

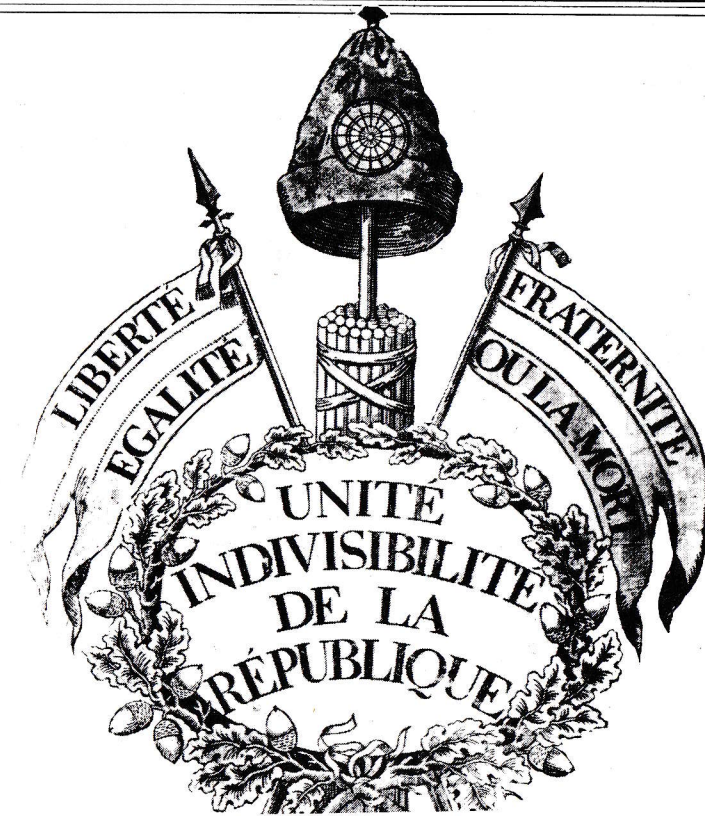
# The French Revolution and the Irish Struggle



*Badge of the United Irishmen*

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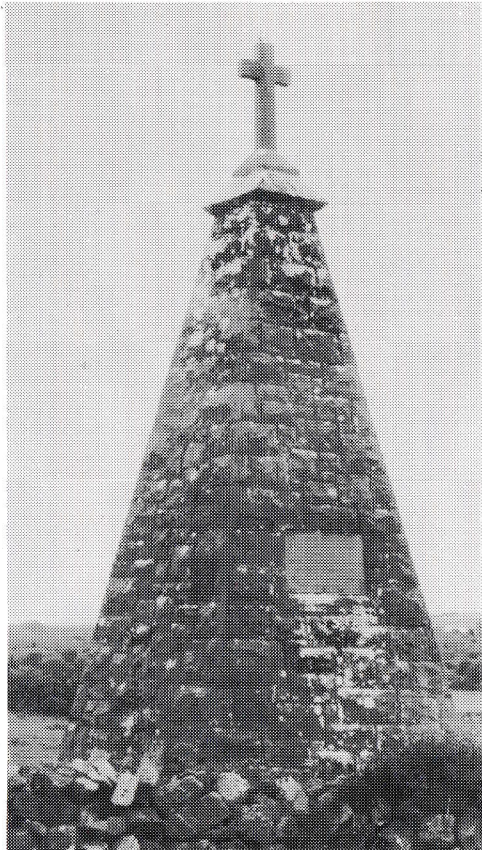
# The French Revolution and the Irish Struggle



Come! rise in your might, O best of men,  
And muster your pikes in yonder glen;  
Your enemies smite, with sword and lance,  
And no laws you will own, but those of France.

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*The French Hill monument outside Castlebar. The inscription reads: "In grateful remembrance of the gallant French soldiers who died fighting for the freedom of Ireland on the 27th August, 1798. They shall be remembered forever."*

*This article is based on a lecture delivered by Seán Ó Brádaigh in Dublin on January 21, 1989 marking the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the First (All-Ireland) Dáil Éireann in the Mansion House on January 21, 1919 and the links between Irish and French Republicans – 'Partners in Revolution' 200 years ago.*

O ! The French are on the sea  
Says the Seanbhean Bhocht  
The French are on the sea  
Says the Seanbhean Bhocht.

O ! The French are in the Bay  
They'll be here by break of day . . . .

And will Ireland then be free ?  
Says the Seanbhean Bhocht  
Will Ireland then be free ?  
Says the Seanbhean Bhocht

Yes ! Ireland shall be free  
From the centre to the sea  
Then hurray ! for Liberty !  
Says the Seanbhean Bhocht. )

**T**HE FIRST MEETING of the First Dáil Éireann was a trilingual occasion. The Teachtaí spoke to their own people in Irish and English. To the world they spoke in English and French.

Since the 17th century, French has been the language of diplomacy and in its written form often the language of treaties. This came about because diplomats appreciated its precision and clarity as a language.

The French Revolution of 1789 marks a significant date in the history of mankind. In France, it brought to an end the absolute power of monarchs, aptly expressed in the Latin phrase "**Lex Rex, Rex Lex**", the Law is the King and the King is the Law. The tyranny and abuses of King and aristocracy were ended and a new regime was inaugurated, based on the Republican and Democratic ideas enshrined in the motto **Liberty, Equality, Fraternity**. On July 14, 1789 the populace stormed the Bastille, the state prison which symbolised the King's absolute power. From that date on, nothing could stop the Revolution.

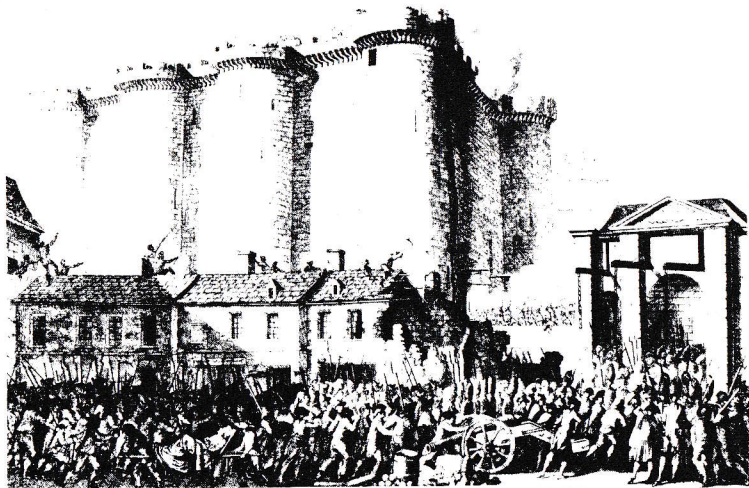
The Revolution was not without fault, it had its excesses and its terror. Nor have the subsequent French Republics been without blemish either – they had their colonies, and they have been less than just to the minority nations within

the French state. Yet, the principles which inspired the Revolution were human and generous and the French Republic has been a model for many other countries.

On the night of August 4, 1789 the National Assembly **suppressed all the privileges** of the nobility and clergy. Three weeks later the **Declaration of the Rights of Man** – Forógra ar Chearta an Duine – was promulgated and later a **constitutional regime based on popular suffrage** was installed.

On October 5, between six and seven thousand of the women of Paris marched on the Palace of Versailles to force the King to accept the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

On this very date, January 21, 1793 King Louis XVI was publicly executed by guillotine in Paris, and later that year his Queen, Marie Antoinette met the same fate.



*The storming of the Bastille, July 14th 1789*

**I**N IRELAND, the 18th century was probably the most miserable of all times for the people. A great mass of people lived in mud cabins, on a diet which consisted mostly of potatoes and buttermilk and were ground down by landlords and tithe proctors. They got whatever education they could in the illegal hedge schools.

↳ Crouching 'neath the sheltering hedge  
Or stretched on mountain fern  
The master and his pupils met  
Feloniously to learn. ↳

Towards the end of the century two beacons shone to rally the people. At home **Theobald Wolfe Tone** became a champion of the oppressed. *"This horrible system"*, he said, *"had reduced the great body of the Catholic peasantry of Ireland to a situation, morally and physically speaking, below that of the beasts of the field."* He was secretary to the Catholic Committee in 1792-95. *"I have laboured"*, said Tone, *"to create a people in Ireland, by raising three million of my countrymen to the rank of citizen."* **The Society of United Irishmen** was founded, and succeeded in uniting large numbers of Catholics and Dissenters, and some Protestants, against English rule.

Máire Mac Neill, in her biography of Mary Ann McCracken relates how the writings of Locke, Rousseau and Paine were widely read in Ulster at this time. She makes the point that *"throughout the Province, but especially in the neighbourhood of Belfast, political, economic and philosophic thought had prepared the community in a remarkable degree for the great upheaval of the French Revolution."*

When the Revolution happened, prayers of thanksgiving were offered in Belfast, Songs of the French Revolution were published and the fall of the Bastille was celebrated each year. Henry Joy jun. had this to say:

*" . . . The exultation with which they hailed the downfall of civil and spiritual despotism in France in the year 1789, affords a decisive proof of their disinterested solicitude for the universal diffusion of liberty and peace. Their joy was expressed by affectionate congratulations to the French patriots and by annual commemorations of the destruction of the Bastille, conducted with pomp and magnificence and calculated to impress on innumerable spectators a conviction of the vast importance which they attached to this glorious occurrence, and sensations of gratitude to the divine providence 'for dispersing the political clouds which had hitherto darkened our hemisphere . . .'"*

In a memorandum to the French Government, Tone described the Dissenters or Presbyterians as *"the most enlightened body of the nation . . . enthusiastically attached to the French Revolution. The Catholics"*, he added, *"the great body of the nation, are in the lowest degree of ignor-*

ance and want, ready for any change, because no change can make them worse.”

From abroad, the American War of Independence inspired the freedom movement, but it was from France that the second and brightest beacon of all shone. Tone became, in his own words “*a diplomat, incognito, in Paris.*” The Revolutionary Government listened to him.

Is tá an Francach faobhrach is a loingeas gléasta  
Le cranna géara acu ar muir le seal;  
‘Sé an síorscéal go bhfuil a dtíall ar Eirinn  
Is go gcuirfid Gaeil bhocht’ arís ‘na gceart . . . .

For on the ocean are ships in motion  
And glad devotion on France’s shore  
And rumour’s telling they’ll now be sailing  
To help the Gael in the right once more . . . .

On December 16, 1796, a fleet of 46 ships sailed from Brest with a formidable army of 14,750 men under the command of Gen. Lazare Hoche, one of the great Generals of the Revolutionary Army. Tone was with them and so also was General Humbert. Their watchword for their campaign in Ireland was: “*Paix aux chaumières, mort aux chateaux*” – Peace to the cottages, death to the castles.

Bantry Bay was their destination, Cork City their first objective and Dublin their second.

Chualas aréir	I heard last night
Na daoine á rá	The people to say
Go raibh Cathair Chorcaí	That the City of Cork
Á dó go lár;	Was being burned to the
Go raibh Ginearál Hoche	ground;
Is a chlaíomh chinn óir	That General Hoche
Ag réiteach an róid	And his gold-headed sword
Do Bonaparte;	Was smoothing the road
Is Ó, bhean a’ tí	For Bonaparte;
Cén bhuairt sin ort?	And, O, woman of the
	house
	What ails thee now?

Bad weather separated Hoche’s vessel from the fleet. An easterly gale continued for several days and by December 22 only half the fleet had entered Bantry Bay. Grouchy, the second in command, decided not to disembark as he had only 6,400 men and the storm would have made a landing hazardous. “*England*”, said Tone, “*has not had such an escape since the Armada.*” And W.B. Yeats wrote many years later that “*John Bull and the sea are friends.*”

Ireland lost a good friend and skilled soldier when Lazare Hoche died of fever in 1797. More fleets were organised, notwithstanding the strain on military resources, as the new Republic came under attack from Monarchs and Emperors throughout Europe, including the British and despite the fact that the French navy was not at all well organised or equipped.

THREE EXPEDITIONS were authorised by the Directory in July of 1798 and command of the first and smallest of these was given to General Jean-Joseph Humbert. His small fleet of three frigates, loaded almost to danger point with munitions and other supplies and carrying 1,090 seasoned troops, of whom 80 were officers, broke the English naval blockade. The fleet’s commander, Chef de Division Savary, a competent mariner, outwitted the Royal Navy and landed his men at Cill Chuimín on August 22, 1798.

Erin’s sons be not faint-hearted  
Welcome, sing then Ça ira  
From Killala they are marching  
To the tune of Viva la!

They come, they come, see myriads come  
Of Frenchmen to relieve us;  
Seize, seize the pike, beat, beat the drum  
They come, my friends, to save us. )

The accounts written by the French officers speak of their shock at the terrible conditions of the peasantry, and remark as well on the hospitality with which the poor people received them. Operations commenced immediately and the people of Mayo rallied in strength.

☞ Killala was ours ere the midnight  
 And high over Ballina town  
 Our banners in triumph were floating  
 Before the next sun had gone down.  
 We gathered to speed the good work then  
 The true men of near and afar  
 And history can tell how we routed  
 The Redcoats through old Castlebar. ☞

Castlebar was defended by a huge army – the Kerry Militia; the Galway Yeomanry; the Sixth Foot Regiment; the Frazer Fencibles; Lord Roden's Dragoons, known as the "Foxhunters"; the Kilkenny Militia; the Longford Militia; the Fencible Cavalry; the Prince of Wales Fencibles; the Fencible and Royal Irish Artillery – in all an army of at least 4,000 men, of whom 600 were superbly mounted cavalry. There was no shortage of Top Brass either – **General Lake**, the Butcher of Wexford, Commander of His Majesty's forces in Ireland; **General Hutchinson**, Commander of His Majesty's forces in Connacht; **Lord Ormond**; **Lord Granard**; **Lord Longford** (Pakenham). A later Pakenham in his book "**The Year of Liberty**" declares that they were all "*totally outclassed by Humbert.*"

Captain Jobit, who kept a diary of the expedition, described Castlebar as "a tough nut to crack, for a little army like ours" - between 800 and 900 French and about 7 or 800 untrained but determined pikemen from many parts of Co. Mayo.

A forced march by night across the mountains in torrents of rain; a surprise attack at dawn; and a masterly assault by **General Sarrazin** on the defenders' left flank gave warning of what was to come.

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*"We present ourselves as sincere friends to all who will embrace the cause of liberty and we thirst after nothing but breaking your fetters and chastising your tyrants."*

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*General Lazare Hoche*



Brave Mayo men faced pounding artillery with nothing but pikes hammered out by skilled blacksmiths who had worked night and day for five days. To confuse the enemy further, Humbert suddenly changed tactics. He launched his full reserve; changed from closed formation to open files; he rose in his saddle, brandished his sword and gave the order, in Irish, "**Éirinn go Brách**"; the drums sounded the "**pas de charge**" and a blue line, now within a few paces of the enemy, regrouped back into closed lines and moved swiftly forward, their bayonets gleaming in the morning sun, a fierce and threatening determination in their countenances.

**The famed army of the French Revolution, was here in the fields of Mayo**, veterans of many victorious campaigns on the continent, men who had endured much and who believed passionately in their cause, they had measured their enemy and marked them down as the defenders and upholders of tyranny and injustice.

The Sasanaigh and their Irish militias and Yeomen hesitated, and then, turned their backs and fled in terror. Panic reigned as French snipers took over vantage points and picked off the bewildered enemy; fierce sword and sabre duels ensued in the streets as a whole army fled in disarray, some to Hollymount and Tuam, and some cavalry did not stop till they reached Athlone, 60 miles away. General Lake's personal baggage was found abandoned in the street. Well and truly and aptly were the events of that day called the **Races of Castlebar**. Sections of the Longford and Kilkenny militias turned their coats and hoisted the green flag. Jobit estimated the numbers who changed sides at 574 men. For this, many of them were singled out afterwards for particularly brutal treatment and execution. Gunner James Magee of Co. Longford was probably the most famous of them.

Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, in his epic account of this engagement, '**L'Attaque**', described the scene in detail:

**Rith an fear agus an beithíoch, rith an ceann críonna agus an cholainn óg, rith an coisí an méid a bhí ina chosa, rith an marcach le srianta scaoilte, rith an boc mór agus an boc beag.**

Rith lucht na muscaed, lucht na lansáí, lucht an ordanáis, an husár, an gránadóir, agus an cairbínire, an dragún agus an scirmiseoir, d'fhág siad slán le hord agus le heagar agus thug do na bonnaí é.

Smiotadh gach reisimint, gach díorma, gach complacht, gach cipe ina gciollaracha ildathacha reatha gan riar gan rialú.

Agus d'imigh an tiorshaighdiúir, an réalai. Chonacthas é, an ceann ceart críonna, an Ginearál Lake, Ard-Cheannasaí an Airm Ghallda in Eirinn le linn éirí amach an Deiscirt . . . . chonacthas é, seal nóiméid, toirt a chabhlach cromtha sa diallait, na spoir ar straidhn phriocála aige, eireaball a chapail sínte ar ghaoth a imeachta, agus chruthaigh sé go maith sa ruagairt rása an lá sin.

D'fhuadaigh an t-uamhan an Ginearál Hutchinson, Ard-Cheannasaí an Airm Ghallda i gConnachta, gur ghabh sé thar bráid sna glintreacha reatha, lasc an Ginearál Trench sa rás leis . . . .

Síobadh neart an Airm Ghallda ina smionagar faoi gheit an *attaque*, scaipeadh i gcéin na blúirí éidreoracha mar a bheadh canach an fheocadáin lá gaoithe.



LE GÉNÉRAL HUMBERT

*"What HUBERT achieved with small forces in a country where 100,000 men were available to fight against him, is simply amazing, and yet, it does not seem to have received the flattering recognition it deserved from History".*

*- Stuart Jones, English Historian.*

Leanadh den tóir go hardtráthnóna nó go raibh an díbirt dheiridh déanta agus an rás rite. Bhí an bóthar mór ina rachlais le fuilleach an Airm; fágadh ocht gcinn déag de ghunnaí ordanáis ar pháirc an áir, caitheadh dhá mhíle muscaed cois bealaigh, fágadh bratacha agus meirgí gan áireamh, bairillí gunna-phúdair agus trucaillí armlóin, claimhte, piostail, lansáí as cuimse, trealamh cogaidh agus uirlisí ceoil, ciotaldrumaí, trumpaí, píbe Albanacha, buabhaill phráis brúite faoi chrúba na gcapall, cáipéisí, úmacha, gunnacharraistí, pubaill, fearaistí an champa agus an chócaire, folcadán stáin an Tiarna, plátaí airgid dhinnéar an Iarla, an sciléad iarainn agus an friochtán féin. I gciseán a bhí saite i ndíog cois bóthair fuarthas trí dhiosaen buidéal lán go scrogaill le fíon dearg Opórtó.

Thit a thost ar Chaisleán an Bharraigh. Lasadh na fuinneoga faoi fluineadh ghrian an Luain. Bhí an Glas agus an Trídathach ag ionnladh a bhfilltí sa solas loiscneach go hard os cionn an bhaile. Bhí anáil na hoíche sa tsráid,

*Peractum est.*

Titeann míogarnach na tuirse ar shúil an bheo, siocann an tsúil ar an marbh.

Tá an Tain déanta. ☞

ON THE DAY CASTLEBAR was liberated, August 27, 1798, James Napper Tandy sailed from Dunkerque with 270 French grenadiers and a large quantity of weapons, powder and artillery, on board the corvette Anacréon, reputed to be the fastest vessel in the French navy. They landed near Burtonport, Co. Donegal on September 16, but on hearing of Humbert's defeat at Ballinamuck, they withdrew. On September 21, the Captain landed Tandy at Bergen in Norway, from where, en route to France by land, he arrived in Hamburg, then a neutral state, on November 22.

There Tandy was arrested and protracted extradition proceedings followed. The British arrogantly demanded that he be handed over for trial. Eventually, Tandy was extradited on October 1, 1799. French retribution was swift. They recalled their chargé d'affaires and consul in Hamburg immediately. Hamburg's representatives in

France were given 24 hours to quit their residences and eight days to leave the country.

This all coincided with the return of **Napoléon Bonaparte** from Egypt and his assumption of power as First Consul of France.

A letter from the Senate of Hamburg which set out their reasons for the extradition was returned unopened. They then communicated personally with Bonaparte, whose reply was devastating, and which he published for the edification of the public.

*“You have violated hospitality, a thing that would not happen among the barbarous hordes of the desert.”*

He promptly ordered trade sanctions which were not lifted until April 1801, on payment of a fine of 4,500,000 francs.

Napper Tandy was sentenced to death at Lifford court, and May 4, 1801 was fixed as the day of execution. A reprieve was granted until May 28 and on May 12 his execution was postponed indefinitely.

By 1802 the long war between France and England was coming to an end, and negotiations for peace were under way.

Lord Cornwallis, the Lord Lieutenant who had taken personal command against General Humbert’s army in 1798 was the chief British negotiator and Joseph Bonaparte, brother of Napoléon was the chief French negotiator.

**The Peace Treaty of Amiens, 1802**, is another significant date in European history. Its signing was delayed when the First Consul instructed his brother to demand that the British comply with one further condition – *“General James Napper Tandy must be released from prison and restored ‘au sein de la France’ – to the bosom of France.”*

On the night of Sunday, March 7, 1802, Tandy was quietly released and put on board a ship for France. On March 14 he landed in Bordeaux to military and civic receptions. The Treaty of Amiens was signed on March 27.



**I**RISHMEN HAVE SERVED with distinction in the Irish Brigades of both the French Monarchy and the Republic and Irish names are among those of the great Generals engraved on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

There has long been an antipathy on the part of French people towards the English. This antipathy dates back to the 100 years war, 1337 to 1453. England is still regarded by many as *“la perfide Albion”*. The Young Irelanders and the Fenians had many supporters in France. In our time there have been numerous Irish Solidarity Committees throughout the length and breadth of France. In 1981, several French towns named streets after Bobby Sands and the other patriots who died on hunger strike – Rue Bobby Sands; Rue des Martyrs Irlandais. French people today take a sympathetic interest in the Irish cause; despite all the misleading publicity, they feel instinctively that the English, somehow or other, must be at the root of the problem.

It was of course in France’s interest to assist us in 1798 when she was at war with England. But it was in our interest also. The Rising failed, but the experience in Wexford, in Antrim and in Down in the month of June showed that brave Irishmen and women, on their own, could take on the enemy and put up a formidable resistance. The campaign in the West in August demonstrated that we had friends in the world outside who understood our predicament and were willing to help.

“And pledge we the stout sons of France, boys  
Bold Humbert and all his brave men,  
Whose tramp, like the trumpet of battle,  
Brought hope to the drooping again.”

As Irish Republicans we are all in the tradition of **Tone and the United Irishmen**. That tradition was born of an Irish separatism which was given a new direction and a new lease of life by the inspiration of the events of 1789 in France.

The generous ideals of the First French Republic born in blood 200 years ago, are part of an inheritance which has inspired every generation of Irish people since then and inspires us today.

We are children of Ireland, but we are also, as Irish Republicans "**enfants de la patrie**" because the school of Irish Republicanism is a Franco-Irish school and we have all been there. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity are noble ideals which still inspire us and for which we still struggle, both North and South of the British-created border.



*Theobald Wolfe Tone*

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*"That Ireland was not able of herself to throw off the yoke, I knew. I therefore sought for aid wherever it was to be found".*

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*Charles, Marquis Cornwallis (1738 - 1805), former Viceroy of India, became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in June 1798. On hearing of the French landing he took personal command of the English forces in the field. He had reached Athlone when he heard of the capture of Castlebar and sent an urgent message to England for "as large a reinforcement as possible", despite the fact that he already had 100,000 troops in Ireland.*

*Not since he surrendered the United States of America to General George Washington at Yorktown (1781) had Cornwallis faced such a superb tactician as Humbert. His strategy was a simple one: he refused to let General Lake counter-attack until they had together assembled an immense army. With 30,000 English troops massed in South Leitrim and North Longford they stopped Humbert's advance on Granard, at Ballinamuck on 8th September 1798.*

*Fatigue had slowed the march of Humbert's army. Had they reached Granard their campaign would have taken on a new character, with Dublin as their next objective.*

*The capital was virtually defenceless as almost all of the garrison had been moved to Connacht.*

*"The life of a Lord Lieutenant of Ireland", said Cornwallis, "comes up to my idea of perfect misery. I wish I were back in Bengal".*

*With the Rising suppressed, he set about constructing the Act of Union of 1800, "with the great object of consolidating the British Empire".*