



# THE FALL OF THE BASTILLE

Over-excited crowd was eager to do something striking. As a start, it carried arms, and a citizen named Launey had brought the story from the general that the gunpowder had been transferred to the Bastille. Some credit called out 'To the Bastille!' The Bastille was scarcely more than a nursery bugbear. If cannon could still be seen on its battlements, they were merely for the purpose of firing the customary salvoes on public holidays; since the far-off days of the Fronde no projectiles had issued from their mouths. The neighbours saw them every morning, but such was the general intoxication that this particular day they seemed to have a threatening appearance. A deputation demanded at the Hôtel de Ville that these suspicious cannon should be withdrawn. From there the Citizens' Committee sent delegates in their turn to the Governor of the Bastille, de Launey, an amiable man, who smiled at the complaint, explained its absurdity, caused the cannon to be withdrawn from the battlements and kept the Committeemen, fully satisfied, to lunch.

This did not suit the agitators; they sought a pretext for action. At their request an advocate named Thuriot had in turn to visit the fortress; Launey received him with the same politeness and, as the best reply to all these fears, paraded before him his little garrison consisting of 95 infirm veterans and 30 Swiss Guards. As a final concession the Governor had the empty gun embrasures blocked up with planks. Thuriot, satisfied in turn, took his departure. But the crowd, which was already battering on the walls, did not accompany him. It was seized with the desire to destroy something.

Launey allowed free entrance to the first courtyard and, gathering his little garrison within the outer wall, merely raised the drawbridge which gave access to the administrative courtyard. It was pretended that this noise was the noise of a fight, calling for action by the crowd. Two men rushed forward, one a French Guard, and broke the chains of the drawbridge with axes. Suddenly it fell. In a moment the courtyard was full. A far from unsympathetic witness who was in the crowd asserts that most of those he saw there were bad characters. Finally, catching sight of some of the garrison, the attackers fired on them. The Governor had really no choice but

to fire in his turn. He found himself in the presence of a mob, largely composed of blackguards, breaking into a fortress of which he was in charge. He gave the order to fire. That same evening, in order to glorify a despicable deed, the rumour was spread that the Governor had sent a message of peace to the crowd, which had then advanced trustingly and had been shot down. No historian now accepts this fairy-tale.

The crowd at first fled in terror, but then returned to the charge. However, the attack was not going well; highway robbers know how to pillage a farm, but the taking of a fortress is a soldier's business. Then soldiers arrived, mutinous French Guards. The sight of them sufficed to demoralize the garrison. It induced the despairing Launey to surrender; one of the junior officers of the mutinous Guards, by name Elie, testifies himself that the Bastille was surrendered on the faith of his promise as a French officer that no injury would be done to anybody. In spite of this and of Elie's efforts, Launey was murdered a few minutes later. He died like a man, when attacked he defended himself, and only fell when riddled with bullets. He was then torn to pieces. A cook's boy named Desnot, 'who knew how to deal with meat', cut off his head; it was to be his boast for ten years with a view to getting a medal. Major de Losne-Salbray was cut down, then an assistant Major, the Lieutenant in charge of the old soldiers, and one of the old soldiers themselves; two others were hanged.

The scenes of cannibalism which followed have been sufficiently described. Knowing of what elements this crowd of alleged citizens of Paris was composed, we can hardly be surprised. But even the Parisians were now affected by the horribly contagious passion for blood. While the liberated prisoners (four forgers, two lunatics, and a sadistic debauchee) were borne along in triumph, the garrison, dragged outside, were greeted with the howls of man-eaters. And suddenly Paris, terrified, saw the shrieking crowd surge back, while above it there oscillated on the ends of pikes blood-spattered heads with eyes half closed.

(Louis Madelin, quoted from *Theobald Wolfe Tone: A Biographical Study* by Frank McDermott, London, 1939).

BY RICHARD HAYES

The dramatic episode which, on 14 July, 1789, ushered in the French Revolution was one of the great symbolic events of history. Not in France alone, but throughout all Europe, the capture of the Bastille was hailed at the time as the herald of a new era for the world. With the fall of the grim fortress many tyrannies tottered, and the news was heard with an exultant joy by lovers of liberty everywhere. And in Ireland, especially, the great event was acclaimed—'it agitated all nations,' writes Gustave de Beaumont, the French historian, 'but there was no country to which the impulse was communicated so quickly and so faithfully as Ireland.'

For many weeks before 14 July, Paris was a city of turmoil and anxiety. Unemployment was widespread and food scarce, while wandering bands of hungry brigands raided the shops for bread. Everyday saw the gulf widening between the Court and the people, who placed responsibility for all the disorder and suffering on the Government and the king's advisers. In addition, the intrigues of the Orleanist party, who were plotting to put the Duke of Orleans, Philippe Egalité, on the throne, fanned the flame of popular discontent, and wild rumours were circulated that the royal troops, quartered at Versailles and at various points outside the city, were awaiting the order to move in and massacre the patriot citizens.<sup>(1)</sup> On Sunday, 12 July, a crisis seemed to be imminent when the news spread that Necker, a popular minister, had been dismissed. That evening saw tumultuous scenes in street and boulevard. Gunsmith's houses were raided and arms seized, wine-taverns were looted, while brigands robbed the food-shops and passers-by. Perils from within and without threatened the city, and no one within its gates, the contemporary chroniclers tell us, slept that night but children.

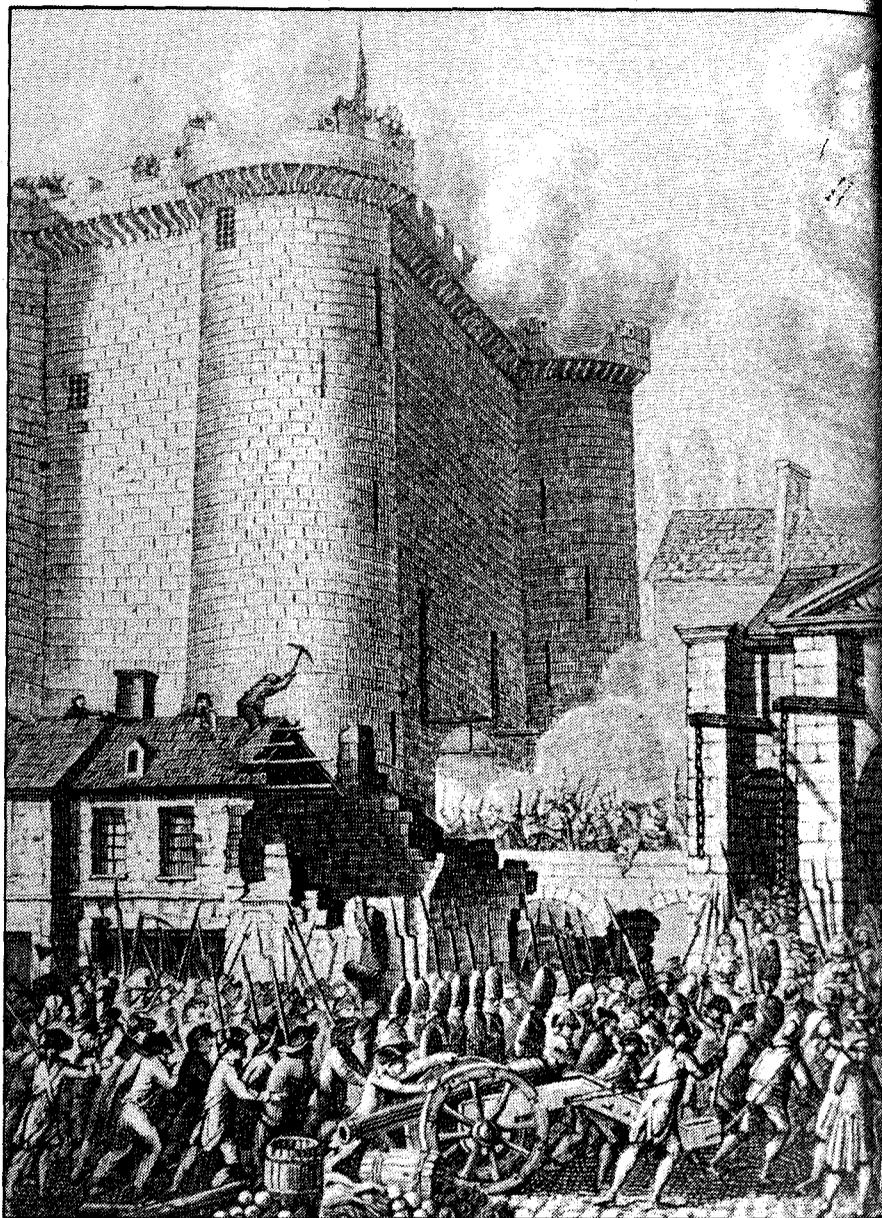
On the following day, 13 July, the disorder continued, and early in the forenoon the representatives of the sixty municipal districts of Paris came together at the Hotel de Ville to devise measures for the protection of property and for the defence of the city against a possible attack of the royal troops. A turbulent gathering of citizens about the building clamoured for arms, while another animated crowd filled the gardens of the Palais Royal where the tense situation was eagerly discussed. At the latter assembly it was proposed that six citizens should be selected to proceed to the Hotel de Ville and impress on the representatives there the urgent need for the establishment of a bourgeois militia or National guard. Joseph Kavanagh, an



Irishman who had come some time previously from Lille to Paris to carry on his trade of bootmaker, was one of the six selected for the purpose. On arrival at the Hotel de Ville, the deputation was informed that the representatives had just passed a decree enjoining the citizens of the various districts, each of which was to raise 200 volunteers as the nucleus of a citizen army. The deputies returned to the Palais Royal with the news, and the large assembly at once broke up and proceeded to the different churches. Kavanagh, realising the urgent need for arms for the people and bringing with him a small group of citizens, then went to the guard-house of the Tuileries and demanded the weapons stored there. On being informed that the place contained none, he requested permission to search it, and the result was that twenty-four guns were discovered hidden away under mattresses.<sup>(2)</sup> With the coming of evening, patrols of the newly-formed citizen guards, some of them armed, succeeded in restoring a little order in the streets, but nevertheless another night of suspense fell on the anxious city.

The morning of the fateful 14 July was ushered in by the ringing of the tocsin from Notre Dame and all the church towers of Paris. Groups of citizens began to gather early at the popular assembly places and an incessant clamour for arms was heard everywhere. During the night the barriers, where taxes were levied on provisions entering the city, had been attacked and burnt, and early in the morning Joseph Kavanagh set out to view the damage that had been done. On his arrival, he saw outside the barriers half-a-dozen waggons, laden with guns and war-equipment, that had halted on their journey from the great camp at Metz to the royal camp at Vincennes. Seeing an opportunity to increase the limited supply of arms available for the citizens, he went to the procureur of the district and asked for assistance to seize the gun-laden waggons. Ten men were furnished to him, the booty was seized, and he proceeded with it towards the Hotel de Ville. As they passed through the *faubourg* Sainte-Marguerite, however, they were stopped by its residents, who refused to allow the waggons to pass—no district in Paris, they claimed, was more exposed to attack and in greater need of weapons of defence. Kavanagh, leaving the convoy under the protection of his men, hurried away alone to the Hotel de Ville where he interviewed De Flesselles, the chief magistrate of the city. Timorous and vacillating, that official dallied with the request and adopted the policy which, later in the day, was to cost him his life. When Kavanagh, however, aggressively demanded help in the name of the nation, he gave way and wrote an order in these words:

*The Permanent Committee of the Paris militia requests the help of the Gardes*



*The storming of the Bastille.*

*françaises to bring to the Hotel de Ville six waggons of arms, which Citizen Kavanagh has left in trust in Sainte-Marguerite at the request of M. Turpin, Procureur-Fiscal.*

*(Signed) Le Grand de St. René,  
(Member of the Committee).*

*De Flesselles,  
(Provost of the Merchants  
and President of the Committee).*  
14th July, 1789.

Accompanied by some French Guards, Kavanagh on returning to Sainte-Marguerite found consternation among its residents. A rumour had just come that four royal regiments were marching from Carrières and were, indeed, on the point of entering the *faubourg*. Kavanagh, leaving the French Guards to defend the barriers as best they could, immediately commandeered a horse and carriage. Selecting two men, he placed one in front and one behind, and all three drove quickly in through the city streets,

waving their hats and shouting 'To the Bastille! Let us take the Bastille!' They occasionally halted on the way to erect barricades and to spread the rumour that royal troops were advancing on the city—news which had no foundation but which inflamed the populace, already tense with emotion. They drove on to the Hotel de Ville with the story and found there an immense gathering seething with excitement, for the rumour had arrived before them. The clamour for arms was renewed, and the crowd, accompanied by Kavanagh, started off for the Hotel des Invalides, where 30,000 muskets were stored. Having secured these, they hurried on to the Bastille, which had already been attacked by their comrades of the *faubourg* Sainte-Antoine.<sup>(3)</sup> For four hours the assault on the great fortress continued, until it fell in the late afternoon before the valour and determination of the people.

Although the capture of the Bastille

...llid from an apparently spontaneous  
 unpremeditated rising of the people,  
 certain that the attack was secretly  
 arranged and plans drawn up on the  
 previous day by the Orleanist  
 conspirators in the revolutionary clubs.  
 The employment of a number of panic-  
 mongers to spread wild rumours, like  
 that of the advance of the royal troops,  
 was one of the means adopted to  
 precipitate an insurrection, and  
 Kavanagh seems to have been one of the  
 revolutionary agents so employed  
 during those feverish days of mid-July. A  
 contemporary pamphlet rather  
 grandiloquently describes him as the  
*genie premiere* of French Liberty on  
 account of his activities on the morning  
 of the fourteenth, by which, it claims, he  
 precipitated the Revolution on that day<sup>49</sup>.  
 And yet, strangely enough, his name is  
 missing from the official list of the  
 Bastille attackers. That illustrious worker  
 in the archives of the Revolution, M.  
 Burneux, writing on this subject, says:  
 'In the Archives' museum under the  
 number 1166 there is preserved the  
 official manuscript of the victors of the  
 Bastille. A certain number claim to have  
 been at the attack who were not there.  
 There are others whose names one is  
 surprised at not finding in the list, e.g.,  
 Kavanagh, who was "the first to direct  
 the populace to the Bastille", as  
 Baudhomme says'. It is well known,  
 however, that among the 863 attackers,  
 which was the exact number of those  
 who took active part in the siege, many  
 did not wish at first to be regarded as  
 such, though later when those attackers  
 were looked on as heroes who deserved  
 pensions and medals, the number of  
 those who claimed to have taken part  
 rose to thousands.

Towards the end of the year 1791,  
 Kavanagh<sup>50</sup> was appointed by the  
 Commune as one of the twenty-four  
 police inspectors for Paris, and a year  
 later he unexpectedly appears in a  
 sinister light. He was then one of the  
 gang, composed of the most abandoned  
 ruffians in Paris, whom the Commune  
 hired to carry out the terrible prison  
 massacre in September, 1792 - that deed  
 which so much tarnished the cause of the  
 Revolution. He was employed in the foul  
 work at the prison of La Force during the  
 red week when fifteen hundred  
 defenceless men and women were  
 butchered without mercy; and one  
 cannot help linking his name with that of  
 Maillard, the ring-leader of the  
 September assassins, who, like him, was  
 a Bastille besieger and police official.  
 During the Reign of Terror in 1793 and  
 1794, Kavanagh again occasionally  
 appears, engaged in such work as  
 raiding the homes of suspected Royalists,  
 placing them under arrest and putting  
 seals on their papers and effects. In July,  
 1793, he comes officially into a little  
 prominence in his capacity as police  
 officer in connection with the  
 assassination of Marat. Obsessed with



*St. Patrick's Chapel, Irish College, Paris, drawn by Jeremy Williams.*

the thought that the death of the  
 revolutionary leader would save France,  
 Charlotte Corday came up to Paris from  
 her native town of Caen. For several days  
 she tried unsuccessfully by various  
 subterfuges to obtain an interview with  
 him. She called once at his house on the  
 night of 13 July, 1793, and, forcing her  
 way in, stabbed him in his bath, 'as a  
 main source' she declared, 'of the perils  
 and calamities of France'. Immediately  
 arrested, she was hustled off to prison  
 where, on arrival, she disclosed the name  
 of her city lodging. Towards midnight,  
 Kavanagh and another police officer  
 hurried off to the little Hotel de  
 Providence with the hope of finding  
 accomplices or incriminating papers, but

in the modest apartment nothing was  
 discovered but a Bible opened at the  
 story of Judith. Kavanagh was engaged  
 in various duties of this kind till the  
 Terror passed, and later, when those  
 accused of being involved in the  
 September massacres were about to be  
 brought to trial, he seems, like the  
 majority of these, to have disappeared  
 and is heard of no more. His part in the  
 Revolution would appear to be a rather  
 ignoble one, and one remembers him  
 chiefly as a panic-monger in the wild  
 days of July, 1789, and a prison assassin  
 in the dreadful week of September,  
 1792...

Two other Irishmen, better known to  
 fame, who were present at the siege of



the Bastille – the brothers John and Henry Sheares – appeared there merely as spectators. Three months later, in October, 1789, they saw, too, that wild procession of the Parisian mob which swept to Versailles and brought the ring in mock triumph to Paris. In the early years of the Revolution, they frequented the political clubs and became acquainted with Robespierre, Brissot, Roland and other popular leaders. In public and private they denounced the despotic government of their own country and spoke of the necessity of an Irish revolution. They were present in November, 1792, at the famous meeting in Paris of the Irish, English and American sympathisers with the Revolution who resided in that city, and the names of both brothers are among the signatories to the address of congratulation sent by the gathering to the National Assembly. In the previous August, when the royal palace of the Tuileries was stormed by an insurgent mob and the king and queen barely escaped with their lives, the beautiful Theroigne de Mericourt led a body of pikemen in the attack. She and John Sheares had frequently met at the revolutionary clubs and salons and had become intimate friends. He conceived such a passionate admiration for the famous heroine that he proposed marriage to her.

However strong his revolutionary sentiments may have been, they do not seem to have affected the generous and chivalrous character of the young Irishman. Swayed by a generous enthusiasm for the finer ideals of the Revolution, the two young apostles of liberty returned to their own country where, five years later, they were to suffer martyrdom for its cause.

Paris was then, as now, the centre of the fashionable world and, notwithstanding the feverish excitement in its streets during those July days of 1789, it was at the time full of visitors from many lands. Many Irish people, of whom we have no definite record, must have assisted, at least as passive spectators, at the siege and fall of the Bastille. And, in a contemporary Irish journal, the following curious incident is related:<sup>(9)</sup>

*During the late commotions in Paris, a young man, who is a student in the Irish College in that city, distinguished himself in a very particular manner. Being perfect master of the French language and possessing a very uncommon flow of eloquence, together, with all the graces of oratory, every evening he harangued the populace in the different public places of the capital, pointing out to them their natural rights as men and animating them in the most forcible manner to assert their well-founded claims to freedom and independence. One evening, in the midst of an animated oration, a party of police attempted to take him into custody, but the populace immediately attacked them*

*with such fury as made them make a very precipitate retreat, and the young student was carried in great triumph to the College, amidst the acclamations of a vast multitude.*

On the day of the attack on the Bastille the news was immediately conveyed to the National Assembly, which was in session at Versailles. It created a good deal of excitement among the members, and a deputation was selected which was to proceed immediately to the city with the object of pacifying the people and ending the disorder. Lally Tollendal<sup>(7)</sup>, scion of an illustrious Irish family, was one of its members, but when he and his colleagues reached Paris the fortress had already fallen. On their arrival at the Rue St Antoine, they met the wild procession, flushed with triumph, surging towards the Hotel de Ville and bearing the tattered flags of the Bastille and human heads on pike-ends as trophies of victory.

Thus the siege and capture of the Bastille precipitated the Revolution. For more than a hundred years, the famous fortress was to Frenchmen a sinister symbol of tyranny and dark deeds. An evil tradition, fed on stories that often enough had no actual foundation, had grown up around it. It was known that lovers of truth and justice had been cast into its dungeons like the gallant Irish gentleman, Lally of Tullaghadaly, who served France so loyally and who was led out of it on the death-cart execution...

When the stout fortress fell on the afternoon of the fourteenth of July, the joy of the citizens was unbounded, and in the wild excitement of their triumph there was no immediate thought of the prisoners within its walls. But a little later in the evening, when the doors of its dungeons were burst open, the people found with no little surprise that it contained only seven captives. And their surprise became greater on finding among them no martyr for truth or victim of despotism. Four of the prisoners were forgers, one was a debauchee, the remaining two suffered from mental weakness. Of these latter, one was an Irishman – James Francis Xavier Whyte, who was also known as Count Whyte de Malleville. An officer of the Irish Brigade, he had gone insane eight years before, was removed by his relatives to the asylum at Vincennes and transferred in 1784 to the Bastille.<sup>(8)</sup>

Whyte was born in Dublin in the year 1730 and went in his youth to France, where many of his family had distinguished records of military service. He became a cornet in the Soubise Volunteers and subsequently a captain in the Irish Regiment of Lally. In 1767, he married at Paris, and fourteen years later began to suffer from dementia, which necessitated his confinement by his family at the old fortress of Vincennes. In 1784, he was removed with others to the Bastille, where he constantly suffered from delusions and delirium until the outbreak of the Revolution. His mental

condition must have been hopeless, we find his relatives, some months before the fall of the Bastille, depriving him of his civil rights by ordinary legal procedure and transferring his property to his daughters.

On the evening of 14 July, he was led out in triumph from the Bastille by the excited populace and feted through the thronged streets. It must have been a trying experience, after years of solitary confinement, for the wretched man as the wild procession swept him along towards the Palais Royal. In a despatch already referred to, sent by the British Ambassador in Paris to his government describing the events of these days, he tells that:

*Whyte was questioned by some Englishmen who happened to be near him when he was conducted away, but the unhappy man seemed to have nearly lost the use of his intellect and could express himself only incoherently; his beard was at least a yard long; what was very extraordinary, he did not know that the Bastille was the place of his confinement but thought he had been shut in in Saint Lazare, nor did he appear to be sensible of his good fortune in being released; he expressed, however, a strong desire to being taken to a lawyer.*

Another eye-witness of events described him as 'a little feeble old man . . . he exhibited an appearance of childishness and fatuity; he tottered as he walked and his countenance exhibited little more than the smile of an idiot . . .'<sup>(9)</sup> A sympathetic citizen gave the unhappy man shelter for the night and next day he was transferred to the lunatic asylum at Charenton, where the remainder of his life was spent.<sup>(10)</sup>

#### REFERENCES

1. Some regiments of the Irish Brigade, on account of their traditional devotion to the French monarchy, were reputed to be among these troops. *Le Moniteur* of the 4 July, 1789, reports: 'New regiments are constantly arriving from the frontiers, and the people observe with some concern that these are for the greater part composed of Swiss, Germans and Irish.' During these days of tension preceding 14 July, General Daniel O'Connell, Commander of the German regiment of Salm-Salm, is credited with having advised in favour of the foreign legions moving in on the city, dispersing the revolutionary gatherings and thus establishing firmly the threatened royal authority.
2. Another account says that Kavanagh, in addition, looted a large sum of money from a chest in the guard-house.
3. Another version of this incident declares that Kavanagh, having induced the crowd to march to the Invalides and on the way fearing danger, slipped quietly out of the



*The seven prisoners, led by the bearded Dublin man, James Francis Xavier Whyte, are taken from the Bastille.*

- procession and made his way home.
4. This pamphlet, of which there is a copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale, is entitled *Exploits glorieux du célèbre Kavanagh, cause première de la Liberté française*, and was published in 1789.
  5. A contemporary official record describes him thus: Joseph Kavanagh – age 49 – Lille – Bootmaker – Police Officer – Residence, rue de Hurepoix 11, 7.
  6. Walker's *Hibernian Magazine*, August, 1789.
  7. Lally Tollendal was a grandson of Lally of Tullagh nadaly, in the County of Galway, an Irish nobleman who left his native country with the 'Wild Geese' after the Siege of Limerick. Lally of the Revolution was a striking figure among the French nobles of the time. In the first year of the Revolution he was strongly in favour of reform, and, while warmly attached to the King, advocated the establishment of a democratic monarchy. He left France in disgust after Louis XVI was brought in mock

- triumph from Versailles to Paris in October, 1789. He returned, however in 1792, but was immediately arrested and barely escaped being a victim of the dreadful prison massacres in September. (He was released on the evening previous to the massacres, probably through the influence of Danton.) Again leaving France, he did not return till the restoration of the Bourbons. This illustrious Franco-Irish family is now extinct – the last of them died practically a pauper in a lodging-house in London in the 1920's.
8. There was not at this period, as there is to-day, any very finely-drawn line between criminality and lunacy, and it was not unusual to confine cases of mental aberration in prisons, while criminals were sometimes placed in mental homes.
  9. In his *Life of Camille Desmoulins*, Jules Claretie gives a vivid picture of Whyte: *He appeared in the light of day and no one knew from where he came or who he was. One day, he had been*

*transferred from Vincennes to the Bastille. How many years had he been there? No one knew, and he, being insane, was unable to give any account of his former life. He stared at the captors of the Bastille without seeing them, he heard them speak without understanding them. Unheeding, he was carried through the joyous city. He exchanged his prison only for a cell – after a few days he was locked up in Charenton.*

10. It may be mentioned here that at the time of the attack on the Bastille an Irish priest, the Abbé MacMahon, was the chaplain to the place. In the Archives Nationales (0'500 596-597) there is a detailed account of the granting of a pension to him on the 11 Dec. 1789. The De La Ponce MSS. in the R.I.A., give the Abbé's name among those of the MacMahon family serving in the Irish Brigade at the beginning of the Revolution.

(Reprinted from *Ireland and Irishmen in the French Revolution*, London, 1932).