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Fighting to the last Man - The Rebellion of 1798 [I]

Folklore about Gaelic heroes, handed down from the ancients, aims at fostering noble demeanour, a love of community and a sense of discipline and learning. This instilled a determination to defend our laws and values, to help our Celtic people survive during migration, in times of well-being and times of subjugation. Echoes of our past, going back 5,000 years, permeate the unhybridised Irish language. Gaelic people suffered unsparing pressures down the years and the rising of 1798 stands out in this regard.

The United Irishmen was a society formed in 1791. The Irish leaders, driven to rise up by colonial imposition, were inspired by the American Revolution (1775–83) and the French Revolution (1789). The aim of the movement was to gain freedom for Ireland. In 1796, England began a campaign to suppress the United Irishmen, who wanted to form a national government, with ‘an equal representation of all the people’. The emblem was an embellished Celtic harp, bearing the words -

Equality. It is new and strong and shall be heard.



The Society had many principled Church of Ireland Protestants in its leadership. Members were mostly Catholic and Dissenters (mainly Ulster Presbyterians). These last were also victims of severe, English **Penal Laws**, said to be ‘**a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance... for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people... as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man**’. In the 17-1800s, the English ruling classes, not the English people, used religion as a guide to distinguish friend from foe.

The rebels cropped their hair short, in the French revolutionary style, being called ‘Croppies’. Local risings began by the Spring of 1798. The rebels, armed with farm instruments, had no forces or organisation to speak of. They were as desperate as they were idealistic. English Militias conducted widespread executions of volunteer members of the United Irishmen, to undermine them.



A cohort of fully acculturated (anglicized) people was long established here, with no tie to principle: spies readily operated for the English. So the Town Major, Henry Sirr, Dublin’s police chief, seized ten of the

leaders, on 12th March, 1798, in the house of the Presbyterian, Oliver Bond, a woollen merchant. He and two others were sentenced to death in a 'show trial', a term deriving since then from European history.

The charismatic **Theobald Wolfe Tone**, the leader of the United Irishmen, sought rights for his Presbyterian and Catholic countrymen. He and **Napper Tandy** (son of a Quaker ironmonger, a man of conviction and principle), went to Paris to ask **Napoleon Bonaparte** for help. Napoleon said to Wolfe Tone: "Mais, vous êtes brave (Goodness, you are courageous)". **Lord Edward FitzGerald** (1763 - 1798) was active in the service of Britain in the American War of Independence and the Irish Parliament. However, he was a leading member of the United Irishmen, **on the grounds of conscience**, and he decided to revolt unaided. On the eve of the uprising, he was fatally wounded during the arrest. The movement was not halted.



Hugh Douglas Hamilton - <http://www.galleryofthemasters.com/h-folder/hamilton-hugh-douglas-lord-edward-fitzgerald.html>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3835564>

Sir Ralph Abercromby, the English Commander-in-Chief in Ireland, planned to use **collective punishment** of the populace. Troops were sent to live at 'Free Quarters' in disturbed areas, with orders to requisition food, cattle, fodder and to break the people by any means. Widespread house burnings, **confiscation of food, torture and rape** followed. Turning the island into a concentration camp was not enough.



General Lake replaced Abercromby. He believed in **selective punishment**. The law was suspended. He could take action 'if necessary beyond that which can be sanctioned by the law'. Lake himself said: "I am convinced that the **contest must lay between the army and the people**".

A) In Athy, Co Kildare, on the 1st of May, 1798, **Triangles** first appeared. A victim was secured to a wooden triangular structure and then flogged to death, if they had not information to give. There were right-handed and left-handed floggers. They flogged in unison. Tiring floggers had replacements, to ensure torture continued, removing skin, muscle and blood.



B) Portable ‘**Traveling Gallows**’ were used for **Half-hangings**. Victims were hanged over a soldier’s back or from a wooden structure. They were revived, each time they lost consciousness from the strangulation.

In another procedure - called ‘**Picketing**’ - the victim was left hanging but could choose to stand awhile, if he were able, on sharp pointed stakes. When close to death, this victim would also be let down, revived and hanged again. This would be repeated until it was as well to leave the victim hanging. In all cases, the outcome was a horrifying death.

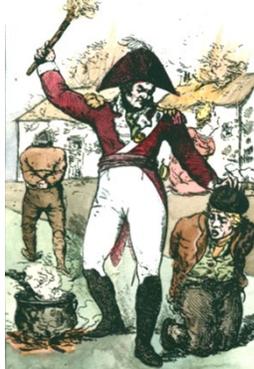


The picket or picquay was a military punishment in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, whereby a **victim was forced to stand on a sharp stake**. However, in Ireland it was a choice between either the sharp stake or strangulation with a rope.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picket_\(punishment\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picket_(punishment))

C) For **Pitch Capping**, a conical cap filled with boiling pitch (tar), was fitted to victim's head. The boiling tar ran down the face and into the eyes and mouth. When the pitch had cooled, the cap was pulled off, with most of the scalp. Shears were used to remove long hair – often with the ears too. Sometimes gun-powder was added to the boiling tar, which was then set alight.



Boiling tar could also be poured directly into the victim's eyes and mouth. As doing this invariably proved quickly fatal, the method was used as a form of execution.

Civilians were tortured and killed at will. The rebels often faced guns, armed with only pikes, normally used for gathering hay. At least eleven **priests** fought beside their people: some were killed in battle and four were hanged. The most famous was the Wexford priest, **Father John Murphy**, of Boolavogue. He was stripped, flogged, hanged and beheaded and his corpse burned.

In Ulster, Presbyterian rebels captured Antrim town for a few hours on the 7th June but were then driven out '**with great slaughter**' by government artillery. In Wexford, on 21st June, General Gerard Lake surrounded **Vinegar Hill**, with a force of 20,000. Battle was joined. For about two hours, the rebels, with their women and children, were shelled. Armed with farm implements, they were cut down. The rebellion in the South-east was over.

By July of 1798, General Lake had quelled the rising around the country. The English Occupation had so distressed the people that men, women and children had willingly faced death. The method of crushing the rebellion, such as it was, may well have been one of those things about which, on the 18 of May, 2011, **HM Queen Elizabeth II**, said “things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all”.

Général Humbert's Napoleonic Republic of Connaught 1798 [II]

Much of the information provided on these events was written down from the oral accounts of local people. They came from the short-lived Republic of Connaught. Their stories are kept in the Folklore Department of Ballinamore Library, County Leitrim.

Connacht had escaped from the pillage of General Lake. On the 22nd of August, 1798, **le Général Humbert** came from France, at Killala, Co Mayo. Flying an English flag, he easily took the town. Many volunteers joined him, including men from **Dún Chaocháin**, Co Mayo. The extreme impoverishment of the people struck the French.



After a 15-mile march at night, Humbert arrived in Castlebar on August the 27th, 1798. A combined force of 2,000 French and Irish routed a force of 6,000 English soldiers. The defeat became known as the ‘**Castlebar Races**’, for the headlong flight of the English. Huge quantities of guns and equipment were abandoned, including General Lake's personal luggage. Following the French victory, thousands of volunteers flocked to join Humbert. On August the 31st, 1798, Humbert set up the **Republic of Connaught** and appointed one **John Moore** as its President.



Lake wanted revenge for his earlier, humiliating defeat. Humbert left Castlebar, under cover of darkness. On Friday, September the 7th, his forces routed 100 troops guarding Ballintra Bridge. He tried to destroy it, to slow General Lake down, but English snipers prevented this. Humbert’s forces passed through Drumshanbo – to rest on Dristernan Hill. At Cloodrumin, British forces led by Crawford opened fire on Humbert’s rearguard. His forces halted to face the pursuers, who retreated, at full gallop, suffering considerable losses.

Following this engagement Crawford did not engage with Humbert’s forces, until Lake joined up with them much later, at Ballinamuck. Humbert considered proceeding to Granard, where he thought thousands of United Irishmen from the Midlands would join him. However, it came to light that over 2,000 United Irishmen had been defeated at the Battle of Granard. Armed with pikes, the Rebels had been no match for the English forces. When the Battle of Granard was over, the English took surviving Croppies to the church at Granard, to hang them.

A Commander at Granard, called Heppenstall, was called ‘**The Walking Gallows**’. From Wicklow, he was powerfully built and had the reputation of casually acting as jury, judge and executioner. It was said if he mistrusted a ‘*peasant*’ he met by along the road, “he would punch him down and then seize him, half- or wholly unconscious, and hanged him on his back until he was dead”.

Similarly at Granard, Heppenstall threw a victim over his shoulder - with a rope around his neck - and jumped around until the victim was dead. When the English grew tired of hanging, any prisoners still alive were tied up and left lying on the street overnight. In the morning a **herd of cattle** was driven over them. Anyone still alive, once again, was shot. In the days which followed, **an orgy of burnings floggings and shootings of local people** began, to deter anyone from joining Humbert.



Humbert continued along what is locally called the **Old French Road**, from Fenagh, to meet up with the rest of his forces. Late on the 7th of September, Humbert reached Cloone with a weary and tired group of soldiers.

Humbert received a deputation from local United Irishmen: they promised him 10,000 recruits, if he could wait until the following day. Later again, at 10pm, **General Charles Cornwallis**, the 1st Marquess Cornwallis, who was serving since June, 1798, as both Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and Commander-in-Chief of Ireland, left Carrick, with his troops, for Mohill. He learned that Humbert was staying the night in Cloone. He sent word to Lake to proceed there. Lake was somewhere close to Keshcarrigan and must march through the night.

At Cloone, Humbert's men ate and rested. On the 8th of September, Humbert's forces left the townland. The French and Irish went towards Ballinamuck, leaving Keeldra Lake and going into Cattan and Fearglass, in the parish of Gortletteragh.

Cornwallis' army had reached Mohill. He knew that Humbert was heading for Ballinamuck. He sent his troops ahead of Humbert, to cut him off. General Lake was following Humbert. The combined English force was about 35,000. It was now only a matter of time before Humbert was caught at Ballinamuck. His forces numbered something short of 2,000. The battle took place on a warm Saturday morning, the 8th of September.

Humbert's army was outnumbered and could only put up a token resistance. The French surrendered and were taken prisoners of war. No quarter was shown to the Irish. The English charged into them, killing all they could. On the 9th of September, many people went to the battlefield at Ballinamuck. Amongst them was a man from Killesandra, who wrote: "There lay dead about five hundred. I went with many others to see them. How awful! To see that healthy mountain covered with dead bodies, resembling at a distance flocks of sheep – for numbers were naked and swelled with the weather".

In the days and weeks following the battle, the Yeomanry from Leitrim, Longford, and Cavan scoured the countryside, looking for rebels who had escaped. Tradition handed down tells us that a fleeing Rebel was caught at Fenagh and hung from a tree outside the late Jimmy Joe McKiernan's (local Sculptor) House. William Brady from Keshcarrigan was caught helping Rebels to flee across a bog, a few miles from Ballinamuck. He was tried and sentenced to be hanged by the neck, until dead. Afterwards his head was to be severed from his body and placed on the most conspicuous part of Cavan town. Prisoners brought to Carrick-on-Shannon were not court-martialled.

One account said: "After the action at Ballinamuck, the regiment marched to Carrick-on-Shannon where, in the courthouse, there were a couple of hundred rebels. An order arrived from Cornwallis directing a certain number of them to be hanged without further ceremony – and a number of bits of paper were rolled up with the word 'Death' being written on the number ordered to be killed; and, with those in a hat, the Adjutant Captain Kay entered the courthouse and the drawing of lots began. As fast as a wretch drew the fatal ticket, he was handed out and hanged

at the door... It was a dreadful duty to devolve upon any regiment". Another account says: "19 hanged, with remaining prisoners sent to another regiment to follow our example".

Two places of execution were used in Carrick-on-Shannon. Prisoners not hanged at the first site were sent to the second. Yet **other prisoners were exported, as slaves, to colonies** like Australia and Tasmania. The French were treated as prisoners of war and all were returned to France. An exchange of British prisoners held in France ensured their safe return. In Ireland, executions, punishments and reprisals went on for weeks after the battle of Ballinamuck. During the first two weeks of September, 1798, more soldiers and bigger armies than local people had ever seen, marauded across the Leitrim and the Fenagh countryside. 'Free Quarters' was fully exploited: robbery, rape and murder of young and old was carried out by soldiers with free rein to do what they wanted.

Adelia M. West, an Anglo-Irish lady, wrote in her memoirs "My mother told me that the autumn of '98 was the finest she ever saw, it was like Summer through November and on to Christmas. She cut a large bunch of roses in the garden at Annadale [in Kiltubbrid] but, though flowers were unusually plentiful, food was scarce. And the poor misguided, **ignorant people were in many places starving.**"

The disconnect between dying people and their masters is noteworthy. **Éire, Banba and Fodhla**, our three Princesses - of the Land and People, of their Defence and of Learning - had overseen another stage in their relegation into obscurity. And Famine was yet to come, in 1845.



Éire



Banba



Foghla

With the kind permission of Jim Fitzpatrick -

<https://journevingtothegoddess.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/goddess-banba/>