on the main body. On his line being formed, he ordered Major Ormsby and one company to occupy a post on the hill which covered his right and prevent the rebels from turning that flank, and he advanced on the right of the line with two curricule guns. Lt.-Col. Gough was ordered to take charge of the left. In a few minutes, at about 2.30 in the afternoon, the whole came into action with, on both sides, an unremitting fire of musketry and grape shot for nearly an hour and a half, with Major Ormsby's company on top of the hill taking the brunt of the action.<sup>12</sup> On the French side, an officer, Jean-Baptiste Thomas,<sup>13</sup> described that Col. Vereker:

*"debouched from behind a mountain and on a high road which skirted it, about 200 toises [426 yards] from Clooney [Collooney]. We had made the mistake of not stationing on this mountain an advance post which would have kept watch on this point, and would have protected us from any surprise attack ... These troops were marching in column against our camp which had not yet been pitched in [Collooney] itself, that is to say on a piece of level ground contiguous to this small market town where four high roads meet."*

*"Happening to be one of the first under arms with a section of grenadiers, I marched to meet the enemy. I posted these grenadiers in ambush behind a wall of loose stones which surrounded a field; through the only opening in it ran the high road along which the enemy were coming, and who, seeing us in ambush at this post, considerably slackened their pace, which gave our troops time to form and to execute a move to the enemy's right flank, to possess themselves of the mountain which we have already mentioned, which the enemy, through lack of experience in warfare, had neglected to occupy.<sup>14</sup> Their artillery was still advancing, following their first line of march, and halting from time to time to fire.*

*"I had made the grenadiers who were with me stop behind the wall which masked them, instructing them not to return fire with their [muskets], and only to fire when I should direct them to. I was waiting for the three pieces of the cannon of the English to be sufficiently close to us, so that the shots we fired at them would be more accurate: therefore, when I saw them about thirty to forty paces from us, I gave the order to fire and, having instructed [the grenadiers] to aim as carefully as possible at the gunners, after a discharge that knocked down many gunners, we charged on the guns, which we took. Our column,*



Collooney medals presented by Limerick Corporation to privates of the City Militia, 1798.

Limerick Museum.

*having meanwhile possessed themselves of the height, fell on the enemy's right flank, routed them and took them prisoners. Only very few escaped. We released on parole the prisoners we had just taken, both officers and men, because we had no provisions to give them, nor any place to keep them, and we could on no account take them with us on our march."*

A Sligo gentleman, quoted in Lenihan's History,<sup>15</sup> wrote:

*"... at last superior numbers prevailed. Major Ormsby's detachment was obliged to retreat from the hill, and that post being given up, the enemy began to press round in numbers to the rear of the line. A retreat was then absolutely necessary to save those gallant fellows, who even then maintained their post, although their ammunition was nearly expended; never did any man show greater gallantry and coolness than Colonel Vereker at this trying moment; he never quitted his post whilst a man could stand by him, and when his artillery horses were so badly wounded that they could not bring away his guns, he attempted to have them brought off with ropes, and not until nearly surrounded on all sides did he leave them. The gallant and steady manner the officers and soldiers resisted the attack of the united French and rebel army of above 4000 men, strongly posted, with nine field pieces, reflects the greatest honour on them, and has saved the town from ruin. The entire loss on the side of the king's troops was 6 killed and 21 wounded. The enemy had above 50 killed and wounded; many of the latter have since died in hospital here. The French fought with great bravery, and acted with humanity to the wounded officers and men who fell into their hands."*

Col. Vereker himself reported his casualties as one officer and six rank and file killed, and five officers and 22 rank and file wounded.<sup>16</sup> After the battle, he crossed

the river in good order and returned to Sligo.

A Church of Ireland clergyman, Rev. Edward Mangan, travelling with a militia regiment for protection came upon the scene after the battle<sup>17</sup>:

*"Early on the 5th of September, our attention was roused by the noise of firing at no great distance, the cause of which was explained before mid-day; when we came among the dead and dying; field pieces overset, a broken bridge, the mangled carcasses of horses etc. Among the slain were several men in French uniform, some of whom belonged to General Humbert's force; but more proved to be British deserters. I noticed two or three wearing waistcoats distinguished by the buttons of the militia regiments they had forsaken, but having French coats on. This scene was the result of an exceedingly spirited proceeding on the part of the Limerick regiment of militia, which was quartered in the town of Sligo; when Lord Gort, then Colonel Vereker, who commanded, proposed their going out and attacking the French battalion as it passed, so as to turn the enemy from his line of march. This was done accordingly; and the fortunate consequence was, that after a smart contest in which many lives were lost, the enemy's forces were compelled to take a different direction from that which they intended ..."*

The casualties of the Limerick City Regiment in the engagement were: Officers: Ensign Rumley, shot through the body - dead. Captain Crips (severely wounded), shot through the neck and jaws. Slightly wounded: Colonel Vereker, Lieut.-Col. Gough, Major Ormsby, Captain Nash, Ensign Bindon. Privates: Killed: John Wallace, Edward McMahon (McMahon afterwards returned to Limerick, not having been killed, but taken prisoner by the French). Missing: Timothy O'Sullivan. Badly Wounded: Corporal Kain. Slightly wounded: John Hickey, Patrick Hynes, Michael Harrison,

Jeremiah Leahy, James Sullivan, Patrick Nelson, Denis Godfrey, Nicholas Purcell, Timothy Bryan, Corporal Mahony.<sup>18</sup>

After returning to Sligo, Col. Vereker evacuated his forces to Ballyshannon, leaving the town defenceless. However, Humbert presumed that Vereker's force was an advance guard of a much larger army, and he abandoned his plan to take Sligo, instead turning southwards to defeat at Ballinamuck on 8 September.<sup>19</sup> Why Col. Vereker left Sligo defenceless is unknown, but the feeling of the time is summed up in an article in the *Dublin Evening Post* of 29 September 1798<sup>20</sup>:

*"It is now ascertained that the design of the French General, after he had retreated from Castlebar, was to take possession of Sligo, and after pillaging that town, to proceed northwards toward the Co. of Donegal - and had he advanced towards Sligo after the affair with the Limerick militia at Colooney, that town must have fallen into his hands without opposition, its garrison having received orders to evacuate it and fall back to Ballyshannon ... of the plan of evacuating Sligo, and leaving that rich and populous town to the mercy of the enemy .. we cannot presume to speak; but we earnestly hope that it will never be thought necessary, under any circumstances, or in any instance, to resort to such a measure ..."*

Col. Vereker was ordered back to Sligo by General Lake, as their absence was causing much uneasiness in the country.

In Limerick and other parts of the country the action at Collooney was seen as a great victory over the French. A meeting of the Common Council in Limerick on 8 October 1798 resolved: "That the steady, loyal and gallant conduct of our fellow citizens the Limerick City Regiment of Militia, who ... so intrepidly engaged and successfully opposed the progress of the whole French and Rebel Army ... merits our sincerest thanks and warmest applause ...". Dublin gave Col. Vereker the Freedom of the City, and from the High Sheriff and Grand Jury of Sligo came an address of "our warmest thanks .. to Col. Vereker ... for his uncommon exertions and intrepidity during a very severe action by which the enemy not only received a considerable check, but were diverted from their intended attack and pillage of the town of Sligo, and induced to direct their line of march another way."

Nobody can doubt Vereker and his men's bravery. Bartholomew Teeling, Humbert's aide-de-camp, says "Humbert bore honourable testimony to the gallantry of Colonel Vereker, whom he pronounced the only British Officer he had encountered in Ireland who was capable of commanding a hundred men." Others were less complimentary. Col. Heyland wrote: "Colonel Vereker mistaking them for a common mob, drew out the city of Limerick Militia and attacked with only 200 men, but was

obliged to retreat, leaving his battalions guns etc. Twelve yeomanry had the courage to fight their front posts but all were killed or taken prisoner." The *Dublin Evening Post* account on 8 September 1798 reads: "Colonel Vereker, with a small detachment of the Limerick City Militia, hearing that only the rearguard of the Enemy occupied Colooney, attacked the town - but, as might be expected, was repulsed." A letter from an officer in the Reay Fencibles printed in the same paper on 25 September says bluntly: "The French came that evening to Colooney, with five miles of Sligo, where they were met by the Limerick militia, whom they defeated and took their cannon from them."

The *Dublin Evening Post* of 18 October 1798 reported a meeting of the Limerick Common Council: "Resolved that the sum of fifty guineas be paid by our Chamberlain towards raising a fund to purchase a suitable piece of Plate for the Officers' Mess and proper medals for such of the non-commissioned officers and privates of the regiment as were engaged in the action that day." The *Freeman's Journal* of 24 August 1799 reported: The Corporation and Citizens of Limerick have subscribed for very elegant Gold and Silver medals to be presented to the City of Limerick Militia for their brave and valorous conduct at Collooney in resisting the French army under General Humbert, who sometime ago invaded this kingdom. The Gold medals are for the Serjeants, the Silver for the Privates; they have been manufactured by Messrs. James Brush and Son, of St. Andrew's Street, where they are now to be seen." Brush himself was probably not the artist of the medal, as an advertisement of his in 1789 reads in part: "In the Seal line he presumes to say, that no Person in this City can equal him, for neatness and durability of settings. He has engaged an eminent Seal Engraver from London, specimens of whose work are ready for inspection."

The medal, which is known in silver only, has on the obverse, the arms of Limerick City, a gateway, with portcullis raised, between a pair of castellated towers, above, a conical turret with flag flying, enclosed in a spray of olive and spray of palm, ends tied, inscribed above, CORPORATION OF LIMERICK, and below, OF LIMERICK, and on the reverse, the imperial crown enclosed in two sprays of olive, ends tied, inscribed above, TO THE HEROES OF COLLOONEY, and below, 5<sup>TH</sup> SEP<sup>R</sup>. 1798, with in smaller letters between the date and the tied ends of the sprays, BRUSH.

Colonel Vereker had been elected MP for Limerick city in 1790, and was re-elected in 1797. In the preparations for the Act of Union, it is recorded that Lord Castlereagh was anxious to win his vote, and having approached him, received the simple and dignified reply: "Having defended my country with my blood, I shall never betray it with my vote." In every debate he raised his voice against the Union, and his name is recorded in

every division.<sup>21</sup> Others against the Union raised his conduct at Collooney in the debates. Mr. Frederick Falkiner said: "... if it was not for the unparalleled gallantry of one regiment who stopped their career ... the French banditti would have reached this capital, while his Excellency's immense army had never seen them." Mr. Plunkett was even more eager to score off Lord Cornwallis by using Vereker: "I must observe that whilst the military Lord Lieutenant was in the field with an army of 60,000 men to support him, history will have it to record that we are indebted to a gallant Irishman (Mr. Vereker) at the head of about 800 native troops for having withstood the enemy, and prevented the capital of Ireland from being entered in triumph by a body of not one thousand Frenchmen."<sup>22</sup>

After the Union, Vereker was again elected MP (now the sole one) for Limerick. Under the administration of Pitt, he held the office of Lord of the Treasury from May 1807 to August 1810. In 1802 he was appointed Governor of Limerick, and in 1809 Constable of the Castle of Limerick, the last person to hold that office, which he held until his death in 1842. In 1817 he succeeded his uncle as second Lord Gort, thus vacating his seat for Limerick which he had represented continuously for 27 years, having been elected MP seven times, always by large majorities.<sup>23</sup>

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