The Limerick City Militia and the Battle of Collooney, 1798

By OLIVER SNODDY

The silver medal here illustrated, from the collections in the National Museum of Ireland (reg. no. RIA 316), is one of those which was awarded to privates of the regiment which took part in the military engagement at Collooney, Co. Sligo, in 1798, between a force for the most part composed of members of the Limerick City Militia, under Colonel Vereker, and a force composed of Irishmen and French soldiers, under General Humbert.

![Silver medal](photo)

Silver medal struck in commemoration of the Limerick City Militia who fought in the Battle of Collooney, Co. Sligo, 1798. (Photo: National Museum of Ireland)

THE MEDAL.

*Obverse*: The arms of Limerick city, a gate with a pair of castellated towers and a turret behind with flag flying, enclosed in spray of olive and spray of palm, ends tied. Above, CORPORATION AND CITIZENS, and below, OF LIMERICK.

*Reverse*: The Imperial Crown enclosed in two sprays of olive almost forming wreath, ends tied. Above, TO THE HEROES OF COLOONY, and below, 5TH. SEPR. 1798, with, in smaller letters between date and tied ends of sprays, BRUSH. Diameter, 1.6 ins. Weight, 9½ cwts., 9 gns. Pierced for suspension ring.
THE ARTIST

Although the Revd. H. R. Dawson does not include the now faint signature in his description of the medal, he has no hesitation in ascribing it to James Brush of 7 St. Andrew Street, Dublin. Dawson describes Brush as a silversmith but this does not appear to have been the case, Strickland stating that Brush "was enrolled as a quarter-brother of the Goldsmiths' Corporation in Dublin in 1771," while Brush had himself described in Wilson's Dublin Directory, from 1773 to 1793 inclusive, as a Jeweller and Watchmaker. This latter attribute of his has not been noticed by any of the commentators on the Irish medallists, Dawson, Frazer, Forrer, or Strickland. He has, however, been listed by Miss Fennell as a watchmaker. Both Frazer and Forrer used the description, as found in Wilson's Dublin Directories for the years 1794-1801 inclusive, of Brush as a Jeweller and Madeira Wine Merchant.

One feels that, taking their cue from Dawson, all the commentators condemn rather unfairly the quality of this medal. Furthermore, none seem to have noted or listed that this medal was also struck in gold and issued to the non-commissioned officers of the Limerick City Militia Regiment; no specimen in gold seems to have survived.

Dawson dates the medal to 1798, probably from the following reference to a Limerick Council meeting in The Dublin Evening Post of 18 October 1798.

Resolved that the sum of fifty guineas be paid by our Chamberlaine towards raising a fund to purchase a suitable piece of Plate for the Officers' Mess and proper medals for such of the non-commissioned officers and privates of the regiment as were engaged in the action on that day.

The striking in gold of this medal, hitherto unnoted and not represented in the collections of the National Museum of Ireland, and the dating of the medal as from 1799 is suggested by the following newspaper extract.

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1 In a paper read to the Royal Irish Academy on 16 March 1838 and published in TRIA, 19 (1839).
4 Dawson, loc. cit. (see fn. 1).
5 Frazer, loc. cit.
6 Forrer, loc. cit.
7 Strickland, loc. cit.
8 G. Fennell, A List of Irish Watch and Clock Makers, p. 6. (Dublin, 1963).
9 Frazer, loc. cit. He only uses the reference given for the year 1797.
10 Forrer, loc. cit. Following Frazer he also only refers to the 1797 entry.
11 Dawson, loc. cit., speaks of Brush's medals as "miserable in point of design and workmanship" and of Brush as "totally devoid of skill and judgment in that line." Frazer, loc. cit., thinks Dawson's "expression is rather strong" but only finds in favour of the medals that "they possess interest regarded as historic records."
12 Dawson, loc. cit.
14 Freeman's Journal, 24 August 1799.
The Corporation and Citizens of Limerick have subscribed for very elegant Gold and Silver medals, to be presented to the City of Limerick Militia, for their brave and valourous conduct at Collooney, in resisting the French army, under General Humbert, who sometime ago invaded this kingdom. The Gold medals are for the Sergeants, the Silver for the Privates; they have been manufactured by Messrs. James Brush, and Son, of St. Andrew’s Street, where they may be now seen.

Brush himself was probably not the artist; one gathers from the variations in the description of his activities that he was primarily a jeweller and then an entrepreneur. It is possible that he commissioned a die-sinker and this is indicated by an advertisement of 1789, in which he claims that he continues to execute orders in his line, with that Taste, Elegance and Punctuality which has merited their past, and he hopes will ensure their future Favour. — As every Article he sells is made by himself and able Assistants; he engages no Work shall leave his Shop, but such as the Connoisseur and the Person of Taste may admire. In the Seal line he presumes to say, that no Person in this City can equal him, for neatness and durability of settings. He has engaged an eminent Seal Engraver from London, specimens of whose work are ready for inspection.

one specimen of which is praised by Frazer. This “Seal Engraver from London” was probably the man responsible for sinking the dies for the Collooney medal.

Strickland says that “His name does not occur after 1798” but despite the ascription of the medal to James Brush and Son in 1799 he continues to be referred to in Wilson’s Dublin Directories up to and including 1801. In 1802 the business is listed as James Brush and Son, Jeweller and Madeira Wine Merchant, and it is described as such up to 1812. In 1813, however, the business had been completely transformed, being described as “Brush (Mary and Jane) Tea Dealers.” This suggests that James senior died or retired from business sometime in the period 1800 to 1801.

THE BATTLE

The battle itself, which was commemorated in Collooney by a monument to the Franco-Irish victory and in particular to Bartholomew Teeling’s gallantry, and in Limerick by a Collooney Street, in honour of Vereker, was, in fact, little more than a skirmish which lasted about an hour according to one estimate and almost an hour and a half according to Vereker’s own account. Though there does not seem to have been any government bulletin or announcement of the battle and though, for example, The Freeman’s Journal of 8 September 1798 carries no account of it, it did in effect, and as such was seen in retrospect, alter the course of Humbert’s plan of campaign and it was, therefore, a remote cause of his final defeat at Ballinamuck.

15 This advertisement appeared in the Dublin Chronicle in the issues dated 1–3 January 1789 and 6 January 1789. The latter reference only is cited by Frazer (loc. cit.) and, following him, by Forrer (loc. cit.).
16 Frazer, loc. cit.
17 Strickland loc. cit.
18 Freeman’s Journal, 24 August 1799.
19 Wilson’s Dublin Directory for 1802, p. 25.
20 Wilson’s Dublin Directory for 1813, p. 5.
21 An Impartial Relation of the Military Operations which took place in Ireland in consequence of the landing of a body of French troops, under General Humbert, in August, 1798, (Dublin, 1799). The author was an officer in the Government forces at the time.
22 Dublin Evening Post, 4 October 1798.
23 I could trace no such bulletin in the collections of either the National Library of Ireland or the National Museum of Ireland.
Humbert after landing, taking, and garrisoning Killala, was successful at Castlebar and on the advice of his Irish associates—Teeling was his Aide-de-Camp—began moving his forces north. Sligo, the first main obstacle, was garrisoned by a mixed force composed primarily of the Limerick City militia under its commander Colonel Vereker. On 5 September 1798 Humbert and his forces had reached Collooney where they were surprised by Colonel Vereker whose own account of the battle reads as follows: 24

About nine o'clock in the morning of the 5th Capt. O'Hara, of the Liney yeoman cavalry, who commanded my advanced piquet at Tubbercurry, reported to me that he had been driven back by the advanced guard of the enemy, after a smart skirmish in which he had one man killed and another wounded ... He then says he learned that part of the French army had arrived at Collooney with the intention

as I conceived of attacking this town and as I judged it more advisable to attack than to wait to be attacked, I marched out with 250 of the Limerick City Militia, 2 curricule guns, 26 30 yeomen infantry and a troop of the 24th regiment of light dragoons.

Vereker picked his position well and attacked strongly in a "close skirmish" of "near an hour and a half" but

at length the very superior numbers of the enemy enabled him to outflank the division on my right which was compelled to fall back.

Fearful of being surrounded and with little ammunition left, a horse being shot forcing him to abandon the curricule guns but not their ammunition wagon, he called a general retreat by which time, according to his own account,

one officer and six rank and file were killed—five officers and 22 rank and file wounded.

Vereker not only retreated to Sligo but evacuated the town, with-drawing to Ballyshannon, a move which resulted in grave anxiety 26 and caused him to be ordered back to Sligo by General Lake. 27 This apparently unimportant skirmish, which was later to be hailed as an Irish Thermopylae, then appeared only as another Franco-Irish victory:

24 Dublin Evening Post, 4 October 1798.
25 Frazer, op. cit., p. 319, incorrectly refers to Vereker having "four curricule guns" on this occasion.
26 Dublin Evening Post, 29 September 1798. Cf. also Impartial Relation (see Fn. 21).
27 The unease is referred to in a Dublin Evening Post, 29 September 1798, extract as follows: It is now ascertained that the design of the French General, after he had retreated from Castlebar, was to take possession of Sligo, and after pillaging that town, to proceed northwards toward the Co. of Donegal—and had he advanced towards Sligo after the affair with the Limerick militia at Collooney, that town must have fallen into his hands without opposition, its garrison having received orders to evacuate it and fall back to Ballyshannon ... of the plan of evacuating Sligo, and leaving that rich and populous town to the mercy of the enemy ... we cannot presume to speak; but we earnestly hope that it will never be thought necessary, under any circumstances, or in any instance, to resort to such a measure ... According to the author of the Impartial Relation, Vereker was ordered back to Sligo by Lake because of "their absence having created much uneasiness in the country."

120
an obscure report goes about that we have experienced another check between
Coloney and Sligo, on the banks of a river, at a distance of about four miles from
Sligo28

according to one account, and

on the seventh of September an obscure report arrived at Killala of the action at
Coloney fought on the fifth, which was said to have ended in favour of the French29

according to the same source elsewhere. The Dublin Evening Post account on 8
September 1798 reads:

Colonel Vereker, with a small detachment of the Limerick City Militia hearing that
only the rearguard of the Enemy occupied Coloney, attacked the town—but, as
might be expected was repulsed.

while an officer of the Reay Fencibles in a letter printed in the Dublin Evening Pos
on 25 September 1798 says bluntly:

The French came that evening to Colone, within five miles of Sligo, where they
were met by the Limerick militia, whom they defeated and took their cannon from
them.

An even more uncomplimentary account is given by Colonel Heyland:30

Colonel Vereker mistaking them for a common mob, drew out the city of Limerick
Militia, and attacked with only 200 men, but was obliged to retreat, leaving his
battalions guns etc. Twelve yeomanry had the courage to fight their front posts
but were all killed or taken prisoner.

If, however, Vereker had underestimated the force he was meeting, all give tribute
to his bravery, Humbert included,31 while one report has it that Humbert left his own
surgeon-general behind to attend the wounded officers32 amongst whom was Vereker
himself,33 a man he signalled out for praise.34 Humbert too was mistaken in the force
he was meeting. He felt that Vereker must have been the advance guard of a larger
army,35 and, consequently, abandoned his project to take the (unknown to him) now
evacuated town of Sligo36 and continue into the north. Turning back south he was
eventually met and defeated by far superior forces at Ballinamuck.

29 A Narrative of What Passed at Killala, also by Stock but published over the signature of
"an Eye Witness", (Dublin, 1800), p. 81.
30 Heyland, The Irish Rebellion of 1798, (Greenock, 1913). A diary, kept by Col. Heyland an
officer in the government forces, and first published in 1913.
31 Cf. the Impartial Relation; Dublin Evening Post, 29 September 1798; C. H. Teeling, A Sequel
To Personal Narrative of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, (Belfast, 1832) p. 223; Major Gen. Nugent to
Vereker as published in Dublin Evening Post, 25 September 1798.
32 Dublin Evening Post, 8 September 1798.
33 Impartial Relation.
34 Teeling, loc. cit., says "Humbert bore honourable testimony to the gallantry of Colonel
Veriker whom he pronounced the only British Officer he had encountered in Ireland who was
 capable of commanding a hundred men."
35 Teeling, loc. cit.: Dublin Evening Post, 29 September 1798 and Vereker’s own account in
Dublin Evening Post, 4 October 1798 all suggest this reading, while Guillon, La France et L’Iylands
Pendant La Revolution, pp. 394–5, (Paris, 1888), who had the opportunity of examining French
sources which I have not seen, writes: "Car au lieu de marcher sur Sligo qui ne lui aurait pas opposé
de résistance, Humbert prit le corps de Vereker pour l’avant-garde d’une véritable armée, et
redescendit vers le Shannon."
36 Impartial Relation; Dublin Evening Post, 29 September 1798.
Soon the Battle of Collooney took on a different interpretation. From the High Sheriff and Grand Jury of Sligo came an address of our warmest thanks ... to Col. Vereker, ... for his uncommon exertions and intrepidity during a very severe action by which the enemy not only received a considerable check, but were diverted from their intended attack and pillage of the town of Sligo, and induced to direct their line of march another way.37

A Common Council at Limerick on 8 October 1798 resolved:

That the steady, loyal, and gallant conduct of our fellow citizens the Limerick City Regiment of Militia, who ... so intrepidly engaged and successfully opposed the progress of the whole French and Rebel Army ... merits our sincerest thanks and warmest applause ... 38

Dublin gave Colonel Vereker the Freedom of the City.39 Vereker subsequently in Parliament opposed the moves leading to the Act of Union40 and during parliamentary debates on this topic had his conduct at Collooney eulogised. Other opponents of the Union measure, Mr. Frederick Falkiner for example, said:

... if it was not for the unparalleled gallantry of one regiment who stopped their career, ... the French banditti would have reached this capital, while his Excellency's immense army had never seen them.41

while Mr. Plunkett was even more eager to score off Cornwallis by using Vereker:

I must observe, that whilst the military Lord Lieutenant was in the field with an army of 60,000 men to support him, history will have it to record that we are indebted to a gallant Irishman (Mr. Vereker) at the head of about 800 native troops for having withstood the enemy, and prevented the capital of Ireland from being entered in triumph by a body of not one thousand Frenchmen.42

From such excessive praise it was but a short step to speaking of the regiment as "men who have immortalized themselves on that eventful occasion" and of Vereker as "the Irish Leonidas."43

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37 Dublin Evening Post, 18 October 1798. This date is given incorrectly in O'Rorke, The History of Sligo: Town and Country, Vol. 1, p. 376, as 28 October 1798.
38 Dublin Evening Post, 18 October 1798.
39 Freeman's Journal, 20 October 1798.
40 Freeman's Journal, 24 January 1799.
41 A Report of the Debate in the House of Commons of Ireland, on Tuesday and Wednesday the 22nd and 23rd of January, 1799, on the Subject of an Union, (Dublin, 1799) as found in Tracts on the Subject of the Union, Vol. V, (Dublin, 1800).

Note: The absence of Limerick newspaper references to either the Battle of Collooney or the striking and presentation of the medal can be explained by the fact that there are no issues of the Limerick Chronicle for the period in the National Library of Ireland, Trinity College Library, or the British Museum Newspaper Library, while enquiries to the office of the Limerick Chronicle have, at the time of going to press, failed to elicit any reply.

122