

A Brave Slave, Robert St. George

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, birth, death and marriage notices in newspapers were the preserve of the rich and privileged classes. Deaths among the poorer classes and servants scarcely got mention. It was therefore surprising to find a death notice for a servant, inserted by his mistress. A further peculiarity for that time was the fact that he was described as a 'black'. The notice inserted in the *Limerick Chronicle*, 27 July 1803, reads as follows:

'Died yesterday at Clonmackin (sic) the seat of Mrs Palmer, his mistress, after a lingering illness which he bore with Christian patience, Robert St George (a Black); it was he who gallantly defended the late Rev Edward Palmer's house (his then master) against a gang of robbers on the night of 6th of January 1792 and shot dead, with others, the principal of the party.'

In 18th century Britain, it was regarded as a status symbol to have a black slave and it was quite the custom among the gentry and merchant classes. In 1771 it was estimated that there were between 14,000 and 15,000 resident there, the majority living in London¹. However, it does not appear to have been a common practice in Ireland at the time, and even less so in Limerick. The evidence for this is the lack of contemporary advertisements in local newspapers for the sale of slaves or rewards for the capture of those who escaped.

The reference to Robert St George's heroics was an invitation to investigate the circumstances surrounding the attack on his master's house on 6 January 1792 and find out why it warranted mention in his death notice over 11 years later.

The attack on Clonmacken house, referred to in the death notice, became a *cause célèbre* for the *Limerick Chronicle* newspaper. Every edition of the newspaper for the remainder of the month of January, after the attack, carried updates on the pursuit of the raiders. The day after the attack, the paper had a full account of what happened:

'This morning about the hour of two o'clock, a gang of robbers armed, (supposed 16 in number) attacked the dwelling-house of the Rev. Edmond Palmer, at Clonmackin, (sic) in the north liberties of this City; - with a large sledge, which they stole out of Mr. Butler's forge, they broke the door fronting the lawn; providentially Mr. Palmer was instantly

by John Curtin

alarmed, and with two of his servants prepared to give the robbers a proper reception - finding the family up, the villains fired in at the front and back windows, which was returned by the servants with effect, as one of the Robbers fell, having received a wound in the head (of which he died as this Paper was going to Press) two more of them must have been badly wounded as they were observed to be carried off by their Companions, and blood traced a good distance from the house; the fellow's name who was shot is Burke, - and from the exertions of the Magistrates &c. it is sincerely hoped the rest of the gang may be apprehended. - They left behind them a large sledge, a tin Jill-can in which they had brought fire, and a long pole.²

One of the party of attackers, Edward Thompson, who claimed to be from Roscrea, was captured at Doonass. He was wounded in the neck and face and turned approver by informing against his comrades. He also confessed to committing burglaries at Hezekiah Holland's, at Crossagalla and at Patrick Keating's, near Sixmilebridge. They had planned to attack several other houses in the area, including John Singleton's at Ballygrennan. One of the gang, John Gallagher, a butcher from Thomondgate, was arrested on Thompson's information³.

Based on the same informant, less than flattering descriptions of the attackers who remained at large were published. A list of subscribers to a reward for their capture and conviction was also given.

'Reward of such Sum as is annexed to each of our Names, to any Person or Persons, who shall within 12 Calendar Months from this date, apprehend and prosecute to Conviction, said Robbers, and so in proportion for each and every one of them as shall be Convicted.'

The following Persons who were of the Gang, who attacked Mr. Palmer's House, remains to be taken.'

'MARTIN BURKE, aged about 40 Years, 5 Feet 8 Inches high, smooth Face, black Hair hanging loose, generally wore a brown loose Coat, and was employed to carry the Post from Limerick to Ennis and Charleville, and formerly to Nenagh, on all of which Roads he was well known.'

'PATRICK CLARK, about 28 Years of Age, light brown Hair, about 5 Feet 6 Inches high, by Trade a Mason, from or

*near Loughrea, in the County Galway.'*⁴

'ABY or ABRAHAM CLARKE, about 36 Years of Age, from some part of the County of Limerick, by Trade a Shoemaker, a strong able Man, about 5 Feet 8 Inches high, dark Hair, a little pock-marked, and his Nose rather turned up.'

'LAURENCE SHIELS, from Sleevebauun, County Roscommon, by Trade a Mason, about 5 Feet 5 Inches high, a strong built Man, full Face, fresh Complexion, and fair sandy Hair.'

'ANTHONY DOHERTY, a noted Swindler and Coiner, near 30 Years of Age, about 5 Feet 4 Inches high, a smart made slender Man, a little pitted with the small pox, and sandy hair, and wounded at Mr. Palmer's.'

<i>Edm. Palmer,</i>	22 15 0
<i>Glentworth Limrk.</i>	11 7 6
<i>Walter Widenham,</i>	11 7 6
<i>H. Hartstonge,</i>	11 7 6
<i>Charles Smith,</i>	10 0 0
<i>J. P. Smyth</i>	11 7 6
<i>T. Maunsell, & Co.</i>	11 7 6
<i>Steph. Roche John,</i>	5 13 9
<i>Lant. Hill,</i>	11 7 6
<i>Thos. Arthur,</i>	5 13 9
<i>Charles Coote,</i>	11 7 6
<i>Phil. Roche John,</i>	5 13 9
<i>William Maunsell,</i>	11 7 6
<i>Hugh Brady,</i>	5 13 9
<i>Anthony Lefroy,</i>	5 13 9
<i>David Dwyer, Jun.</i>	5 13 9
<i>W. T. Monsell,</i>	5 13 9
<i>John Clarke,</i>	5 13 9
<i>Mau. Crosbie,</i>	5 13 9
<i>John Seymour,</i>	5 13 9
<i>Ben. White</i>	5 13 9
<i>John Ormsby</i>	5 13 9
<i>Arthur Ormsby</i>	5 13 9 ⁴

The distance travelled by the attackers can be gleaned from the arrest of Anthony Doherty by High Constable Fall, who pursued him as far as Athlone. He arrested him at the fair in the town and lodged him in Roscommon Jail. Doherty, who was wounded in the leg and thigh, was brought all the way back to Limerick⁵.

The break-up of the gang of robbers and the gallant defence made by Mr Palmer and his servants came as a great relief to the local gentry. They displayed their gratitude by adding their names to a list for publication, which was a common practice at the time. Rev Palmer took full credit for the repulsion of the attackers with an insertion in the same issue of the



Clonmacken House, early 1950s. Photo by Stanley Stewart.

Limerick Museum.

paper without any mention of assistance from his servants. The tribute read:

'We the under-named Inhabitants of the City and Liberties, being fully persuaded that the issue of the late attempt upon the Rev. Mr. Palmer, has in a great measure been the means of breaking up a dangerous Gang of Robbers, think it incumbent upon us, not only to congratulate him and his Family on their safety, but to return him our hearty Thanks, as being the Instrument under Providence, of rendering us and the Community a Public Service, hoping that the spirited Example he has exhibited will be followed throughout the Country.'

'Limerick,' 21st. January, 1792.'

M. BLAKISTON. | GLENTWORTH,
ROBT. MAUNSELL | (LIMERICK.)
CHARLES OLIVER | M. CROSBIE, D.L.
CHARLES COOTE | W. MAUNSELL, Ch.
WILLIAM WILSON | LANCELOT HILL.

WM. FITZGERALD | JOS. PEACOCKE.
CHARLES SMITH | PH. ROCHE JOHN
W. WIDENHAM | JONATHAN ASHE
GEORGE GOUGH | SYL. O'HALLORAN
JOSEPH GABBETT | THOs. HUNTER
RICKARD LLOYD | J. FITZGERALD
J. WARDLAW | CHAR. JOHNSON
SAMUEL HUNTER | PHIL. SMITH
DAVID HASTINGS | F. SARGENT WM.
FRED. PRICE | JOHN MINCHIN

We are unavoidably obliged to omit the Names of several Gentlemen to the above, for want of room.'

An interesting footnote was added to the end of the list, stating:

'The name of J. M. HARVEY, was put to the above Advertisement just as it was going to the press without consulting him, as he is one of Parson Palmer's intimate friends; but on being since informed by himself that part of the

*contents were inconsistent for him, as one of the Society of Quakers to sign, - the Printer has discontinued his name.'*⁶

Ironically, Summerville, the house owned by Joseph Massy Harvey, was also attacked exactly a month after the publication of the death notice in 1803.⁷

Were it not for the benevolence of Mrs Palmer, the exploits of Robert St George and his very existence in Limerick would have gone unnoticed.

SOURCES

1. David Lee & Bob Kelly: *Georgian Limerick 1714-1845*, Limerick Civic Trust, 1996
2. *Limerick Chronicle* newspaper, 7 January 1792
3. *Ibid.* 12 January 1792
4. *Ibid.* 18 January 1792
5. *Ibid.* 28 January 1792
6. *Ibid.* 25 January 1792
7. *Ibid.* 27 August 1803