



# JAMES BURKE: PRIEST AND REVOLUTIONARY

**J**ames Burke was born in 'the parish of Saint Conald', near Ennis in 1739. He was the son of John Burke and Mary Callery. There is some confusion concerning the exact location of his birthplace, as the area is now known as Dromcliffe.

Burke was educated at the Irish College at Bordeaux and, after his ordination as a priest, was made canon of St. Astier in the diocese of Perigueux. Later, he was appointed curé of St. Jacques d'Ambes, near Bordeaux, and was officiating there when what he later called 'the most glorious of revolutions' broke out in 1789.

During Burke's studies at the Irish College at Bordeaux, one of his teachers had been Dr. Guillotine, the inventor of the terrible death instrument that was to bear his name. Guillotine, a native of Bordeaux, was a friend of James Roche, a Limerickman who lived in that city during that period.

It has been claimed that Burke had been greatly influenced by the views of Dr. Guillotine. Be that as it may, he soon became an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution. He was one of the first priests in the district to take the oath to the civil constitution, and to become a constitutional curé. But before long he gave up his clerical functions, and became one of the leading revolutionaries in the area. He bought a farm,

BY DES RYAN

and also became involved in dealings with the confiscated lands and houses of the Bordeaux aristocracy.

In his book *Ireland and Irishmen in the French Revolution* Richard Hayes provides details of some of Burke's revolutionary activities, and quoted from an 1811 attestation by M. Ysabeau, the representative of the Paris Commune who became the ruler of Bordeaux:

*Becoming an intimate friend of Ysabeau, the Representative of the Commune, who had supreme power in the district, he gave that official much assistance, particularly in the onerous work of provisioning the town during the famine. One day Ysabeau asked him what reward he would desire for his signal services, and Burke replied: 'Save the lives of my fifty fellow-countrymen, imprisoned at the Carmelites, and preserve from confiscation the college where I was educated - that is the reward I desire.' Ysabeau immediately promised him what he asked, and when there was a little unavoidable delay in carrying out the promise, the Representative described afterwards how Burke 'followed me to Bourg, to Blaye, etc., persistently demanding of me to save his countrymen and his college - such were his words.' 'As for the College,' continues Ysabeau, 'it was impossible to restore it, for I was*

*not strong enough to expel Lacombe from within its walls - Lacombe, the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal and Robespierre's trusted friend. But as for the fifty Irishmen who were prisoners, I gave them their freedom and I chartered an American vessel which took them home to Ireland.'*

Richard Hayes also tells how Ysabeau was selected by Robespierre to go to Bordeaux to take charge of the city:

*At Bordeaux, the Church of Saint Eutrope was, like the College, Irish property, and both enjoyed immunity, in the early years of the Revolution, from the repressive measures against ecclesiastical institutions. This immunity ceased, however, with the commencement of the Reign of Terror in the middle of 1793, and towns like Bordeaux, which were in sympathy with the Girondists, were specially marked out for drastic treatment by Robespierre and the victorious party of the Mountain. In the autumn of that year the edict went forth from the Commune at Paris that terror must be made the order of the day, and forthwith two Representatives, armed with unlimited powers - Tallien, one of the assassins in the September massacres, and Ysabeau, a friend of Robespierre - were sent to that town. A Military Tribunal, with a local fanatic, Lacombe, for its President, was immediately set up and the guillotine soon began its bloody work. The jails, too, were filled with citizens, and*



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A revolutionary committee at work.

property was sequestered, while a scarcity of food intensified the general misery of the inhabitants. In October, 1793, a furious mob of Jacobins attacked the Irish College. Some of the mob laid hold of him as he was endeavouring to get hurriedly away, but his soutane, old and worn, we are told, gave way, probably saving his life. A month later, the Terrorist, Lacombe, officially invaded the place and put the students and priests under arrest, imprisoning them in the Carmelite convent. He took complete possession of the College with its furniture, plate, linen and stores, and established there not only his own family but also his Military Tribunal, whose seven judges, on account of their vicious characters, were known locally as *The Seven Deadly Sins* ('*Les Sept Péchés Capiteux*'). From within the walls of the Irish Seminary he and his accomplices proceeded to scatter frightfulness and death on all sides.

For all his revolutionary zeal, Burke was twice imprisoned by the new regime. Richard Hayes has explained why this happened: 'Burke was guilty of many indiscretions and made many enemies, who did not scruple to spread calumnies regarding his character.'

In his later book *Old Irish Links with France*, Richard Hayes elaborates on these 'indiscretions':

*Ecclesiastical property having been taken over by the State and put up for sale, Burke in March, 1791, purchased by his own account and for the account of a firm of merchants of Bordeaux, including that of the Ursulines, in the city.*

Hayes goes on to quote a contemporary pamphlet, written by M. Vine:

*Everything seemed to be going on for the best, and the curé of St. Jacques was passing happy days when a small*

*'accident', which we shall relate, took place. The 'most glorious of Revolutions' was to create difficulties even for its fervent disciples, as Burke discovered to his cost.*

*The Republic was at war with the chief powers of Europe, and the National Convention in September, 1793, ordered the arrest of all subjects of these powers resident in France. In October, 1793, this was carried out in Bordeaux, and many foreigners were imprisoned in the prison of the Carmelites. Just then, and for some while before, Burke was ill and, notwithstanding every care, the state of his health grew daily worse, and at last he determined to come to Bordeaux to consult a doctor.*

*On Wednesday, 16 October, 1793, he came by boat to the city, but on the evening of the 18th at midnight a police officer placed him formally under arrest. The state of his health was so bad, however, that he did not remove him, but left two gendarmes in the house where he was staying.*

*This was a hard blow for the patriotic Burke. On the 19th October he addressed a petition to the Representatives for his release. 'Burke begs of you, fathers of the people', he wrote, 'to give him the justice due to a constitutionalist priest, paid by the State and himself a sincere Republican. He is not a Frenchman, it is true; since, even under the old régime, one could not hold a benefice without being French (with all the more reason a benefice in charge of souls), he is therefore not to presume that the decree affects the priests in the service of the Republic, being all French before their appointment - otherwise such would have been null and void. It is on account of this that he has every reason to hope that your justice will release him on bail;*

*and once his health is re-established he will go wherever he is ordered'. To this appeal no reply came from the Representatives.*

A few weeks later, Burke addressed the *Comité de Surveillance* in similar terms, adding that he had the pleasure of displeasing some of the noblesse of his parish and their agents, and that, as a result, these had spread calumnious reports about him. He stated, too, that his means were limited and that he could no longer afford to pay the expenses of the four Volunteer guards who were placed over him, while at the same time he offered to produce documents proving his innocence. Again, there was no reply, and, at last, after a final appeal to Ysabeau, he got his release and returned to his farm.

A month later, while Ysabeau was presiding at a meeting of the National Club in Bordeaux one evening, Burke appeared there and presented a silver plate as a gift to the Republic. The Representative congratulated him on his patriotism and, as a former Oratorian, was delighted to see a curé who had apostasised like himself. He flattered Burke with pleasant words and invited him to spend the next day at his house. They became intimate friends and, to give a more complete proof of his revolutionary zeal, Burke obtained from Ysabeau an order permitting him to demolish his church building and sell its materials.

Richard Hayes quotes from a description of Burke by one of his many enemies:

*Burke, an Irishman, had bought his church which was quite new, and demolished it in order to sell, or devote to some other purpose, its materials. He is a playboy and was a smuggler before the Revolution. He told me not long ago that he would like to return to Ireland, and that he would never again ascend the altar steps. Why did he not do so more than twenty years ago, seeing that he did not wish to become better?*

Vine, in his pamphlet, comments on Burke's action regarding the church, and remarks that 'the break with his past was now complete'. He continues:

*Forgotten during the height of the Terror, Burke could hope that, with the fall of Robespierre after Thermidor, danger was over for him. It proved to be nothing of the kind. Calumnies and his own indiscretion again brought him under notice. Ysabeau, who had been some time previously recalled from Bordeaux, was again sent there after Thermidor and arrived in August, 1794. Calumnies regarding Burke poured in on him, whom he had once more arrested. He was charged with demanding 200,000 francs from a citizen to whom the money had been given by Ysabeau to purchase lands. But, after an inquiry into the charge, he was released after his innocence was proved.*

Ysabeau had been recalled to Paris by the



Georges Jacques Danton.

Committee of Public Safety because of what it considered 'the clemency of his administration.' He was succeeded by Jullien, 'a more noted Terrorist,' under whose rule the superior of the Irish College in Bordeaux, Fr. Martin Glynn, was executed, after having been discovered in July, 1794, saying Mass in a private house.

Years afterwards, in an account of his revolutionary activities, published in a pamphlet entitled, *Burke, a sauvé la mission de Bordeaux*, James Burke described his own and the students' release and how the college survived:

*In December, 1793, Lacombe, the Robespierre of the Gironde, armed with the double decree of the National Convention which ordered the arrest of priests and British subjects, came with his satellites to take possession of the Irish seminary at Bordeaux. He arrested the superiors, masters and students to the number of 50, brought them prisoners to the House of the Carmelites and seized the College, the furniture, plate, linen, provision, etc. He then established there his own family and his revolutionary committee, and from within its walls his lieutenants went forth to scatter terror on all sides.*

*... On the 23rd of February, 1796, I learnt, while in prison, that the house of the Irish seminary had just been auctioned as national property for the sum of 36,000 livres to a merchant who proposed to establish in it a tobacco factory.*

*The enmity to priests had not yet ceased - it was far from being so - but at all risk I determined to stop the sale, and on the delivery of the contract I prepared a petition with the help of some legal men who were fellow-prisoners of mine. Next day, my petition was presented to the President of the Directory of the*

*Department, and the delivery of the contract was postponed till a new order or the Minister came. Released soon after obtaining this respite, I fought the matter out at much risk and at much expense.*

Among the forty students who had been imprisoned in the Irish College was Michael Murphy, who later went on to become the Wexford insurrection leader in 1798.

When he finally succeeded in preventing the sale of the college, he began work on its restoration. After the Concordat of 1802 between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII, he became reconciled to the church and resumed his pastoral duties in Bordeaux. However, he failed in his efforts to save the Church of St. Eutrope, which was sold as the property of a country at war with France.

In 1815, the French Minister of State, Lally Tellendal, who was of Irish parentage, pleaded for a state pension for Burke who, he said, had risked his life and had given his last penny to save and restore the Bordeaux Irish college as a

seminary, 'while his only reward was bitter persecution.'

When James Burke died in 1822, he left all he possessed for the establishment of a bursary for young Irishmen to study for the priesthood in the college and for a daily mass to said for him. He was buried with full clerical honours from the cathedral of Bordeaux.

#### SOURCES

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Robespierre addressing the Convention.

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