

# Some Transported Rebels of 1798

**T**ransportation had been used as a punishment for crime in England and Ireland since the sixteenth century. In Cromwellian times, thousands of Irish people were sent to the West Indies. In the early eighteenth century, some prisoners were shipped to America in an effort to "deter criminals and supply the colonies with labour." After the American War of Independence, a new outlet was needed and New South Wales was decided on as the new destination for convicts.

In 1791, the first convict ship sailed from Ireland for Sydney. Newspaper reports in February, 1791, recorded that "the jailer of Limerick set off for Cork with a number of prisoners, where a large transport is preparing to carry all the convicts in the Kingdom to Botany Bay." Limerick continued to provide prisoners for convict ships for as long as the punishment was used. Four Ahern brothers were tried at the summer Assizes in 1800 at Limerick on the charge of being "croppies." Three of the brothers, John, Mathias and Michael, had their death sentences commuted to banishment for life and were transported on the *Atlas* convict ship. (The fourth brother, Murtagh, may have been gaoled, or allowed join one of the services). At times there could be a long wait between sentence and sailing on a convict ship. The prisoners were kept in gaol or on a convict hulk offshore while they awaited their fate. Conditions in either place were intolerable, as William Burke wrote in his letter from Limerick prison to his mother on July 13th, 1802. Awaiting transportation and already confined for six months, he begged that "she would try to have the judge influenced, so that his sentence might be commuted." He said he was "confined without the air of a yard or any other place that is comfortable, but a dismal room ... my poverty here is unsupportable .. It is with a flood of tears I write you these lines and it grieves my heart full sore to leave you and my poor father in your old days." The next convict ship did not sail until November that year.<sup>1</sup>

## Notorious Seditious Rebels

In 1798, Gerald Fitzgerald, brother of the Knight of Glin, was organiser of the United Irishmen in West Limerick. He worked closely with Nicholas Sandes in Listowel enrolling members into the Society. They both appointed local organisers, including Phil Cunningham of



Portrait miniature of Gerald Fitzgerald, brother of the Knight of Glin.

Photo courtesy Harold Kinsman.

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by Tom Donovan

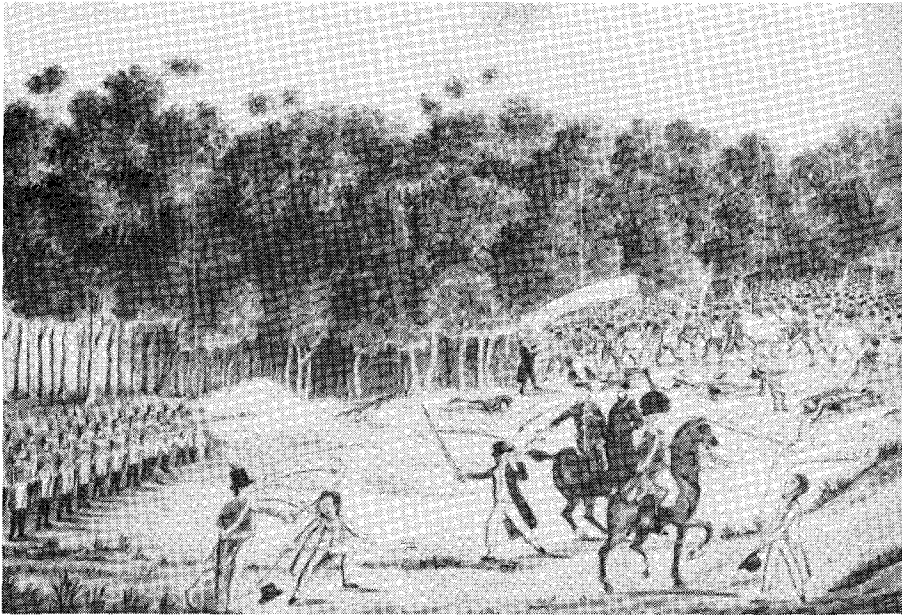
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Moyvane, Bill Leonard of Aghanagran, Marcus Sheehy of Duagh, Tom Langan (alias Captain Steel) of Glin and surrounding districts, and a young Pat Galvin. All these men were arrested and sentenced to be transported to Botany Bay.<sup>2</sup>

Cunningham, Langan and Sheehy were taken on the convict ship *Anne*, but they were held as prisoners, like most of their fellow passengers, before sailing. The condition of the ship prior to sailing was poor, as the stores had to be removed and

the ship smoked to destroy the rats on board.

The *Anne* eventually set sail from Cobh on 20 June 1800. It took 240 days (eight months) to reach New South Wales, and there was much disturbance during the voyage. She was part of a convoy as far as the Canary Islands. Three weeks after leaving Rio de Janeiro, when the prison was being fumigated, a mutiny broke out. The conditions on board were appalling, and while the master of the ship was described as kind, the mate was a brute and the cause of most of the trouble. An incident which led to the mutiny arose when a prisoner spilled something on deck and the mate killed him with a



The 1804 rising at Castle Hill: Phil Cunningham challenges Major Johnson.

National Library of Australia.

cannon ball. Marcus Sheehy was identified as a ringleader during the mutiny, and was executed by firing squad before the assembled convicts. Sheehy earned the dubious distinction of being the only prisoner thus executed on a convict ship, as they were usually hanged on the yard's arm. Another prisoner received 250 lashes.<sup>3</sup> A priest, Fr. O'Neill, succeeded in having the mutineers submit to the ship's officers and he also interceded on behalf of Langan and Cunningham, who were also involved in the riot.<sup>4</sup> Master Stewart admitted that, despite the mutiny, in general the conduct of the prisoners was good. Most of them he thought "were guilty of no crimes, but were charged with political crimes into which they had been led unwittingly by secret societies."<sup>5</sup> The attitude of Governor King to the arrival of the *Anne* was quite different. He described those on board as "137 of the most desperate and diabolical characters ... together with a Catholic priest (Fr. O'Neill) of the most notorious seditious and rebellious principles, which makes the number of United Irishmen amount to 600 ... ready and waiting to put their diabolical plans into action."<sup>6</sup> Fifteen of the prisoners, who were all victims of the 1798 rising, died on the voyage to Sydney.<sup>7</sup> All survivors were sent to Norfolk Island, described as "the hell of the doubly damned, where prisoners were flogged and dehumanised."

### Captain Steel

Captain Steel (Tom Langan) was kept on Norfolk Island until 1810. On New Years Day that year, Lachlan Macquarie was appointed Governor of New South Wales replacing William Bligh (of *Bounty* fame). He appointed as his secretary, Major Finucane, who had relatives living near Glin, at Tarbert, Co. Kerry. At the request of Major Finucane, Langan was taken to Sydney and assigned as the Major's



Rev. Samuel Marsden (1764-1838), the 'Flogging Parson'.

Mitchell Library, Sydney.

servant, where he was treated with courtesy and kindness. He saved one of Finucane's children, Susan, from drowning.<sup>8</sup> She later became the mother of the Irish scholar, Standish Hayes O'Grady, who befriended Langan's cousin, Micheal Ó Longain, the poet.<sup>9</sup>

Back in Ireland, the Knight of Glin was working to have Langan released. Apparently an error was made in the certificate commuting his sentence to New South Wales and the *Anne* did not carry a list of convicts on board when it sailed in 1800. Finally in September 1814, when Langan had served twice his sentence, the Right Honourable Robert Peel wrote to Governor Macquarie, through Whitehall, requesting permission for him to return to Ireland. It was Captain Terence Murray of Balliston, near Shanagolden, who eventually secured his release.<sup>10</sup> Murray's father was himself a United Irishman and lost a leg in an encounter with George



Lachlan Macquarie (1762-1824), Governor of New South Wales 1810-1821.

Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Leake's notorious yeomanry near Shanid, Shanagolden.<sup>11</sup>

Langan returned home in 1817 and was showered with gifts by the local people amid scenes of jubilation. Shortly after his return, he lost an eye in a fight with a press gang. He was one of the few who returned from sentences of transportation, as for many there was no return regardless of the length of the sentence. Langan eventually died around 1845 and is buried in a unmarked grave in Glin, back where his adventure began.<sup>12</sup>

### Philip Cunningham

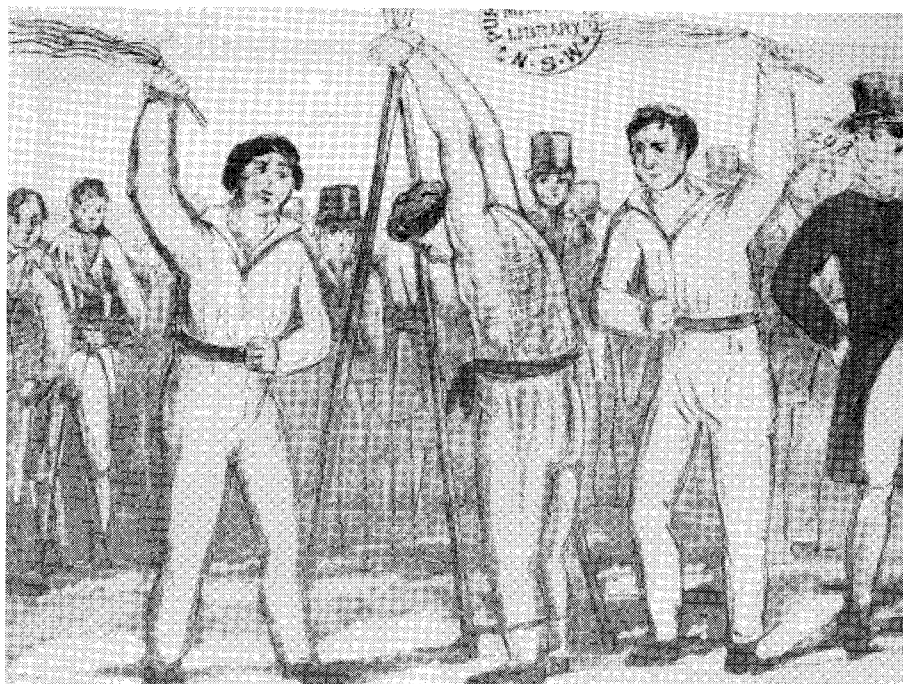
Langan's other companion on board the *Anne*, Phil Cunningham, a stonemason, was a man of great stature and commanding appearance. His whole demeanour so impressed the authorities that they took him from Norfolk Island and placed him as overseer over gangs of convicts working in Sydney. He built a house of considerable value for himself, and so great was his influence over his convict workers that the authorities decided that Phil and these men should get a free pardon. Despite the promise of a pardon, Cunningham's men had decided on an insurrection as the only means of ending their misery.<sup>13</sup> They asked Cunningham to lead them in an attack on Castle Hill settlement, with the intention of joining with rebels at Puramatta and marching on Sydney. The rising was doomed to failure, as the authorities were warned by an informer named Keogh. Phil Cunningham led the rebels, who were armed mostly with scythes, axes and a few muskets, with a cry "Now my Boys, Liberty or Death" and they sang songs of 1798 like "The Croppy Boy." The hill where the rebels made their stand became known as Vinegar Hill, after the hill in Wexford and the site of the famous battle six years earlier. The main battle, which took place on 4 March 1804, was easily suppressed, and Fr. Dixon tried to negotiate a truce without bloodshed. During negotiations with Major Johnson, a

melee broke out and Phil Cunningham was shot and badly wounded. As an example to other convicts, they strung up the wounded Cunningham from the stair of the Government store in Paramatta without a trial. Many of his followers were executed after court martial, and several more were sent north to coal mines and treated little better than slaves.<sup>14</sup>

There is little information on Bill Leonard, a comrade of Phil Cunningham, as a rebel back home in Kerry. It is suspected that he may have been involved in the rebellion at Castle Hill, but little is known of his fate thereafter.<sup>15</sup>

### Pat Galvin

The fifth man transported was a young twenty year old Kerryman, Pat Galvin, who travelled to Sydney on the ship *Minerva*. In September 1800, informers led the authorities to believe that iron pikes were made at secret forges and hidden in preparation for a rising. They were determined to find these pikes, and those who spoke only Gaelic were the main suspects. Pat Galvin was one of the suspects chosen to extract information by "whipping until his spine was open to the air and blowflies." Governor King had a parson (known as the whipping parson) called Marsden arrange the flogging. Joseph Holt, the exiled Wicklow rebel, has left an account of the floggings. "Two floggers, one left-handed and one right-handed, were employed. Even though he was two perches away, the flesh and skin blew in his face as it shook off the cuts. Galvin was ordered to get 300 lashes. He got 100 on the back and you could see his backbone between his shoulderblades. Then the Doctor ordered him to get another 100 on his bottom. He got it, and his haunches were in such a jelly that the Doctor ordered him to be flogged on the calves of his legs. He got 100 there and as much as a whimper he never gave. They asked him if he would tell where the pikes were hid. He said he did not know, and if



Flogging with the cat.

Mitchell Library, Sydney.

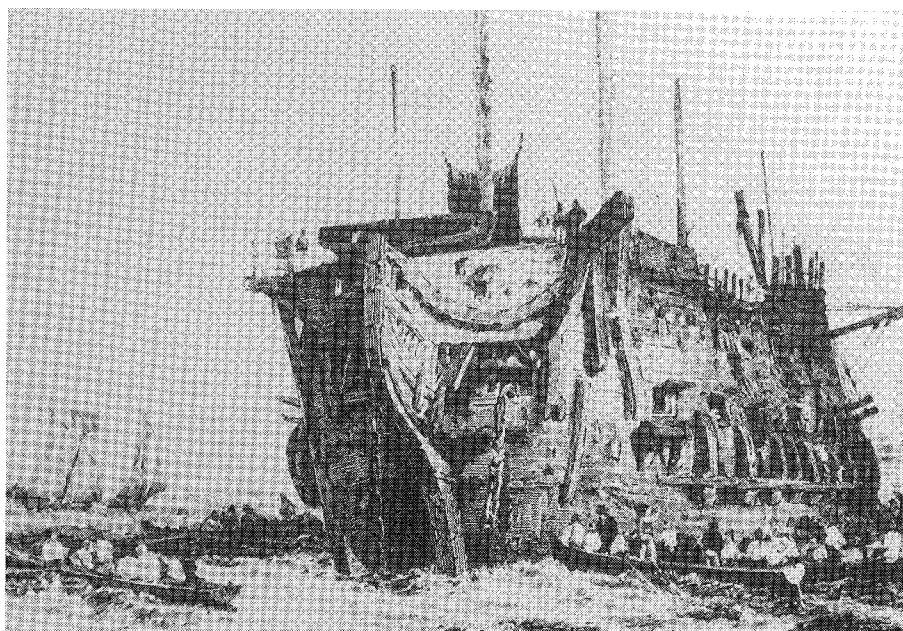
he did, he would not tell. "You may as well hang me now" he said, "for you never will get any music from me to make the others dance." They put him in a cart and sent him to hospital." The frustrated Marsden reported to Governor King that Galvin "will die before he reveals anything." Despite any evidence, King ordered that the suspects should be flogged again and sent to Norfolk Island. Galvin recovered from his ordeal and in 1800 he received a free pardon from the compassionate Governor Macquarie.<sup>16</sup> Like Langan, he too returned to Ireland and is buried in Murher graveyard in his native Moyvane, Co. Kerry.<sup>17</sup>

It is unusual that, of the five men originally sentenced to transportation, two of them managed to return home. The majority of those transported who were lucky enough to receive pardons made the best of their new lives and helped develop

their adopted country, which became known as Australia. Many men brought their families to live out their lives in the new world. Others were less lucky and endured such hardship that was so revolting and barbarous that many went mad, and nearly all craved death.<sup>18</sup> They suffered so much that the fate dealt to Marcus Sheehy and Philip Cunningham seemed an easy release.

### SOURCES

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Hulk used to hold convicts.