

# *CATHAIR NA MART*



£1.50

*A pen and ink drawing of the town of Westport, circa 1818 by James Arthur O'Connor. Courtesy British Museum, London.*



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*Westport Historical Society wishes to thank all those who contributed articles for this, the first journal, published by the Society.*

*Our thanks also to the Allied Irish Bank, Westport, the British Museum, London for the illustration on the front cover, the Librarian Staff, National Library of Ireland and the Librarian Staff, Mayo Co. Library.*

*The Society hopes that this journal will be the forerunner of many and invites articles for further publications from our readers.*

*JARLATH DUFFY,  
Chairman.  
December 1981.*



**AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF WESTPORT**  
**PART I**  
**THE ORIGINS & EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN**  
**WESTPORT 1750—1780**

by Peadar O Flanagan, B.A.

**INTRODUCTION:**

This article is an attempt to put into writing an outline on which a definitive history of the town can be based. The principal difficulty in attempting a definitive history at this time is the unavailability of a major private archive within the town. The sources on which this article are based are therefore the printed sources presently available, together with such manuscript sources as are available for study. The opinions reached are those of the author except where otherwise acknowledged in the text.

Westport is a comparatively recent town having developed over the past 250 years. In the present article the author will deal with the origin and early development of the new town of Westport in the period 1750—1780 and will refute some of the existing theories as to who planned the town.

**ORIGINS:**

The town of Westport owes its origins to a number of factors:

- 1 Geographical location, sited near the mouth of the Carrowbeg River in a corner of Clew Bay at the western extremity of the central plain. The earliest habitation in this area dates back some 5,000 years and there are a variety of archaeological sites in the locality.
- 2 The existence of an earlier habitational site, Cathair na Mart (The Stone Fort of the Beeves), in the 16th century an important O'Malley stronghold which was burned and destroyed by Sir Nicholas Malby, Governor of Connacht in 1583 in his campaign against the Mayo Burkes. During the 17th century Cathair na Mart passed from the O'Malleys to Lord Mayo (Theobald of the Ships, a son of Graine Uaile), and from the 3rd Viscount Mayo to John Browne, a lawyer, who married Maud Bourke. Browne raised a regiment in the service of King James and was one of the drafters of the Treaty of Limerick. Colonel Browne settled at Cathair na Mart and built a house on or near the site of the old O'Malley fortress. He was succeeded by his son Peter Browne to whom a curious monument exists at Carnalurgan with the inscription 'Orate Pro Anima Petri Browne Qui Me Fieri Fecit A.D. 1723.'
- 3 The character of John Browne (1709—1776), son to Peter Browne, orphaned at the age of 15, and sent by his Protestant guardians to be educated at Oxford, from which he returned in 1729, conformed to the Established Church, and inherited the lands about Westport accumulated by his father and grandfather, which he proceeded to develop. He employed the German



architect, Richard Cassels to design the present East Front of Westport House in 1732; this was executed in a simple style with cut limestone from a quarry on the Estate, and the work completed, followed by the house-bridge (1734), the stable block (1735), and old Protestant Church now in ruins in the Demesne (1736). Waterfalls were constructed in the river and the North and South Woods planted at this time.

The village of Cathair na Mart existed where the greatpark now lies and consisted of a High Street with alleys descending down to the river. It had a population of approx. 700 inhabitants. A small port also existed at the mouth of the river. Roads lead from the village to the west (West Road), the south (Sandy Hill Road) and the east (Old Paddock Road).

John Browne became an M.P. for the Borough of Castlebar in 1743, was created Baron Monteagle in 1760, Viscount Westport in 1768, and Earl of Altamont in 1771.

By mid-century he decided on the ambitious project of building a new town on his estate, and he continued with this project until his death in 1776 when it was continued by his son, Peter Browne, the 2nd Earl.

#### FOUNDATION:

It has been suggested that Westport was originally laid out and planned by an architect. There are a number of variations on this theme:

- 1 The Cassels Theory — that Westport was planned by Richard Cassels in the 1730's.
- 2 The Wyatt Theory — that Westport was planned by James Wyatt circa 1780.
- 3 The French Architect Theory — that the town was planned by a French architect who came with Humbert in 1798.

**The Cassels Theory.** — with the exception of his designs for the East Front, Central Court of Westport House, Stable-block and Church, there does not appear to be any other plan by Cassels dating from the 1730's. The only other building dating from this period is the Old Rectory which predates the town and would possibly date from the period of the old Protestant Church, i.e. 1736.

**The Wyatt Theory** — which has been quoted in many reference books, would assume a date of approximately 1780 for the town. Outside of his internal designs for Westport House (1782) and those of his son Benjamin Dean Wyatt for a theatre in the town (1812) there is no evidence to support this theory.

**The French Architect Theory** is more a matter of tradition and has no basis in fact.

It has been found convenient to adopt a theory which would credit a particular well-known architect with the planning of the town, and in particular in the case of the Wyatt theory, this view has become generally accepted and quoted in most modern references to the town.



*Painting of Westport Quay circa 1818 by James Arthur O'Connor, from the Westport House Collection.*

Photo: Liam Lyons



*Painting of Westport House from the West by George Moore 1761, showing the new town in the background, from the Westport House Collection.*

Photo: Liam Lyons



The question may now be asked as to who did in fact plan Westport. The answer is not a simple one. Westport was not planned or built in a day or for that matter in a year or decade. It developed over a period of more than two centuries.

If any one man is to be credited with planning the town, then it must be credited to John Browne, who caused the town to be built.

We have an interesting first-hand account from this period from the pen of Dr. Pococke who visited Westport in 1752 and was a guest of John Browne. He refers to Westport (Cathair na Mart) as a village and states that Browne had decided to remove the village and to landscape the area:

"We descended to Westport, a small village situated on a rivlet which falls into that bay, and makes the south-east corner of that great bay, in which there are some small islands . . . Mr. Browne's house is very pleasantly situated in the south side of the rivlet over which he has built two handsome bridges, and has formed cascades which are seen from the front of the House . . . This is an exceedingly good house, the design and execution of Mr. Castles; Mr. Browne designs to remove the village and make it a park improvement all round; there are fine low hills every way which are planted and grow exceedingly well; the tyde comes just up to the house and the cascades are fine salmon leaps."

Two 18th century landscape paintings by George Moore dated 1761 at present in the Westport House collection depict the house and district from the east and from the west. In the painting from the west, Westport House is depicted as a free-standing building, alongside Carrowbeg River with its bridges and falls. The stable-block can be seen to the left of the picture and the spire of the old Protestant Church in the background. The north and south woods and great park are in existence and what may well be developments in the upper right-hand side of the painting, which could represent the earliest parts of the new town.

From the above-mentioned evidence I conclude that the present town was commenced by John Browne between the years 1750—1760. That the earliest developed parts of the town were along existing roads leading to old Cathair-na-Mart, Monument Street to the Fountain, the original town centre, John's Row leading to Tubberhill and thence to the West Road, and Peter Street leading to Church Street and old Caher-na-Mart. At this time the Carrowbeg River basin flowed to the North of its present course and this part of the town was developed only in later years. Bridge Street led from the Fountain to the river and Mill Street to the Old Mill which was situated under the present viaduct. The Octagon, James Street and Shop Street were developed at a later period.

Thus the early development of the town followed the natural lines of communication and the Fountain, and later the Octagon and later still the Fairgreen became focii for radiating streets.

The early houses were stone-built structures, slate roofed and for the most part two-storey with small windows, a number of examples of which still remain on High Street, Peter Street and Bridge Street. The names of the streets were either descriptive — Monument Street, High Street, Mill Street, Bridge Street or related to the Browne family — Peter Street, John's Row.

The early town was quite small as there was as yet no major industry. However, this was soon introduced, and the linen industry introduced in the early 1770's was the foundation of the town's later prosperity.

The best account of this period in the town's history is that of the English traveller and agriculturist, Arthur Young, who visited Westport in the year 1776. He arrived in Westport on 29th August:

"In the evening reached Westport, Lord Altamont's, whose house is very beautifully situated, from a ground rising gently from a fine river, which mares two bold falls within view of his windows, and sheltered on each side by two large hanging woods, behind it has a fine view of the bay, with several headlands projecting into it, one beyond another, with two or three cultivated islands, and the whole bounded by the great mountain of Crow Patrick. On the right from the hill above the house is a view of the bay with several islands, bounded by the hummolus and Clara Island with Crow Patrick rising like a superior lord of the whole country and looking down on the great region or other mountains that stretch from Joyce's Country."

His host the Earl of Altamont he describes as "An improver whose works deserve the closest attention". He describes the various improvements made on the estate concerned with land reclamation, application of fertiliser, rotation of crops and the introduction of the best breeds of English cattle.

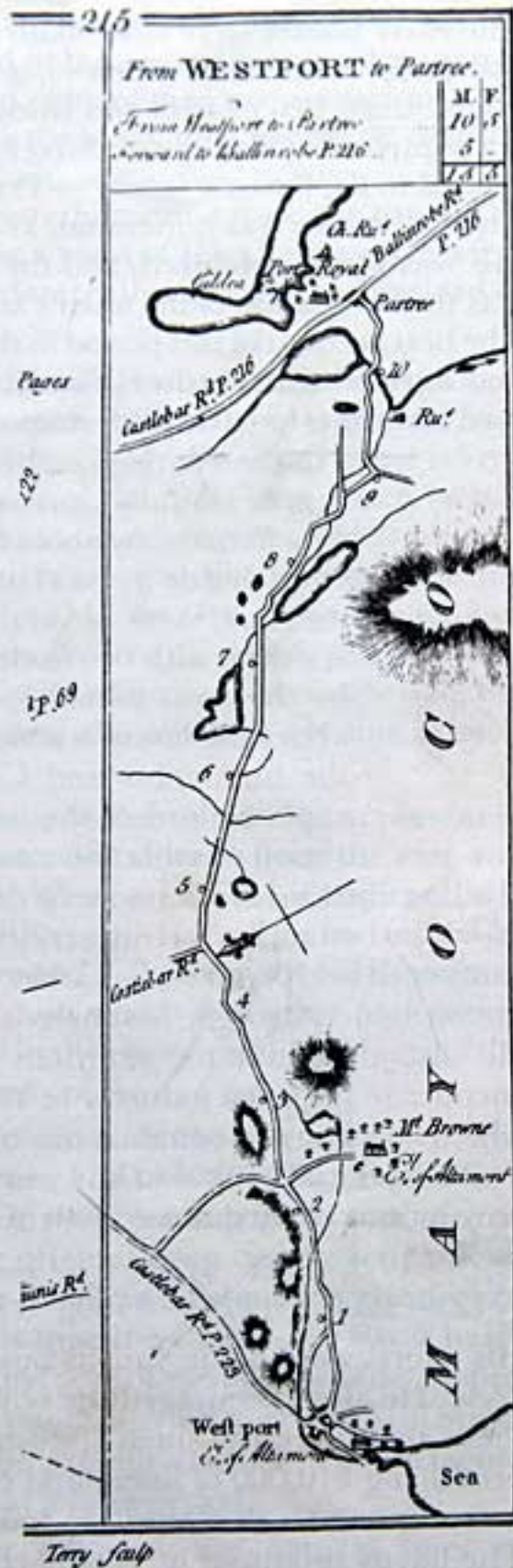
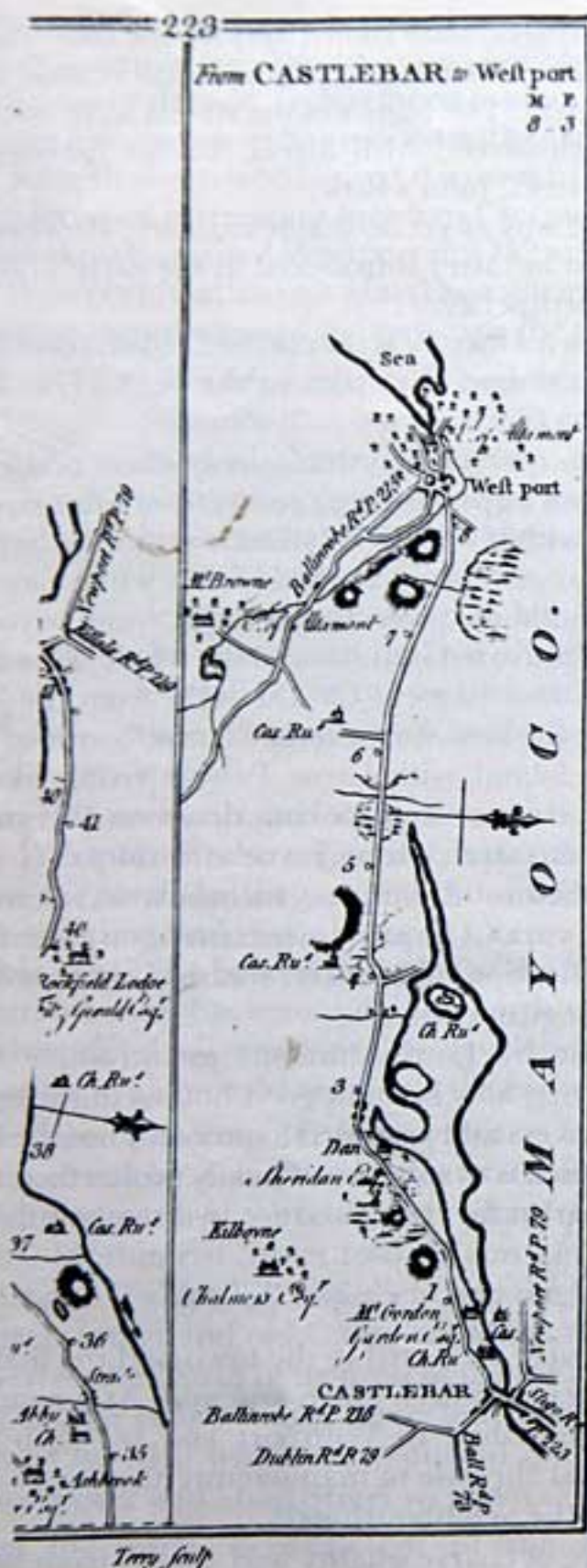
He also describes the exertions made by Lord Altamont to introduce and encourage the linen industry in Westport; how he built good houses in the town which he let on reasonable terms to weavers and provided looms; and how he lent them the initial capital to buy yarn, which was spun from locally grown flax, and how he encouraged the growth of a market for their produce by buying it up for the first few years:

1772 — £200; 1773 — £700; 1774 — £2,000; 1775 — £4,000

His efforts were not in vain as buyers were attracted to the town and the market grew. He also encouraged the building of a bleach green and mill. As a result of these measures the linen industry flourished in Westport and by 1776 was producing £10,000 of linen, and even at the rate of manufacture they were only weaving one-tenth of the yarn spun in the neighbourhood.

The linens produced in Westport were of coarse quality and sold at from 9d. to 1/1d. per yard, the weavers earning 1d. per yard per day. The spinning of the yarn which was carried out by women and children in the home, earned 2½d. to





Detail from Taylor & Skinner  
 "Maps of the Roads of Ireland" (1778) showing the Town of Westport

3½d. per day. Young goes on to describe the living conditions of the people in the area. The poor lived on the potato for nine months of the year and bread and milk for the remainder. They have one or two cows, fish are plentiful. Menfolk feed their families from labour in the field and the family income is supplemented by the spinning of yarn by the womenfolk. Dealing with land-holdings around Westport, Young states that most of the holdings are large, from 400—500 acre stock farms, the cultivated land being sub-let at increased rents to the oppression of the poor, who as he states "have a strong aversion to these Tierney Begg".

Rents average about 8/0d. an acre, ranging from heath-land at 2/0d. to good land at 16/0d. Plowing is done by teams of horses, proceeded by a man walking backwards in front of the horses.

The population of the area is increasing rapidly and on Lord Altamont's estate had doubled itself within 20 years. There is no emigration.

Land leases were for the duration of 3 lives or 31 years and they sold at 21/22 years purchase at a rack-rent.

Tithes were compounded in lump sum. Rents had fallen over the past 5 years by 13/0d. in the pound, but by 1776 were in the balance with a tendency to rise. Much of the land which was let was re-let into small holdings.

From Young's detailed account, we get a picture of Westport as very much a rural town depending on agriculture as the chief industry. The introduction and development of the linen industry gave the impetus for the expansion of the town on the lines previously mentioned i.e. from the Fountain, down Bridge Street, along Mill Street, and from the Octagon down James Street and across Shop Street. The lower reaches of the town were the last to be developed.

In 1776 John Browne, 1st Earl of Altamont died and was succeeded by his son, Peter Browne as 2nd Earl, who is listed as one of the subscribers to Taylor and Skinners "Maps of the Roads of Ireland". This interesting publication gives us (1778) the earliest existing plan of the town. Though it is most difficult to identify individual streets, the roads leading from the town are distinguishable and it can be seen that the Carrowbeg River course had not yet been altered, and there was only one bridge over the river, across the road leading from Castlebar. There was no development north of the river.

Part of James Street, Mill Street and all of the Fairgreen, Malls, Altamont Street, Castlebar Street, and Newport Road had yet to be developed. The Octagon or Square as it was called may not have taken its present shape. One of the most interesting buildings in the town dating from about this period is the Market House (Wyatt Theatre) with its four-arched cut-stone exterior closing the view from Shop Street. This building has been attributed to James Wyatt, but is more likely to have been designed or built or both by a local builder. An internal plan by Benjamin Dean Wyatt, for a theatre for the town of Westport, dated 1812 can be seen in Westport House, but this plan was not carried out.



With the death of the 2nd Earl of Altamont in 1780, Westport was a well-established and growing town with its small port at the Quay, as yet not fully developed, its market for agricultural produce, its linen market. The only church at this date was the Church of Ireland in The Demesne, the rector was Rev. Alexander Clendinning. A lease for the site of the present Catholic Church had not yet been granted and Catholic services were most likely celebrated in a temporary structure at this time.

The industries in the new town included milling, weaving, candlemaking, tanning. Agriculture, fishing and hunting would have played an important part in the local economy.

Importing, exporting and trading and manufacture would in the coming years play an even more important role in the development of the town and port in the years 1780—1820. The population which was growing rapidly may have been as high as 2,000—2,500.

The period 1780—1845 which will be dealt with in a future article was to be one of rapid growth and development during which town and quay took the shape with which we are familiar today.

## SOME ROOT CAUSES OF FAILURE IN IRISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT:

### A Mayo Perspective

by John Gibbons, M.A.

From a cursory glance at contemporary local newspapers, the most noticeable feature of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 was that it made a large collection of colourful titles available to local politicians. Reports of political meetings displayed studious care in denoting each politician's complete title. For example, after his election to different local councils, Mr. J. Walsh, a Westport shopkeeper was always laboriously referred to as "Mr. J. Walsh, shopkeeper, T.C., R.D.C. P.L.G., C.C."\*

*\*(T.C.: Town Councillor, R.D.C.: Rural District Councillor, P.L.G.: Poor Law Guardian, C.C.: County Councillor).*

The Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 was intended however as more than a scheme to satisfy local politicians' appetites for titles. It set out a complex plan to reorganise the system of local government. Before this time there were three local government bodies, the Grand Juries, the Boards of Guardians and the Town Commissions (these were Corporations in some large towns). The Grand Jury was the oldest and most important of these bodies. It was responsible for road building and bridge construction in each county and the maintenance of county buildings. (Contracts for maintaining and repairing sections of roads were at that time negotiated with farmers and labourers in the different localities). It also had charge of the lunatic asylums, the county infirmaries and it carried out negotiations with railway companies for rights of way and for the acquisition of land. The Grand Jury was also obliged to preside over Assizes, the powers of which were substantially less than those of the present District Courts. Members of the Grand Jury were selected by the County Sheriff and were invariably large land owners, graziers and members of the professional classes.

The Poor Law Boards of Guardians were originally established in 1837 to provide workhouses and other facilities for the poor. Between that time and 1898 they were given a number of other responsibilities, mostly in the area of poor relief and sanitation. Membership of the Boards comprises of some elected and some appointed members. However, the voting procedure was such that only large ratepayers could succeed in being elected. Reports of intimidation of electors was common as voting was by open ballot. For example, the 1895 Poor Law elections for Clogher district which was a part of Westport Poor Law Union produced a lot of controversy detailed in the "Mayo News" in subsequent weeks. It was claimed by one of the defeated candidates that intimidation had come from "very high quarters" to prevent 'several parties' from voting for him (c.f. Mayo News, May 8th, 1895).



The third local government before 1898 was the Town Commission. (There were no Corporations in Co. Mayo). In Mayo, the towns of Ballina, Castlebar and Westport each had a Town Commission. Members of the Commissions were all ratepayers elected by the other ratepayers in each town. The Town Commission was responsible for such matters as keeping the streets adequately lit at night and building and maintaining the town's sewerage system.

The overall intention behind the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 was to introduce a properly organised system of local government which would be more democratic and more responsible in carrying out and administering schemes of social change introduced by the government of the day. In this responsibility the new Councils proved to be a dismal failure and they have lived with the legacy of that failure ever since. In the larger scheme of things, it was hoped the new local government system might quench demands for Home Rule, a policy called "killing Home Rule with kindness". It was not a success in this respect.

Established in every administrative county under the new Act was a County Council consisting of a Chairman and Councillors. Most of the business of the Grand Jury was transferred to this Council. So also were some of the powers of the Boards of Guardians, for example that of levying the poor rate. The rates in each county were now raised in one general rate. The county council was also conferred with large powers for the acquisition of land but "for county purposes only". In other words the County Council was given no power to take part in the break-up and re-distribution of the landed estates. The new Councils were elected by the Parliamentary electors for the county with the addition of women and peers. The election was by secret ballot.

In order to carry out local government business in smaller areas within county districts, councils subordinate to County Councils were established. These were usually named after the town around which they were situated. They were divided into two classes, Rural District Councils and Urban District Councils. The Rural District Council corresponded more or less with the Poor Law Union boundaries. It was composed of councillors elected on the same franchise as the members of the county councils. Twelve members were elected for each electoral division which previously had elected just one Poor Law Guardian. The council's greatest responsibility lay in the area of public works.

The Urban District Council had the power of the Grand Jury with regard to roads. It could also levy its own rates but still was accountable for certain contributions to the County Council. By creating Urban and Rural District Councils as distinct and separate bodies, the Local Government Act enshrined the division between town and country. Large ratepayers in Ballina, Castlebar and Westport immediately applied for Urban District status for their towns. They were aware that an Urban District Council would make them largely independent of responsibility for the upkeep and development of the rural

hinterland. While they were quite prepared to grow wealthier on trade from that hinterland the idea that their rates should be used to help finance its development was totally anathema to them. Eventually in 1925, the Rural District Councils were abolished altogether. The result of this decision for rural areas was, in the words of one author, to make "a great diminution of the opportunities open to the citizen to take part in public life". (J. Collins, *"Local Government"*, Dublin, *Institute of Public Administration*, p.79).

Town Commissions could not become Urban District Councils until such time as they applied to the Local Government Board in Dublin and were accepted on the basis of their size and population. So, the first local elections to be held after the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 were not Urban District Council elections but the Town Commission elections of January 1899. These were held in Ballina, Castlebar and Westport. They were significant only in the fact that they were used by candidates to prepare themselves for the takeover of the Mayo County Council after the first County Council elections which were due to be held in April 1899. Townsmen — large ratepayers for the most part — were determined to control these Councils. Central to this control was the vote of the newly-enfranchised artisans and labourers enfranchised under the new Act. Suddenly, local nationalist politicians comprising mostly of a group of large ratepayers were clamouring for the artisan and labourers votes. Political speakers who for so long were insensitive to the problems of local labourers were suddenly unleashing wild rhetoric of social intent. At the meeting the artisans and labouring men were exhorted of "the great necessity of binding together and standing up like men for their rights. As an example of the want of an organisation, he gave the case of the men who were working in a large flour establishment from 6 o'clock in the morning to 6 o'clock in the evening for a paltry ten shillings a week and at the whim of their master these men could be thrown out of their work at a moment's notice as was the case recently (a voice "Ned Staunton") if they asserted their manhood and joined together like brothers in a powerful organisation such as they could make this one they would very soon make their tyrannical master treat them less like dogs and more like men" (*Mayo News*, 18th March, 1899).

This type of language, which had never previously entered local political speeches, suddenly became the order of the day. An Artisan and Labour League was formed, with the blessing of the large ratepayers. The result was a brief upsurge in the public voicing of the atrocious working and living conditions of labourers in the town. In return, the Artisan and Labour League pledged its vote to the Nationalist candidate in the Westport Town Commission elections. The "Mayo News" reported:

"The most remarkable feature of the polling next Thursday in Westport will be the turnout of the recently organised labour element.



**Westport Town Commission Electoral panel by local political affiliation, by occupation, by result in election, by other elections contested.**

Name	Political Affiliation	Occupation	Result in Townland Election	Other Election Contested
J. Brennan	'Snobocracy'	Shopkeeper	N/E	
Ml. Browne	'Nationalist'	Draper	13th	
T. Duffy	('N')	Shopkeeper	N/E	R.D.C.
J. Durkan	('N')	Housepainter	N/E	
J. Gilboy	('N')	Bootmaker	18th	
E. J. Heraty	('S')	Merchant	5th	R.D.C.
E. Horkan	('S')	Merchant	N/E	
T. W. Joyce	('N')	Merchant	12th	R.D.C.
T. Joyce	('S')	Shopkeeper	6th	R.D.C.
P. J. Kelly	('N')	Merchant	1st	R.D.C.
Thomas Loughlin	('N')	Tailor	N/E	
P. McBride	('S')	Shipbroker	3rd	C.C.
Thos. McGreal	('N')	Cattle Dealer	9th	
Wm. Monaghan	('N')	Stone cutter & grocer	16th	R.D.C.
J. Moran	('S')	Merchant	N/E	
M. Moran	('S')	Ship carpenter	N/E	
J. Mulloy	'Independent'	Merchant	N/E	
M. Mulloy	('N')	Shop assistant	5th	
T. Nevin	('S')	Contractor	10th	
A. O'Malley	('S')	Merchant	17th	
T. O'Malley	('S')	Shopkeeper	2nd	R.D.C.
O. O'Malley	('S')	Merchant	11th	R.D.C.
P. O'Malley	('N')	Baker	N/E	
Thos. Ruddy	('N')	Carpenter	N/E	
T. Richardson	('S')	Builder	N/E	
J. Ryan	('N')	Shopkeeper	14th	
Wm. Scott	('Ind.')	Draper	N/E	
E. Staunton	('N')	Carman & Labourer	N/E	
M. Staunton	('N')	Shopkeeper	7th	
P. Toole	('Ind.')	Ironmonger & grocer	N/E	
J. Walsh	('N')	Shopkeeper	4th	R.D.C. & C.C.
T. Walsh	('S')	Shopkeeper	N/E	

This table is compiled from information derived from Mayo News 14th January 1899 and Mayo News 15th April 1899.

N/E = Not elected

'N' = Nationalist United Irish League candidates

'S' = 'Snobocracy', the title given in local newspapers to candidates sympathetic to grazier and landlord interests

Ind. = Independent

1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. = the order in which candidates were elected

The members of the Artisan and Labour League will form into ranks at their rooms in James Street and headed by the Temperance Society band will march through the town to the courthouse and vote solid for the Nationalist candidate" (*Mayo News*, 13th January 1899).

However, for the Nationalist candidates their alliance with the artisans and labourers was just the first step towards a larger goal. The new local government bodies were considered as "ramparts on which to train guns against the enemies of the Irish race" (*Mayo News*, 18th October 1898). In the process the more immediate and local needs of the artisans and labourers were swallowed up and forgotten. They had served their electoral function. The Artisan and Labour League became defunct within a year. Meanwhile, the victorious candidates in the Town Commission elections prepared themselves for the County Council election. In Westport district a local shopkeeper named John Walsh was chosen as the Nationalist candidate. Against him in the same district was a Patrick McBride. Walsh defeated McBride by 897 votes to 467 (*Mayo News*, 15th April 1899).

Elsewhere, townsmen — mostly large ratepayers and shopkeepers were victorious in the first Mayo County Council election. Rural correspondents to local newspapers were openly angry at this result. It appeared to them that the democratic era promised in the new Local Government Act was being thwarted by the larger Nationalist ratepayers. At the time the Act was passed one local Nationalist politician had declared:

"Next Spring every young fellow that I see around me there if he has only got a cabin above his head can be elected a member of the County Council" (*Mayo News*, 25th June, 1899).

The following year just before the elections took place the telling comment of one correspondent to the Western People was that:

"In looking over the reports of the different conventions held in the county to select councillors he found by the reports in the local papers that, as a rule, the men selected to represent the ratepayers were residents of the town. He failed to see why the tenant farmers should not be represented by tenant farmers also. Did the towns possess all the intelligence? Heretofore, they were ruled by the Grand Juries . . . it now seemed that instead of a Grand Jury they were to be ruled by a Town Council" (*Western People*, 4th February, 1899).

Town councillors were quite aware of this antagonism which had come to a head as a result of the competition between town and country politicians for the first County Councils. It continued on after the elections took place. One town commissioner opposed the extension of Ballina Urban boundaries into rural areas because he claimed that:

"The country people will rise up against them and they will have to face up to an opposition which will be strong and intent" (*Western People*, 5th February 1899).



Another source of discontent was the way in which intimidatory tactics were used in order to press voters into giving their votes to certain candidates. The secret Ballot Act was largely ineffectual. One Parish Priest made his position quite clear before the election. He said:

"The people now know their enemies and their friends and have a right to deal with them as such. In these elections let every man vote for principles to the exclusion of individuals. Let them vote for the principles of the United Irish League which are better land and better homes for the people and let no man delude himself with the idea that he can record his vote against the people's candidate and that his action will remain undiscovered. In small districts where electors are few, **such persons if there be any will be as well known to me as if I saw no vote recorded, notwithstanding the undoubted secrecy of the polling booth**" (*Crime Branch Special Files, Public Records Office, London CO/904/184*).

The dominance of large town ratepayers and the almost complete exclusion of rural representation from the County Councils affected the success with which these bodies carried out their work in rural matters. At first they promised that "the new Local Government Bill will bring about a revolution in popular power scarcely second to that effected by Catholic Emancipation — A revolution which will place at the disposal of the people the whole machinery of local government" (*Mayo News, 14th May 1898*). In fact, however, from the beginning these councils were an obstacle rather than a force of social change. This fact was made quite clear in 1907 when the Congested Districts Board refused to give County Councils the power to administer any of their schemes for rural development. Mr. A. Doran, the Chief Land Inspector of the Congested Districts Board had this to say:

"I do not believe that any schemes suitable for the congested districts will be administered efficiently through the County Councils without making special arrangements for the working of them. These poor districts have not sufficient representation on the County Councils especially the remote districts. They have not, as a rule, an efficient representative and that representative does not find it convenient to attend all the meetings of the councils. When a county rate is carried it brings in a very small revenue from the congested districts because of their low valuation. When the county authorities ... consider a scheme in the interests of the county generally they will not give the special assistance to the poorer districts which they require, as the amount of revenue which these districts contribute is less than the better districts" (*Royal Commission on Congestion in Ireland: Dublin 1908, Mr. A. Doran, A3393*).

In other words, the councils dominated by large ratepayers from the towns were simply not prepared to allow their rates to be used on agricultural schemes for the improvement of rural areas around them. This was in spite of the fact that most of the wealth of these towns originated in the trade derived from these rural areas. The County Councils also attempted to prevent agricultural co-operatives from getting any sort of assistance from the Department of Agriculture. In the early 1900's agricultural co-operatives posed a threat to shopkeepers in many areas by selling manures and bagstuffs to farmers at cheaper rates than they were doing. The Department of Agriculture at this time was advised by a Council of Agriculture, two-thirds of whose membership was composed of County Councillors. At a meeting of the Council of Agriculture in November 1906, county councillors passed a resolution objecting to any organisation of farmers into an agricultural co-operative. It also requested the Department of Agriculture to avoid contact with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (i.e. the central co-operative body) (*Royal Commission on Congestion Vol. VIII, Digges Report*).

The reason for this was that these county councillors were shopkeepers themselves and feared competition from agricultural co-operatives. With these insights we reach the root cause of the failure of the Irish Local Government system to develop as a useful force in social change. What was left was what one author called "endless foolish fine talk and corruption ... the ultimate perfecting of the political machine until all independence and individuality are ground to fine dust by its working ... absurd broadly ridiculous councils and Boards which have gone into strange ways and have displayed incapacity and worse than incapacity".

(George A. Birmingham "A Nascent Democracy", *Westminster Gazette May 22nd 1909*. J. O. Hannay Papers in T.C.D. MSS. 3435).



**MAJOR JOHN MACBRIDE: 1868—1916**  
**PATRIOT, SOLDIER & MARTYR**  
by Owen Hughes, B.A.

Sometime in the late 1850's there settled at Westport Quay the Captain-owner of a merchant schooner, a native of the Glens of Antrim, named Patrick MacBride who married of a family with deep roots in the Westport area. Captain MacBride is remembered as a very progressive local merchant and large importer.

There is a record in the house of the Irish Christian Brothers at Westport which reveals him as a man of great charity and courage in an emergency. On hearing of an outbreak of fever amongst the small community of three Brothers, he went to their house, confined, removed and buried one of the brothers who had died, and had the two survivors removed to the fever-ward of the local Union Hospital. For this deed of bravery he paid with his life in a matter of days. He died of the same fever at the age of 35 on 13th November, 1868.

His son, Major John MacBride was born six months previously on 7th May, 1868, in the private house attached to the family's licensed premises and on which President De Valera unveiled a plaque to his memory on 4th August, 1963. His four brothers were Joseph, elected first Sinn Fein deputy for West Mayo in 1918; Patrick who inherited the family business; Francis who emigrated to Australia; Anthony, who retired from the post of County Surgeon in Mayo in the late thirties, spent many years practising in London where he was an active member of the I.R.B. and close friend of Dr. Mark Ryan who gives him honourable mention in his book — "Fenian Memories". John, the youngest of the family, and the subject of this article, was born in the year that followed the Fenian Rising of '67 and in the shadow of the Auxiliary Workhouse, which, but twenty years earlier, housed thousands of victims of the Famine in the Westport district and of which sad and bitter memories were still fresh in the minds of his family and neighbours.

Twenty five years before his birth the Constitutional movement under O'Connell for the Repeal of the Act of Union had failed but before the chagrin of this failure and the clouds of the Famine had risen from a mortally wounded nation the Flame of Hope and Freedom burst forth anew in the '48 Rising — reasserting afresh the Separatist Idea of '98 and Ireland's right to Nationhood. In his early 'teens in the late seventies and early eighties he witnessed the struggle of the National Land League to break the power of Landlordism with its concomitant evils of evictions and famine. He heard of "The New Departure" as a result of which the Fenians threw in their weight behind the social and economic struggle for the land. In his middle teens he went to serve his time in the Drapery Store of Mr. John Fitzgibbon, Castlerea, Co. Roscommon.

My method of presenting a brief and incomplete sketch of Major MacBride's life-long devotion to the Cause of Irish Freedom, the zeal and energy he showed in



pursuing that ideal, his influence on the movements of his time, and the indomitable courage and soldierly gaiety so characteristic of him — is to call as witnesses recorded statements of his own, of some of his close associates and finally, of some of his enemies. One associate of his, the late Michael J. Cassidy, 9 St. Alban's Park, Ballsbridge, Dublin, a native of Castlerea, writing to Mr. Michael A. Waldron, Ballyhaunis, on 3rd February, 1963, said:

"I remember the late Mr. Fitzgibbon telling me during the Boer War that MacBride was an extreme nationalist when he worked as an apprentice in his shop. When I went to serve my time in Castlerea I met from time to time a number of the old Fenians and heard from them that MacBride, during his apprenticeship years, was very active organising the Brotherhood. During the Boer War his name was constantly mentioned in Castlerea. I did not know him at that time but I heard from some of his old comrades of his activity, particularly, from the late John Lavan who was in MacBride's time a clerk in the Distillery Mills, Castlerea. Lavan, a native of Cloughonally near Kilkelly was a prominent figure in the Fenian Movement and when he died the organisation erected a large Monumental Cross to his memory in St. Joseph's Cemetery, Castlerea."

After the death of Parnell we find him in Dublin, an active member of the Young Ireland League and Celtic Literary Society in 1892, 1893 and 1894. These societies, consisting as they did of youths who sided with Parnell, helped to keep the Separatist idea alive by organising visits to the graves of Wolfe Tone in Bodinstown, Eoghan Rua O'Neill in Cavan, by visiting the scenes of the '98 Rebellion in Wexford — New Ross and Vinegar Hill. They supported the revival of the Irish Language by pressing for the appointment of Irish Professors in the Training Colleges. They displayed great energy in pressing Local Authorities to establish libraries throughout the country under the recently passed Public Libraries Act. They formulated a plan for the operation of compulsory Primary Education under the Compulsory Education Act. This plan was at first rejected by the Commissioners but later substantially implemented. The most zealous workers in the Young Ireland League were A. Griffith, Henry Dixon, Liam O Runai and John MacBride. Indeed, it may well be said, that it was at these meetings of The Young Ireland League, half-secret, half-open, held in the early 90's after the death of Parnell — in the stuffy back-rooms of Dublin, that ideas of future rebellion and revolution were nurtured.

In 1895 MacBride emigrated to South Africa. In 1897 when Arthur Griffith arrived in South Africa, a warm welcome awaited his arrival from John MacBride. An account of MacBride's activities there was reported by Arthur Griffith in his paper the "United Irishman" of 25th November, 1899, and reads as follows:

"Nearly four years ago, a young Irishman — a stranger in the land — wandered in one night to an Irish Meeting in Johannesburg. In the

chair he saw an Irish millionaire — on the platform an Irish peer — around the hall 500 Irish working men. He listened to the orators in eveningdress preaching whiggery and West Britonism — he heard them laud the flag that Irishmen struck down at Almanza and Fontenoy — he heard them praise the vampire-empire that was sucking away the life-blood of his country and he marked how the men of the race he loved — for the love of which that night he was in exile — listened to the genteel dastards.

Then he sprang to the platform and faced the men of his nation. Amongst them all there was not one whom he knew. He was no cunning orator with art to sway the hearts and minds of men; he was simply a fearless Irishman whose soul revolted at falsehood he heard being preached to his brethren, yet never an orator so won men's hearts as he did that night. His soul burned in the sentences he spoke, and when pointing his hand scornfully at the false guides who sat in silent astonishment on the platform, he said to the men who hung breathless on his words, 'If you want the Empire of the gibbet and the Pitchcap, of the Famine Graves and the Coffin Ships, of the Battering Ram and the Convict Cell, why these gentleman of birth and wealth will show you how to serve it; but if you be for Ireland — Tone's Ireland, Emmet's Ireland, Mitchell's Ireland, Allen, Larkin and O'Brien's Ireland, why let these gentlemen uphold the empire themselves by their own stout hearts and strong right hands'. And then a great shout rang out from the throat of every Irish working man in the hall — 'Down with the British Empire'.

Panic-stricken the noble and wealthy Irish whigs fled from the platform, followed by derisive laughter of the men whose souls they had striven to corrupt, never again to stand before a gathering of Transvaal Irishmen, and with cheer on cheer the generous-souled Irish workers acclaimed the young stranger, who had met the forces of West Britonism in all their strength and crushed them beneath his heel, as their leader. His name was John MacBride. Neither threats nor cajolery availed to move the Transvaal Irishmen from the position they took up that night on the Rand".

In 1898, the Commemoration ceremonies at home, in London and in the U.S.A., of the 1798 Rising, which resulted in the healing of the Parnellite Split by the formation of the United Irish League, gave Griffith and MacBride an opportunity of uniting the Irish in South Africa. The hatred between the British and the Boers had by now reached fever point. The Boers who could make no distinction between the Irish and the British because they spoke the same language and mixed socially labelled them all Uitlanders or aliens. In unison



with the ceremonies at home, Griffith and MacBride set to work energetically to organise a commemoration ceremony in Johannesburg. They gave lectures on the '98 Rebellion, spoke at meetings and organised publicity through two papers, *The Kaugersdrop Sentinel* and *De Voortrekker*, owned by Ben Viljoen, a wealthy Boer friend. A huge parade of Irish took place through the principal streets of Johannesburg carrying the Irish Flag and singing national songs so that for the first time the great international gathering of onlookers realised that the Irish had an independent national philosophy. The celebrations ended with a community of friendship being formed between the Boers and the Irish at a function presided over by the Burgomaster de Villiers and at which, before the break-up, *Die Volkslied* and *God Save Ireland*, were sung.

Griffith, on the invitation of Willie Rooney, returned to Ireland in October, 1898, to take up the editorship of a newly founded National paper. A year later, on the outbreak of the Boer War, his friend, John MacBride, was unanimously elected as a leader of the Irish Brigade.

Nationalist sympathy in Ireland at the time of the Boer War lay on the side of the Boers and the formation of the Transvaal Irish Brigade was greeted with some enthusiasm. Arthur Griffith was later to write of them in his paper, the *"United Irishman"*: *"They have chosen the side of the weak — the side of right and liberty — in the present war, but primarily they have gone out to battle for Ireland, to strike at and weaken her oppressor"*. That was how leading contemporary nationalist opinion saw it — a war which might weaken the ties of empire and so help towards Irish freedom. A week later the Transvaal Committee was formed in Dublin with Maude Gonne as its first President and including James Connolly, Arthur Griffith, and the old Fenian, John O'Leary. It held anti-recruiting meetings, published anti-recruiting posters and had its meetings broken up by the police and many of its members, including Connolly, arrested.

During the progress of the Boer War a situation of some interest arose in Mayo, due to the resignation of Michael Davitt as a member of Parliament, in protest against the suppression of the Boers. Arthur Griffith, Henry Dixon and Liam Rooney decided that the most effective protest they could make in support of Davitt's resignation would be to nominate Major MacBride then fighting with the Boers for the seat. They explained that if he won the seat he would not be allowed to take it and that as soon as the vacancy was declared the Irish Party — then known as the United Irish League — could have it back. The United Irish League would not accept this position and nominated John O'Donnell also a native of Westport area, as official candidate against MacBride. A bitter campaign was fought. The United Irish League had both funds and organisation as well as the support of the Press whereas, Griffith had no organisation and little or no funds. The result of the election was a victory for the official candidate of 2,401 votes for O'Donnell to 427 for MacBride. Most of MacBride's votes were got in Ballyhaunis and its vicinity.

Back in Paris after the end of the Boer War, he was visited by Arthur Griffith and Maude Gonne. Griffith warned him that he must not return to Ireland and urged him to go on a lecture tour of the U.S.A. to collect funds for Griffith's paper) which he did, accompanied by Maude Gonne, a lady who was to become his wife in 1904.

On the 10th June, 1902, he wrote to John Devoy, Fenian and Editor of the *Gaelic American* as follows: *"I wish you would impress on the brothers the absolute necessity for supporting the "United Irishman" (Griffith's paper). The "United Irishman" at present supplies the place of organisers in Ireland and is at least equal to a dozen"*. (Devoy's Postbag)

On Saturday 14th February, 1903, the *"Freeman's Journal"* in its *"Latest Newsbox"* carried the following item headed — *"Major MacBride's Message"*.

*"From the Morning Leader's Correspondent" Paris, Friday.*

By a curious coincidence tonight, I was calling on a Canadian friend who introduced me to Major MacBride. I asked him if he proposed to return and live in Dublin. He laughed and said the British Government would either arrest or shoot him if he did. "But", he said laughing merrily, "The Almighty never meant Ireland to be governed by Britain and if the readers of the Morning Leader care for a message from me, you may tell them I would dearly love to come and deal with the English in their own country as I did when I was fighting with the Boers in South Africa — and maybe I will one day!"

The courage, sincerity and gaiety of the wish expressed in this message notwithstanding the element of conceit it contained was translated into deeds in Jacob's Factory during Easter Week, 1916, and was again re-echoed on 5th May when, facing the Firing Squad he scornfully refused to be blindfolded, remarking, "I have faced British Guns before".

One can imagine how dearly he would have loved being one of the men who, during the War of Independence, within five years of his death, "came to deal with the English in their own country".

Back in Dublin after General Amnesty in 1903 his friends secured for him a small position under the Dublin Corporation. In 1904 he married Maude Gonne, daughter of an English Army Officer and English mother. Brought up in Dublin as an infant, educated in France, she travelled widely with her father who held various diplomatic appointments until his death. A woman of remarkable beauty, popular in many European capitals, she used her influence on behalf of many of the Irish Treason-Felony prisoners and was instrumental in securing their release. She was noted for her work in the Land League days, as a founder of women's organisations and was active in all phases of the national struggle. Their son, Mr. Sean MacBride, is Secretary General of the International Commission of Jurists and Chairman of Amnesty International. Isn't it one of the ironies of History that in the discharge of his duties for both Organisations he comes into



sharp conflict with the policies of the present-day South African Government?

We find Major MacBride commenting in the "United Irishman" on 10th September, 1904, on the Sinn Féin policy of Abstention: *"it is 100 years too late. It will have no effect unless the young men of the country back it with arms. My own opinion is, and I believe it is also Griffith's, that there is no way to win Irish freedom but with the strong right hand"*.

His appeal to his countrymen in Kilkenny in 1909 at the Commemoration of the Manchester Martyrs was: *"Do all in your power to prevent your countrymen from joining the degraded British Army"*.

His friend, Mr. Cassidy, in his letter to Mr. Waldron, tells us more about the Major's activities:

"In 1910 MacBride came to Athlone under the guise of supervising the fishing rights of a section of the River Shannon owned by a Fenian friend of his named Anthony Mackey of Limerick. His real mission was to organise the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the midlands and Connacht. An old friend of his and mine was Dr. Sheridan, Dispensary Doctor for Kiltoom. Between us the Major was introduced to many sections of the people. The Major and myself became close friends and in his absence I deputised for him in many ways. The 1916 Rising was the chief object. He was a fearless organiser and by degrees made many suggestions. The first was to form a Sinn Féin Club where we would have an opportunity of meeting the younger generation. This was a success in every respect. The Committee arranged that he would give a lecture on the Boer War and organise hurling and football matches. The lecture was a financial success and a hurling match between Craughwell and Kilkenny was another financial success. He succeeded in getting excursion trains from Galway and Kilkenny at very low fares and big contingents came from both places as well as the Midlands to Athlone. Both teams were champions at the time and a good percentage of the organisers at both ends was aware of the Brotherhood's determination for a Rising. I was at that period a Superintendent for a British Insurance Company and had a pass on the Railway from Mullingar to Castlerea and Galway and in that way I travelled to many parts of the West and Midlands with the Major. Several times we went together to Craughwell, Athlone, Loughrea, Castlerea and Claremorris. On one occasion there were races in Balla. We all met at Nally's Hotel before the race meeting and delegates from Sligo, Castlebar and Westport were present. I had a good file of our work and correspondence but in 1916 I had several

raids from the military and police and unfortunately they were destroyed. From 1912 to 1916 Dublin was the general place of our meetings and from there onwards Sinn Féin Club was very active until the taking over of the Military Barracks in Athlone in 1922. I am enclosing some letters from the Major and am attaching a note to each to help you to understand their contents. I am seriously handicapped as I have no person of that period I would ask to assist me. My age, 85, is not conducive to good memory. However, if you knew the Major as I did you would never get tired of writing about him. He was thoroughly sincere in every way".

Amongst the long list of suspects listed by Sir Mathew Nathan shortly after his arrival in Ireland as Under-Secretary in late 1914 were:

Thomas J. Clarke, whose shop at 75 Parnell Street was receiving daily attention from the police; Major John MacBride; Thomas Ashe; James Larkin; James Connolly; Bulmer Hobson; Arthur Griffith; John T. Kelly; F. Sheehy-Skeffington; P. H. Pearse and others. These were what Nathan described as "the small knot of violent men".

An excellent account is also given by Oliver Gogarty in his book "Tumbling in the Hay", about the pleasant evenings spent in An Stad, 1b North Frederick Street, amongst the nationalists and intellectuals of the time. This was the rendezvous of artists, athletes, writers, musicians, singers and travellers. Amongst those who regularly gathered there in the pre-rebellion days were: Art O'Brien, William Bulfin, Cathal Brugha, John MacBride, The O'Rahilly, Michael Hanrahan, Padraig O'Keefe and Michael Cusack (founder of the G.A.A.).

It is also worthy of noting that at the famous meeting held on 9th September, 1914, in the Library of the Gaelic League Headquarters at 25 Parnell Square, to which Eamonn Ceannt invited Arthur Griffith and James Connolly that the other members present were P. H. Pearse, Thomas McDonagh, Sean McDermott, Sean T. O'Ceallaigh, Joseph Plunkett, Major John MacBride, Eamonn Ceannt and William O'Brien (Labour).

The Meeting made two important decisions:

- 1 That there would be a Rising
  - (a) If the Germans invaded Ireland.
  - (b) If Conscription was pressed.
  - (c) If the end of the war was in sight without a Rising and
- 2 That Ireland would seek to be represented at the post-war Peace Conference.

It was further decided to use all open national movements to forward and strengthen the propaganda for freedom and to further strengthen the secret military movement of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

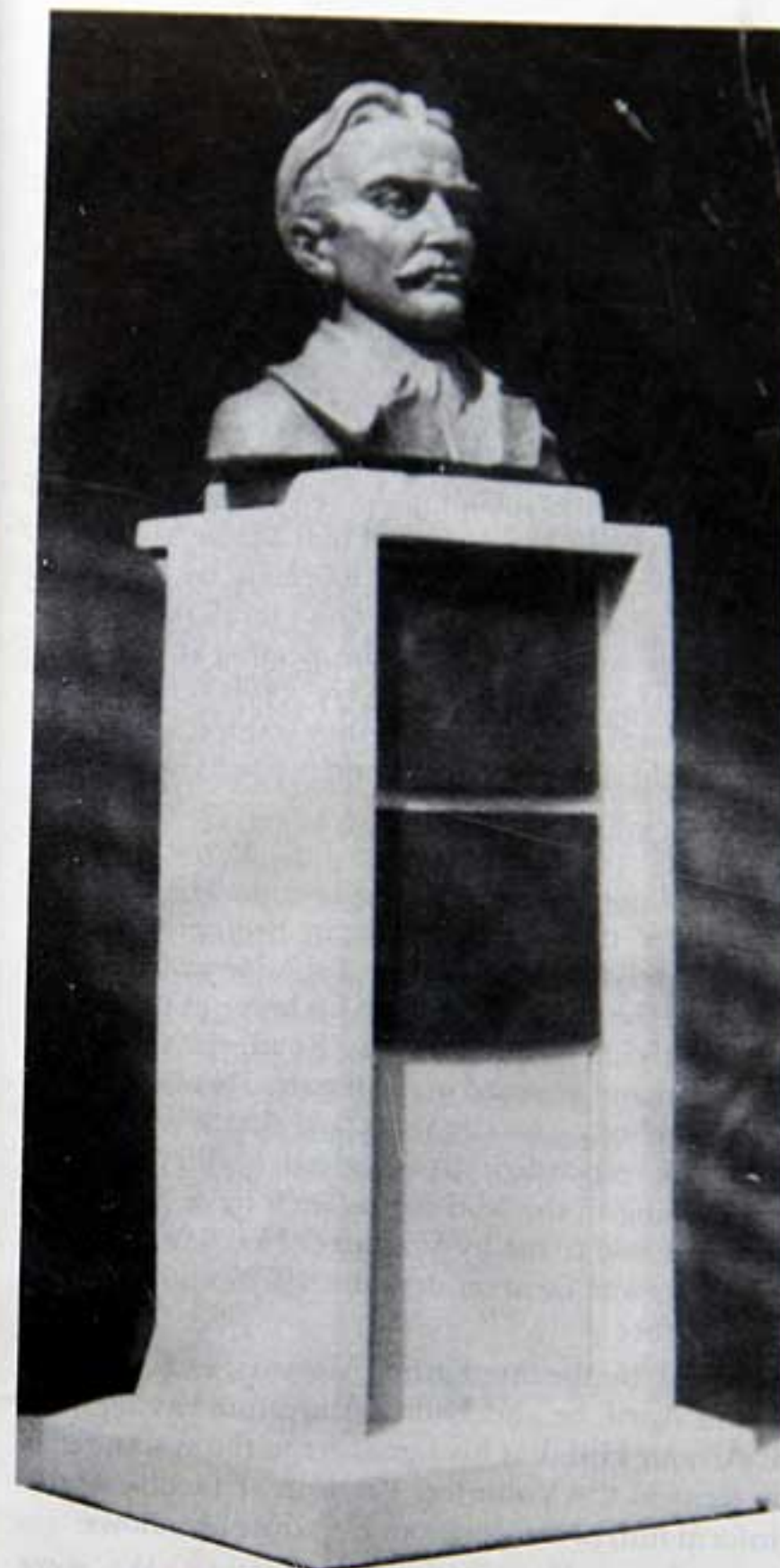


In his address on the Manchester Martyrs in November, 1914, Major MacBride gives us the Fenian Credo of Separatism, and I quote:

"No man can claim authority to whittle down or barter away the immutable rights of nationhood; for Irishmen have fought, suffered, and died, through too many centuries, in defence of those rights. And, thank God, Irishmen will always be found, in the darkest and dreariest nights that fall upon our country, to snatch up the torch from the slumbering fire to hold it up aloft as a guiding light; and to hand it on, blazing afresh, to the succeeding generation."

On Easter Monday, 1916, at 11.30 a.m. as 150 members of the 2nd Battalion of the Dublin Brigade of the Irish Volunteers assembled under Commandant Thomas McDonagh at Stephen's Green, despite the confusion resulting from the countermanding of the mobilisation order by Eoin MacNeill, a sturdily-built man of soldierly bearing approached McDonagh who assured him that the Rising would start within an hour. "Then I'll go with you", he said, "if I can be of any use". That man was Major John MacBride. He held no rank in the Volunteers though he had often spoken on Sinn Fein platforms and at anti-recruiting meetings. But like the old war-horse he smelled the war and went prancing to the fray. McDonagh an old friend of his in the I.R.B. organisations readily accepted and on entering Jacob's Factory he was immediately promoted Vice-Commandant. Jacob's biscuit factory in 1916 was one of the tallest buildings on the south side of the Liffey. Triangular in shape, it lay in a net-work of narrow streets, its height gave it many advantages in street warfare. Its colossal bulk made it a powerful fortress. Supplies were no problem. The biscuits, butter, and eggs in its store-rooms provided food for the battalion. Its flourbags provided material for barricading windows. If it were to be taken by artillery-fire a large portion of the south-west of the city would have to be razed to give a clear field of fire. It overlooked Portobello Barracks and the barracks attached to Dublin Castle and Dublin Castle itself.

After fortifying the factory, outposts were placed by MacBride, who also supervised the placing of snipers on the roof. With these aids on the side of the Rebels, the British found it safer to move under cover of darkness than in daylight in the streets near the factory. By one p.m. on that same day ten volunteers at an outpost in Bishop Street were warned by a scout that a detachment of troops was making its way up Camden Street towards the factory. As the detachment came abreast of the opening of the street, fire was opened on them. An officer and six men fell before the fusillade of the Volunteers. During the whole week the garrison at Jacobs pinned down and seriously limited the movements of the British garrisons 300 at Portobello Barracks and as many more at the Castle. Food and supplies of ammunition were regularly sent to the Citizen Army group under Michael Mallin and Countess Markievicz, at the College of Surgeons on Stephen's Green. On Thursday of Easter Week, Commandant De Valera sent a



*Proposed Major John MacBride Monument.*

messenger to Jacob's with a request for ammunition. A party of 15 men was dispatched from Jacob's but due to stiff opposition they were forced to retire, suffering one casualty on re-entering Stephen's Green. This event had one effect. The British, after their long awaited and costly success at Mount Street Bridge, were closing in on Boland's Mills and Bakery. The sudden outburst of fire in their rear gave the impression that they themselves were being surrounded. They pulled back part of their force and began to erect barricades to protect their flanks and rear, thereby giving welcome respite to the beleaguered garrison at Boland's. So Jacob's garrison proved a support and strength to their neighbouring battalions and a sharp thorn in the side of the British throughout the week.



Finally, in the post-Rising period MacBride is mentioned at least twice during the sittings of the Royal Commission to enquire into the cause of the 1916 Rebellion: Sir Neville Chamberlain, Inspector General of the R.I.C. giving evidence on 28th May, 1916, said:

**“Mr. Redmond’s declaration** on the outbreak of 1914 war did not find favour with the extremists in Ireland and Mr. Redmond’s policy was openly denounced by such men as Bulmer Hobson and Major MacBride”.

In his evidence before the Commission, **J. C. Percy, J.P.**, who stated he was an honorary Recruiting Officer gave his impression of the adverse effect of the Sinn Féin movement upon recruiting for the army and navy. After describing his experience he was asked by Mr. Justice Shearman, “Have you ever run up against Major MacBride?” He replied, “Yes. There are two towns in the West of Ireland — Ballina and Westport. Ballina did splendidly in recruiting. Then you go to Westport and you cannot get recruits. We were told that Major MacBride dominates the place”. Later on when asked by the Chairman how he was succeeding in recruiting for the Navy, he replied, “Yes, I don’t think there is the same prejudice against the Navy as the Army. We had a fine meeting at Westport although we did not get any recruits (Laughter). There were 500/600 in the hall of military age and they did not interrupt. I asked them if they wanted to fight for Ireland and they said “yes”. I then told them that they could not fight for Ireland without the Navy and they agreed (Laughter)”.

One of the “500/600 of military age” referred to by Mr. J. C. Percy, J.P. has recounted to me an instance of how Major MacBride carried out the “hardening” process after addressing a meeting of the Irish Republican Brotherhood at a premises owned by Tom Navin at Sandyhill, Westport, in 1912. He was escorted by a bodyguard of the members from the meeting house to his home at the Quay. At that time there was no public lighting along the Quay Road, the night was dark and windy and the trees creaked and groaned in the nearby Demesne as the party descended the Quay hill. Somebody casually remarked that it was a very wild night to which MacBride at once responded: “It is, indeed, a wild night, but bear my words in mind — it is nothing to the wild nights we’ll have in Ireland before very long”. That incident was told to me by Volunteer Ned Sammon still hale and hearty in his seventies who was incarcerated after 1916 and gave full service during the War of Independence.

In his book “Personal Recollections” by the late Father Aloysius, O.F.M. Cap. he describes how on Sunday, 30th April, he and Father Augustine having been informed by Padraig Pearse at Arbour Hill that his signature to the surrender of the previous day was genuine, went to the Volunteer garrison at Jacob’s under Commandant McDonagh to inform him of the position. He wrote as follows:

“Father Augustine and myself walked to the factory. We were admitted through a door in Peter Street and brought through the

factory to Commandant McDonagh. He took us to a room where we met Major MacBride. Miss O’Farrell had already arrived with a copy of Pearse’s letter similar to the one we bore. Major MacBride said that if any attempt was made to counsel surrender he would oppose it with all the strength he could command”.

In a recent account published by Volunteer Padraig O’Ceallaigh in the Capuchin Annual, 1966, who was a member of the garrison in Jacob’s Factory describing the fighting there during Easter week says: “Commandant McDonagh sent small batches of Volunteers on frequent forays to reconnoitre or to establish an outpost in case the enemy should attempt to creep up to us secretly — Major John MacBride personally led some of these expeditions”. In the 1916 number of the Irish weekly *Inniu*, Eamán de Blaghd, describing his acquaintance with the Easter Leader states: “I once met a soldier who was not one of the Signatories of the Proclamation, Major John MacBride. He came to Belfast to give a lecture to the small club we had there — an event of which we were proud. He was particularly brave, his ideas and example had a great influence on the young generation, and I think he should be named with the seven who changed Ireland”.

Finally, he is named with three of the signatories in the immortal poem by W. B. Yeats — Easter 1916 —

“We know their dreams; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in verse —  
McDonagh and MacBride,  
and Connolly and Pearse,  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly;  
A terrible beauty is born”.



## SOME 17th CENTURY LINKS WITH BRITTANY

by Sheila Mulloy, Ph.D.

Westport has adopted the twinning fashion and is now associated with the town of Plougastel-Daoulas in Finistère, Brittany. Brittany, of course, has had long associations with Ireland, both countries forming part of the Celtic world. Old romances, such as that of Tristan and Iseult, link the two nations, and at a later period Irish missionaries such as Fiacra and Ronan, came with their Christian Faith to this westernmost corner of what is now called France. To this day the memory of these Irishmen is preserved in the names of Breton towns and villages, and many are honoured as patron saints of parishes.

It is certain that with the passage of time there must have been a continuous flow of traffic between the Breton ports and the ports of southern Ireland. There would have been movement of goods and raw materials, interchange of scholarship and invention. There were human cargoes, too, when Irish youths fled from poverty and hardship, to enroll in foreign colleges or army. If proof be needed of this traffic, we have it in the name of the channel between the Breton islands of Sein and Ouessant (Ushant). This is known as 'l'Iroise' or the channel of the Irois, or Irlandais (Irish). At what date this stretch of water received its name is not known, but it was a dangerous section and must hide many wrecks of ships both Irish and French.

Trade between Ireland and France increased somewhat in the 17th century, in spite of the continual wars and legislative restrictions and the unwelcome attentions of pirates and privateers. The exports were for the most part natural products such as wool, hides, tallow, beef and butter, the imports consisting mainly of salt, cloth, brandy and wine. Because of the unsettled conditions, the shorter sea routes were the most favoured, and trade between Saint-Malo and Waterford became especially important. Trade also grew between Cork, Limerick, Galway and the French ports of Dieppe, La Rochelle and Bordeaux. French ships avoided the east coast of Ireland because of the proximity of the unfriendly English fleet, and the absence of safe ports on that coast. The west coast was naturally a difficult one for a sailing ship with all the terrors of the broad Atlantic, and the hazards of a long sea voyage with its attendant risk of disease for all on board, because of the contemporary ignorance of diet and hygiene.

The Jacobite War of 1689—91 gave an extraordinary impetus to the sea-borne traffic between Ireland and France. At this period Louis XIV of France sent substantial aid to Ireland in the form of men, war materials and provisions, and nearly all the supply ships with their attendant ships of war departed from, and returned to, Brest Finistère, which is only 11 km. from our Plougastel-Daoulas. Some of these men and supplies had been brought overland to Brest, while others had been brought down the Loire to Nantes and then transshipped to join the



remainder of the convoys at Brest. These convoys came first to the southern Irish ports of Bantry, Kinsale, Cork and Waterford, and later when the Jacobites were confined to the area west of the Shannon, the French ships brought their cargoes to Limerick, Galway and Sligo.

We cannot claim any direct link between Westport and Plougastel-Daoulas, but one Westport boat at least arrived in Brittany. This must have been something of a surprise for both the captain and the authorities at Belle-Île, where our friend arrived 29 August 1691 bearing news of a victory which must have cheered the hearts of our allies, but which was, alas, completely unfounded. His news only serves to emphasize the comparative isolation of Mayo from the Jacobite headquarters at Limerick. Unaware of the prevailing gloom and loss of morale, following on the losses of Athlone, Aughrim and Galway, the captain was, apparently, still full of a blind faith in the possibility of Sarsfield leading his men to victory.

The governor of Belle-Île, M. de Nancras, relates this happening in a letter to the Marquis de Barbezieux, Minister for War.

"Yesterday there came to the harbour a ketch of 80 tons which comes from Westport in Ireland, whence she departed the 19th of this month, laden with bar iron, horseshoe iron, nails and earthmoving tools, which she was carrying to Limerick. While passing Galway she learnt that eight enemy vessels, and many provision ships had entered the river Shannon, and four had entered Galway, which obliged her to make for Nantes. He reports, Monseigneur, that General Sarsfield had cut 5 enemy regiments to pieces, taken 400 prisoners, and captured 8 cannon, and that he was marching towards Dublin with a considerable body of men, and that the enemy army has retired from before Limerick".

Colonel John Browne of Westport had been appointed Lord Lieutenant in Mayo by order of 5 October 1689, signed by Sir Richard Nagle, Secretary of State. He had orders to requisition men and provisions for the army, and for the garrisons of Inishbofin and Galway, while at the same time he was supplying cannon balls, iron and tools of his own manufacture to the garrisons of Athlone and Galway. The cargo mentioned in the above letter was intended for Limerick, where the siege was to begin 4 September 1691 and end with the signing of the Treaty 13 October. What became of John Browne's cargo is not known, but doubtless the loss incurred by this unintentional diversion to France, contributed to the necessity for that special article in the Treaty of Limerick which provided for the payment of debts incurred by him in the service of King James.

Some Westport people may actually have been in Plougastel at an earlier stage of the war when there was a hospital there for the sick of the Mountcashel Brigade. Some 5,387 Irish troops had left Cork 18 April 1690 on board the French fleet

which returned to Brest 1 May. This brigade was made up of the Butler, Dillon, MacCarthy, O'Brien and Feilding regiments, and the Dillon and Feilding regiments especially contain many western names. At this period in warfare, and indeed right up to the Crimean War and later, there were more victims of fever in camps and aboard ship, than there were deaths in battle. Accustomed as we are to the rapid transport of modern times, we cannot easily understand how an operation of this kind could take more than three months from the time the Irish regiments were marched to Cork in February to await the arrival of the French fleet, until their arrival at their eventual destination in the south of France towards the end of May. Embarkation began 28 March and because of unfavourable weather conditions, disembarkation was not to be until 35 days later. Troops and crews were expected to be sick after such a voyage and this was no exception. There were in fact, 3,000 patients in all, some of whom were dead on arrival. As for the Irish, there were 850 sick among those disembarked on the first three days, and all were in an undecipherable state, dreadfully dirty and eaten by vermin.

The diseases in question were dysentery, typhoid, scarlet fever and smallpox. To care for the great number of patients, hospitals were established all over Brittany, including Plougastel and Brest. On 1 June 1690 there were still 1,355 Irish — 61 officers, 1,285 soldiers and 9 women — in hospital in Brest and its neighbourhood. Their great fondness for milk was remarked on, and orders were given that the milk supplied to them should be of good quality. The French officials also reported that even the sick among the Irish could not be persuaded to eat meat on Fridays.

The local population at Rennes proved themselves very charitable towards the unfortunate foreigners, but as they were not accustomed to the passage of troops, they were shocked at the number of deaths. In Quimper fear of infection and the verminous state of the men made it impossible to recruit attendants. Some young ladies who were moved by charity to serve them, and two male nurses fell sick 'which so moderated the piety of the former and repelled the latter, that there is no one else to be had, no matter what money is offered them'. The nursing sisters in Brest and the soldier attendants contracted fever. The contractor for the hospital at Landerneau and three surgeons were in a serious condition, and people fled from them as if they had the plague. The patients' clothes were in such a terrible state that they had to be burnt, and orders were given for new clothing to be supplied to all the Irish troops as rapidly as possible. The uniform was to be grey with red facings.

In fact the fever epidemic was not confined to the hospital staffs and patients, but quickly spread to the local populace. With half the surgeons and nurses sick, it was difficult to find replacements. One mayor who had been particularly solicitous in his care for the sick, had caught the infection and was dying. This had the effect of discouraging all further offers of help.

Exact figures for the number of deaths among the Irish troops are not given, but that they were considerable can be judged from such weekly returns as still exist



among the French archives. From these we see that 254 Irish died during the six weeks from the period of disembarkation to 12 June, but after that the numbers fell. The last return we have is for the period 2-12 July, which gives the number of deaths as six, and by September the hospitals were broken up and the remaining patients were deemed incurable and transferred elsewhere.

In the period from disembarkation up to 12 June, 20 Irish had died in the Plougastel hospital. In the following monthly period 5 had died. The number of sick, meanwhile, had fallen from a peak of 52 on 31 May to 12 on 12 July. Such were the sad associations with Plougastel of the Irish soldiers of the Mountcashel Brigade. These troops came to France in exchange for the 6 French regiments which had been sent by Louis to help James in Ireland. Some of these French troops had embarked for Ireland at Plougastel, and disembarked there upon their return from Galway the following October. On that last occasion 28 soldiers had been drowned when their overloaded longboat was ferrying them ashore.

And so throughout those years the Brest area remained directly linked with Ireland, until the last sad months of 1691 and the Spring of 1692 brought some 15,000 Irishmen from Limerick and Cork to pass the rest of their lives in the service of France. We should bear these in mind when in these happier times we visit Brest and the other towns of the neighbourhood, including Westport's Breton twin town of Plougastel-Daoulas.

(The information in the above article is based on French manuscripts at Vincennes which have been edited by the writer for the Irish Manuscripts Commission).

