

NINETY-EIGHT

By The O'Rahilly



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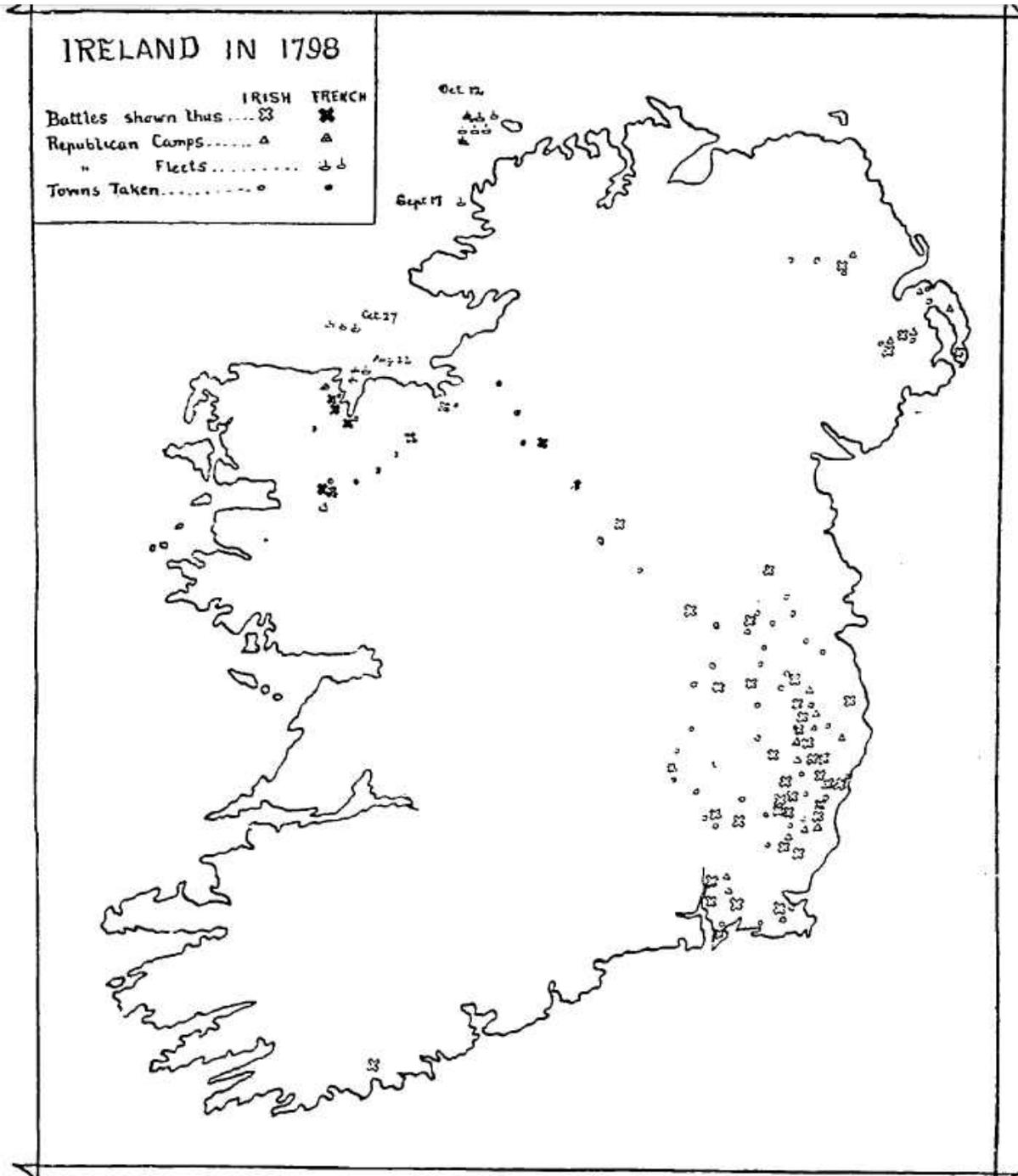
PUBLISHER'S NOTE

These are a series of writings published in *Irish Freedom*, the official organ of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) by Michael Joseph O'Rahilly, known more famously as *The O'Rahilly*, from between April 1912 to June 1912.

Written amidst the Home Rule crisis and likely in response to the formation of the Ulster Volunteers, "Ninety-Eight" serves as an analysis of the 1798 rebellion exploring the reasons for its failure and how The O'Rahilly's generation could learn from such errors by arming themselves.

The O'Rahilly himself became involved in the Irish Volunteers, and later fought in the Easter Rising, in which he was killed in the attempted retreat from the GPO.

MAP



Map of Ireland, 1798, published in *Irish Freedom*, June 1st, 1912.

I.

(April 1912)

In the last analysis the foundation upon which all government rests is the possession of arms and the ability to use them, therefore it cannot fail to be instructive to us to consider the circumstances of the most recent occasion when any considerable body of the Irish people appealed to arms.

In March, 1798, nearly the whole Directory of the United Irishmen were imprisoned in Newgate, where Lord Edward was sent to follow them on May 19th, and May 23rd was fixed upon for the General Insurrection. Dublin was to be attacked that night; the stoppage of the mail coaches was to be the signal to the country that the hour had come. The coaches were stopped at Santry, Lucan, Kildare and Naas. Ireland had got the signal. How did Ireland respond?

During the following week, with the exception of the counties Kildare, Meath, Carlow, Wicklow and Wexford, Ireland showed no more intention of flying to arms than it did last year when the police removed the poles in Grafton Street.

The first leader to take the field was Michael Reynolds, who massed his men in Tipper Quarries, and on the night of the 23rd entered Naas, where he was repulsed. Prosperous, Rathangan and Monasterevan were attacked, with varying success, and at Old Kilcullen the pikemen achieved a signal victory over the dragoons and the Suffolkshires. In Meath the Republicans occupied Dunboyne and Dunshauglin, and established a camp at Tara, where they were defeated with great slaughter on May 26th. The Wicklowmen were repulsed at Newtown-mountkennedy, and in an attack on Carlow on May 25th the pikemen were ambuscaded, being allowed to enter unopposed and then hemmed into some 80 houses, which being set on fire they were burned alive. Three hundred are said to have perished in the battle or in the flames, and two hundred were hanged shortly afterwards. A soldier named Daly was promoted for having slain 23 of his countrymen in an alley way in the town.

The Republican success at Kilcullen was entirely negated by the absence of any simultaneous rising in the South and West, and owing to the perfect peace which prevailed in Limerick General Duff was enabled to march unmolested with 600 men from there to the Curragh, where, at the Gibbet Rath, his troops massacred about 200 pikemen who had, under safe conduct from General Dundas, come in to surrender. It is only fair, however, to state that General Duff's apologists explain that these men were massacred by mistake.

In Wexford Father John Murphy unfurled his standard at Boolavogue on May 26th, being accompanied at the time, it is said, by seven men. Their numbers increased later. His first success was at the Harrow, where his party was rashly attacked by the Camolin Cavalry. Having barricaded the road in front of the cavalry the pikemen also blocked it with cars at their rear, when, being attacked from both sides, the horsemen were unable to form or escape and were totally defeated. After this was established a Republican Camp at Kiltomas Hill, which was successfully attacked by the Garrison of Carnew, and another at Oulart, which was attacked on Whit Sunday, May 27th, by the troops from Wexford, with remarkable results. The attacking party consisted of 110 men of the North Cork Regiment, under Col. Foote, who declared their intention of beating the rebels off the field. Having encountered a body of pikemen, who pretended to retreat, they charged after them until they reached the point where the beating was to begin, when the Royalists discovered that they were now surrounded by the pikemen, who slew 112 of them; including 6 officers. Only the Colonel and four of his men escaped, while the Republicans lost only three men.

After this Father Murphy attacked Enniscorthy, which, after a stubborn fight, he stormed by the Duffry Gate on May 28th. The Garrison fled to Wexford, and the Republicans established new camps at Vinegar Hill and at the Three Rocks.

At this period the latter enjoyed an extraordinary opportunity, which, doubtless owing to their imperfect organisation, they were numerous enough to avail themselves of. Immediately after the fall of Enniscorthy the garrison at Gorey retreated to Arklow, and were fully

prepared to evacuate Arklow also and to retreat to Wicklow upon the approach of the pikemen.

But, owing to the utter failure of the latter to follow up their advantage, Gorey was left unoccupied by *either party* until the 30th of May, when the English King's troops at Arklow, finding to their amazement that the Republicans did not advance, re-entered the town.

To support Wexford, which was now threatened, Gen. Fawcett sent forward from Duncannon Fort a reinforcement of the Meath Militia, and a party of artillery with two howitzers, but when they arrived at the Three Rocks, within a few miles of Wexford, the detachment was attacked, cut to pieces, and the cannons taken.

This victory was gained on May 29th, and was immediately followed by the surrender of Wexford, or rather by the garrison scurrying out of it while the negotiations for surrender were in progress. By another bad blunder these troops were allowed to take their arms with them and to reach Duncannon Fort with comparatively little opposition.

On July 1st the camp at Ballymanane Hill, near Ferns, was attacked by the Carnew garrison, and on the 2nd Father Kearns led a column to attack Bunclody or Newtownbarry.

Upon this advance the garrison retired precipitately and the Republicans entered the streets, where however they were fired upon from several fortified houses, in endeavouring to storm which they failed to pursue the fugitive garrison. Observing this, the latter reformed upon the high ground about a mile away, and returning, poured a hail of grape and musketry upon the pikemen, who were driven from the town and compelled to retreat again to Vinegar Hill.

The next important action was that of Tubberneering, when Col. Walpole, with Gen. Loftus, Lord Ancram, Col. Scott and Capt. MacManus attacked the Republican camp at Ballymore Hill. Their troops were disposed as follows: -

The Carnew garrison were to march to Camolin; Lord Ancram marched from Newtownbarry to Scarawalsh Bridge; Gen. Loftus and Col. Scott moved from Gorey to Ballycanew; and Capt. MacManus occupied the cross road between Clough and the Ballycanew Road; while Col. Walpole led the main body by Clough and Tubberneering.

But when they reached Tubberneering they were suddenly attacked by a deadly musketry fire from both sides, and were defeated so rapidly that there was no time for their flanking parties to assist them; their guns were captured, turned against themselves, they retreated pell mell, and, although they made a hopeless stand at Clough, the victory was complete, Walpole himself being among the slain.

II.

(May 1912.)

So little time did the action take that when Gen. Loftus arrived at the scene the battle was over, and he considered himself fortunate to escape across the mountains to Carnew, where he was joined by Lord Ancram. Having heard the account of this battle the reader will not be surprised to learn that Walpole was not really a soldier. He was a close friend of the Lord Lieutenant, was popular at the Viceregal Lodge, and was altogether the sort of man who, if he had lived in our time, would be an Honorary Vice-President of the Women's National Health Association or something of the kind.

After Tubberneering the English King's forces were seized with absolute panic. They not only fled through Gorey but evacuated Arklow. The Lord Lieutenant's wife took ship for England, and the country as far north as Bray was at the mercy of the Republicans. This being so, it seems incomprehensible now why the latter did not advance northwards when, with the assistance of the Wicklowmen, who held the mountains as far as Dundrum, Dublin would probably have fallen into their hands. But they advanced no further than Gorey and Coolgreany.

On July 5th, the day after Tubberneering, Bagenal Harvey, now made Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Wexford, advanced on New Ross to open the passage to Munster. The shooting of Furlong, a messenger whom he had sent under a white flag, precipitated the attack before Harvey could make proper disposition of his troops, who entered the town *en masse* and fought in the streets for five hours. Although Gen. Johnson, the Commander of the Garrison, had retreated across the bridge when the town was filled with pikemen, finding himself unpursued, he rallied his troops, re-entered the town and succeeded in recapturing it, and, as in Carlow, in burning alive a party of Republicans who had taken refuge in a house in Mary Street. It was undoubtedly this outrage that caused the hideous reprisal that same evening when the Royalist prisoners were burned in the barn of

Scullabogue. New Ross was the most fiercely contested battle of the period, as many as 3,000 Republicans being said to have fallen.

It was two days after this, on June 7th, that the campaign in Ulster opened with the Battle of Antrim, the town being attacked by the Republicans under McCracken, and where, owing to the incompetence of his lieutenants, they were defeated and had to retire to Donegore Hill, Ballymena, Randalstown and Toome, which they held for two days.

On June 9th the Republicans of Down assembled at Saintfield, where they defeated the Newtownards garrison, took Saintfield and Newtownards, and obtained all the baggage and ammunition of the troops. Bangor they took the next day and formed their headquarters at Mount Alto, on the south of Ballynahinch, while the Royalist army bivouacked on the Windmill Hill on the north side. During the night of June 12th Monroe, the Republican leader was informed that the enemy's troops had entered the town to pillage, and that while revelling they might be attacked and defeated with ease, but this quixotic commander is said to have scorned the proposal of a night attack as unchivalrous, and was decisively beaten the next morning notwithstanding the desperate gallantry of his men. At this time, too, the Republicans of the Ards attacked Portaferry but were repulsed by the garrison.

To return to Wexford, although the County Wicklow lay unprotected for three days after Tubberneering, it was only on June 9th, five days afterwards, that the Republicans approached Arklow, which then had been re-garrisoned and fortified by Gen. Needham, and after an attack lasting half the day the pikemen retired at nightfall to Gorey, although it appears that the garrison were ready to retreat themselves as soon as the darkness gave them an opportunity. This retreat of the Republicans was probably the most decisive incident in the struggle of '98. The pikemen left behind them the body of Father Michael Murphy, who had fallen within a few feet of the barricade, where it was found by the English King's troops, who cut out his heart, burned his body and melted the fat for the Ancient Britons to grease their boots with. That the officers of the garrison authorised and took an actual part in the performance would be incredible were it not

attested by the most truthful historian of the period, a Protestant clergyman, whose loyalty to England has never been questioned.

On June 17th the Republicans, under Garrett Byrne, took Tinahely, and on the following day their camp on Kilearan Hill was bombarded by Generals Lake, Loftus and Dundas, but without result; yet, during the night of the 18th, Byrne secretly abandoned Kilearan and retired to Vinegar Hill. This move, though intended to protect the headquarters at Vinegar Hill and Enniscorthy, was really a most unwise one, as it left the way clear for General Lake to concentrate on the Republican headquarters.

Assuming that Kilearan Hill did not admit of defence and that Byrne was able to evacuate it secretly, all authorities are agreed that if instead of retreating south he had advanced northward, seized Rathdrum and thus threatened Dublin, General Lake must necessarily have abandoned the attack on Enniscorthy and followed him to Wicklow, where, if Byrne was unwilling to engage him, he could have found a safe retreat in the mountains. On the other hand, if Lake had then persisted in his attack on Vinegar Hill, Byrne might, with the road open before him, have made himself master of all Wicklow, and might even have taken Dublin. Byrne, however, found the main body at Vinegar Hill, and Lake disposed his troops as follows to attack it.

Gen. Dundas moved from Hacketstown to Carnew, and thence by Ballycarney to Scarawalsh Bridge; Gen. Loftus from Tullow to Carnew, thence to Groves Bridge, Camolin, Ferns and Scarawalsh Bridge; Gen. Needham from Arklow to Gorey and thence to Oulart; Gen. Johnson moved from Ross to Old Ross, and covered the country from the Black Stairs to Carrickbyrne; Gen. Moore was ordered to land at Ballyhack, thence to Foulkesmill, Carrickbyrne, Clonmines and Taghmon. Gen. Duff advanced from Newtownbarry and patrolled the Sculloge Gap and the west side of Slaney to Scarawalsh Bridge. Sir Charles Asgill marched from Kilkenny to Groves Bridge, Borris and Craigenamanagh; and the Duncannon troops were to unite with Gen. Moore at Foulkesmill.

Lake's design, which was to surround the camp, completely leaving the Republicans no avenue of escape, was frustrated by two incidents. One was the attack made upon Gen. Moore's column at

Foulkesmill on the 20th by a body of Republicans, who gave him battle there and so delayed his march upon Taghmon. And the other was the fact that Gen. Lake, who apparently had become fearful of the issue of the struggle, ordered Gen. Needham to leave Oulart and to reinforce Gen. Lake himself at Solsborough. When Needham reached Solsborough Lake appears to have recovered his nerve, and sent him back to Oulart again, where of course he arrived too late to accomplish anything. The attack on Vinegar Hill and Enniscorthy was made on June 21st from the north, west and east simultaneously, and the Republicans, their powder being expended, broke and fled southward to Wexford.

Arrived at the Three Rocks they held a Council of War, and being of different opinions, as is not unusual amongst patriots, they split into two columns, one marching northward to effect a junction with Holt and Dwyer (who during all this time had complete possession of the Wicklow Mountains) and the other declining to fight its way into Kilkenny in the forlorn hope of persuading the West to wake.

The former, under Fitzgerald and Perry, marched to Peppers Castle and Gorey, where they detected the garrison, and thence to Hacketstown, which they captured after a nine hours' battle. They afterwards occupied Tinahely and Monaseed, and on June 29th, under the direction of Holt, they ambuscaded the Ancient Britons at Ballyellis and annihilated that regiment. In this battle they practised their usual tactics when confronted with cavalry, blockading the road with their baggage and feigning a retreat until they had the cavalry to the barricade when they surrounded and slaughtered them. With the horses and equipments of the Ancient Britons which they took here they formed a cavalry regiment, which they christened the "Ancient Irish."

They again attacked the English King's troops at Carnew, defeated them at Ballyraheen, and fought an indecisive battle at Ballygullen on July 4th, after which they, too, undertook the hopeless task of rousing their countrymen and marching through Kildare and Meath, where they appear to have got little or no support; they made their last stand in Ballyboghil, Co. Dublin. The other body which,

after Vinegar Hill, had decided to march under Father John Murphy to Kilkenny, made a circuit by Mayglass to Foulkeshill, thus passing round the flank of Gen. Moore's column which was advancing on Wexford, thence they went north to Killan, and crossed the Blackstairs Mountains by the Sculloge Gap. They then occupied Killedmund, defeated the garrison at Goresbridge, and camped on the Ridge of Leinster in expectation of the rising of the West. Some of the colliers having joined them, they defeated a party of troops at --- acord???, fought again at Coolbawn, and after a severe struggle took Castlecomer.

Thence they advanced to Ballylinan to attack Athy, but finding the assistance they got in Kilkenny and Leix was utterly inadequate, they held a Council and decided to retreat. Returning by the same route they were attacked and defeated at Kilcumney Hill, where Father Murphy was captured and hanged, his body burned and his head spiked on the Market House of Tullow. Some of the survivors reached the wood of Killoughrim, where they formed a guerrilla band known as the "Babes in the Wood," who held out until they were exterminated. Others of them reached Wicklow and joined Holt and Dwyer, who were able to make the melancholy boast that they were the only Irish in arms on the arrival of Humbert at Killala on August 22nd.

Humbert's campaign is an amazing example of what a handful of brave men can do, and it is decidedly interesting to follow the movements of the 1,100 Frenchmen who, landing in a foreign country held by 100,000 soldiers and occupying nearly half a province, fought eight battles in 17 days, won seven of them, and only surrendered when surrounded by an army of 30,000 men.

That several thousand Irishmen docked to Humbert's standard is, of course, true, but the comparative worthlessness of his allies may be judged, not from the libels that British and West British historians have heaped upon them, nor even from their utter helplessness after Humbert's surrender, but from the fact that, though desiring a change of Government, they did not strike as much as one blow when their countrymen in Leinster were in arms, were winning victories, and had in ten days subjugated a county.

Humbert landed at Kilcummin head on Aug. 22, defeated the Killala garrison, hoisted the green flag, and distributed arms. On the 24th he attacked Ballina, pretended to retreat, and ambuscaded the Ballina troops at a bridge on the Killala road. On the 26th he occupied Ballina without opposition, and on the following day started for Castlebar, the county seat. Having informed everybody that he was going by the main road through Foxford, which intelligence was promptly conveyed to the British at Castlebar, he proceeded only as far as Hollywood, where he wheeled sharply to the right, and marching round Lough Conn advanced over the mountain pass of Barnageehy, hitherto believed to be impassable for troops.

III.

(June 1912.)

By this manoeuvre Humbert reached Castlebar from the opposite direction to that from which he was expected, and though the garrison had received the surprising news in time to form between him and the town, he achieved the complete victory known as the "Castlebar Races," where his British Majesty's troops fled from him until they reached Tuam that night and Athlone early on the next day, thus establishing a long distance record of 75 miles in 27 hours. Humbert's tactics here were in marked contrast to those of the Irish Insurgents, for his cavalry pursued the beaten army so closely that a party of eight or nine French hussars overtook and captured a gun, which they were turning on the runaways, when Lord Roden's Regiment of Fox-hunters charged back and overwhelmed the little group, killing five and driving off the rest. The place where these heroes fell is still known as French Hill. Humbert remained in Castlebar until Sept. 4th waiting, I suppose, for the universal rising which was to follow his arrival, and this not materialising he began his eastward march with the object of outflanking the Lord Lieutenant, who was advancing on him with a large army, and of either joining the Irish in Granard who had risen in revolt, or possibly with the idea of taking Dublin with his own 900 men. He advanced them to Swinford and Bellahy, whereupon the English King's forces, under Cornwallis and Lake, moved in a parallel line from Hollymount to Ballyhaunis and Frenchpark.

Learning at Bellahy that the Royalists were at Frenchpark, Humbert turned northward to Tubbercurry, where he routed a small force that opposed him, and where he was joined by a party of Irish who had crossed the Ox Mountains from Ballina. Thence he advanced rapidly to Collooney, where he was attacked by the Limerick Militia under Col. Vereker, whom he defeated after an hour's fighting and captured their guns. Meantime Gen. Lake had been dispatched to pursue him by Bellahy, while the Lord Lieutenant retired by Carrick and Mohill to head him off advancing into Leinster. From Collooney Humbert marched rapidly eastwards, leaving on the road three six-

pounders, and throwing five pieces of artillery into the river at Drumahaire he hurried forward as if to threaten Manorhamilton. But wheeling sharply to the right, within a few miles of that town, he passed through Drumkeeran, skirted the left bank of Lough Allen, and crossed the Shannon at Ballintra. Here his rearguard neglected his orders to destroy the bridge, and he was much harassed by the pursuing cavalry of Col. Crawford, upon whom he turned near Drumshambo on Sep. 7th and defeated with some loss. But the next day at Ballinamuck, within eleven miles of Granard, he was overtaken and forced to fight, after which he surrendered to the British army of 30,000 men.

This was the last action of the period; the British arms were triumphant, and the victors mafficked on the plains of Leitrim. Humbert's Irish allies having been excluded from quarter, 500 of them, unresisting prisoners, were massacred in cold blood on the field of Ballinamuck. About 200 more were imprisoned in the courthouse at Carrick-on-Shannon when an order arrived from Lord Cornwallis directing that a number of them should be immediately hanged. As there was some difficulty in deciding who to hang the following ingenious form of trial was devised, which we must admit was just as effective and much cheaper than the trials by packed juries of our own time. A number of slips of paper were rolled up, the word "Death" being written on as many of them as the Lord Lieutenant desired to murder. One Captain Kay took charge of the raffle, and putting the slips in his hat he gave each prisoner one draw. Seventeen men drew the fatal tickets, and as fast as they did so they were taken out and hanged at the door. This incident illustrates the neatness and simplicity with which British officials dealt with Irishmen 100 years ago, and it would be impossible to chronicle the myriads of similar incidents that disgraced the period. Nor were such outrages confined to one side of the struggle, as the hideous massacres of Royalist prisoners on Wexford Bridge and the massacre of Republican prisoners on the recapture of the town testify. But there is one other "trial" which should not be forgotten.

Mr. Grogan, of Johnstown Castle, an old gentlemen of over 70, who was a cripple and walked with crutches, was hanged and beheaded

on Wexford Bridge by the English General, Lake, the evidence against him being that he had sufficient influence with the Republicans to secure a supply of bread for the starving family of a lady named Seagrave.

Nine days after the surrender of Humbert a French brig, with Napper Tandy and General Rey, arrived with arms, artillery and supplies at Rutland Island, in Donegal, expecting that the country was up and that they had nothing to do but to join their friends. They were astounded to hear that very few had joined the French and to find that the natives fled to the mountains on their approach and seemed not at all inclined to assist them. Within a month a large fleet of French ships, under Commodore Bompard, with Wolfe Tone and Teeling on board, arrived off Tory Island, where they were engaged by an English squadron and prevented from landing; and two weeks after that the three ships which had brought Humbert's party arrived again at Killala with reinforcements for him, but learning that there had been no general rising, and that Humbert was defeated, they sailed back to France. Thus ended the war of '98, and the question arises, why did it end thus?

A glance at the map is the best answer. Ninety-eight was the grave of Irish freedom, not because of any overwhelming military ability on the part of the British, as the defeats of Tubberneering, Three Rocks, Ballyellis and Castlebar testify; not from any inferiority in the valour of the pikemen, as the capture of New Ross and Enniscorthy shows; not for the want of assistance from the French, who sent four expeditions within two months, but because the most Irish of the Irish people did not in that period strike a single blow for the independence of their country. Excepting the solitary skirmish at Ballinascorty, Co. Cork, on June 19th, when the Westmeath Militia were attacked by a few hundred pikemen, I have not found mention of a single engagement in the predominately Irish districts until the arrival of the French, and even after that I find no record of the engagement in which the French were not actually present. Why was this?

The results of the Wexford campaign make it clearly evident that a simultaneous rising of say one-fourth of the Irish counties

would have defeated all the forces that the British and Irish Governments could have sent against them. Any considerable disturbance in even one or other mountainous county like Kerry, Galway or Donegal might have turned the scale. Why was there no such disturbance?

The arrest of Lord Edward and the other leaders cannot be given as a reason, because after the 23rd of May there was no further occasion for secrecy and every man knew his duty. The charge of cowardice is disproved by the fact that such counties as Limerick, Kerry, Cork, Westmeath, Galway and Kilkenny provided scores of regiments which fought against their countrymen. It will hardly be asserted that they did not desire a change of Government. And the only tenable explanation appears to be that the Irish counties had no arms. And why had they no arms? Had they not received 628 years previous notice that men who wish to be free must first find arms themselves. Didn't they have sufficient common sense to know that a man who is dissatisfied with his form of government, and who has not got a rifle and a thousand rounds of ammunition in a place where he can get it when he wants it, is only playing at politics? But, you may say, there were disarming acts, martial law, searches of houses and so forth, and it was impossible for the people to obtain arms. I refuse to accept this explanation. There are no disarming acts now. Rifles can be bought freely by anyone who has the price of them. Powder, although somewhat dearer, is as easy to obtain as sugar. Yet will anyone assert that the Irish who desire a change of government are armed today?

If you object that conditions are different today and that there is no prospect of Ireland getting such a chance in our time as she did in 1798, I reply that Ireland never had such a chance in 1798 as she had a hundred years later during the Boer War.

By inaction the opportunity was missed in 1798. In the same way it was missed in 1900.

Let it be the work of all who desire their country's freedom to prepare so that it shall not be missed when the opportunity comes again.

