

THE STRANGE CAREER OF THE MAN FROM ENNIS:

JAMES BARTHOLOMEW BLACKWELL

BY HUGH GOUGH

James Bartholomew Alexander Blackwell was born in Ennis, County Clare, on 16 September, 1764. He spent most of his life in France as a soldier in the French army, and died there during the 1820s. In going to France, he followed the path of Catholic emigration started by the Wild Geese in the 1690s. A clerical student, a medical student, then a soldier, he came to Ireland with the 1798 Invasion, was imprisoned at Kilmainham for more than two years, and later fought on many of the battlefields of northern Europe. He was a man of many parts, and the claim has even been made that he led the assault on the Bastille, on 14 July, 1789. Since 1986, an annual ceremony has been held at Kilmainham Jail to commemorate his role in the event. But was he really there? Who was the real Blackwell, and what did he really do during the Revolution? What should we remember him for now?

Although born in Ennis, Blackwell, like many Catholic children from middle class backgrounds in 18th century Ireland, was educated in France. He went to Paris as a boy and was a pupil at the Irish College, on the rue des Lombards, thanks to a scholarship endowed by his maternal great-uncle, Doctor Bartholomew Murray, for members of the family intending to enter the priesthood. Having received the education, Blackwell decided against becoming a priest, and trained as a doctor instead, at the Hospital de la Bicêtre. However, it is not clear that he ever qualified, for in 1783 he took French nationality. Three years later, on 5 January, 1786, he enrolled as a cadet into the Walsh regiment, one of the three remaining regiments of the Irish Brigade in the French army. Although very few of the rank-and-file of these regiments were Irish by the late eighteenth century, the officers were still overwhelmingly Irish, and Blackwell must have felt very much at home.⁽¹⁾

In his book, *Ireland and Irishmen in the French Revolution*, R.J. Hayes claims that Blackwell mixed in Parisian radical circles on the eve of the revolution, and was 'an intimate friend of Danton, Camille Desmoulins' and the other leading spirits of the clubs who helped to participate in the insurrection of the



General Hoche.

fourteenth of July'. He goes on to state that Blackwell was chosen by the citizens of the faubourg Saint Antoine to lead them in the attack on the Bastille, and this has been reiterated since by several of Blackwell's biographers.⁽²⁾ Yet Hayes quotes no source for this, and it is probably complete myth. The Walsh regiment was in fact stationed in the island of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, between July, 1788, and the spring of 1790, and although officers frequently spent long periods away from their regiments, it is unlikely that the young Blackwell would have been able to absent himself in Paris. Even if he did, none of the abundant literature on the Bastille, or the archival material, mentions his name. In the spring of 1790, the Paris Municipality set up a commission to draw up a definitive list of those who had participated in the attack, and it finally came up with 954 names. Each of the participants was given a medal and a parchment, and the final list is now in the Archives Nationales. Blackwell's name is not there. It is possible that he was overlooked in error, or that he was not in Paris in the spring of 1790 to make his claim. Yet it is



Napper Tandy.

difficult to see how a man who supposedly led the major assault could have been omitted both from the list, and from the many contemporary accounts. Even more telling is the fact that at no stage in his subsequent career did he ever claim to have been involved, even though it would certainly have been a useful feather in his cap for military promotion.⁽³⁾

What, then, did happen to Blackwell when the revolution broke out? His dossier in the Archives de la Guerre in Paris shows that he left the Walsh regiment in 1791, at the age of twenty-seven, to enrol in one of the volunteer regiments then being formed in the Paris area. By the spring of 1792, he was a lieutenant in a volunteer corps called the Poacher Hussars, which in October, 1792, became the 21st Cavalry Regiment. In August, 1793, he was a captain the same regiment, fought on the north-eastern frontier in the armée du Nord during the campaigns against the First Coalition, and was wounded at Pont à Marck, near Lille, in the autumn of 1794. It was during this period that he seems to have met his wife, a young woman from Somerset, Sophie Wade, who was in France with her father in the latter months of 1793, and was arrested as an enemy national. Blackwell appears to



have attended her trial, acting as interpreter for herself and her father. He fell in love, and married her shortly afterwards.⁽⁴⁾ We have a description of him at around this time, from an English secret agent in Paris. He was 5' 10" high, with grey eyes, a sandy moustache, a long nose, high forehead and pointed chin. He took copious amounts of snuff, and spoke fluent French.

Until 1798, Blackwell remained a captain, at a time when rapid promotion was available for talented officers because of the rapid growth in the size of French armies. Blackwell missed out on promotion, "but in the spring of 1798 he began to show an interest in Irish affairs. On 17 March, he attended a St. Patrick's Day banquet in Paris, in the company of Tom Paine, Napper Tandy, and the celebrated Irish general, Charles Kilmaine. He struck up a friendship with Tandy, who visited his home frequently and was a great admirer of his wife. It was probably Tandy who persuaded him to volunteer for the expedition of 1798, for in early September he set sail from Dunkirk, in the *Anacréon*, bound for the coast of Donegal. Before embarking, he had persuaded the Naval Minister, Bruix, to grant him the rank of lieutenant-colonel, arguing that it was the only way of providing him with sufficient authority for his expedition:

Ambition has always been alien to my heart; but I fear that my relatives and friends would have a poor idea of me, or could believe me to be a poor citizen, if I were to arrive with the grade of captain, a grade which I had six years ago, while several of my compatriots will arrive with superior grades, without ever having served a day in the army. In Ireland, one's rank counts for a great deal ...

The *Anacréon*, with Blackwell, Tandy and a detachment of troops on board, arrived off Rutlin Island in mid-September, 1798, shortly after Humbert's defeat at Ballinamuck. The two men went ashore on Rutlin Island and occupied the postmaster's house; but, on learning of Humbert's defeat, they re-embarked and set sail again for France. According to Blackwell, Tandy was so drunk that he had to be carried back onto the boat; but this may be malicious gossip, for the two men had begun to quarrel and their former friendship was soon to collapse in mutual acrimony.⁽⁵⁾

Affairs now turned from bad to worse, for the *Anacréon* was hit by heavy winds on the return journey to France and forced into the port of Bergen in Norway. Tandy and Blackwell feared that the British navy might capture them if they resumed their journey to France, so they decided to return by the overland route. The French consul in Bergen fitted them out with disguises, and Blackwell pretended to be an American, using the name of Mr. Blackfirst. He left Bergen, with Tandy, on 2 October, and set out for Hamburg which had for several years



Kilmainham Jail doorway.

been a port of entry for Irish refugees making their way to France. However, the British plenipotentiary in Hamburg, Sir James Craufurd, was tipped off about their identity, and on the night after their arrival, 22 November, 1798, he had them arrested. Blackwell appears to have drawn his sword to resist arrest, but was quickly overpowered.

The arrest caused an international incident. The British government claimed that both men were British subjects, wanted on treason charges. The French claimed that they were French army officers who should be released and allowed to return home. Hamburg was diplomatically neutral and wanted the whole affair to go away, but two of Britain's allies, Russia and Prussia, put heavy pressure on the authorities to extradite Tandy and Blackwell and, on 1 October, 1799, they were finally put on

the sloop, *Xenophen*, bound for England. Blackwell had by now spent almost eleven months in prison and, apart from one abortive escape attempt, had whiled away the time by trying to learn German.⁽⁶⁾

The *Xenophen* docked in Sheerness on 29 October, 1799, and Blackwell was taken to Dublin. He arrived there on 12 November, 1799, and was committed to Kilmainham to await trial. According to the Bow Street officer who accompanied him, he complained during the journey of his contempt for Tandy, and his disgust with the 1798 expedition. (Lecky, *v. 71*, quoting examination of Peter Perry, Bow Street officer, 5 November, 1799; *the ISPO*): "Certainly, once he arrived in Kilmainham, he quarreled with Tandy, demanded that he be allowed to dine alone, complained about the food, and persuaded the prison doctor that he

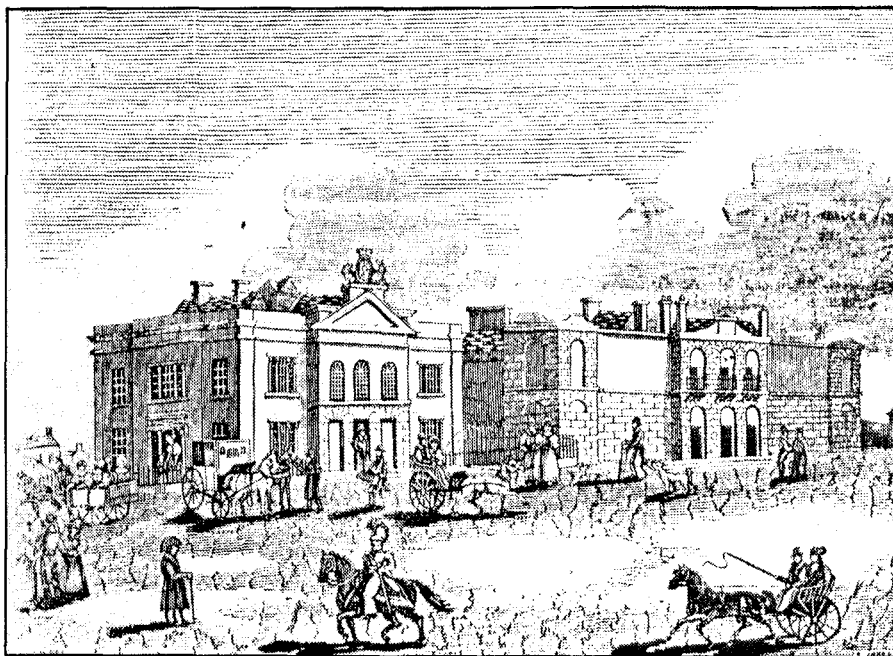
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ded special oyster dinners because of his health. Even when he was provided with a private cell, the quarrels with Tandy continued during exercise periods, and the prison doctor soon became convinced that he was a difficult man and an inveterate liar. He soon withdrew the oyster diet, but Blackwell then demanded that he be given the money allocated to the jailer for his food, and when this was refused, smashed his crockery and threw food around the room. Shortly afterwards, he lost the single room, and was put back into a collective cell.⁽⁷⁾

Throughout his imprisonment, Blackwell claimed the protection of his French citizenship. So too did his wife, Sophia, who returned to England from France, and wrote to the Duke of Portland and to the Irish authorities, asking for his release. Yet he was only released and allowed to return to France after the Treaty of Amiens in the spring of 1802. He then went back to his regiment but, much to his annoyance, was not allowed to keep the grade of lieutenant-colonel which he had been given for the Irish expedition. Nevertheless, promotion did come at the end of 1803, when he volunteered for the new Irish brigade that Napoleon created after the renewed outbreak of war with England. The battalion was based at Morlaix in Brittany, under the command of lieutenant-commander MacSheehy, and Blackwell was posted to it on 15 December, 1803, with the rank of battalion commander. Yet, six months later, he was removed from the regiment, after quarreling with his commanding-officer, O'Connor, who had opposed his promotion to the rank of brigadier-general. Under something of a cloud, he was transferred back to his former regiment.⁽⁸⁾

In 1806, he took part in the military campaigns in Prussia and Poland. He was wounded at the battle of Jena on 14 October, 1806, and again at Eylau on 10 February, 1807. His courage was rewarded with the award of the Legion of Honour, and he spent the next eighteen months in Poland and Germany. By 1810, he was a chef d'escadron, but he was fifty-six years old and his health was beginning to fail. He was diagnosed as suffering from a tubercular complaint, and his doctor recommended that he be posted to a warmer climate. In February, 1811, he went on sick leave. By 1812, he had returned to Paris, and he was never to see active service again. In 1816, he was posted to the fortress of Petite Pierre in Alsace, as military governor, but he was never happy there, and returned to Paris in 1818 after a quarrel with a regimental captain. He died there some years later.

During the last years of his life, Blackwell had a military pension and an annual payment of 20 francs by virtue of his membership of the Legion of Honour. Yet, military pensions were not generous,



Kilmainham Jail and Sessions House.

and this probably accounts for his attempt in 1815 to claim the bursary set up by his grand-uncle in the 1760s, and which had helped finance his own way through the Irish College. The college had been closed in 1793, but was reopened in 1802, after the Treaty of Amiens. Bartholomew Murray had established four bourses for members of the Murray and Blackwell families, but none had been taken up since 1802. Blackwell therefore asked the Minister of the Interior to allocate their revenue - and the arrears back to 1802 - to himself. The Minister, in a polite but firm letter in October, 1815, stated that this was impossible, because of the conditions of the original bequest which tied them to the education of priests. It was too late to change his vocation.

Blackwell had a long and varied career. It is very unlikely that he played any part in the taking of the Bastille, and he was never a leading soldier in the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies. Army records suggest that he lacked technical and tactical expertise, and this probably explains his failure to gain significant promotion. His relations with Napper Tandy, and the reports on his sojourn at Kilmainham, also reveal that he could be a difficult and moody man, something which his quarrels in Morlaix and Petite Pierre confirm. On the other hand, he was also a courageous man, with extensive experience on the battlefield, and the wounds to show for it. He was a supporter of the French Revolution, for otherwise he would have followed the many officers from the Irish regiments in France who emigrated during the Revolution and served in the counter-revolutionary armies. He supported the cause of Irish independence, and risked his life for it in 1798. So, although Blackwell's career does not contain the glamour claimed for

it, by those who have falsely attributed to him a leading role in the fall of the Bastille, it does contain a certain fascination for the historian of the Irish in France during the revolution. Blackwell was no genius, and he was no hero. But he never lacked courage and, if events in 1798 had turned out differently, he might now be remembered for his actions then, instead of being remembered for what he did not do - storm the Bastille.

NOTES

1. Archives de la Guerre, Vincennes: Blackwell's dossier (unclassified): National Library, Dublin, Ms. 8822. Unless otherwise noted, biographical details are drawn mainly from these two sources.
2. *Ireland and Irishmen in the French Revolution* by Richard Hayes, London, 1932, pp. 28-33; *Old Irish Links with France* by Richard Hayes, Dublin, 1940, 37-8; 'James Bartholomew Blackwell: Revolutionary and Royalist', by Most Rev. G. Rodgers, *Molua, Organ of the Association of St. Gregory*, 1959, 26-30.
3. The original list is in the Archives Nationales, Paris C35, no. 208; it has been reprinted in *La Bastille* by F. Bournon, Paris, 1893, pp. 218-223.
4. *Ireland and Irishmen* .p. 30
5. *Napper Tandy*, by Rupert J. Coughlan, Dublin, 1976, pp. 115, 123, 130-8.
6. *Ibid.*, 148-167; G. Servières. 'Un épisode de l'expédition d'Irlande. L'extradition et la mise en liberté de Napper Tandy' *Revue Historique*, 1907, pp. 46-73.
7. Correspondence in State Paper Office, PP&C 633 & 635; & SOC II, 3367, 3368, 3372; see also *Napper Tandy*, 171-180.
8. Pierre Carles, 'Le corps irlandais au service de la France sous le Consulat et l'Empire', *Revue historique des armées*, 1976, pp. 25-54.