

Paddy O'Neill, United Irishman

by Paul Anglim

Paddy O'Neill was born near the White Corner in Ballynort in the present day parish of Askeaton/Ballysteen in west county Limerick.¹ He was a stonemason who helped build the garden walls at the nearby Curraghchase House near Kilcornan.² He also fished in the River Shannon near his home, as did a lot of people in the Askeaton/Ballysteen area at this time. Paddy was also the leader of the local United Irishmen.

Founding of the United Irishmen

The French Revolution of 1789 resulted in the overthrow of the Monarchy by Republicans and had an impact throughout all of Europe. In Ireland, it inspired a small group of Protestant Liberals in Belfast and Dublin to found the United Irishmen Society in October/November 1791. This organization crossed the religious divide with Catholic, Protestant and dissenter being members. By 1792 it had spread to nine urban centres including Limerick city.³

The society openly put forward policies of further democratic reforms and Catholic Emancipation. The outbreak of war with France early in 1793 following the execution of Louis XVI forced the society underground and toward armed insurrection with French aid. Theobald Wolfe Tone, influenced by the French Revolution aimed to establish an Irish Republic. The United Irishmen wanted to get rid of the Monarchy, inherited privilege and social divisions and strive for democracy, egalitarianism and tolerance. The organization spread throughout Ireland and had 100,634 members in Munster alone in early 1798.⁴ The United Irishmen linked up with Catholic agrarian resistance groups such as the Defenders in 1796. This generally just required little more than the substitution of existing defender oaths with the standard oath of the United Irishmen.⁵



Askeaton in 1799 (engraved by J. Walker; from an original drawing by G. Holmes).

Seeking French Aid

The United Irishmen decided to seek help from the French Revolutionary government and to postpone the rising until French troops landed in Ireland. The Derry, Louth and Westmeath Militias marched from Limerick to Bantry Bay in late December 1796 to contest the threatened invasion by General Hoche's French fleet, which had 4,000 men. Limerick was now exposed and a contingency plan worked out by Admiral Villaret de Joyeuse envisaged a landing of the French on the lower Shannon. Terrible weather conditions and command difficulties forced the French to cut their moorings in Bantry Bay and return to home ports and de Joyeuse's plan never came to fruition.⁶

Government and Loyalist Reaction

The British General, Charles Cornwallis was appointed in June 1798 to serve as both Lord Lieutenant and Commander in Chief, the highest civil and military posts in the Kingdom of Ireland. Cornwallis had specific instructions and authority to deal with the Irish Rebellion of 1798, which had broken out in May 1798. He was determined to break the back of the

Rebellion in Ireland. Capital punishment was to be reserved for murderers and principal rebel leaders in the field plus men who had deserted the army to go to the rebel side. Rebels of lesser importance were punished with transportation to Botany Bay, drafted into British Army regiments serving abroad or forcibly enlisted into the Prussian Army.⁷ Pro-government activists in Limerick and elsewhere rallied towards the yeomanry. This civilian volunteer force was under government control and acted as police auxiliaries to the military. They were usually commanded by the local gentry.⁸ The yeomanry searched the country for United Irishmen and meted out punishment if co-operation was not forthcoming. Whipping, transportation and hangings were the usual punishments. The main function of the yeomen in 1798 was to guard their home localities if the garrison was committed elsewhere. While the travel writer, John Harden was travelling through the countryside between Adare and Askeaton he mentions that he saw the yeomanry having a 'sword exercise' as they rode by Hollypark, near Kilcornan, which indicates that the yeomanry was quite active in the locality.⁹

In 1797 there was a military camp set up in Stoneville, (near Rathkeale) which was suitable for 2,000 men. It created a military reserve capable of responding to any emergency in central county Limerick.¹⁰ The camp caused problems for the locals in more ways than one. All the meat in Askeaton was purchased from the local butchers for the camp which raised the price to a level that was more than the inhabitants of Askeaton could afford.¹¹

Martial Law

On 28 March 1798 Limerick magistrates exercised their authority to request that the county be proclaimed under the Insurrection Act in two days. The Privy Council independently issued orders to the army on 30 March 'to employ utmost vigour and decision, for the immediate suppression of Rebellion'. They were 'to recover the arms which have been traitorously forced from his Majesty's peaceable and loyal subjects, and to disarm the rebels, and all persons disaffected by the most summary and effectual measures'.¹²

Local society meeting for the Askeaton area

The local Society of United Irishmen held their meetings at a quiet spot in Toomdeely North, Askeaton near the present day New Quay. They had a meeting arranged for this spot on a June evening in 1798. There was a spy in the area named Sean súil. He had previously tried to become a member of the United Irishmen but was rejected. He had found out about the arranged meeting of the United Irishmen and informed the local yeomen of whom one was John Thomas Westropp. The yeomen concealed themselves near the meeting place awaiting the arrival of the United Irishmen.

Paddy O'Neill, who was out fishing in the Shannon that day, drew up his small boat at the mouth of the River Deel near the meeting place and went to the rendezvous by an unfrequented path. It was a rule that each United Irishman went to the meeting place by himself so as not to attract attention. He stumbled on the yeomen's hiding place and at once he realized the danger. He decided to sacrifice himself to save his comrades. He jumped on top of a high bank and shouted a warning to his comrades who were converging on the meeting place from different directions. He gave away his position to the yeomen who gave chase. Paddy headed in the

| Deaths, Executed | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|---|------|
| 1 | Matthew Kennedy | 0 | 13 4 |
| 2 | John Moore | 0 | 13 4 |
| 3 | Stephen Dunderon | " | 13 4 |
| 4 | Thomas McLainny | " | 13 4 |
| 5 | John Hayes | " | 13 4 |
| 6 | Thomas M. Tierney | " | 13 4 |
| 7 | Thomas Kennedy | " | 13 4 |
| 8 | William Ryan Stephens | " | 13 4 |
| 9 | Patriot O'Neill | " | 13 4 |
| 10 | Patriot Wallace | " | 13 4 |

Paddy O'Neill listed as ninth prisoner executed during the 1798 Rebellion (Rebellion Papers 620_3_27_6).

direction of Askeaton and threw off his heavy boots as the yeomen were gaining on him. The yeomen fired at him, which drew the attention of more yeomen in the town. They blocked off the bridge and when Paddy saw them he decided to jump into the river and swim across towards the Franciscan Abbey. When he crossed over to the east bank he got out of the river and started running along the bank in the direction of Shannonview. He was wet and tired and the yeomen who had crossed the bridge were gaining on him so when they got near him he jumped back into the river again in the hope that the current would take him down to where he had left his boat on the opposite bank near the mouth of the River Deel. Due to his fatigue and weight of his clothes he had to make for land a couple of hundred metres from his boat. His luck finally ran out as some yeomen had waited behind in the hope of capturing more United Irishmen and they handled Paddy as he came up onto the west bank of the river. Paddy was taken to a building near the Desmond castle in the town of Askeaton and while he was awaiting questioning he pretended to shiver and asked if he could go near the fire to dry his wet clothes. He was allowed to and as he came near

he pulled a piece of paper from his inside pocket and threw it into the fire. The men guarding him tried to get the paper out of the fire but they were too late and the paper which held the names of the men that Paddy had sworn to help the French when they landed had gone up in smoke. Paddy thereby saved these men from death or deportation.¹³

Paddy, who the authorities described as a most active rebel was then conveyed to Limerick city.¹⁴ June was a very busy month for the gaolers as military and yeomanry patrols brought many prisoners into the city and they were tried by a General Court Martial convened in the Council Chamber by Major General Edward Morrison.¹⁵ The General directed that only the most active United Irishmen should be punished.¹⁶ Morrison appointed Lieutenant Colonel Darby of the 54th Regiment as president of the Court Martial.¹⁷

Throughout the rebellion there was 136 prisoners interned in the Limerick city gaols. The rebel prisoners were kept at the City Gaol in Limerick which was on Mary Street where the old Tholsel stood. They were also kept in the cells of the new

gaol on Merchant's Quay which was not fully finished at the time. On 7 October 1798, the gaoler, Richard Millward sent a petition to Lord Cornwallis asking for 13 shillings and 4 pence for each of the 136 prisoners he had under his supervision for treasonable crimes throughout the Rebellion. This amounted to a total of 90 pounds, 13 shillings and 4 pence. General Edward Morrison said that Millward conducted himself with zeal and attention throughout the Rebellion.¹⁸

Richard Pierce McElligott a schoolmaster who was also a United Irishman was captured and imprisoned and he kept a diary, which described the conditions in Limerick gaol during this time. He wrote 'what shall I suffer walking up and down in this dismal place from light to light with no companion but a dying man who has been three times flogged, a breathing corpse and legions of rats of all ages'.¹⁹ The prisoners were dependent on relatives for bringing them food.

Hanged and Beheaded

Paddy who was convicted by the court martial of swearing several persons to assist the French when they landed was sentenced on the 28 June to be hanged and beheaded in the neighbourhood that he came from.²⁰ He was then taken back to his native town and hanged at the bridge in Askeaton. When the hanging was over he was cut down and beheaded. All the executed United Irishmen were posthumously disgraced by the denial of traditional funeral rights and it was no different for Paddy as his headless body was buried in a quick lime grave beside the little hill where the present day tennis court is in Askeaton.²¹

Paddy's head was then affixed to one of the rebel's pikes and placed on top of the Desmond Castle. It was a grim spectacle and was used by the authorities to act as a deterrent to other would be rebels. There was a guard present at all times to prevent anybody removing it. The O'Neill family members were sickened by this act of triumphalism by the authorities. Paddy's sister Mary had a plan and much to the disgust of the locals became friendly with one of the guards. She persuaded him

to let her get the head down one night and she gave it to a friend of hers who smuggled it in her apron down to the traditional burial place of the O'Neill family in Beagh Cemetery, Ballysteen.²²

In a letter from John Thomas Westropp to Sir Vere Hunt dated 10 July 1798, Westropp wrote 'We hung and beheaded Neal on the bridge in Askeaton'. He thought that this had frightened the rebels because he also wrote that 'the countryside was getting very quiet with the rebels giving up their arms'.²³ After a string of rebel defeats, the 1798 Rebellion ended with the death in captivity of Wolfe Tone in November 1798.

Endnotes

1. J. Fehenev, *Ballysteen, The People and the Place*, p.119, (Limerick, 1998).
2. Letter from J.T. Westropp to Vere Hunt 10 July, 1798.
3. R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the age of imperialism and revolution, 1760-1801* (Oxford, 1979), p.389.
4. Report of the Secret Committee of (Irish) House of Commons 1798 quoted in T. Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty* (London, 1969) p.46.
5. T. Garvin, 'Defenders, Ribbonmen and Oaths: Underground political Networks in Pre Famine Ireland' in *Past and Present* No. 96, pp138-43.
6. Paul M. Kerrigan, 'The Defences of Ireland, 1793-1815: The Shannon Estuary' in *The Old Limerick Journal* No. 25, Summer 1989, pp100-1.
7. Jim Smyth, *Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Union: Ireland in the 1790s* (Cambridge, 2000), p.107.
8. Oliver Snoddy, *Notes on the Volunteers, Militia, Yeomanry, Orangemen and Fencibles of County Limerick in Irish Sword*, Volume 39, 1971, pp125-40.
9. John Harden, 'Tour in Ireland', 1797, in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 1953-5.
10. *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 April, 1797.
11. Royal Irish Academy, Ms. 12 K. 43 *Diary of a tour of the South West of Ireland made by John Harden in 1797*.
12. *Saunders Newsletter*, 2 April, 1798.
13. Ned Cussen, Moig South, Askeaton interviewed by: Robert J. Cussen, Newcastle West. The interview formed the basis of an article written by 'Orjay' on Paddy O'Neill in the *Limerick Leader* on 11 March 1950. 'Orjay' was the pen name of Robert J Cussen.
14. Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick, Its history and antiquities*, (Limerick 1866), p.405.
15. NAI, Rebellion Papers, 620/17/11, 26 June 1798.
16. Morrison to Castlereagh, 26 June, 1798, NAI Rebellion Papers, 620/17/14
17. NAI, Rebellion Papers, 620/3/27/6
18. NAI, Rebellion Papers, 620/3/27/6, 7 October, 1798.
19. John O'Hart, *Irish Pedigrees, or the Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation*, (Dublin 1892).
20. Lenihan, op cit. p.405
21. Ned Cussen, Moig South, Askeaton interviewed by: Robert J. Cussen, Newcastle West.
22. O'Neill family folklore. I heard the story from my grandfather, whose grandmother was Ellen O'Neill, who in turn was a great-grand niece of Paddy.
23. Letter from J.T. Westropp to Vere Hunt 10 July, 1798. See: museum.limerick.ie. Identifier number 0000.5246.



Right: Ruins of Paddy O'Neill's house.

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