

Balloon Flights in North Munster

IGNATIUS MURPHY*

Some early successful balloon flights from Limerick City are described here, as are also some optimistic reports and a hoax from Co. Clare.

* * * *

On the 19th of February 1784 the *Ennis Chronicle* reported that a local Jack-of-all-trades "has in contemplation to float an Aerial Chariot, on a plan large enough to carry every necessary for a month's cruise, which he flatters himself will be sufficient, from the velocity of the movement of an Air Balloon, to make an excursion to and from the moon". A week later, on the 26th of February, the same newspaper remarked on reports being circulated that a second person was planning a similar expedition. However, the original "superhuman and ingenious Mechanic" had asked "that the public may suspend forming any unfavourable ideas, as a few days will determine the real adventurer, who will set off in his Aerial Chariot, from the door of his Workhouse, and in the presence of the public".

While the *Ennis Chronicle* dealt with the claims of the local adventurer in a light-hearted manner, the reports seem to indicate that he was making some effort to build a balloon which never got off the ground. In fact, the first successful balloon flight in Ireland or Britain took place a few months later, on the 15th of April 1784. On that day a Mr. Rousseau, along with a ten-year-old drummer boy, took off at Navan, Co. Meath, and landed one and a half hours later in a field near Ratoath. The first Irish balloon flight has generally been attributed to Richard Crosbie, some ten months later, on January the 19th, 1785. However, in a letter printed in the *Irish Independent* of 7 February 1970, Hugo McCabe quotes the *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* of 27 April 1784, which gives details of Rousseau's flight.

In late April 1786 Richard Crosbie arrived in Limerick with his balloon amid immense interest. A huge crowd gathered on Wednesday, the 26th of April, to see him ascend from the garden of the House of Industry (in what is now Clancy Strand). When he failed to take off on Wednesday and seemed likely also to disappoint them again on Thursday, the people "were frantic with disappointment" and "were heaping curses and execrations on Crosbie". Finally, however, the ascent took place about 4.30 on Thursday afternoon. The balloon at first travelled due west over the Shannon as far as Tarbert. Eventually it became stationary and Crosbie took this opportunity to eat his dinner and drink a bottle of wine. After that he ascended to a higher altitude where he experienced great difficulty in breathing and his ears felt as if they were going to burst. He was also suffering from intense cold. "My breath, congealed on the instant of respiration, fell like a light snow; and collected on my lap as it dropped." At this point the balloon moved into a downward, easterly air current which brought Crosbie back towards Limerick.

Eventually the balloon descended on the estate of Mr. Singleton, near the O'Brien residence at Dromoland. "I leaped out, still keeping my hands, and as much of my weight as I could on the Boat, calling loudly for assistance; one or two rustics, who I saw in a field for some time, observed me, and I thought were coming to my assistance but to my great mortification it was quite the reverse; astonishment and fear lent them wings, and they fled from me with precipitation. I destroyed a considerable deal of the Balloon's power

*Carrigoran House, Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare.

of ascent, but found the difficulty of holding it myself so great, that after the grappling quitted its hold, I was obliged to yield with the car . . . and had the mortification to see my chariot re-ascend without me." The balloon was eventually "captured" by Captain O'Brien at Ennis, but by then it had been extensively damaged. On the following Saturday a large crowd of people gathered at Crosbie's lodgings in Limerick and then chaired him through the city "with repeated and loud acclamations".¹

After Crosbie's aerial journey in 1786, there appears to have been a gap of over sixty years before the next balloon ascent from Limerick. In September 1849 Mr. Hampton, a well known "aeronaut" with eighty-four ascents already to his credit, arrived in the city with his Irish manufactured balloon, *Erin-Go-Bragh*. Preparations were made in Mr. Marshall's Great Yard in Upper Cecil Street. "The large yard where the monster balloon was inflated, by the Gas Consumers' Company, was most commodiously arranged for such as desired to enter by ticket and see everything connected with the preparation previous to the ascent; and two large platforms, erected for the purpose, were densely crowded with ladies and gentlemen from town and country, while large numbers of gentlemen promenaded in the area around the balloon. The entire was much enhanced by the delightful music of the splendid band of the 31 Buffs, that attended on the occasion.—The windows of every house all through Upper and Lower Cecil-street to the Quay, and all through Catherine-street, and other adjacent positions, were crowded with spectators; and scarcely house or store for a considerable distance around that were not densely crowded on the roofs outside, in most perilous positions, by male and female. In fact, we have not for a considerable time, witnessed such an immense assemblage of people in Limerick, as appeared on this occasion. . . ."

About 4.30 on the afternoon of the 3rd of September Mr. Hampton and two local passengers, Mr. Russell of the Bank of Ireland and Mr. Townsend, Civil Engineer, took their seats, and half an hour later the journey was under way. The balloon went westwards over Bunratty on a beautiful and clear evening with few clouds. Russell attempted to measure their altitude and estimated that at their greatest height they were 4,261 feet above the level of the Shannon. Hampton decided to celebrate by proposing a health "in a bumper" to the balloon. Quite clearly the *Erin-Go-Bragh* travelled a much shorter distance than Crosbie's balloon, but eventually also landed near Newmarket-on-Fergus, on Mr. Creagh's property at Ralahine, Creagh immediately offered every assistance and helped return the balloon to Limerick.²

The next balloonist to arrive in Limerick was a Frenchman, M. Chevalier, a veteran of 150 aerial ascents including a voyage from Paris to Hanover. On his first attempt to inflate the balloon in Limerick, in late April or early May 1868, it was damaged when caught by high winds. As a result he had to wait several weeks before it was repaired and airworthy. After that M. Chevalier made at least two successful solo voyages, landing within a few miles of Limerick on each occasion.³ The ascents took place from a yard at Mountkennett "and as the hour approached when the balloon was to ascend, the quay and dock pier were crowded with spectators, while on the North Strand there was an equal multitude; and the enclosed parts of the yard, for paying visitors, were greatly thronged

¹*Ennis Chronicle*, 1 and 4 May 1786; *Limerick Chronicle* (Bicentenary Supplement), 12 Nov. 1966.

²*Limerick Reporter*, 4 Sept. 1849; *Limerick Reporter & Tipperary Vindicator* ("Reminiscences of a Journalist", no. CLXII), 29 May 1868.

³*Munster News*, 6 and 30 May 1868; *Limerick Chronicle*, 28 May 1868; *Limerick Reporter & Tipperary Vindicator*, 2 June 1868.

by members of the leading families of the city." The *Munster News* of 30 May 1868 philosophised on M. Chevalier's achievements:

Sooner or later, like steam, electricity and other once occult or inapplicable forces, the gaseous faculty of rising and raising weights in the air, will be rendered ancillary to regular progression in the realms of space. The waves of air furnish bearings as well as the waves of ocean, and the Professor has contrived a machine by which he has at any rate proved that support can be found in the atmosphere by fabrics of art, for which suggestions and principles are drawn from the relative structures of balloons and birds. Probably before he leaves Limerick he will deliver a lecture, in which he will explain the theories he entertains and the experiments he has tried.

Hampton and Chevalier were essentially showmen with extremely novel one-man acts, paying their way by the subscriptions of the people who wanted to get a close-up view of their balloons. Unfortunately for them, most of the spectators enjoyed a spectacular free show but there was little they could do about that.

I have not come across any references to balloon flights from Limerick after 1868. However, the following item from the *Clare Journal* of Monday, the 6th of October 1890, shows the continuing interest of the general public in balloon flights:

A Hoax at Kilkee

On Thursday morning the residents and visitors at this favourite watering place were informed by posters at all prominent positions that at four o'clock that evening a certain professor from the Crystal Palace, London, would ascend in his balloon from Burns' Cove and descend later on in a parachute. The intelligence was received with some reservation by a good many, for it puzzled several to guess where the gas would come from at Burns' Cove to inflate a balloon capable of floating a man into open space, and the pecuniary profit arising from the venture was not quite apparent. At four o'clock, however, some small groups were seen wending their way past the pretty lodges at West Cliff, and those were followed by others, singly and in two and three (sic), all converging on the scene of the expected ascent. They reached Burns' Cove in time and spread themselves out on the grassy slopes waiting in patience for the advent of the "Cove" who was to ascend in the celebrated balloon "Electricity". An hour passed, but still no professor appeared, and then suddenly everyone told his neighbour how all along he said it was a hoax, and they went home.