

Belfast Magazine and Literary Journal

Recollections of the Battle of Ballynahinch

Author(s): Iota

Source: *The Belfast Magazine and Literary Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Feb., 1825), pp. 56-64

Published by: [Belfast Magazine and Literary Journal](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20495499>

Accessed: 07/04/2013 13:54

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Belfast Magazine and Literary Journal is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Belfast Magazine and Literary Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

and the ghosts of the eagles, and other birds of prey, took fright, and were seen winging their way, in every direction, to other regions. His Royal Highness, then springing from the ground to the height of more than half a furlong, plunged headlong into the canal of sulphur; and a whole rood of its surface fell instantly a boiling as fiercely as one of the sugar vats of Leith.—“I have lost my dirk!” said the Highlander: and went away with his blue bonnet beneath his arm.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BATTLE OF BALLYNAHINCH.

BY AN EYE WITNESS.

ON Monday the 11th of June, 1798, the Rebel army arrived at Ballynahinch, and posted themselves on a hill called Edenvady, in the demesnes which then belonged to the Earl of Moira (now Marquis of Hastings); but which at present belong to David Ker, Esq. of Portavo. This hill, which is of considerable height, is situated at the distance of nearly half a mile from the town, in a south-westerly direction, and was well fitted for the purposes of the insurgents. The side of it next the town, was that which they occupied. This part of the hill presented an open space of considerable extent, bounded on all sides by plantings, and studded with clumps of trees.

Immediately after their arrival, the insurgents despatched parties in all directions, for the double purpose of collecting provisions, and bringing in the United Irishmen of that part of the country, to increase their numbers. In respect to the latter object, they were very unsuccessful; as the men of Ballynahinch and the surrounding country in general, chose rather to retire to Slieve-croob, and the other adjoining mountains, than to hazard their lives in that cause, in which, before the frowning front of war presented its terrors, many of them had embarked with as much show of ardour, and as much profession of courage, as their neighbours. In foraging, however, the detachments were much more successful: the heaviest threats being denounced against those who would not send prepared provisions to the camp, without delay. Hence, this part of the mission was in general strictly complied with, chiefly from fear, and perhaps partly from love; the females, the old men, and the boys, who alone remained at home, in general wishing full success to the cause, pro-

viding that success could be achieved without personal danger to sons, husbands, or brothers.

A message of the nature above mentioned, was delivered to my father's family, as well as to others; and gave immediate employment to the females of the family, and such others as could be procured to assist, in preparing oaten cakes, and boiling large portions of salted beef and bacon. These preparations were completed by one o'clock, on Tuesday the 12th; and three females, who were to receive assistance from others for a considerable part of the way, were appointed to carry to the camp the articles already mentioned, with butter, and several other items. At my very particular and urgent request, I was allowed to satisfy my curiosity, by accompanying them; as I was so young a boy, as to be secure against detention or danger.

After a walk of about a mile and a half, a considerable part of which lay in the grounds of Lord Moira, we entered the camp of that body of men, who were to sever Ireland from the dominion of Britain, and to give her a separate existence, and a name among the nations—who were to give liberty and equality to their countrymen—to abolish tithes and taxes—in a word, to make Ireland, at least, as happy as the United States and the French Republic were considered, in the ardent conceptions of the republicans of the day.

When we arrived, there were on the ground a considerable number of females, chiefly servants, or the daughters or wives of cottiers or small farmers. These were almost all employed on the same business as ourselves; though it is said, that two or three of them remained on the field, during the battle, submitting to their share of its labours and dangers, and performing as valiant deeds as the men. Nothing could surpass the delicacy and kindness with which these female visitors were received, and conducted through the camp. When those of our party entered the field, they were immediately lightened of their burdens, and escorted along with them to a particular part of the ground, where the provisions were placed, under the care of persons appointed to receive and distribute them; and two or three young men offered their services, to conduct us through the field. Every thing was explained with minuteness: pikes of different constructions were pointed out, and their uses explained; the cannon and ammunition were shown; and the tremendous effects glanced at, which they were calculated to produce. The leaders were also pointed out—the more distinguished and the greater favorites among them—with pride and exultation, and their

H

dresses and ornaments explained. To me, as well as to my companions, the whole was a series of wonders; every thing was striking, and even imposing and delightful. The eye was presented with a mixed and motley multitude: some walking about; others stretched listlessly on the green turf, along the field; a considerable number sheltering themselves, from the scorching rays of a burning sun, under the shade of the trees with which the field was skirted; and many restoring nature with the sweets of balmy sleep. They wore no uniform; yet they presented a tolerably decent appearance, being dressed, no doubt, in their "Sunday's clothes"—some better and some worse; but none in the ragged costume, that is often to be seen in other parts of Ireland. The only thing in which they all concurred, was the wearing of green; almost every individual having a knot of ribbons of that colour, sometimes intermixed with yellow, in his hat. Most of them, besides, had their hats and button-holes decorated with laurel from the adjoining grounds. Their leaders also, in general, wore green or yellow belts, and some of them green coats; and many, both of them and of those under their command, bore ornaments of various descriptions, and of different degrees of taste and execution; the most of which had been presented as tributes of regard and affection, and as incentives to heroic deeds, by females, whose breasts beat as high in patriotic ardour as those of their husbands, their sweethearts, or their brothers. The most common of these decorations were, the harp entwined with shamrock or bays, but without the crown; the British lion and unicorn in a falling attitude; the cap of liberty; and many other symbolic representations, with various corresponding inscriptions, expressive of the wishes and feelings of the people; such as, "liberty or death,"—"a downfall to tyrants,"—"freedom to Ireland," and many others of a similar character. In their arms, there was as great a diversity as in their dress. By far the majority had pikes, which were truly formidable instruments in close fight, but of no use in distant warfare. These had generally wooden shafts, seven or eight feet long, with sharpened heads of steel, of different forms, and commonly ten or twelve inches in length. Some of these heads consisted simply of one longitudinal piece; but others had another piece crossing this, and forming a sort of hooks, which were thought likely to be of use in dragging horsemen from their seats, or in cutting the bridles of their horses: others wore old swords, generally of the least efficient kind; and some had merely pitchforks. Those of the higher class were armed

with guns. There were also seven or eight pieces of small cannon, mounted on common cars, which were not calculated to produce much effect.

The army was composed chiefly of persons in youth and middle life; with not a few, however, on the precincts of old age, or on the borders between boyhood and youth. All seemed to carry a cheerful expression of countenance; but which, from subsequent experience, I would consider, in most cases, to have been affected; and I have no doubt but a more skilful observer would have detected traits of doubt, and even of fear, in a great many faces which seemed lighted up with gaiety and smiles. The leaders were everywhere moving through the field, speaking familiarly and kindly to the men; cheering their courage; and, by such stories and jokes as they knew to be suited to their tastes, exciting mirth among the groups, from which loud laughter, every now and then, proceeded.

We had finished our survey of the camp, and were preparing to leave it, when on a sudden an alarm was given; and all eyes being instantly directed beyond the town, to the road leading from Downpatrick, a detachment of soldiers was distinctly seen approaching, at the distance of about three miles. In a moment, all was bustle through the field; and a degree of trepidation and alarm pervaded the undisciplined mass. It is scarcely necessary to state, that we instantly quitted the ground; and many would doubtless have wished to accompany us, had shame, or the fear of their fellows, permitted them.

On arriving at home, I found the family already in a state of alarm, on the top of a high adjoining hill; from the summit of which, the movements of both parties were seen with as much accuracy as a distance of about a mile and a half would permit; and the use of a small glass added much to the ease of observation.

According to a preconcerted arrangement, two bodies of the King's forces—one from Downpatrick already mentioned, and the other from Belfast—were to meet at a short distance from Ballynahinch, where the two lines of road united, on the side of the town opposite to the rebel camp; and the joint force was to be commanded by General Nugent. If the insurgents had been aware of this arrangement, they might easily have defeated the detachment from Downpatrick, which arrived more than two hours before the other. Had this been done, it is likely that the detachment from Belfast would either not have ventured to attack them, or would have

failed in gaining a victory; and thus the fate of the Northern insurrection might have been somewhat longer suspended.

As we continued our look-out from the hill, the approach of the party from Belfast was in a short time announced, by the smoke and flames of the farm-houses, which they set on fire indiscriminately, on their march from Saintfield to Ballynahinch. This barbarous procedure, which has at all times formed so common and so terrible a feature among the atrocities of war, was perhaps practised, on the present occasion, for the purpose of terrifying the rebels, and the inhabitants of the country; and some think that it was intended to prevent the effusion of blood—by reducing the insurgents, if possible, to submission, without the calamities necessarily attendant on a battle. This is, perhaps, too charitable a construction; but, be that as it may, no such effect followed; for, instead of it, a feeling of execration and horror against the perpetrators was produced in the minds of all who beheld the conflagration, or who lived in that part of the country; which, had the issue of the battle been different, must have been highly injurious to the royal cause. On perceiving these acts of devastation, all the inhabitants who had not yet deserted their dwellings, expected their houses and properties to share a similar fate, and began forthwith to remove such articles as appeared most valuable, or could be most easily concealed. In this way, beds and wearing apparel, barrels of meal, flitches of beef and bacon, and casks of butter, were deposited in meadows and corn-fields, in the bottoms of ditches, in gardens, under rubbish, or in whatever places appeared least likely to excite suspicion. The more valuable articles, such as money or important papers, were, in many instances, disposed of in curious and rather amusing modes. The writer of this article was called to be witness to the concealment of the lease of a farm, and other papers, with some money, under a large stone, in the middle of a field; being told that, from his youth, he had a better chance of escaping than those who were older. A person in the neighbourhood, also, concealed upwards of a hundred guineas in a magpie's nest, on a high tree. After such efforts for the partial preservation of property, the houses were, in most instances, abandoned to whatever fate might await them; their owners betaking themselves to the neighbouring mountains, and other places of comparative security, removed from the scene of the expected conflict.

The two bodies of the military effected a junction without opposition, and took their station on an eminence called the

Windmill-hill, almost exactly on the opposite side of the town, and at the distance of nearly a mile, from the rebel camp. The battle commenced about six o'clock in the evening, and was carried on chiefly by the cannon and musketry, till about nine, when the conflict ceased, in consequence of the darkness. There can be little doubt, that during this period, the advantage lay on the side of the military, in consequence of their superior discipline and appointments; but from the distance, it is not likely that much injury was done to either party. The chief injury sustained by the rebels, however, consisted in the gradual desertion of a great part of their army. Soon after the commencement of the engagement, many began to slink away from the field; and we distinctly heard their more determined fellows shouting to stop the runaways. The chief desertion took place, however, in the dusk of the evening, and during the night, when the darkness afforded the cowardly an opportunity of stealing away unperceived; and the interruption of the conflict gave them time to cool, and to reflect on the horrors of the fight, and on the dangers to which they were exposed. Accordingly, during every hour of the night, fugitives were seen passing our station. Some of these were slightly wounded. One in particular had his handkerchief wrapped round his foot, which was bleeding, the upper part of it having been grazed by a cannon ball. When these poor creatures, on being accosted, saw reason to believe that they were in no danger of personal injury from those who addressed them, the first request was commonly for drink; and a bowl of milk seemed to be grateful and refreshing in the highest degree. They seemed, indeed, to be parched with thirst, partly from the heat of the weather, and the rapidity of their flight, and partly from the fever that seemed to boil in their veins, in consequence of the state of distress and terror into which they were plunged.

One of these fugitives, who passed our station the following morning, was in such confusion, that though it was only two hours after *sunrise*, he thought it was near *sunset*; and, looking towards the horizon, thanked God in the most devout manner, that the sun was so low, and the night so near; as he would thus have the better chance of escaping. A similar state of mind was shown by many others.

The only proceeding worthy of notice, that took place between the armies in the evening, after the cessation of the general firing, was the pouring of a heavy volley from musketry, on the military, by a party of the insurgents, who had

made their way unperceived through the darkness of the evening, till they came close to the enemy. What the effect of this volley was, I have never heard.

During the darker period of the night, which was calm, serene, and delightful, and fitted for milder deeds than those of war, both armies remained quiet; and the natural silence and repose of the hour was only interrupted by an occasional shout, or by the discharge of a sentinel's gun. Between two and three o'clock of the morning of Wednesday, however, the horrors of the scene were renewed, by the King's forces setting fire to the town; and in a short time, a great proportion of the best houses in it were enveloped in flames, and hastening to inevitable destruction. This act, which was by no means necessary, caused the rebels immediately to recommence the fight, and to endeavour, by means of their small artillery, to arrest the work of devastation. The fire was returned by the King's forces; and the contest soon became general, and much hotter than on the preceding evening. The royal army recommenced the cannonade with a heavier fire, and with larger artillery than they had before employed. The scene about sunrise was at once terrific and sublime. The smoke and flames which arose from the burning village; the incessant discharges of small arms; the large and frequent flashes of the cannon, and their loud reports; each of which was reverberated with numerous re-echoes from the neighbouring mountains, loud and confused as if the mountains were tumbling down around us; with the occasional bursting of a bomb shell in the air, before it reached the intended distance;—all conspired in presenting a scene new to all the onlookers, and to most of the combatants themselves; and one that was calculated to impress with awe the stoutest hearts.

At an early period after the recommencement of the engagement, a detachment of the King's forces was sent round with some pieces of artillery to flank the rebels. These made good their object, by possessing themselves of a small hill, about a mile distant from the place where I was. This manœuvre, and the galling fire which succeeded it, greatly disconcerted the rebels, and no doubt contributed in a considerable degree to the success of the military.

Soon after, a party under the command of Captain Evat, was despatched from this detachment, through the demesnes, to annoy the rebels, or to dislodge them from the hill. Their intention was perceived, however; and a number of the insurgents having posted themselves in the demesnes behind a

hedge, adjoining the way which led to the hill, poured on the party a volley of shot, which instantly killed the captain, and, I believe, obliged the rest to retire.

Some time in the course of the morning, the most murderous part of the conflict took place on the streets of Ballynahinch. It is understood that General Nugent sent a strong body with part of the artillery, to pass through the town, and, if possible, to drive the rebels from their position by force. To oppose these, a party of pikemen were despatched, who were said to have acted with great gallantry, and at one time to have possessed themselves of one of the largest of the cannon, which, however, was shortly afterwards retaken. During this part of the engagement, which continued for a considerable period, we distinctly heard the cheers, the yells, and the shrieks of the combatants: thus having at a distance some specimen of the discordant and appalling cry of battle. What was the effect of this conflict on the fortunes of the day, I had no opportunity of learning: but however it might weaken or dispirit the rebels, it is certain that the King's forces did not, at that time, succeed in their intention. The rebel army, however, was suffering constant diminution by desertion; and their fire was gradually slackening, and had almost entirely ceased, it is said, from want of ammunition, about seven in the morning. At this time the military passed without opposition through the town, and proceeded to clear the field of the few combatants that had still the courage to await their approach. On this occasion, the few that remained gave a parting volley, which is said to have done some execution; and then, leaving a complete and decisive victory to their opponents, they sought safety in flight.

Such was the termination of a battle, which continued three hours on the evening of Tuesday, and four on the morning of Wednesday; and which fortunately terminated the ill concerted and short-lived rebellion in the North. Had the rebels been successful in this engagement, their numbers would have been rapidly and greatly increased; and there must have been much more bloodshed, and much more extensive distress and desolation, before they could have been finally reduced.

The numbers of the two parties have been very differently stated. I have been informed by intelligent persons, however, who took pains to gain as accurate information as circumstances would permit, that the number of the rebels was from five to seven thousand, while that of the military was perhaps between two and three thousand. The number that

fell in the battle is still more uncertain. The number of rebels killed on the field and in the flight, has been stated, in several of the published accounts of the battle, at four or five hundred. This statement is generally considered to have been greatly exaggerated; and it is said that only twenty bodies of the rebels were found for interment in the town and on the field of battle, and twenty-eight scattered over the country. Perhaps the truth lies between these extremes. The loss on the part of the King's forces, has been stated to have been forty or fifty in killed and wounded; and this estimate is probably pretty near the truth.

The occurrences of the flight, and the perils and exertions of the fugitives in endeavouring to conceal themselves, or to get safely out of their native land to America or other places, with the numerous privations and hairbreadth escapes of many, would afford sufficient matter for a narrative of much interest. Of these I have heard much; but having had no means of personal observation, I shall say nothing respecting them. In what precedes, I have endeavoured to recal and describe the actual impressions of the time. These impressions were formed at that time of life, when the traces may be expected to be stronger and more vivid than at a more advanced age, and especially when the events are of a striking character; and this expectation has been fully realised in the present instance. Some of the lighter shades are no doubt worn away and defaced in a considerable degree, by the busy scenes and various cares of more than a quarter of a century: still, however, not only the grand outline of events, but in many instances even the minuter traces, retain such a freshness and strength as to seem to be stamped in indelible characters on the very substance of the mind, and to be apparently as durable as itself.

IOTA.