

Review: Insurgent Wicklow

Reviewed Work(s): The Rebellion in Wicklow 1798 by Ruán O'Donnell; Aftermath: Post-Rebellion Insurgency in Wicklow, 1799-1803 by Ruán O'Donnell

Review by: Liam Chambers

Source: *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*, Vol. 16 (2001), pp. 135-141

Published by: Eighteenth-Century Ireland Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30071254>

Accessed: 23-11-2018 15:09 UTC

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

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Eighteenth-Century Ireland Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*

REVIEW ARTICLE

Insurgent Wicklow: Ruán O'Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow 1798* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 441pp., €22.50; *Aftermath: Post-Rebellion Insurgency in Wicklow, 1799-1803* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 272pp., €22.50.

In the vast and problematic historiography of the 1798 Rebellion, County Wicklow has been relatively neglected. In the aftermath of the rising it was Wexford which caught the imagination of historians from a diverse range of political opinions, who sought to graft their interpretations to the events in the cockpit of the insurrection. The work of Ruán O'Donnell on insurgency and counter-insurgency in Wicklow has gone further than any other local study to redress the resulting imbalance. O'Donnell faced more hurdles than most historians of the late-eighteenth century. The lack of focus over the previous two hundred years left Wicklow with an underdeveloped historiography of 1798.

The memoirs of the leading Wicklow rebel, Joseph Holt, were refashioned systematically by their editor, Thomas Crofton Croker, for publication in 1838. Only recently has the extent of Croker's editorial heavy-handedness been fully appreciated, thanks in large part to the work of O'Donnell. The folklore surrounding the life of Michael Dwyer is as problematic as it is useful. Meanwhile, the stories and accounts collected by Luke Cullen in the mid-nineteenth century were not published in the author's lifetime and were never intended as a coherent or conventional narrative-driven history.

Moreover, the Wicklow Mountains and the poor (but improving) internal infrastructure fractured the geographical unity of the county. As a result, the Rebellion in Wicklow has often been subsumed into accounts of actions in the surrounding counties, not least the Rebellion to the south. Geographical considerations provided a further problem. The guerrilla-style conflict that developed in Wicklow in 1798 and continued to 1803 (or even 1804) was premised on the isolation of the mountains. This made Wicklow unique, but created difficulties for the historians who attempted to reconstruct this constantly shifting, mountain-based struggle. The author has succeeded in overcoming these challenges to produce an original and insightful account of the Rebellion and its aftermath in Wicklow.

One of the central questions raised by O'Donnell's work is how did a relatively peaceful and stable county in the late-eighteenth century become one of the most violent, rebellious and troubled regions in the country? Moreover, how did this happen in such a short period of time? *The Rebellion in Wicklow 1798* begins with the necessary account of society and politics in Wicklow before the eruption of revolutionary mobilisation and counter-insurgent crackdown. The author moves beyond putting the 1798 rebellion into its eighteenth-century

context when he claims that 'The scale and ferocity of the Wicklow rebellion of 1798 largely reflected the issues of settlement and dispossession of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries' (p.6). Clearly Wicklow was an unruly county, finally shired only in 1606. Linking the manifestation of rebellion in 1798, if not its causes, with the process of 'anglicisation' is significant but it is a difficult supposition to document. This is all the more apparent when one considers that Wicklow's peaceful veneer was **not challenged** substantially until the spring of 1797. The lack of overt radicalism in Wicklow stands in stark contrast to the surrounding counties. There was little open sectarian hostility in a county which had the highest proportion of Protestants outside Ulster (an estimated 12,000 in a total population of 56,000). There was no tradition of agrarian disturbance in the county, either of the Whiteboy or Defender variety. Nor were there any anti-militia disturbances in 1793 or 1794, probably because the force was raised voluntarily. In fact, the assizes of July 1793 were 'maiden', compelling evidence of Wicklow's peacefulness when much of the rest of the country was convulsed by violence.

One reason for Wicklow's stability was the period of economic expansion in the 1780s and early 1790s, fostered by a cult of improvement among the gentry and the establishment of cottage industries. Politically, the liberal tendencies of the Wicklow establishment created a barrier to the development of widespread radical politics. Wicklow was one of only a handful of Irish counties under the dominance of a liberal landlord: the earl of Fitzwilliam. Unlike neighbouring Kildare, where the duke of Leinster held an even more effective grip on county politics, Fitzwilliam was an absentee, but his influence was clear, evidenced in 1790 by the election of two liberal MPs for the county, William Hume and Nicholas Westby.

One of the central themes of these books is the way in which this liberal ascendancy in Wicklow dealt with the events of the 1790s. Their general antipathy towards militarisation under the control of central government permitted the emergence of an independent 'government party' ready to support a tough law and order stance and in turn challenge the credentials of the liberal gentry leadership. O'Donnell argues that despite the tranquillity of Wicklow in the mid-1790s the development of a 'government party' can be traced to 1794 when the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne was commemorated publicly at Rathdrum. The author demonstrates that the link between establishment politics and the development of radicalism was as crucial for Wicklow as it was for other Leinster counties. In other words, O'Donnell is well aware that the tranquil veneer of early- and mid-1790s Wicklow was more apparent than real, and that the events of May 1797 were more an evolutionary development than a revolutionary departure.

From the spring of 1797 the United Irishmen established themselves as a powerful force in County Wicklow. O'Donnell suggests plausibly that the rapidity of their spread was built upon earlier contacts between leading Wicklow

figures and radicals elsewhere. O'Donnell provides a fascinating portrait of the organisation of United Irish structures in Wicklow with enough background information to make it easily intelligible. The roots of the United Irishmen were multi-layered. There was an important Ulster impulse illustrated by the activities of William Putnam McCabe or William Metcalfe and strengthened by the exiled Ulster population which had taken up residence in villages like Stratford-on-Slaney in the 1780s and 1790s. A second impulse was Dublin and Kildare based. Indeed, the organisation of the Wicklow United Irishmen occurred at precisely the same time as the United Irishmen moved from north Kildare (where there had been a strong Defender organisation) into the virgin territory in the south of the country that shared a general sense of tranquillity with neighbouring west Wicklow. O'Donnell cleverly displays the local dimensions of this spread: the involvement of loosely-defined middle class Catholic groups; the importance of family and social networks (demonstrated most dramatically by the involvement of the Byrnes of Ballymanus); and the importance of idiosyncratic local recruiters, apparently acting on their own initiative, such as 'one Johnson' in Newcastle Barony who recruited United Irishmen on a startling Protestant-only basis. Within only seven months the United Irishmen had a working county committee and 'on paper' would become the largest organisation in Leinster.

The success of United Irish recruitment raised their main military problem, the procurement of the weaponry necessary for an effective underground revolutionary army. O'Donnell argues that the United Irishmen had no coherent plan for arming, aware that public attempts to arm would alert the authorities. However the increasing raids on loyalist homes, and occasional murders, resulted in the more vocal emergence of a Dublin Castle-led clique of Wicklow gentry, determined to impose a policy of militarisation to root out disaffection. The Castle was well aware of the problems posed by Wicklow, as O'Donnell puts it, 'a politically sensitive and strategically vital sector' (p.100). Their first serious attempt to deal with the problem was the dispatch of Major Joseph Hardy as military co-ordinator of the counter-insurgent effort in September 1797. During the ensuing months Hardy became the lynchpin on which contacts between the small but influential government party in Wicklow and Dublin Castle hinged. Arguably, however, the presence of Hardy (despite his Wicklow credentials) stunted the growth of an indigenous loyalist clique.

Three inter-related issues are central to O'Donnell's account of the anti-United Irish effort: the use of martial law, the role of the yeomanry and the presence of the Orange Order. It was clearly the debate about these issues that destroyed any vestiges of the gentry's unity. The use of proclamation under the terms of the Insurrection Act was a deeply contentious issue, viewed by liberals as a diminution of their powers and a recognition that the moderate approach had failed. Nevertheless, the legislation was first applied in Talbotstown Barony as early as November 1797. O'Donnell recognises that the existence of the Orange Order in Wicklow was essentially a post-1798 phenomenon. However, he does

see Orangeism as a significant element of the counter-insurgent agenda, and suggests that it bore responsibility for the heightening of sectarianism (though this is balanced by recognition that United Irishmen were not averse to raising the spectre of Orangeism as a propaganda tool).

The problem is the paucity of evidence. O'Donnell suggests that the spread of Orangeism 'may have come from Major Hardy' (p.119), but the evidence is circumstantial. At times O'Donnell lumps the Orange Order and yeomanry under one banner as 'extra-paramilitary loyalist organisations' (p.118), though the close connection between the two was, arguably, a late development. Clearly the effective purging of some yeomanry corps in February 1798 changed their religious composition. O'Donnell's work strengthens Alan Blackstock's thesis that the association of the yeomanry and Orange Order developed in the months before the Rebellion rather than at the formation of the force in 1796. Hardy, argues O'Donnell, was responsible for the escalating counter-insurgent terror, since he supplied no alternative method of pacification, in fact he had no 'coherent anti-insurgent policy' (p.155) in the first place. With the introduction of martial law to Wicklow on 26 March 1798 (and the whole country a few days later) the harsh counter-insurgent measures increased. However, even at this stage the liberal gentry continued to take an alternative line in some areas, noticeably more lenient in providing protection than their loyalist peers.

The actual fighting in 1798 takes up the final two chapters in *The Rebellion in Wicklow*. O'Donnell implicitly argues that the Rebellion was not the result of repression, but part of a Dublin-centred rebellion that went wrong from the start. This is an exemplary and detailed account of a sometimes bewildering conflict. O'Donnell recounts the outbreak of rebellion in west Wicklow (apparently spurred on by events in Kildare) and in the north (where Dublin was the focus). At the heart of his narrative is the contention that Dublin remained the ultimate objective of the rebels. Two features of this work are particularly important. First, the account of the sheer scale of rebellion in Wicklow means that it can no longer be regarded as a conflict largely confined to Wexford and east Ulster. Indeed, O'Donnell rescues the 'Ballymanus Division' of Wicklow rebels who played such a prominent role in Wicklow and Wexford. Second, and perhaps more importantly, he illustrates that the Rebellion did not end neatly, as thought conventionally, with the defeat of the French at Ballinamuck in September. Instead an 'ongoing low intensity rebellion' continued until at least November 1798 when Joseph Holt finally surrendered. O'Donnell offers a number of reasons for the unusual longevity of the Rebellion in Wicklow: rebel militancy and 'ideological strength' (p.301), fear of loyalists and the excesses of counter-insurgency (the main reason for the failure of the amnesty to deal with the remaining minority), the support of Dublin radicals, the importance of local agendas and the possibility of French support. For instance, O'Donnell shows that there were contacts between Holt and the French. When combined with the inaccessibility of the mountains, this is quite compelling. The message is clear: the Wicklow rebels were not isolated vanguard extremists.

The Rebellion in Wicklow ends with the comment that: 'Wicklow remained the country's focal point of armed political struggle in the aftermath of the great rebellion' (p.346). This is an argument that is taken up in the companion volume, although it should be noted that these books can be read independently. The first chapter of *Aftermath* provides a brief recap on the period to November 1798, adding material on the fate of the 'suffering loyalists' claimants'. *Aftermath* breaks new historical ground. It is the first book-length study of post-1798 insurgency in an Irish county under the auspices of the United Irishmen. Moreover, this is much more than a study of the activities of Michael Dwyer. Dwyer understandably looms large in O'Donnell's history, but he is placed firmly within the context of wider developments in the county and the author strives (successfully in so far as the sources permit) to re-integrate other rebel factions into the story.

The interpretation of the activities of Dwyer and other rebel leaders in the mountains is difficult. One could suggest that during the winter of 1798-99 a local civil war was fought between United Irishmen who remained in arms and loyalist yeomen. The importance of local conditions for the survival of small rebel forces is rightly central to O'Donnell's explanation. Local 'harbourers', often yeomen sympathisers, provided Dwyer and other rebels with the practical means to continue their campaign. This accords neatly with Thomas Bartlett's suggestion that the rebels in the Wicklow Mountains can be viewed as Hobsbawm-esque 'social bandits' closely in tune with the concerns of the local community. Paranoia among some sections of loyalists fuelled the continuation of the conflict. O'Donnell suggests that the infusion of sectarianism was essentially a uni-directional phenomenon, exacerbated by yeomen and loyalist magistrates, not by the rebels. But the continuation of hostilities in Wicklow was not isolated geographically. O'Donnell shows that there were contacts between Dwyer and United Irish activists elsewhere in Leinster. Relations between the two were sometimes ambiguous but, by 1800, the rebels holding out in Wicklow had an attendant propaganda value, particularly in the negotiation of foreign support. Dwyer's escapades fuelled his popularity, especially his miraculous escape from a cottage at Derrynamuck in February 1799.

Although rebel leaders were occasionally arrested (some turned informer against their comrades, like James Hughes or Thomas Halpin) or killed, the existence of rebels in arms a few miles from Dublin seriously worried the administration. During the years after the Rebellion, they made increasingly strenuous efforts to capture the remaining leaders. The co-ordinated counter-insurgency of 1800 was partially successful, but the rebels could easily fade away only to reappear a few months later. A further initiative was the building of the military road through the county to provide protection for isolated loyalists and open up inaccessible areas to militarisation. However, O'Donnell is careful to point out that the road was part of a national network, not designed specifically to flush out the rebels, and indeed not a major factor in their eventual demise.

Despite the fact that militarisation was pursued with so much vigour in 1800, the loyalist gentry in the country were unable to capitalise on their alleged ascendancy at election time. At by-election in 1801, and again at the general election of 1802, liberal candidates were returned for the county seats, although these were now hotly contested.

O'Donnell provides a fascinating account of the activities of insurgents and government forces in the post-Rebellion period. But, by 1801, they appear to have been on the wane, making it difficult to verify O'Donnell's claim that: 'At the close of 1801 the surviving Wicklow United Irishmen were possibly better organized than at any time since 1798' (p.93). Certainly O'Donnell illustrates the continuation of rebel violence adeptly through a multitude of seemingly minor incidents. The strength of this work lies in how O'Donnell links these, so that incidents which might seem unimportant on their own, when viewed against the larger context, provide concrete evidence of continuing insurgency. The most difficult question is the extent to which this was politically driven, and this is a question the source materials do not answer. O'Donnell suggests that reactions (or lack of them) to outside events are one possible measure of the extent to which groups like the Dwyer-faction were more than local bandits. Therefore the author argues that the fact that both the Peace of Amiens and the Emmet plot impacted was 'indicative of a continued allegiance to a United Irish agenda' (p.101).

The final third of *Aftermath* is concerned primarily with the Emmet-led insurrection of 1803 and its connections with Wicklow and, specifically, Dwyer. The organisation of Emmet's revolutionary movement and the involvement of local Leinster elements are reconstructed admirably. O'Donnell shows convincingly that Dwyer was prepared to become involved with Emmet and met him twice for this purpose in April and June 1803. However, his determination that he would only become involved forty-eight hours after the Rebellion broke out in Dublin rendered his potential contribution questionable. Nonetheless, O'Donnell is quite correct in his analysis that Dwyer's lack of involvement was the result of poor communication, not just caution or expediency. The subsequent lack of contact between Dwyer and Emmet creates a problem for the author, whose final chapter ostensibly deals with the pair. The connection, as it turned out, was a wholly negative one. O'Donnell provides a brilliant account of the confusing rising of 1803 and Emmet's brief sojourn in the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains before his capture. The author recognises that 'It seems that very few insurgents in Wicklow knew that a rising was imminent on 23/24 July and that the population as a whole were entirely ignorant' (pp.148-9). This is a surprising finding and one which contrasts strongly with neighbouring Kildare. But the central point, from a Wicklow perspective, was that the failure of the Emmet plot permitted the kind of military crackdown in Wicklow that led to the end of overt insurgency. O'Donnell's account indicates that the intensification of counter-insurgency, in this instance, targeted a whole community in the Glen of Imaal

and other rebel strongholds, threatening 'harbourers' and relatives of rebels directly. When one combines this with O'Donnell's finding that Dublin and other non-Wicklow fugitives received less than enthusiastic support in Wicklow in late July 1803, the importance of the connection between Dwyer or others and their local communities becomes abundantly clear. By pressurising the local communities that tacitly supported continued insurgent activity, the government forced Dwyer's surrender in December 1803 and eradicated other small factions early the following year.

O'Donnell's work demonstrates the scale and ferocity of conflict in Wicklow and the upheaval it wrought. The author is particularly strong on military engagements, both major and minor. These volumes underline the importance of detailed research at a local level, but their strength derives from the author's combination of his expertise at a local and national level. The very detailed footnotes, which regularly supply additional material, provide a model of professionalism and indicate the range and depth of O'Donnell's research. *Aftermath* includes valuable appendices, particularly the long list of over one thousand Wicklow rebels (which has been made available as a searchable database via the Internet). O'Donnell does not supply lengthy commentary on his narrative and the chapters often end rather abruptly. Nevertheless, he has demonstrated clearly that the Rebellion and its aftermath radically altered the physical and mental landscape of Wicklow. In turn these books have irrevocably changed the historiography of the 1798 Rebellion. Indeed, by demonstrating the rapid collapse of Wicklow's 'pre-Rebellion equilibrium' (p.176) and the longevity of insurgency there, Ruán O'Donnell has posed fundamental questions concerning the nature of eighteenth-century Irish society.

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick

Liam Chambers