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. 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 morning 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 to desire a new militia inagh, 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 to proceed at once to the churches 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.

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 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, (Provoost of the Merchants and President of the Committee). 14th July, 1789.

Accompanied by some French Guards, Kavanagh on returning to Saint-Marguerite found consternation among its residents. A rumour had just come that four royal regiments were marching to enter 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!' The rumour that royal troops were advancing on the city, 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 Saint-Antoine. 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...
at the attack was secretly employed of a number of panic-mongers to spread wild rumours, like the advance of the royal troops, as one of the means adopted to precipitate an insurrection, and it seems to have been one of the revolutionary agents so employed during those feverish days of mid-July. A pamphlet rather indolently describes him as the "homme" of the Revolution on account of his activities on the morning of the fourteenth, by which it claims, he precipitated the Revolution on that day, yet, strangely enough, his name is missing from the official list of the Bastille attackers. That illustrious worker of the archives of the Revolution, M. Pageux, writing on this subject, says: "In the Archives' museum under the number 1166 there is preserved the original 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 "l'homme" 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 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 riffraff 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 helping the homes of suspected Royalists, placing them under arrest and putting marks 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 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 July, 1789, and a prison assassin in the dreadful week of September, 1792...
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 standing the feverish excitement in its fashionable world and, notwithstanding the object of pacifying the people and ending the disorder. Lally Tollendal, 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 appeared 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 describes him as 'a little feeble old man... He exhibited an appearance of childishness and fatuity; he tottered as he walked and the smile of an idiot did not differ from the smile of an idiot...'

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.

**REFERENCES**

1. Some regiments of the Irish Brigade on account of their traditions of 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...
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. Lally Tollenal was a grandson of Lally of Tullaghmadaly, 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 barley 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 (7500 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.


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