

## TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE: THE HUMBERT INVASION OF IRELAND IN 1798

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That forces of Revolutionary France invaded Ireland two months after Britain brutally suppressed the Great Rebellion there in 1798 is a historical fact that few of us "Anglo-Saxons" know, although the Irish still remember. The Humbert invasion in '98 with 1000 French veterans and a handful of Irish volunteers, along with previous unsuccessful French attempts, lives on in Irish legend, even in song. As James Joyce noted in *Ulysses*, into the nineteenth century native Irish reminisced about an Ireland freed of British rule with the aid of the French. So sang the *seun bhean bhocht* (or poor old woman, the personification of the Emerald Isle):

Oh, the French are on the sea,  
Says the Shan Van Vocht.  
The French are on the sea,  
Says the Shan Van Vocht.  
Oh, the French are in the Bay,  
They'll be here without delay,  
And the Orange will decay,  
Says the Shan Van Vocht

And the song concludes with Ireland's bright hope:

And will Ireland then be free?  
Says the Shan Van Vocht,  
Will Ireland then be free?  
Says the Shan Van Vocht.  
Yes, Ireland shall be free  
From the center to the sea;  
Then hurrah for liberty  
Says the Shan Van Vocht.<sup>1</sup>

On August 22, 1798, after long years of waiting, the French were in the bay, the Bay of Kilcummin on the northwest Atlantic coast, and they began landing the same day in County Mayo just five miles distant from Killala, which the French immediately attacked.<sup>2</sup>

After more than two years of planning and several unsuccessful or aborted attempts, soldiers of the French Republic finally set foot on Irish soil. Their intention was indeed to free Ireland from the British yoke, in cooperation with the separatist United Irishmen who had long been planning a rising to coincide with a French invasion.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the Humbert invasion came with too few numbers to an Ireland where the Great Rebellion had been savagely crushed just weeks before in Wexford and County Antrim. It was a matter of too little, too late.<sup>4</sup>

France's plans for invading Ireland to strike at the British dated back to 1796. At Christmastime that year, 15,000 French soldiers transported on 40 ships threatened the Irish coast for almost three weeks. Commanded by the undaunted General Lazare Hoche, the invasion might well have succeeded had the troops been put on shore at Bantry Bay. A combination of terrible weather, poor seamanship, and timidity on the part of Hoche's subordinates kept the army from landing.<sup>5</sup> The United Irish organization they had come to support was only in its beginning stages as an underground army in 1796. Throughout 1797, however, the

secret army grew in size, despite government efforts to disband it, while several Irish agents in France — including the famous Theobald Wolfe Tone — tried to persuade their would-be ally to send new forces. Both France and Ireland probably lost their best chance for a successful invasion in 1797.<sup>6</sup> By 1798, with Dublin Castle's repressive methods becoming more effective and the United Irish leadership itself in jeopardy, there was a harsh debate between Irish leaders who wanted to risk a rising before the French came and those who said the French had to be waited for. The unsuccessful Wexford Rebellion made the matter moot; so did the arrest of most of the United leadership.<sup>7</sup>

Against this background the French Directory in the late summer of 1798 made plans for yet another attempt to invade Ireland. Resources were limited, however, because General Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt was taking place at the same time. Since France had neither disposable ships nor men to send a large-scale expedition as they had done in 1796, a series of small invasions were planned, each dependent on the success of the ones previous. The final orders were issued by Eustace Bruix, minister of marine, who had overall responsibility for the project. First the renowned Irish rebel James Napper Tandy would sail from Dunkerque with Irish exiles and a few French on the corvette *Anacreon*, land in north Ireland, and reignite the embers of rebellion. (The French chose to believe Tandy's empty boast that thousands of Irish would rise if he simply made an appearance somewhere on the island). Small boats would then leave separately from Calais and Boulogne to carry arms to committed Irish insurgents. Shortly thereafter Humbert's small force would sail from Rochefort. Embarked on three frigates, these troops would land in the northwest, after the insurrection was well underway. The main force, with almost three thousand men, would follow from Brest and land near Donegal; its

general Jean Hardy, was to command all the French troops in Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

Humbert, man of the people, veteran of the struggle against French rebels in the west, and participant in the 1796 Irish invasion attempt, was a good choice to lead the first wave of French soldiers into Ireland. Born in 1767 on a small farm near Saint Nabord in the department of the Vosges, he was a dealer in rabbit and goat skins before the Revolution. In 1789 he was sergeant of a local citizens' militia; when the war started he was lieutenant colonel of a volunteer regiment. After service with the Army of the Rhine in '93, his unit was sent to the Army of the Ocean Coasts to fight counter-revolutionaries. In 1794 he earned a promotion to brigadier after defeating with 450 grenadiers the famous rebel leader Stofflet. When the British landed an emigre army at Quiberon in 1795, Humbert, under General Lazare Hoche's orders, helped drive the invaders into the sea.<sup>9</sup> In 1796 he proposed to the Directory that England be paid in like coin with an invasion to stir up guerilla war in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> During the failed '96 Bantry Bay attempt, he and his Free Legion were aboard the *Droits de l'Homme* which had a running battle with two British vessels on the way back to France. Humbert lost 100 men in the fight; he knew first hand from his 1796 experience the risks of seaborne attack on Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

He also knew that time was of the essence if the 1798 attack were to succeed. Humbert wasted very little of it in making his preparations at Rochefort. Inter-service rivalry was not a problem here as it had been in '96; for once the navy was being very cooperative. On 12 July Bruix urged Contre-amiral Danie Savary, Humbert's opposite number in that service, to sail as soon as possible; the navy minister sent final instructions just over two weeks later.<sup>12</sup> There was, however, a problem with money. To build morale for the risky venture ahead, Humbert promised his

troops three months' advance pay. Apparently because of royalist treachery in the Treasury, the funds were not forthcoming.<sup>13</sup> The *payeur* at Rochefort came to the general's rescue and advanced him 47,000 francs without authorization from Paris.<sup>14</sup>

On 5 August 1,032 troops embarked at La Rochelle on the frigates the *Concorde*, *Medée*, and *Franchise*. They also carried three field pieces, large supplies of cartridges and powder, 3,000 extra uniforms and 6,000 muskets for the insurgents.<sup>15</sup> A dozen or so Irish expatriates sailed with the expedition. Humbert had requested the services of Wolfe Tone, but he was with the larger expedition that was to come later from Brest. His brother, Matthew, joined instead. Also among the Irish volunteers were Bartholomew Teeling, an Ulsterman who served Humbert as an interpreter, Sullivan, a nephew of Nicholas Madgett, the Irish liaison in the French Foreign office, and Michael O'Keon, a native of County Mayo who proved valuable during the invasion.<sup>16</sup>

The small squadron set sail on 6 August, carefully skirting six enemy vessels that lay off La Rochelle, and spent sixteen days in the crossing. Savary deliberately sailed far to the west before turning east to approach the Irish coast, obeying orders to avoid conflict with British ships. Flying the Union Jack as camouflage, the small squadron beat its way into Killibegs inlet about noon on 22 August. A British officer and three sons of the Bishop of Killala rowed out to offer welcome. Imagine their surprise when Humbert made them his first prisoners! The ships having anchored at 2 p.m., Irish peasants flocked to assist with the unopposed landing, welcoming the French as liberators.<sup>17</sup>

Humbert's little army enjoyed immediate success in its first encounter with British defenders, and ordinary Irish quickly flocked to join in the war effort. Adjutant-General Sarrazin and his grenadiers with one volley drove off about

50 yeoman defenders of Killala; half of them were made prisoner and sent back to France as proof positive of a first success.<sup>18</sup> Humbert made his headquarters at the Bishop's Castle and promptly turned it into a recruiting station for the Irish. A green flag emblazoned with gold letters proclaiming "ERIN GO BRAGH! [Ireland Forever!]" flew over the Castle gate and drew in country people like filings to a magnet. The French, though, were dismayed with both the misery and stubborn Catholicism of their supporters. Wrote eyewitness Joseph Stock, genial Protestant bishop of Killala, the French

boasted openly... 'that they had just driven Mr. Pope out of Italy and did not expect to find him again so suddenly in Ireland.' It astonished the French officers to hear recruits... declare 'that they were come to take arms for France and the Blessed Virgin.'<sup>19</sup>

And Capitaine Jobit noted scornfully in his journal:

Never could any peasants have exhibited such a pitiful spectacle. The men, women and children were semi-naked, and housed in wretched and narrow cabins which afforded little protection from the weather.... Almost all these semi-savages are such fanatical Catholics that they can only be pitied.<sup>20</sup>

The people of County Mayo were apolitical as well as miserable: the 1798 rebellion never touched their area and they had never been organized by the United Irishmen. Some joined the French for the uniforms, guns, rations or to

settle old scores with Protestants. Few were ready to risk their necks in battle. Still, according to Sergeant-Major J.B. Thomas,

These unfortunate islanders were enthusiastic about liberty nonetheless. They believed they had already been delivered from the cruel English yoke. They looked upon us as their liberators and born protectors of their religion which is Catholic....Wherever we went they brought out flocks of geese and sheep to us with loud hurrahs, shouts for liberty and success as we marched by.<sup>21</sup>

In two days six to seven hundred rebels joined Humbert; in two and half weeks the French distributed arms to over 5,000.<sup>22</sup>

While at Killala the general issued a number of proclamations, some of which had originally been drafted for the Hoche expedition. Speaking in the name of the United Irish committee, he promised independence, the abolition of privilege, religious freedom, and careers open to merit. French soldiers had come to liberate the Irish from oppression; they would respect persons, property and religious opinions.<sup>23</sup> Humbert also reminded Irishmen of their sacred duty to support the French in their enterprise:

Brave IRISHMEN, our cause is common. Like you we abhor the avaricious and blood-thirsty policy of an oppressive government. Like you we hold as indefeasible the right of all nations to liberty. Like you we are persuaded that the peace of the world shall ever be troubled

as long as the British ministry is suffered to make with impunity a traffic of the industry, labour and blood of the people<sup>24</sup>

Having established a base at Killala, Humbert left 200 French and many Irish behind as a garrison and moved on to take Ballina, seven miles away, after a stiff fight on 24 August. There he learned the British were massing their forces at Castlebar and decided to march at once and take them by surprise.<sup>25</sup>

The British reacted swiftly to news that the French had landed forces in Connaught, Ireland's westernmost province. On 24 August, two days after the invasion, Major-General Henry Hely Hutchinson, marched from Galway with 4,000 Redcoats, sure that he had the advantage of numbers. Arriving at Castlebar, capital of Mayo on 25 August, he dug in and sent an officer under flag of truce to ascertain the size of the French-Irish force.<sup>26</sup> On 26 August Lieutenant-General Gerard Lake, infamous for his treatment of rebels in the east, arrived at Castlebar with reinforcements, assumed command, but left to Hutchinson all dispositions for the defense of the city. Thus Lake bore full responsibility for everything that followed. The British had five to six thousand men, drawn up in two lines on a ridge north of Castlebar. Knowing they would face only 800 French regulars, Lake and his fellow officers were cocky.<sup>27</sup>

Humbert avoided the main road to Castlebar and took a seldom-travelled mountain track still hoping for surprise, even though he learned from Hutchinson's emissary that the city had been reinforced. After an exhausting night march of 15 hours, the French approached, only to encounter British pickets four miles from the city. The element of surprise was lost.<sup>28</sup> Humbert also had a disadvantage in numbers. Since he had left 200 soldiers behind in Killala, the French contingent was

only 800 men. The number of Irish with him was probably about the same, or a total attacking force of 1600 men at most. British sources say the Irish were used only as a shield for French regulars; French sources note that the rebels panicked and fled when they came under cannon fire.<sup>29</sup> It was an inauspicious beginning for the alliance of liberator and liberated.

This was, however, the only major setback the allied army suffered that day. About 10 a.m. Sarrazin attacked the British left, met stiff opposition and fell back. But when *chef de bataillon* Ardouin attacked the left with three companies of grenadiers, the enemy, composed of unreliable militia, broke and fled. Ardouin's companies were the first to reach the city of Castlebar. Simultaneously Sarrazin attacked the right which gave way since its flank was turned. Under Humbert's orders the attack then became general; French soldiers overran British positions, seized their guns, and turned them on the retreating enemy.<sup>30</sup> The British defeat was so complete and their retreat so precipitate that afterward the battle was derisively called the "Races of Castlebar."<sup>31</sup>

In the glow of victory Humbert set up a "Republic of Connaught" on the French model. It was short-lived, however, lasting only from 27 August to 4 September. The general appointed a president and governing council, promised independence, and considered issuing assignats. Humbert also issued his own *levée en masse*, ordering

...every individual from sixteen to forty in the name of the Irish republic, to repair immediately to the French camp...to march in mass against the common enemy...whose destruction alone can secure the happiness and independence of ancient Hibernia.<sup>32</sup>

According to contemporary sources, some 3,500 to 5,000 Irish partisans did enroll at Castlebar. The problem was turning them into an effective fight force in such a short period of time.<sup>33</sup>

Some of Humbert's comrades in '98, and a few historians since, have accused the French general of wasting time at Castlebar when he should have been marching to the interior to meet rebel forces. However, Humbert was only following his instructions which cautioned him to be "prudent" until the second French wave landed and to exploit victory as a means of enlisting the Irish.<sup>34</sup> According to a Castle agent Humbert and Sarrazin "differed materially" on the decision to stay. Matthew Tone later expressed his disgust that Humbert "amused himself, during a fortnight, drilling the peasantry of the neighborhood" when he should have moved toward Ulster where the United men were strong.<sup>35</sup> Richard Hayes speculates that Humbert could have reached Dublin if he had immediately moved into Roscommon, Longford and Westmeath where news of Castlebar inspired a tardy and tentative uprising. And Thomas Pakenham was puzzled that when the French did move they went north, not east towards where the people had risen.<sup>36</sup>

Humbert left Castlebar on 4 September both to fulfill his mission and to avoid the enemy which was closing in. On the same day Lord Lieutenant Charles Cornwallis was 12 miles from the city with an army of up to 20,000 men. Humbert's Franco-Irish force was only a tenth of that number.<sup>37</sup> Humbert had three options: march east toward the rebels in Roscommon, move north to rendez-vous with Hardy's force that was to land there, or flee to the Ulster mountains to gather Irish partisans. He preferred to march east<sup>38</sup>, but that choice was closed to him since Cornwallis's army was advancing along that road. He therefore turned north, hoping to turn toward the interior if he could elude the

British. Cornwallis himself saw the danger. His subordinate, Sir John Moore, wrote "his lordship was haunted by the fear that Humbert would turn his right flank, cross the Shannon before him, and make for Dublin."<sup>39</sup>

After four days of hard marching Humbert actually did breach the barrier of the Shannon, but his army was exhausted and vastly superior British forces were closing in. Between 4 and 8 September Humbert's little force -- 800 French and about 1000 Irish -- marched 62 miles, fought a major skirmish just south of Sligo, and crossed the Shannon at Ballintra but failed to destroy the bridge.<sup>40</sup> British cavalry scouts were now in almost constant contact with a fleeing invader. Cornwallis carefully maneuvered his overwhelming numbers on 7 September to close the trap on the enemy.<sup>41</sup> As Marianne Elliott points out, such measures were "like taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut" and were "intended as much to impress the natives, rebel and loyalist alike, as to crush the French."<sup>42</sup>

The stage was set for the final engagement at Ballinamuck on 8 September. As the thin column approached the village along a narrow lane through a bog, General Lake attacked with cavalry and took some prisoners.<sup>43</sup> Humbert and four companies counter-attacked, then with the rest of his army and the Irish volunteers kept up a stiff resistance for about half an hour. When he saw reinforcements from Cornwallis's army joining those already engaged, Humbert decided to surrender, giving his sword to Lake. The British officer asked Humbert,

And, where did you intend to go?.... To Dublin, to break the irons of those who suffer under your tyranny, replied the French general. That extraordinary project, continued General Lake, could only be conceived by a frenchman.<sup>44</sup>

The French, though, made no provision for their Irish allies who were to suffer the fate of all rebels taken with arms in hand.

The British turned the slaughter of the Irish into a savage game, although some sold their lives dearly. About 300 of the thousand or so rebels fought on, but hundreds fled for their lives into the swamp or nearby fields. The British cavalry pursued them, like a fox at bay, and sabered them down. A French eyewitness said of the British troopers, "it was astounding to see their horses leap over the walls that fenced in the fields. They jumped them like goats."<sup>45</sup> On the field of battle the Irish lost about half their force. A loyalist observer wrote,

They lay dead about five hundred: I went the next day with many others to see them, how awful! to see that healthy mountain covered with deadbodies, resembling at a distance flocks of sheep— for numbers were naked and swollen with the weather.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the French invasion in 1798 — like the one staged for King James a century or so earlier — ended in tragedy for Ireland and little loss to the French. The French POW's were escorted to Dublin as curiosities and trophies of victory. Some of them to the satisfaction of the British lambasted the Irish as unworthy of liberty.<sup>47</sup> Humbert, though, was not one of them.

The three week invasion of Ireland in late summer '98 showed what France might have done in Ireland if sufficient troops had landed while that island was in rebellion. After Humbert's defeat the Directory sent five more expeditions to Ireland. Two of these were the second and third waves to support Humbert. The other three were

projected in the event the earlier ones were successful. Only the smallest of these actually landed for a few hours in Ireland, then withdrew. Two others were defeated at sea, and one reached the Irish coast and returned safely to France. Between August and November 1798 France had prepared to send to Ireland approximately 10,000 men, but not all at one time. If France had committed to the Irish opportunity the resources she had sent at the same time to Egypt, the story might have been quite different. Years later at St. Helena, Bonaparte was well aware of the fact. He said, "If, instead of the expedition of Egypt, I had made that of Ireland...what would England have been today? and the continent? and the political world?"<sup>48</sup>

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Denis Donoghue, "The Stains of Ireland," Review of *The Year of the French* by Thomas Flanagan, *New York Review of Books*, 26 (14 June 1979): 21. For recent evaluations of the 1788 Humbert invasion, see Flanagan's wonderfully complex but mostly accurate historical novel, Thomas Flanagan, *The Year of the French* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), 293-335; Marianne Elliot, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 214-240; Marianne Elliot, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 372-387; and John Gallaher, *Napoleon's Irish Legion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 13-17.