

# The French are in our Fairgreen -1798

*Bliain na bhFrancach*  
*Toss Gibbons, Lahardane*

France was declared a republic in 1792 and Connaught was declared one in 1798. The United Ireland movement of the 1790's was a non-sectarian movement and it was the diplomatic activity of Wolfe Tone that culminated in the French expeditions to Ireland. In 1796 a French fleet carrying 13,000 troops landed in Bantry Bay in Cork, the objective being to march on Dublin and cross the Irish Sea to invade the United Kingdom. Wolfe Tone was with the French fleet. This attempt failed because of poor weather conditions in Bantry Bay. During the same year Napoleon conquered most of Italy; he probably had better weather!

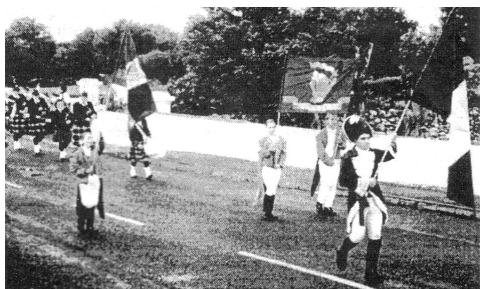
In 1798 France invaded Switzerland, and Napoleon led the French army on an expedition into Egypt. On 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1798 three French frigates entered Killala Bay, landing at Kilcummin. This was Ireland's last invasion.



Fr. Lavelle in his book: *"Addergoole: Native Parish of John McHale"* says: *"If A.D. 1798 was to prove a memorable year Ireland in general, it was fraught too, with terrible consequences for Addergoole:"* The Conroy Monument in Lahardane was erected in 1937 by Michael Timoney.

The part Mayo played in the last invasion of Ireland in 1798 is broadly well known, as is the fate of Addergoole's Parish Priest at the time, Andrew/James Conroy. A summary might go like this. The French under General Humbert landed in Kilcummin, close to Killala, on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1798, a Wednesday. They then marched with the Irish Forces on Ballina, through Crossmolina, and camped on the Fairgreen in Lahardane, made their way with three cannon up the Gap Road to take the English force by surprise. The first part of this engagement took place on Sion Hill, close to the Sacred Heart Hospital. The English troops were driven back, and eventually down Staball Hill over the bridge at the bottom, up and out of the town. The plaque on the bridge commemorates this engagement, along the route several graves now lay forgotten. Following this victory, the "Republic of Connaught" was proclaimed in Castlebar, and John Moore of Moore Hall was appointed its president. The new republic lasted less than a month.

Humbert surrendered at Ballinamuck in County Longford on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1798 when he realized that the English had 15,000 troops. The French were treated as prisoners of war and sent back to France; 500 Irish troops were massacred and a further 1,000 escaped, with more being hung across the West over the next few months. A good grasp of the Mayo involvement in the campaign of 1798 can be gained from reading Stephen Dunford's *"In Humbert's Footsteps Mayo 1798"* (2006).



In 1993 Lahardane Parents Council had a pageant about 1798 and the part that the people of Addergoole played. Here the Irish and French troops march through Lahardane from the Fairgreen towards the Conroy Monument.

Less well known is the detail of what Addergoole people

did in the 1798 Campaign. A book published in 1937 by Richard Hayes *"The Last Invasion of Ireland"* has this information. Here is the local story, told largely through extracts from the book where local oral historians gave accounts to Hayes. First, in Hayes's own words:

*"Midway along the road to Castlebar was the village of Lahardane with its little mountain chapel, where father Conroy officiated as pastor. Humbert's forces arrived there at midnight and found a welcome awaiting them. Provisions of various kinds, bread, milk and chicken, had been prepared for their coming and, while soldiers and insurgents bivouacked in the village green, the officers partook of Father Conroy's hospitality. But the rest was a brief one, and they were quickly drawn up in line once more to resume the march. Before starting, the insurgent ranks were swelled by a number of recruits from various parts of Glen Nephin - Jordans of Derrysallagh, Barretts of Lahardane, Joyces of Glenavinne and others. And when the allied force began at last to move off, a shadowy figure, standing apart on the roadway, blessed with uplifted hand each company as it filed past in the darkness."*

Hayes goes on to tell how in the summer of 1935, when he was in Letternavoge, Richard Corcoran, a grandson of James Corcoran, gave him an account of Captain Mangan's and his grandfather's death.

*"Captain Mangan went on his keeping after Ballinamuck and spent twelve months on the hills of Ballycroy. He was making his way one day to Cúm on the shore of Lough Conn. Information was given to the redcoats - by whom I won't say - that he was here at Letternavoge at the house of my grandfather or at James Noone's close by. That night the two houses were surrounded by soldiers. They didn't find him at Noone's. The party of them that came to my grandfather's were refused admission. After some talk they let my grandfather roll out an oak chest and, while he was doing so, he was shot with two bullets in his skull. He was a comfortable farmer and was a friend of Captain Mangan and a friend of the cause. The Captain was inside with a hundred and fifty rounds of ammunition and his gun and pistol. They called on him to surrender and he refused. They set fire to the thatch then and a part of the roof fell in. When that happened, the Captain ran through the fire and smoke, and made for Letternavoge lough with the smoke, as the wind was blowing that way. The other lot of soldiers that was round Noone's ran towards my grandfather's. As Captain Mangan was passing over a wall, one of them struck him with a flagstone. They shouted then and all of them came running up and they poured bullets into him. Afterwards they cut his head off and put it on the gates at Gortnarnabby, the yeomens' and English army's den on the shore of Lough Conn. 'Twas a hotel after and 'tis a convent now. The skull was left there till the crows picked the eyes out of it. Two days after, his friends came here and brought away his body by night. They buried him in Adrargoole at night, for they daren't bury him in the day."*

Mrs. McGowan of Linen Hall Street, Castlebar, a grandniece of Captain Mangan, told Richard Hayes much the same story in 1935, but added this.

*"Captain Mangan had his reprieve three days before he was shot. Men in high place in Castlebar thought much of him and got it. Up to a while ago his sword was kept at Mrs. MacHale's of Lahardane, but it got lost."*

Martin Joyce of Carrowkeel House, Edmund Blake's grandfather, wrote to Richard Hayes about William Burke, who was carrying the dispatch to the English headquarters at Castlebar that told of the movements of the French-Irish army.

*"When William Burke, the despatch rider, reached Lahardane he met Father Conroy either by design or accident. A few minutes afterwards he gave up the papers in his possession to two men on horseback on the road at the Castlebar side of Lahardane. Then the news spread to all the country people and Father Conroy sent John McHale, a boy seven or eight years old, to tell the Barretts and Joyces of Glenavinne and the Jordans of Derrysallagh to muster all the forces they could and meet the French. They did so and all these were with Humbert to Castlebar. The boy John McHale was afterwards the great Archbishop of Tuam."*

*"After Burke gave up the despatches, he went on the run. After the defeat of the French he was much looked for by Captain Mostyn of Crossmolina. On three occasions they searched Carrowkeel House at night. On one of these occasions Burke was within, but escaped by a secret passage at the back of the house. About one month later he was, however, captured in a hut in the mountains between Lahardane and Newport, was tried by court-martial and executed. He was a Catholic, a lieutenant in the British army, and was of the Burke family of Carrowkeel."*

Martin Joyce also told Hayes about the execution of James McNamara of Caffoly.

*"He was hanged on the bridge at Crossmolina. The O'Donels of Killeen near the town, by their influence with Lord Castlereagh, got him reprieved, but he was executed by Colonel Jackson of Enniscoe" and the reprieve in sight," McNamara was spied on by a neighbouring Protestant, Billy MacKenzie, who later married one of Jackson's illegitimate daughters. The body of the executed man was taken down soon after execution, but all efforts to restore life failed."*

John McNeela of Dervin told Hayes this.

*"There was a lot from here joined the French. There was a poor labouring man - 'Páidin a' choga' he was called - went from here to Killala when he heard they were landed. He lived over Rawkell. He fought well with them through all the battles and came back after the troubles were over. And when he was dying long after, he sent for Liam Pleimionn, whose own father was with the French, and he told Pleimionn that he had sixteen shillings left in his pocket and to get a piper to play 'The White Cockade' over his grave when he was dead."*

*"The French and the Irish that were with them came the mountain road from Crossmolina. They had little light cannon that they dragged with them. 'Twas midnight when they got here to Lahardane, and they stopped for an hour at the Fair Green beyond. They came to free Ireland, but a lot of people at the time were afraid and didn't rightly understand. The people gathered about them in the Green but they couldn't understand the French language. The French were going by another road, but Father Conroy, the parish priest, told them to take the way by the Windy Gap. They took it and they drove in all the cattle about the Gap. They went on then to Castlebar and they won a big battle there. The Irish fought well with them there, but they'd fight better if they were trained."*

*There's a Frenchman's grave at the Windy Gap, but 'tis unheeded like many another grave in Ireland. Father Conroy gave his life to liberate Ireland. He lived a quarter of a mile at the Gap side of the village. He stopped Burke the messenger from the English in Ballina. And isn't it a miserable thing that there's not a stone to mark his grave. I spoke to the priests about it and to the people and nothing was done."*

And

*"A man named Gaughan that lived here joined them. He was caught and was in the jail at Castlebar. The prisoners made a hole in the wall, and Gaughan got through with two others, though he was a big man. They stripped themselves of their clothes first, when they got out they made for Nephin."*

Hayes says this about the arrest and eventual execution of Fr. Andrew/James Conroy.

*"Several months after the Insurrection a battalion of English troops under General Trench left Castlebar and proceeding by Barnageeha to Lahardane, placed Father Conroy under arrest. Next day at Castlebar he was brought before a court-martial and charged with assisting the French. The various activities in which he was engaged were cited in evidence against him ; and it was sworn that a French carbine and cartridges were found in his house as well as a French Proclamation to the Irish people and letters which passed between him and Roger McGuire of Crossmolina. He was found guilty and, immediately after his trial, was led from prison to the Green where the sentence of death was carried out. The tree on which he was hanged remained an object of popular reverence up to some years ago, when it was uprooted by a storm. Throughout the evening of his execution large numbers of his parishioners from Adra-goole arrived in the town and conveyed his body home. At the dawn of a November day in 1798 he was buried in the little graveyard of Lahardane beside the lonely shores of Lough Conn."*

A footnote in Hayes's book refers to a book published four years after the first Rathkell School was opened, 1845, and written by William Maxwell. Fr. Conroy might not have been executed.

*"A gentleman, still living, to whom I am indebted for valuable information, alludes in his correspondence to the execution of an aged priest, who, according to Sir Richard Musgrave, acted as a French commissary and recruited actively for the invaders. Between Musgrave's hearsay authority and the direct testimony of one of the old man's judges, the reader will form his own opinion touching the guilt or innocence of the condemned priest:*

*" ' I was despatched with two hundred men and two field-pieces to occupy the celebrated pass of Barnageeragh, an extremely strong defile, where a few men, well posted, ought to check the advance of a large force. Having rode a few miles to reconnoitre in front of the pass, I reached the house of a priest who had been charged with acting as commissary to the French. The old man came out and surrendered himself, requesting to be conveyed to Castlebar, and protesting his perfect innocence, with a strong assurance that he had acted under terror, and with the sole intention of saving life. I subsequently sat on the court-martial which tried that poor man, and strenuously voted against the sentence which condemned him-but he was subsequently executed. Having at the time taken considerable pains to ascertain the facts, I declare it to be my sincere conviction, that the man acted altogether under fear, and against his own inclination- and I say this rather Sir Richard Musgrave has given a very different colour to the case.' "*

What do we know about Fr. Conroy's burial place? Addergoole is the graveyard, but can we get a more accurate location? Fr. Lavelle says:

*"Tidings of the atrocity soon sped down the Windy Gap to the people of his love, and his murdered body was tenderly borne by his sorrow-stricken parishioners through historic Bearnageehy to its last resting-place in Addergoole burial ground, where it lies within the ruins of the old roofless church beside the tideless waters of Loch Conn."*



There are seventeen marked graves inside the old church. The writing on six headstones and tombs is legible; none of those bear the name of Andrew/James Conroy. The writing on the other headstones is illegible, perhaps belongs one to our “Ságart arún”.



Nothing appears to be known about the burial spot in Addergoole for Captain Mangan, and even less of what happened to the bodies of James Corcoran, Lieutenant William Burke and James McNamara? Along with Fr. Conroy they, and other local people who were involved in 1798 and survived, are our “*Men of the West*”.

On 28th of March 2007 I was invited to talk to pupils at Rathkell School about 1798, and the part that Addergoole played in that campaign. After the talk we had this picture taken. Note the pike and the sword. My wife’s family had kept Captain Mangan’s sword safe through the years.

