

Vinegar Hill and the 1798 Rebellion

This May and June mark the 210 anniversary of the events which are known as the 1798 rebellion. Inspired by the ideals of the enlightenment and the success of both the American and French Revolutions, numerous Irish Presbyterians, Catholics and dissenters from the Anglican Church began to dream of an independent and republican Ireland where all people irrespective of religion, could participate in their governance.



Depiction of the battle of Vinegar Hill

The failure of early attempts at Catholic emancipation, combined with the rise of the Orange Order persuaded the leaders of the United Irishmen to plan an armed rebellion looking to revolutionary France for assistance. An abortive attempted by France to land 15,000 troops in Cork, resulted in the British government imposing martial law and the use of terror as Yeomanry units began conducting roving sweeps for weapons which often were an excuse for plunder, rape and arson.

In 1798 the United Irishmen had 280,000 sworn members and were attempting to await a second attempted French Invasion force, but the increasing terror of the disarming campaign forced their hand and they set a date of 23 May 1798 for a general uprising. It was almost doomed to failure from the start: information from informants had resulted in the arrest of many of the key leaders on 18 May and the collapse of the plan to take Dublin which was essential to the rebel plans. In an age before telecommunications, it was impossible to call off the rebellion; what then resulted was a series of sporadic and uncoordinated uprisings which met with harsh and brutal defeats and reprisals.

Arguably the most successful part of the rebellion occurred in County Wexford. A unit of pikemen under the command of Fr. John Murphy defeated a unit of armed yeomanry. On 28 May the Wexford rebels captured the town of Enniscorthy after several hours of hard fighting, securing much needed arms.

Unfortunately, these successes were short lived. The collapse of the rebellion in other parts of Ireland freed British troops who now converged in a tightening noose about the rebel camp at Vinegar Hill. The strength of the rebels is estimated at 20,000 but there were also thousands of women and children. The British forces surrounded Vinegar Hill and subjected it to a prolonged Artillery bombardment, when the rebel forces broke; only a heroic stand by rebels under William Baker to hold the bridge at Enniscorthy prevented total annihilation. When the defense collapsed, the Militia Cavalry was unleashed resulting in the massacre of hundreds of stragglers, mainly women and children.

The rebellion would continue, and a small French force would invade Ireland in August 1798 and enjoy some modest success before being defeated. Reprisals against the rebels of '98 were harsh with the majority of the leaders being executed by drum head courts. One cannot help but wonder how different the history of Ireland would have been if the rebellion of '98, and it's principals of toleration, had succeeded.

Did you know that:

A common slang term for the rebels of 1798 was "Croppies". Rebels would cut their hair short to show their rejection of the Aristocracy whose fashion was to wear their hair and wigs long.

Fr. Murphy initially opposed rebellion, and urged compliance with the disarming act, but continued atrocities by the yeomanry caused him to advise his parishioners "that they had better die courageously in the field, than to be butchered in their houses"

The reprisals against the leadership of the '98 were particularly harsh: When Fr. Murphy was captured in Tullow, County Carlow, he was stripped, flogged, hanged, decapitated and his corpse burnt in a barrel of tar outside a Catholic family's house, his head placed on a gate facing the local Catholic Church.

The signal for the coordinated rising in the 1798 rebellion was the stopping of the 5 overnight mail coaches to the main provincial towns Unfortunately, only the Ulster and Cork coaches were successfully stopped.

The problems of the 1798 would be repeated in 1916, the failure of the Germans to land promised rifles and the capture of Sir Roger Casement prematurely triggering the Easter Rebellion