Some Notes on the United Irishmen and Limerick

By Dr. Richard Hayes.

While recently consulting some manuscript files in the Irish State Paper Office, I unexpectedly met with a number of official letters and documents relating to the United Irish movement in Limerick. They refer mainly to trials, executions and imprisonments in the troubled year of 1798 and afterwards, as well as to activities throughout the country in connection with the conspiracy of Robert Emmett. The latter seems to have had wider ramifications beyond Dublin and its neighbourhood than is generally supposed.

About a year before the late Archdeacon Begley passed away, I spent a very pleasant evening in his company and admired, not for the first time, his apparently inexhaustible store of knowledge in every phase of local history. During our talk I had the temerity to query the statement made in the third volume of his great Trilogy, viz.: —that in Limerick there were only three persons associated with the 1798 movement. With characteristic vehemence he upheld, however, the truth of what he had written but failed to convert me to his view. For one thing I could not overlook the fact that the official statistics of their organisation show that there were 100,634 United Irishmen in the province of Munster alone, and it required too wide a stretch of one’s imagination to believe that only three were in Limerick. My talk with our lamented and honoured historian recurred to my mind while I was perusing the documents in the I.S.P.O. A letter dated early in 1798 (Carton 620/3) addressed to Edward Cooke, the notorious Under-Secretary of the time at the Castle, mentions “Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Athlone, Derry and Belfast” as the “Chief Divisions of the United Irish Organisation”—this corroborates the statement of Oliver Bond, in his evidence before the Secret Committee of the House of Lords that the organisation “had made considerable progress in Limerick and other places in the south.” The same carton, under date 7th October, 1798, contains the official list of some of the prisoners interned in the New Gaol, Limerick, and disposed of since the commencement of martial law in the city before a General Court-martial. They numbered 136, of whom 10 were executed and 40 transported. Three of them, well-known citizens, were discharged on bail, viz: —George Hardgrove, Richard MacElligot and Robert Ross. The names of those executed are given thus: —

Matthew Kennedy
John Moore
Stephen Dundon
Thomas Mullany
John Hayes

Thomas MacInerney
Thomas Kennedy
William Ryan Stephens
Patrick O’Neil
Patrick Wallace

Those convicted by courtmartial, to whose names the penalty of ‘Life’ is attached as having been inflicted, are given as follows: —

Richard Kelly
Michael MacInerney
Owen Ryan
John Cunningham
William Higgins
James Ryan

John Moanes
James Casey
Manus Sheay (?Shea)
Francis Arthur
John Kerrin
Another long list follows of “prisoners in custody, Sept. 1800,” among whom occur the names of John O’Donnell, Patrick Wallis, William Wallis, David Wallis and John Dyer—these five men are specified as having been “committed by Silver Oliver Esq. on 2 July 1800.” To this is added—“Tried and sentence not known.” A letter (11 Nov. 1800) from Major-General Sir James Duff at Limerick to Colonel Littlehales at Dublin Castle tells him of the approaching execution of Francis Hanman, Patrick Russell, Noble Croker and Andrew Carroll; and of the execution “on the following Thursday, Friday and Monday of Denis Herlihy, John O'Donnell and Timothy MacMahon.”

Another document, dated May 1800, gives the name of Paul Slattery as “lying in Limerick gaol under sentence of transportation for life.”

Notwithstanding these repressive measures of 1798 and the succeeding years, other official letters of a later date show that the spirit of the young men of the United Irish organisation in Limerick remained unbroken. Thus a document in Carton 620/50 (no. 4), dated 14 January 1803, has a Petition of the magistrates of the county asking that it be proclaimed and placed under martial law. This action apparently followed the foiled attempt to capture the castle of Limerick on the 3 January by the United Irishmen, with the story of which readers of this Journal are familiar. Letters in the I.S.P.O. show the anxiety existing among the local military authorities in Limerick during the year 1803. Some of them state there may be a French landing at any moment, that French agents are known to be going through the county, that pedlars and ballad-singers are moving from place to place in the county giving secret signs of the United Irishmen, &c. Judging from these letters, one of the moving spirits in the patriotic activities was James Baggot the noted mathematical master, who resided at Ballingarry. In that village the house is still pointed out where Lord Edward FitzGerald rested during his secret journeys through Ireland in the early months of 1798 in connection with the United Irish organisation, and where he sat in conference with Baggot and other local leaders of the countryside. Despite the failure of Emmett’s enterprise in July, 1803, these patriotic activities continued—the enclosure in the following letter shows that the gallant Thomas Russell, even after the arrest of Emmett, was in communication with Bagott. The letter, dated 5 August 1803 (Carton 620/66), is from General Payne, the English commanding officer for the Limerick area, to Dublin Castle:

“This county yet continues in an apparent state of unusual tranquillity. My friend, who gave me the last two informations relative to Dublin and on other points which have since been confirmed, insists upon it that this county is determined to rise. He adds however that in consequence of the failure in the Capital there is a strong party against it, but the stronger are for it. There are, he says, 3 pieces of ordnance in Kerry on which they place great reliance, and he hopes to be able shortly to tell me where they are. I have no hesitation in saying that I believe the cannon are there . . . .”

In this letter is an enclosure signed “J.D.” and addressed to Payne, which runs as follows:

“Dear General

“On Friday last a man came through Shanagolden with a letter from Thomas Russell to Bagot informing him that there were 30,000 Rebels (of course the number is greatly exaggerated) still holding out in the mountains of Wicklow, and that they expected the South would rise to assist them. He also brought a letter from Bagot to Captain FitzGerald requiring to know from
him whether he would take command of the people of Kerry and this county. The answer was that as they did not succeed in Dublin that he thought it more prudent for them to delay the Rising a little longer—but if it was a thing they were determined upon that he would take the command of them. You may be sure that this information is perfectly correct as I have it from a quarter which leaves no doubt of the truth of it.

"I know the people are all willing to rise and that though Captain FitzGerald should refuse to take command of them that it is supposed that Bagot has some other person to take command.

"Glin is become the centre of sedition in this county.

"I have the honour to be &c."

In a Post-script to this letter is the following:—

"Bagot is a schoolmaster and a celebrated mathematician. Colonel Anstruther may recollect he is the man 'our friend,' when he was in Limerick, named as the supposed leader of the Party on the 6th of January—though he never appeared. Colonel O'Del is now here—he has, I know, long suspected him and had watch over him during the last Rebellion, but the fellow was too cunning for him. I will propose to Colonel O'Del to have his papers searched and the fellow taken up at all events. I think it may be as well to lay hold of Russell at the same time."

Further letters from General Payne have references to Baggot and FitzGerald. One, dated 7 August 1803, states as follows:—

"I think taking up Bagot would at least confound the projects of the Rebels. He is such a cunning fellow, I do not think we could make out anything against him, but it would be a great object to have him out of mischief, as I am convinced he is the head of all which is carrying on in this county. Would you recommend the measure? Mr. O'Del will lay hold of him whenever I wish it."

Another, dated 11 August, refers to Captain FitzGerald, the insurgent leader "whose prudence," it states, "in delaying the Rising is called timidity by some of the Rebels," and suggests that "any means should be adopted of getting round him." And the letter ends thus:—

"If we could make friends with him, I am inclined to think he could reveal all that is going on in the county—he is a shrewd, clever man. That rascal Bagot can neither be frightened nor bribed, and when Mr. O'Del returns, I think we had better take him up."