

# 'A more general and rooted spirit of disaffection': the 1803 rising in Kildare

by Liam Chambers



Detail from *A Map of the County of Kildare* by Lieut. Alex[ander] Taylor, of his Majesty's 81st Regt., 1783. (Andrew Bonar Law)

In the aftermath of the 1803 rebellion Robert Emmet frankly admitted that ‘To change the day was impossible for I expected the counties to act, and feared to lose the advantage of surprise’. The participation of rebels from County Kildare was central to Emmet’s strategy. The county’s proximity to Dublin and the high-profile involvement of the Kildare United Irishmen in 1798 ensured that they would become involved again in 1803. Not only did Emmet expect hundreds of Kildare rebels to participate in the projected *coup d’état* in Dublin, he also envisaged a rising in the county. Despite a number of crushing setbacks, it is remarkable that hundreds, possibly thousands, of Kildare rebels were poised to engage in rebellion on 23 July 1803. The two main centres of rebellion outside the capital were the Kildare towns of Naas and Maynooth. This deserves some attention. Indeed, it was no wonder that the lord lieutenant, the earl of Hardwicke, commented after the rebellion that ‘there is a more general and rooted spirit of disaffection in that county than in any other part of the country’.

### Preparations

Before the outbreak of the 1798 rebellion Kildare had one of the strongest United Irish organisations in the country. Despite the fact that government disarming was beginning to bite in the months before rebellion broke out, the rising in Kildare lasted two months, ending with the surrender of the leading participants on 21 July 1798. This did not mean the end of the United Irish organisation in the county. Some groups of United Irishmen, under leaders like Michael Doorly of Lullymore, continued to meet in remote areas. In other parts of the county it appears that new organisational structures were introduced which ensured that no meetings were necessary and that action would only be taken once plans for a new rebellion were well advanced. This meant that neither the government nor local magistrates had any clear indication of the scale of disaffection in the county, beyond the activities of robbers who took advantage of post-rebellion lawlessness. Over the next few years Kildare was gradually pacified, though loyalists remained vigilant

and reports continued to reach Dublin Castle of suspicious activities.

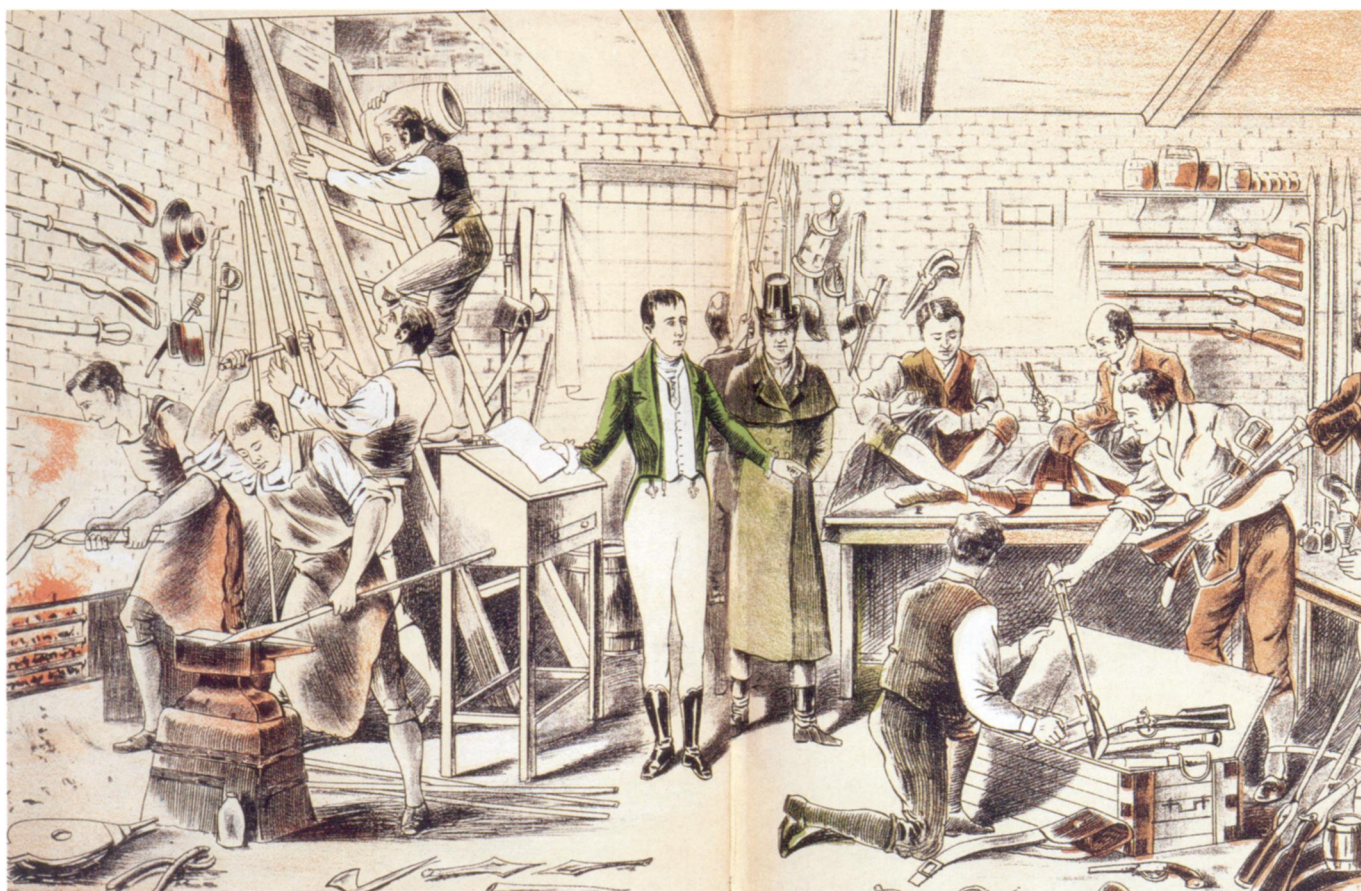
Kildare involvement in plans for rebellion in 1803 began in March. One of the men recruited in France to play a leading role in the conspiracy was a stonemason from Rathcoffey called Michael Quigley. Quigley was one of the fifteen Kildare leaders who surrendered in July 1798. He was banished after his release from prison in 1802. Quigley arrived back in Ireland on 5 March 1803. Two days later he met Robert Emmet in Dublin; Emmet supplied him with money and dispatched him to Kildare where, he assured Emmet, he would be able to enlist one thousand rebels willing to march on Dublin on only two days’ notice. Accompanied by Thomas Wylde and John Mahon, Quigley visited known United Irish veterans in Naas, Sallins, Rathcoffey, Prosperous, Timahoe and elsewhere. Quigley’s mission around north Kildare was closely followed by local magistrates, and according to their reports local United Irishmen responded enthusiastically. Sir Fenton Aylmer, a prominent local landowner, noted that ‘the peasantry of the County Kildare in general are determined to rise when they hear of a French invasion and join the enemy’. By 10 March Quigley was back in Dublin, where he directed rebel preparations with the assistance of other Kildare rebels who had been recruited to work in the arms depots in the city centre. Malachi Delany, a south Kildare veteran of 1798, also visited

the county to encourage and organise potential rebels. A well-known republican, he was arrested soon after his arrival in Kildare in March 1803 and was later tried at Naas for involvement in the 1798 rebellion, but was acquitted. While reports now began to trickle into Dublin Castle of renewed rebel activity in Kildare, the government remained largely in the dark about rebel preparations since there was no formal organisational structure to penetrate, as had been the case in 1798. Indeed, despite the reactions of magistrates to Quigley’s mission and Delany’s arrest, military commanders and government spies reported from Kildare that the county was tranquil as late as July.

By this stage plans for rebellion were proceeding rapidly. On 15 July a meeting of Kildare leaders took place at the Thomas Street depot in Dublin. Emmet introduced Nicholas Gray, an attorney and leading Wexford United Irishman in 1798, who now resided near Athy, as the projected leader of the Kildare rebels. Three leaders from Maynooth and Celbridge were also present: Owen Lyons, Thomas Kereghan and Thomas Frayne. A loose plan was agreed. Rebels from Naas would march on Dublin, while rebels in other parts of the county would take action locally. The explosion at the Patrick Street depot the following day meant that the date for rebellion was brought forward to 23 July. On 21 July Thomas Wylde and John Mahon were sent to Kildare to alert rebels of the impending



Maynooth, showing St Patrick’s College and the castle, c. 1800. Maynooth (top left of map) and Naas (bottom left) were the main centres of rebellion in the county. (Royal Irish Academy)



*Robert Emmet and Michael Dwyer in Marshalsea Lane depot, 1803. Emmet met Kildare United Irish leaders there on 15 July 1803. (Shamrock, December 1896)*

insurrection. However, problems arose when Kildare rebels began arriving in Dublin to view for themselves the preparations and arms in the depots. One group of Kildare rebels arrived on the morning of the rebellion and were bitterly disappointed by the unsatisfactory level of armaments they found, which contradicted the glowing reports of Wylde and Mahon. This group of unidentified rebels simply returned home, bringing the men under their command with them. This is a telling episode. It suggests that United Irishmen had learned the lessons of 1798 and would not be overawed by the leadership of someone from a higher social class like Emmet.

## Rebellion

Despite this setback, Emmet decided that the rebellion would proceed, involving other Kildare insurgents. Later reports suggested that rebels were poised for action across the county, particularly in the north. In the end, however, only two towns seriously participated: Maynooth and Naas. At around eight o'clock on 23

July about one hundred rebels, possibly more, gathered on the main street in Maynooth under the leadership of Owen Lyons, a shoemaker, Carter Connolly, a schoolteacher, and Thomas Kereghan, a farmer and Grand Canal boatman, all wearing 'green uniforms'. The rebels were armed with pikes, though some had muskets, pistols, swords and carbines. They easily overpowered the only two soldiers stationed in the town and then set about searching for arms in the possession of local inhabitants. At this point a curious, and later disputed, incident occurred. Carton House, the seat of the duke of Leinster, William Robert Fitzgerald, was just outside Maynooth. The duke's liberal politics were well known, leading to unwarranted accusations of complicity in the 1798 rebellion. The United Irish involvement of his brother, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, only heightened suspicions. Leinster was made aware of plans for a rising on 23 July and immediately informed Dublin Castle, later asking for extra troops. But according to information

supplied after the rebellion Leinster also contacted the rebels through a servant called Thomas Cooney and offered them weapons from Carton. This was not because the duke supported or sympathised with the rebels, though some rebels were deluded enough to think that this was the case, but 'lest government should think that they, the rebels, would not lay a hand on him'.

About midnight the small band of Maynooth insurgents learned that the mailcoach was approaching and an ambush was prepared. One participant, Daniel Collison, later described what happened: '... upon the mailcoach coming up Kereghan and his party fired first and as the coach passed the inn yard of Maynooth . . . Owen Lyons and his party fired: s[ai]d Lyons being in uniform and armed with a blunderbuss . . . there were a number of cars drawn across William Bridge in Maynooth . . . and s[ai]d bridge was guarded by a body of pikemen who threw down their pikes when the coach had passed the parties who fired'. At this point the rank and file were already becoming wary. The

leaders decided to march to Celbridge, where they expected to rendezvous with a rebel force commanded by Thomas Frayne, who had also met with Emmet in Dublin. However, Frayne announced that his force would not be ready until the following night. After the small rebel force reached Rathcoffey on 24 July, they became aware that the rebellion in Dublin had failed. They were now in a precarious position—rebels in arms with no possibility of success and few options. They were already in indirect contact with the duke of Leinster, who offered to accept their surrender without an 'inquiry'. Initially hesitant, one group of rebels took up the offer after negotiations involving a French-born professor of natural philosophy at Maynooth College, Andre Darre. They finally surrendered in Maynooth on 25 July.

According to plans agreed by Emmet and rebel leaders from Kildare a week before the rebellion, rebels from Naas would not attack the town (they had failed to capture it despite a prolonged assault on 24 May 1798); instead they were to march on Dublin. Reports reached Alexander Marsden on 23 July that Naas and the area around the Grand Canal was 'almost abandoned' and panic was spreading among loyalists. It soon became clear that suspected rebels were travelling from Naas to Dublin in small groups, ready to participate in the rebellion. At least 150 made the journey, though some reports put the figure as high as 400. Even those who later claimed that they had no knowledge of, or involvement in, the rebellion admitted that Naas was eerily quiet and the road to Dublin suspiciously busy for a Saturday afternoon. Some of the Naas insurgents seem to have participated in the rebellion in Dublin along with their Kildare colleagues who had been employed in the arms depots. A few were suspected of involvement in the murder of the attorney general, Arthur Wolfe, while others may have been killed in skirmishes. But many seem to have turned back on the road, possibly because of rumours that the rebellion had been postponed or cancelled. One source stated that John Patterson, a butcher from Naas, 'left Dublin on the evening [of] 23 July to stop the Kildare rebels'. This suggests that at least some of the disaffected Kildare rebels who met



Lord Lieutenant Philip York, earl of Hardwicke.

Emmet earlier in the day were from Naas. Nonetheless, it is surely significant that over 100 rebels from the Naas area were willing to risk the journey to Dublin to participate in the rebellion.

### Aftermath

The rebellion was followed by the arrest of hundreds of rebels and suspected rebels in trouble spots around Maynooth and Naas, and also in parts of south Kildare which remained quiet during the disturbances. Suspected Naas rebels supplied a string of excuses for their journeys to Dublin on the day of the rebellion—to buy boots, corn or hops, for ‘business’, to visit relations, to inform the authorities of the impending rebellion, and, falling back on a standard explanation, because they were ‘forced’. The Maynooth rebels had an informer in their ranks, Daniel Collison, the son of the local postmaster, who quickly provided full details of the rising. Connolly, Frayne and Kereghan were arrested in the days and months after the rebellion. Connolly, who later went insane in prison, and Frayne provided full confessions. Owen Lyons, the last of the Maynooth leaders still at large, was finally arrested in 1804, having hinted to Admiral Pakenham of Leixlip that he would ‘rather be hang’d than transported’.

Nicholas Gray, the projected leader of the Kildare rebels, and his brother-in-law, Henry Hughes, who both helped finance the conspiracy,

were imprisoned in September 1803. The most important Kildare conspirator, Michael Quigley, initially evaded capture, escaping to the Wicklow Mountains with other Kildare rebels. The group later moved to Quigley’s home neighbourhood at Rathcoffey before relocating to Ardfry in County Galway. Quigley was finally arrested in October 1803. He quickly agreed to provide the government with information, on condition that the lives of fellow prisoners were spared along with his own. He later spied on other prisoners and assisted in the hunt for his former comrades Thomas Wylde and John Mahon. He continued to supply the government with information after his release from prison in 1806. Quigley’s decision to become an informer underlines the fact that the failure of the 1803 rebellion marked the effective end of the United Irish organisation in County Kildare. While many veterans of 1798 were prepared to become involved in 1803, they must now have realised that further attempts at rebellion were futile.

### Explaining the Rebellion

Local magistrates and national government struggled to explain the level of rebel activity in Kildare, particularly in the small town of Maynooth. The puzzled comments of Sir Fenton Aylmer were typical: ‘Have any people of consequence been their leaders or what the devil do they want?’ The state solicitor, James McClelland, offered two scapegoats: the duke of Leinster and Maynooth College. The duke’s bizarre offer of arms to the rebels, his acceptance of the rebel surrender on 25 July and the fact that rank-and-file participants believed the duke was secretly on their side all led the government to question his role in the Maynooth rising. While they realised that he was not directly involved, it was felt that he had utterly mismanaged the situation. For his part, the duke kept Dublin Castle constantly updated concerning events in Maynooth in the weeks after the rebellion. When McClelland produced a report in late August which criticised him, the duke demanded a declaration ‘that would vindicate his character’. In reality, the rebellion marked the final collapse of his political power. He died on 20 October 1804.

Maynooth College provided an

even softer target for those who wished to make political mileage from the rebellion. Allegations quickly surfaced that students and professors at the college were aware of the plans for rebellion but did nothing to report them. It was further suggested that the college had handed over arms to one of the leaders, the schoolteacher Carter Connolly, and that the college tailors had prepared rebel uniforms. The actions of André Darre on 25 July only lent credibility to such stories. As early as 30 July the duke reported that the college authorities were ‘very unhappy’ about reports of their links to the rebels. Apparently the students had been returning home for vacation, which may have led to accusations against them. Despite the slim evidence, James McClelland concluded that ‘the spirit of disaffection in Maynooth has been increased by the conduct of the professors and students of the college’. Hardwicke had already commented: ‘That seminary will excite much indignation, and I think it will bear a question whether the priests would not be more civilised by a foreign education’.

The focus on the duke of Leinster and Maynooth College distracted attention from the real roots of the 1803 rebellion in Kildare: the continued existence of the United Irishmen. The aftermath of the 1798 rebellion in Wicklow and Wexford was accompanied by a violent backlash against suspected rebels and rebel sympathisers. This helps explain why former United Irishmen in both counties were reticent about involvement in the 1803 conspiracy. By contrast, Kildare experienced no ‘white terror’ after 1798. Most leaders, like Michael Quigley, were imprisoned temporarily. Many ordinary rebels simply handed in their weapons and returned home. Patrick Whelan, a labourer from Athy, reported in 1804 that in 1798 the rebels ‘lay’d down their bad ones [i.e. arms] and took away their good ones . . . The rebels have their arms still, each man hid his own arms the best way he could’. The Kildare United Irishmen retained significant weaponry.

The vast majority of ordinary United Irishmen survived the 1798 rebellion and were prepared for

another rising in 1803. However, the second insurrection was very different in character from the first. The flawed organisational structures, which had been riddled with informers in 1798, were simplified. More importantly, the prominent Kildare landowners who were attracted to the United Irishmen in 1797 and 1798, principally by the leadership of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, were not involved in 1803. Men like the former Kildare MP Colonel Maurice Keating, Thomas Wogan Browne of Castle Browne (now Clongowes Wood College) and Thomas Fitzgerald of Geraldine were all suspected of United Irish involvement in 1798 but supplied information to the government in 1803. In this respect the Kildare United Irishmen learned one of the harsher lessons of 1798. While the United Irish membership of prominent local figures encouraged the radicalism of their wavering tenants and neighbours, in the long run they constituted a serious gamble. One such leader, the silk merchant Thomas Reynolds of Dublin and Kilkea Castle, decimated the Kildare United Irishmen in the months before the 1798 rebellion by turning informer.

The 1803 rebellion in Kildare was orchestrated by the lower social orders without the involvement of the 'gentlemen' and larger farmers. Among suspected Naas rebels questioned in October 1803 were a number of publicans, a baker, a brewer, a distiller, a slater, a shoemaker, a farmer, a nailer, a skinner, an ex-soldier, a butcher, an apprentice and an apothecary. One Naas rebel, John Edwards, was reported to have declared: 'That he had been a rebel, was now one and would always be one, that he did not care for being hanged, and that the oppressions of the people were such that everyone ought to be rebellious'. Despite the attempts of the duke of Leinster to depict the Maynooth rebels as well-dressed strangers, it is clear that they were drawn from similar social backgrounds to their Naas comrades. The 'lower order' character of the rebellion suggests a further collapse of deference in Kildare. Combined with the informal organisational structures of the United Irishmen, this helped to ensure that plans for rebellion remained relatively well



*William Robert Fitzgerald, 2nd duke of Leinster* by Martin Shee. The duke's bizarre offer of arms to the rebels, his acceptance of the rebel surrender on 25 July and the fact that rank-and-file participants believed that he was secretly on their side all led the government to question his role in the Maynooth rising. (*National Gallery of Ireland*)

concealed until just before the outbreak. But it also had negative implications for Robert Emmet, as he discovered when some Kildare leaders refused to cooperate on the morning of the rebellion. Nonetheless, Kildare's proximity to the capital and well-known rebel sympathies meant that the county was central to plans for rebellion. In the end, the hopes of the Kildare United Irishmen were finally destroyed by the failure of the 1803 rising.

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**Further reading:**

- L. Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare, 1790–1803* (Dublin, 1998).
- H. Landreth, *The pursuit of Robert Emmet* (New York and London, 1948).
- J. Newman, *Maynooth and Georgian Ireland* (Galway, 1979).
- R. O'Donnell, *Aftermath: post-rebellion insurgency in Wicklow, 1799–1803* (Dublin, 1999).