Insurrection

In the pre-Famine period, West Limerick, in common with most of the Province of Munster, was a remarkably violent society. Social changes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries resulted in the impoverished labouring class competing for sites for their miserable mud cabins, trying to exist on a diet mainly of potatoes, and earning about sixpence a day if they were lucky enough to have work. In these circumstances, violence was inevitable and was directed impartially at whoever was thought to be impinging on the rights of the aggrieved classes.

Many crimes, such as stealing or assault, carried a mandatory sentence of seven years transportation to Australia. By the 1820s and 1830s, such Irish convicts were arriving in Australia at an average rate of about 1000 per year.[1] Up to ten per cent of these Irish convicts were Protestants.[2]

On Tuesday, 7 October 1823, eleven men from Ballyhahill, Co. Limerick, were marched through Cork city to Cobh, and there put on board the convict hulk to wait until a convict ship was ready to sail to Australia, to take them into the seven years exile that had been inflicted on them at Rathkeale Court on Friday, 3 October, for an assault on Neville P. Nunan. The assault had taken place on Friday, 19 September. According to the official account, Nunan, of Tullylease, a few miles
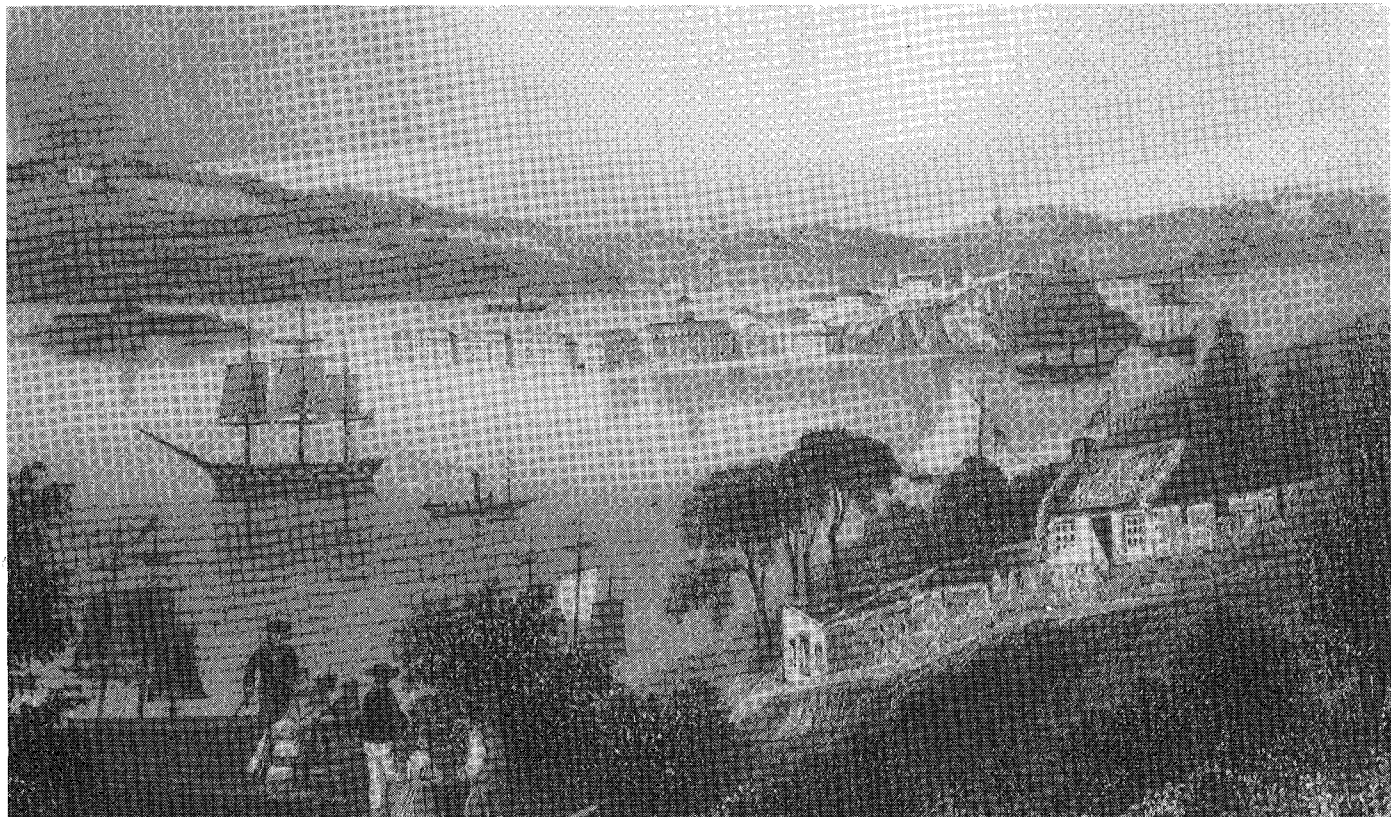

Ballyhahill village towards the end of the 19th century.
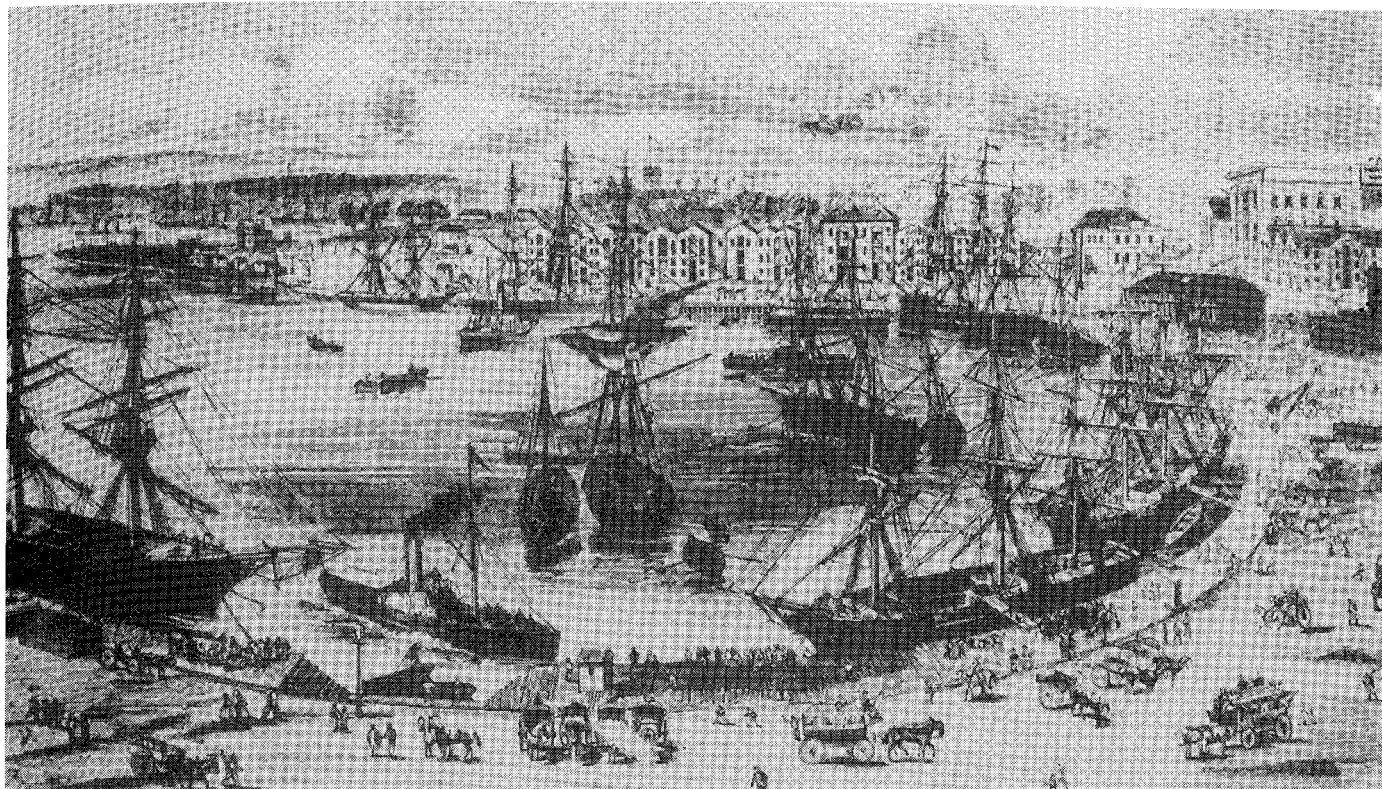
by Gerard Curtin

south of Dromcollogher, had gone to Ballyhahill on that Friday to collect some debts due to him. At about noon, a large crowd had gathered and Nunan was attacked and beaten. A gold pin, a watch and a knife were taken from him and his saddle was cut to pieces. The watch and knife were thrown away on the field, and a quantity of papers which Nunan carried were taken away. He was left on the roadside and was later helped to Shanagolden, where he was given first aid by the Rev. George Vincent. He was taken by jaunting car to Rathkeale, where he received medical attention. It was found that he had thirteen wounds, which cannot have been severe, as he was able to travel back to Shanagolden the following day.[3]

The Cove of Cork: print by W.H. Bartlett.

Circular Quay, Sydney, arrival point for the convict ships in New South Wales.

On Monday night, 22 September, a large party of military under Captain Cox of the 1st Regiment, Rifle Brigade, stationed at Rathkeale, together with a party of police, moved into Ballyhahill. House after house was raided and 31 people were arrested and brought to Shanagolden, where they arrived on Tuesday morning at seven o'clock. Word was sent to Nunan at Rathkeale and he travelled on a gig to Shanagolden. The 31 prisoners were paraded in the street of the town. Hundreds of people had crowded around them, but Nunan made light work of identifying 11 of them as being involved in the assault on himself. Their names were given as: John Hurley, Edmond Sheehy, Murtu Culhane, James Sheehan, John Hanley, Edmond Sheehan, John Bath, James Connors, Thomas Culhane, Edmond Walsh and Thomas Coughlan, all from the Ballyhahill area.[4]

The eleven were put on trial at the Rathkeale Sessions on Friday week, and the magistrates of County Limerick were very well represented on the bench. Presiding over them was special magistrate Blackburn, who had been appointed to operate the Insurrection Act in the county. The trial was only a formality. The evidence of Nunan was regarded as the clearest testimony, and the eleven men were sentenced to seven years transportation, the statutory punishment. One of the witnesses who came forward to swear an alibi for one of the accused was promptly charged by Nunan as being a ringleader of his assailants, and was arrested. The trial dragged on all day and did not come to a halt until 8pm, when Blackburn announced sentence, and said that nothing could induce him to recommend their case in a favourable light

to the government. On Monday, 27 October, Blackburn said at the Sessions at Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, that he had received an order from the government directing him that the eleven men sentenced for the outrage on Nunan should be the first to board the convict hulk at Cobh.[5]

Two hulks were used for the detention of prisoners awaiting transportation. The hulk at Cobh was the *Surprise,* and no doubt the prisoners had some new experiences, unexpected and unwelcome, during their enforced stay on board. Commander Brunicardi in his history of Haulbowline, Spike and Rocky Islands (Cork, 1968), recalls that the grim vessel, the *Surprise,* is referred to in the old ballad, *The Town of Passage*[6]:

Tis there's the hulk that's well stored with convicts,
Who were never upon decks till they went to sea,
They'll ne'er touch dry land, nor rocky island,
Until they spy land in sweet Botany Bay.

What fate lay in store for the men? Six of the eleven arrived in Sydney on 7 August 1824 aboard the 375 ton convict ship, the *Prince Regent.*[7]

In November 1828, the following were the occupations of these six men: John Bath, the only Protestant of the group,[8] is stated to be age 27, his occupation a shepherd, working for William Ogilvie, Merton, Hunter River; James Connor, age 43, occupation labourer, employer S. L. Harris, Goulburn Grove; Thomas Michael Coughlan, age 34, occupation cook, employer John Coghill, Kirkham, Cooke County; James Sheehan, age 34,

occupation shepherd, employer Robert Lethbridge, Plains; Edward Sheehan, age 30, occupation dairyman, employer John Street, Bathurst; John Hurley, age 27, occupation labourer, employer Terence Murray, Melville.[9]

Of the other five, Thomas Culhane arrived in Sydney on 17 December 1825 on the convict ship *Catherine Stewart Forbes.* In November 1828, his age was 39, occupation labourer, employer J.H. Boughton, Tillmey. Edward Sheehy arrived in New South Wales on 18 February 1826 on the convict ship *Mangles,* which had a cargo of 189 male prisoners from Ireland.[10] In 1828, he was aged 35, occupation labourer, employer John Farrell, Pittwater.[11]

The final three prisoners cannot be traced with certainty. In the census of 1828, there is a John Hanley serving a seven year sentence. His age was 21, occupation labourer, employer J. Reid, Rosebrooke. He arrived in Sydney on 13 July 1828 on the convict ship *Bordino,* which had sailed from Cork with 200 male prisoners. It is unlikely that John Hanley was held in a convict hulk for four years. If he was, then he was only sixteen at the time of his sentence.[12]

In 1828 there was an Edward Walsh residing at Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. He arrived at Port Jackson on 12 July 1824 aboard the *Countess of Harcourt.* This ship had a cargo of 171 male prisoners from the Downes, England.[13] Again, it is unlikely that this is our man.

Of Murtu Culhane, no trace can be found. He is not recorded in the census of 1828. Did he die on the voyage, or perhaps serve his time somewhere else?[14]

John Hurley was named as one of the two ringleaders.[15] It seems that he was the

Shanagolden towards the end of the 19th century, postcard.

man with the greatest ability of the prisoners, as he is the only one of the eleven mentioned in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 1851-1890. By 1828, he had been assigned to Captain Terence Murray and his son, Terence, on whose Lake George grants he worked, and became superintendent. He was freed from servitude in 1830 and, by 1832, had become an innkeeper at Campbelltown. He married Mary Byrne in 1837 and had a family of three sons and three daughters. He owned the Royal Hotel in Campbell-town by 1841 and bought land near the town where he later had a stud of Clydesdales. By 1861, he had 90,000 acres of land and, when he died on 27 November 1882 from senile decay, he left £25,303.[16]

Terence Murray (1810-1873) was the third and last child of Captain Terence Murray and his wife Ellen, nee Fitzgerald. He was born at Balliston, Shanagolden. His father was a paymaster in the British Army and, on leaving in 1827, he took up a land grant in New South Wales.[17]

Such is fate, that John Hurley, a prisoner, could travel half way around the world and go working for another West Limerick man and a native of an adjoining parish. Terence Murray travelled from Shanagolden a free man. John Hurley travelled from Ballyhahill to Australia a convict. Both did equally well. The fatal shore of transportation had become a land of opportunity.

SOURCES

1. Patrick O'Farrell: *The Irish in Australia,* NSW University Press, 1986, p.23
2. *ibid.* p.29.
3. *Limerick Chronicle* 8 October 1823.
4. *Cork Examiner,* 7 October 1971.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*
7. Malcolm R. Sainty & Keith A. Johnson: *The Census of New South Wales 1828,* NSW State Library, 1985.
8. He was probably a native of Finnoo townland, as there are Baths living in this townland, then known as Whiskeyhall, in the Tithes of 1833.
9. Malcolm R. Sainty & Keith A. Johnson, *op. cit.*
10. *Shipping Arrivals and Departures, Sydney (1826-40),* NSW State Library
11. Malcolm R. Sainty & Keith A. Johnson, *op. cit.*
12. *ibid.*
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*
15. Christopher O'Mahony & Valerie Thompson: *Poverty to Promise, The Monteagle Emigrants 1838-58,* Crossing Press, New South Wales, 1994, p.160.
16. *Australian Dictionary of Biography,* 2, 1851-1890, NSW State Library.
17. *Australian Dictionary of Biography,* 1, 1788-1850, NSW State Library.

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Mohernagh House, home of Thomas Hurley, today a ruin.