

The Limerick Meteorite

Friday, September 13, in the year 1813, dawned bright and clear, as the people of Adare and Patrickswell went about their business greeting the dawning of a new day. About 9 am their peace was shattered with the sudden appearance of a dark cloud accompanied by loud reports, the kind one would associate with the discharge of artillery. An unnamed eye-witness from Adare gave a detailed account of the phenomenon:

A considerable noise not unlike the beating of a large drum, which was succeeded by an uproar resembling the continued discharge of musketry in line. The sky above the place whence this noise appeared to issue became darkened and very much disturbed, making a hissing noise, and from thence appeared to issue with great violence different masses of matter, which directed their course with great velocity in a horizontal direction towards the west. One of these was observed to descend; it fell to the earth, and sank into it more than a foot and a half, on the lands of Scagh, in the neighbourhood of Patrickswell, in the county of Limerick.

It was immediately dug up and I have been informed by those that were present, on whom I could rely, that it was then warm and had a sulphurous smell. It weighed 17 lb., and had no appearance of having been fractured in any part, for the whole of its surface was uniformly smooth and black, as if affected by sulphur or gunpowder.

Six or seven more of the same kind of masses, but smaller, and fractured, as if shattered from each other or from larger ones, descended at the same time with great velocity in different places between the lands of Scagh and the village of Adare.

One more very large mass passed with great rapidity and considerable noise at a small distance from me. It came to the ground on the lands of Brasky, and penetrated a very hard and dry earth about two feet. This was not taken up for two days, it appeared fractured in many places, and weighed about 65 lbs. Its shape was rather round, but irregular. It cannot be ascertained whether the small fragments which came down at the same time corresponded with the fracture of this large stone in shape or number, but the un-fractured part of the surface has the same appearance as the one first mentioned. There fell also at the same time, on the lands of Faha, another stone, which does not appear to have been part of or separated from any other mass; its skin is smooth and blackish, of the same appearance with the first mentioned; it weighed about 74 lbs.; its shape was very irregular, for its



One of the meteoric stones which fell at Adare in 1813

(Limerick Museum)

by Denis O'Shaughnessy

volume was very heavy . . . it was about three miles in a direct line from the lands of Brasky, where the large stone descended, to the place where the small ones fell in Adare, and all the others fell intermediately, but they appeared to descend horizontally, as if discharged from a bomb and scattered in the air.¹

What the rustics of Adare and Patrickswell did not realise at the time was what they were witnessing was a major fall of meteorites, in the layman's language, chunks of debris large enough to survive the journey through the atmosphere and land on Earth.

The vast majority of missiles from outer space are of such small dimensions as to be entirely consumed by the heat they generate passing through the atmosphere. In former times, these were known as shooting stars, the sight of which elicited the notion among Roman Catholics that another Holy Soul had served its time in Purgatory and was on its way across the sky to be reunited with its Maker.

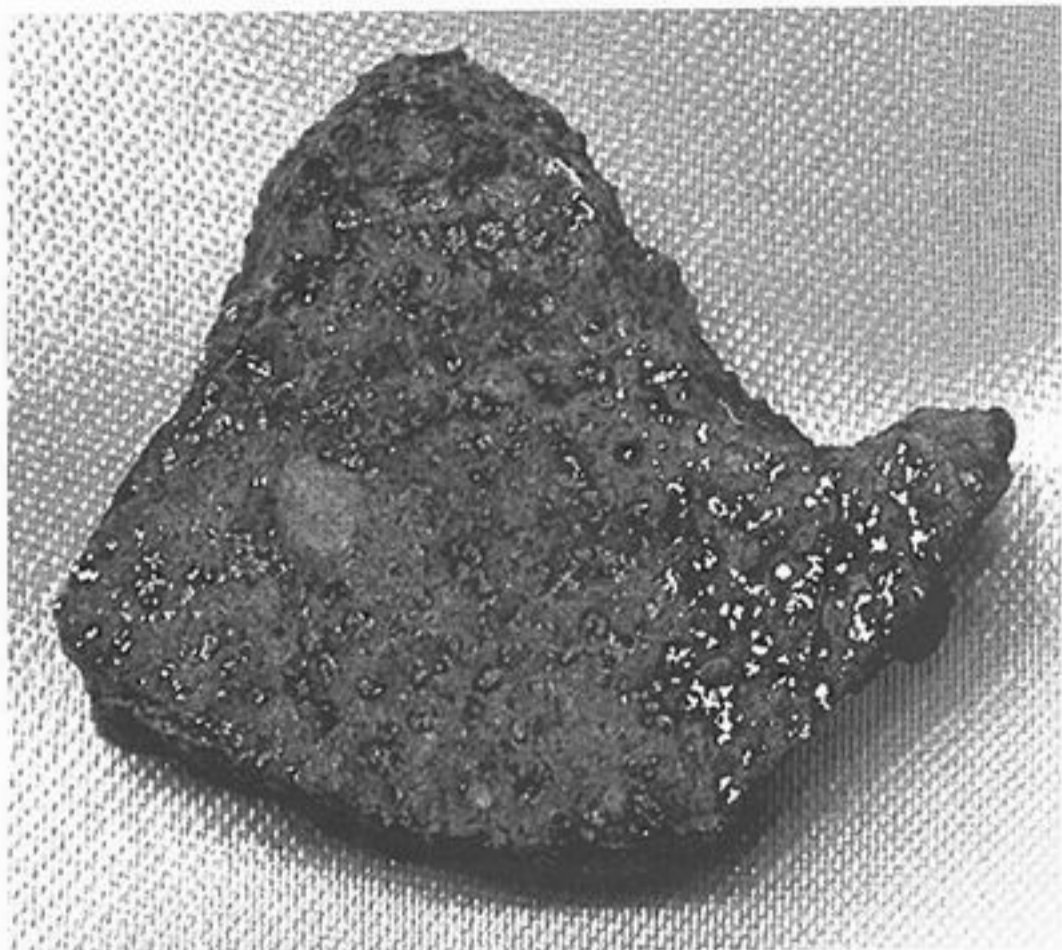
The Limerick historian, Maurice Lenihan, in his history of Limerick, was unaware of a meteorite as his account of the landing records:

On September 10 (sic) near Adare, a very loud report was heard in the air, like rapid volleys of artillery, accompanied by a long and rumbling noise, like the fire of musketry, the wind being at the time S.W., nearly calm, and the mercury in the barometer standing at W29 in 8-10ths. Several stones were discharged from above and fell in the village of Adare and Patrickswell. One remains in the possession of Mr. Tuthill of Faha, weighing four stones weight.²

The Limerick Chronicle, in its report, stated that 'the sound of most dreadful thunder was heard in the direction of Adare; the peals were violent and continued for a considerable time and were accompanied with some awful appearances – large fragments of atmospheric stones, and other circumstances, which indicated some very serious concussion to have taken place.'³

The Limerick Evening Post described the meteorite fall as a 'Phenomenon', and stated that, 'the rocks that fell were of extraordinary weight and had a strong sulphurous smell. This circumstance is vouched to us by several Gentlemen of the first respectability. The curious can see one of these stones at this office.'⁴

In a later edition of the same paper, a letter writer signing himself 'Philo-Chemicus', discounted an idea that that was



Fragments of rock from a meteorite fall

abroad that the rocks had fallen from the moon, 'If such were the case, then the whole planet would eventually fall on earth', he stated. He maintained, 'the rocks were a commixture of aerial acid (fixed air) and inflammable gas, which caused a strong concretion, exactly similar to the Phenomenon alluded to in your previous edition.'⁵

Fragments of the County Limerick landing were scattered for a radius of three miles, the largest landing in Breska, Clarina and was weighed in at 65 lb., the largest meteorite ever recorded in the then British Isles. The piece went missing for quite a number of years but was eventually discovered in 1951, on the farm of Mr. John Collins and was purchased by the National Museum, where it is now on display, coincidentally at Collin's Barracks. It is known as the 'Breska Mass' after the area in which it was found.

Another section of the meteorite weighing 17 lbs. found its way to the Oxford University Museum and the National Museum of Natural History in Paris also contains a sample of what it labels the Lim-

erick meteorite. Museum records indicate that it weighs 132.74g and is a 'broken sample with crust'. Nearer to home, Limerick City Museum has a fragment, which fell at Adare and was picked up from the street of the town.

Sceptics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries ridiculed the idea that rocks could fall from the heavens. In 1807, when two American academics revealed that they had witnessed a fall of meteorites in Connecticut, no less a personage than Thomas Jefferson, President of the U.S.A., said, "that he would sooner believe that two Yankee professors would lie than that large stones should fall from heaven."

The ancient enlightened Greeks regarded these meteorites as being of extra-terrestrial origin, but the concept was lost in later times.

At the Fernlea Meteorite Company sale in Scotland some time back, fragments of the Limerick meteorite (described as being polished part slice with fusion crusted edge) went on sale. One tiny piece (25x20x2mm - 3.362g) was priced at \$840, while a larger piece (45x20x2mm - 7.4g), priced at

\$1,850, was sold. \$7,000 would have bought a fragment measuring 35x30 x12mm and weighing 35.0g.

One of these fragments, put on display, would considerably enhance the Adare Heritage Centre, in view of the fact that the meteorite fell a short distance from the village. Seeing that museums are being put under pressure to return treasures to places of origin (Kells village and the Book of Kells is an example) maybe our National Museum, or better still, the Oxford Museum, might oblige and return the fragment to the area where they landed so many years ago.

SOURCES

- 1 Narrative of an eyewitness quoted by Maskelyne, "Lecture Notes on Meteorites", *Nature*, 1875, vol. xii. p.485. Reproduced in "The Meteoritic Hypothesis" by Norman Lockyer (1890).
- 2 Maurice Lenihan *Limerick; Its History and Antiquities* (Limerick 1866).
- 3 *Limerick Chronicle* 11 September 1813.
- 4 *Limerick Evening Post* 11 September 1813.
- 5 *Ibid* 15 September 1813.



Hollypark House, Kilcornan where the Breska meteorite was stored for some years