

The Battle of Ballinamuck

(This is the third in our series of articles on the risings in 1798. The first article described Wolfe Tone's leadership role and the second, the rising in Wexford.)

Although the spring and early summer went badly for the Irish pikemen who were soundly defeated by regular British troops, Irish hope, late in summer 1798, came wrapped in the tricolor flag of France: Wolfe Tone was with a French invasion fleet that would give the Irish rebels the forces it needed to contest successfully on the field of battle with the Crown's soldiers. Napoleon was not enthusiastic about an Irish expedition, Egypt being on his mind; nevertheless the French agreed to send three ships to Ireland. Wolfe Tone would accompany three thousand French troops under the command of General Hardy; General Kilmaine would command four thousand men; Matthew Tone, Wolfe Tone's brother, would sail with one thousand soldiers commanded by General Humbert.

In fact, Irish hopes ultimately settled on the smallest of these task forces. Kilmaine's force was never organized, and, in October, Hardy's was destroyed before it could land, resulting in Wolfe Tone's capture and death. Before Wolfe Tone was arrested by the British, his brother Matthew would land in Killaia Bay, County Mayo in late August 1798 with Humbert's troops. At last the French had arrived; now the sides, the Irish hoped, would be more even.

Humbert, to his disappointment, was met, in Killala Bay by a few thousand-poorly equipped peasants with no prominent leaders. The French had been led to believe that the whole of Ireland would rise up and join the French once they had landed. Landing in the west of Ireland was not to the advantage of the French expedition. The United Irishmen there had no prominent leaders and were poorly organized. The French distributed the arms and uniforms which they had brought with them and tried to make an army out of their Irish comrades.

The French-Irish collaboration had immediate successes. Humbert advanced on Ballina which he took without resistance. Humbert's instructions were to establish a bridgehead and then wait for Hardy's larger force to join him, unless the Irish forces would prove strong enough for independent action. Humbert knew he needed more Irish soldiers if he were to be effective. He feared that the peasant volunteers in his army would scatter at the first sound of a cannon.

In order to motivate an uprising of the Irish people and to give him a larger supply of men from whom to forge an effective fighting force, Humbert decided that he must advertise his presence in Ireland and fan the flame of hope that the risings of 1798 had ignited. He chose to engage the British. He had learned of a force of 3500 British troops advancing on his position. He surmised that he could be successful if he engaged the British at Castlebar, County Mayo. Defeating the British at Castlebar, especially since the commander of the British forces was General Lake who had defeated the Irish pikemen in Wexford, would be the kind of demonstration that the Irish people needed to show that they could, with French help, defeat the British.

With seven hundred French infantry cavalry and almost the same number of Irish rebels, Humbert conducted a twenty-five mile forced march through back roads to reach Castlebar. The strategy was a brilliant success. With only one cannon, the French overran the British and forced the British to run, leaving behind muskets, packs, cannons, flags, munitions, and even General Lake's luggage. Known later as "The Races at Castlebar," this defeat was one

of the most ignominious defeats in British military history. The French and the Irish established a provisional government in Castlebar before heading east hoping to join the major force of United Irishmen at Granard, a market town in North Longford.

However, a delay in the west allowed the British time to form a net around the French and Irish forces. Lord Cornwallis marched west with 26,000 troops intending to contain the French at the Shannon while General Lake was ordered to pursue the French invasion force, sniping at the rear guard and cutting off its line of retreat.

The hope of Castlebar was not enduring. Already the combined United Irishmen forces of Longford and Westmeath had been crushed at Granard. On September 8, 1798, near the small village of Ballinamuck, County Longford, Humbert drew up his 859 French troops in line of battle. There could be little doubt of the outcome. Behind Humbert was Cornwallis blocking Humbert's way to Dublin. In front was Lake's 5000 men. Only about a thousand Irish rebels remained in this final battle of the Year of the French.

The battle which lasted but half an hour commenced with Colonel Crauford's dragoons cutting through the Irish rebels. When the dragoons reached the French, there was a bloody struggle, but it lasted no more than five minutes before Humbert put his hat upon the point of his sword and held it high above his head in token of surrender. The French officers followed their general's signal and ordered their men to lay down their muskets. A second body of British cavalry had reined in seeing the signs of surrender, but Colonel Teeling, an Irish officer in the French army, had not signaled surrender so British infantry advanced on them. Crauford attacked a large contingent of Irishmen with his dragoons, their sabres sparing only those with officers insignia, hanging to be their fate.

The victory well in hand, a British officer suggested to General Lake that the rebels be permitted to surrender. Lake answered that no rebels against the crown were to be given any leeway. Some said that Lake needed bayonets as bloody as Crauford's sabres for the victory of the battle of Ballinamuck to be his. Lake, the defeat at Castlebar still burning, chased the rebels into a bog where they were drowned or bayoneted.

French prisoners numbered 842 of the 859 committed to the battle. Matthew Tone was one of only eighty Irish prisoners taken out of 1000 in the battle. Matthew gave his life for Ireland before his more famous brother was captured in Donegal. The French soldiers were brought to Dublin where they were exchanged for English prisoners of war.

The rebels of 1798, untrained, virtually leaderless, ill armed with homemade pikes and stolen muskets, were no match for the loyalist militia and yeomen strengthened by the garrison of British regulars. For a time, though, the rebellion had posed a formidable threat to British rule in Ireland.

After Ballinamuck, the Irish took a collective breath. 1798 was a year of many risings; it was a year of defeat; but it was a year that forced the British to reconsider its policies in Ireland. Only three years later the Act of Union was enacted which, the British hoped, would settle Ireland in peace and forestall another Year of the French.

(written by Joseph McCormack)

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