

Croppies Rise Up! Leicestershire & the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798

(This article is a product of the research done by the author for his dissertation in pursuit of his doctorate at the University of North London. The author is director of our "twin " organization at Soar Valley College, Leicester.)

Leicestershire had a serious, central and long-term participation through two local military units in the crushing of the Rising of 1798 in Ireland and in enforcing subsequent "pacification" measures. Interestingly, their contribution is not attested to in existing secondary accounts, including the most recent. By going back to Musgrave (1801), Maxwell (1845) and Bishop Stock's narrative diary (1798-9), important elements of confirmation were obtained which ratified data extracted from the local records in county archives. These latter centered on military records, diaries and correspondence, and newspaper accounts. In particular, they give a much fuller picture of the participation of both local militia and fencibles in the Western Campaign, August to October 1798, and the post-battle massacre of around 650 Irish levies after Ballinamuck.

The Leicestershire Militia, selected by compulsory ballot, was mobilized in 1796 to guard French prisoners of war and to undertake similar national guard activities. On 7 September 1798, they assembled in and set off from Leicester en route to Chester. As the non-commissioned officers and enlisted men had written a joint letter of loyalty to their commander, the Duke of Rutland, on 16 June, obedience and enthusiasm would be assumed. This view is reinforced by the men voluntarily donating 150 pounds of their wages to the government. When they arrived at Chester, they were paraded. Around another 650 men who were late because of harvest work joined them, giving a total of around 1300 troops. When they were asked to volunteer for service in Ireland, not mandatory by their terms of enlistment, only half stepped forward. This raises the question of the true nature of the letter of loyalty; just how representative was it in reality?

As might be expected in a tense situation where the British simultaneously faced foreign war and internal revolt, those who volunteered for Ireland turned on their former comrades, physically and verbally abusing them and stripping them of equipment and clothing. They were also subjected to pointless and physically exhausting fatigues, and when they got back to Leicester, they had to endure the boos and jeers of the females in the populace. Those militiamen who actually went to Ireland served in the main as the Dublin garrison.

It would appear that there were several possible reasons for this mutinous response-- and cowardice was not one of them. Evidence suggests that radical political activists, the United Britons, who were partners of the United Irishmen, had revolutionary cells in or around Leicester. Illegal, armed drilling at night time was reported, as was the distribution of inflammatory antigovernment handbills under the doors of the military stables. All the same, those 650 who did go to serve in Ireland acquitted themselves favorably, so much so that, half a century later, the government belatedly awarded them the right to wear an Irish harp as part of their regimental badge for services rendered in 1798 and subsequently.

The other Leicestershire unit to serve in Ireland in 1798 was the Loyal Leicestershire Prince of Wales Regiment of Fencible Infantry, raised in late 1794. They were started by a local Member of Parliament, Thomas Boothby Parkyns, and officered by the elite of the Leicestershire gentry, one of whom was squire Clement Winstanley.

The Fencibles were moved to Liverpool in 1795 and on to Dublin in May. In theory, the Fencibles should have been of great reliability, being volunteers to a man. Many, however,

were physically disabled by weight, age and health factors and large numbers were returned to England as being unfit for service in Ireland. For example, in the actual campaign, a Captain Russell who was captured and shot at Tobercurry was aged seventy, an extraordinary age for a man on active frontline duty.

Like the militia, the Fencibles donated seven days pay in March 1798 to assist with government expenses. They were stationed at Killala on the coast of Mayo. On 22 August when Humbert's French fleet arrived, unidentified, a group of Fencibles rashly rowed out to meet the fleet and were promptly made prisoners. (Incredibly, the Fencibles made the same mistake when a second French fleet arrived in October. The French landed no troops but took two officers and six privates of the Fencibles as prisoners.) After the French had disembarked, the Fencibles and other defenders were outnumbered and fled. The arriving French force included two United Irish leaders, Matthew Tone and Bartholomew Fealong. Although many Irish flocked to join Humbert's Republic of Connaught, there was a basic culture clash between the politically informed French troops and the conservative-minded Irish peasant levies. This militated against effective cooperation and action.

At the battle of Castlebar (27 August), Franco-Irish pluck and the element of surprise caused the loyalist forces, including the Leicester Fencibles, to retreat so precipitately that the Irish call this engagement "the races of Castlebar." Despite further Franco-Irish successes, their advance was stopped and finally crushed at the **Battle of Ballinamuck**. To show the extent of the involvement of the Leicester Fencibles, extracts from the following letter from one of their officers (unidentified) are offered:

... for 4 or 5 days our advanced guard frequently came up with the enemy's rearguard and killed several, so that we passed the wretches laying dead on the road and by the side, such mangled bodies you never saw it was dreadful to behold them - but they plundered all the gentlemen's houses as they passed of their wine and whiskey, so that numbers were overtaken drunk on the road and cut to pieces. I assure you we have not had our clothes off for 3 weeks, having been encamped wherever we halted, which at times was not longer than 3 to 5 hours.

We encamped at Ballynamuck that day and for 3 days were engaged on Court-Martials on the rebels. Blake (a Rebel General) and 9 of the Longford Militia, who joined the rebels, were hanged the day after the action, and several men were condemned (about 60) and marched off with the Army to Carrick on Shannon, where we left them.

By 23 September, loyal forces had advanced to and retaken Killala. Winstanley and a group of Fencibles escorted fifty captured French troops to Dublin and then returned to assist in the reoccupation of Killaia. The subsequent "pacification" campaign in the West was as cruel as the annihilation of the Irish peasant levies after Ballinamuck. To their credit, the Leicester Fencibles appear to have been uniquely well behaved, earning a letter of appreciation from the "chief citizens" of Killaia marking the Fencibles' performance.

Readers who know American history will be interested to know that the regular Leicester Regiment, the 17th Foot, was part of the British force defeated at Yorktown. Archaeologists in the United States have found buttons on the Yorktown site emblazoned with the number 17.

Leicester today is a diverse city with a substantial Anglo-Irish and Asian population. Both groups were a part of a cast of adults and young people who performed in the 1998

production of a locally written musical which celebrated the events of 1798, "Croppies Rise Up! Leicestershire and the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798." To witness children of the East singing "The Men of the West" was a positive portent for this multi-ethnic community. Times sometimes do change for the better.

(Written by Nessian Danaher and originally printed in September 1999)

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