

The 1798 rebellion in north Leinster

LIAM CHAMBERS

The fundamental purpose of the United Irish rebellion of 1798 was the overthrow of the Irish administration based in Dublin; hence their primary military objective was the capture of the capital. This paper analyzes the rebellion in Dublin and the surrounding counties, the heart of any indigenous revolutionary endeavour. A successful rebellion depended on the participation of rebels over a wide region. Therefore an examination of an insurrection which ultimately failed must not only consider those areas where rebel mobilization occurred (Dublin, Meath and Kildare), but also the partial or non-existent mustering of those counties which contributed less to the active rebel cause (Westmeath, Queen's County and King's County).¹

From late 1796 the internal impetus of the United Irish movement gradually shifted from Ulster to Leinster and by April 1798 the Leinster provincial had issued a set of instructions essentially designed to prepare the organization for rebellion.² Graham has demonstrated that a three-phase insurgency plan gradually emerged, to be executed without French military assistance, a prospect which appeared increasingly probable. Central to rebel strategy was the capture of key sites within Dublin.³ The second phase involved the region immediately outside the capital. Francis Higgins, a government informant, reported during

1 For a detailed account of the rebellion in some of the counties under discussion, see Thomas Pakenham, *The year of liberty: The history of the great Irish rebellion of 1798* (London, 1969, repr. 1992), pp 88–169; for Dublin see Thomas Graham, 'Dublin in 1798: The key to the planned insurrection', in Dáire Keogh and Nicolas Furlong (eds), *The mighty wave: The 1798 rebellion in Wexford* (Dublin, 1996), pp 65–78; for Kildare see Liam Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare, 1790–1803* (Dublin, 1998); Mario Corrigan, *All that delirium of the brave – Kildare in 1798* (Naas, 1997); Seamus Cullen and Hermann Geissel (eds), *Fugitive warfare, 1798 in north Kildare* (Clane, 1998); for Meath see J.G.O. Kerrane, 'The background to the 1798 rebellion in County Meath' (unpublished M.A. dissertation, N.U.I., U.C.D., 1971); Seamus O'Loinsigh, 'The rebellion of 1798 in Meath', in *Ríocht na Míde*, iii–v (1966–71); for Westmeath see Liam Cox, 'Westmeath in the 1798 period', in *Irish Sword*, ix (1969–71), pp 1–15; for Queen's County (Laois), see John S. Powell, *Portarlington and 1798* (York, 1998).

2 *Report of the secret committee of the house of commons with an appendix* (Dublin, 1798), pp 233–4.

3 Graham, 'Dublin in 1798', pp 68–71.

May 1798 that it involved the rebel occupation of positions 'from Garretstown [*sic*], Naul etc. and Dunboyne and circuitously round the metropolis to Dunleary etc.' Higgins also made clear that Lord Edward FitzGerald, the United Irish 'generalissimo', was to lead a march on the capital and was to have been transported to Fingal on 20 May for this purpose, presumably to link with forces from Kildare.⁴ The 'third phase' of the plan is less clearly understood but involved the remaining counties in Leinster engaging the military presence in their locality and thereby preventing the second layer of rebel mobilization coming under counter-attack.

As United Irish organization within Dublin increased in strength and military capacity during the spring of 1798, counties around the capital came under increasing strain in the form of military pacification, particularly Kildare, Queen's County and King's County. Disaster struck on 19 May when Lord Edward FitzGerald was arrested and William Lawless absconded, followed quickly by the arrest of the somewhat marginalized Sheares brothers on 21 May and of Samuel Neilson, the key remaining leader, on 23 May while involved in a mission to rescue FitzGerald, an action which illustrates the crucial importance of FitzGerald to United Irish plans. Nevertheless, plans for a rising within Dublin continued and large bodies of rebels from outside the capital had reputedly entered already. Mobilization began on the night of the 23 May following the issue of last-minute instructions by Samuel Neilson – hours before his arrest. An important reason for rebel failure at the heart of its strategy was the fact that the Dublin administration received prior information as to what was to happen and quickly occupied the rebel points of assembly, forcing the would-be insurgents to disengage and quietly return home.⁵

The rebellion as it actually occurred makes little sense outside the context of its Dublin element, the crucial central component of the overall United Irish strategy. But while the United Irishmen in Dublin failed, those in the surrounding areas rose in armed insurrection. The neighbouring baronies and counties had been kept closely informed of the developing rebel plans.⁶ Samuel Sproule, an informer, reported that representatives had been sent to Kildare and Wicklow on the night of 23 May 'to raise them immediate[ly]: it is believed they will *rise tonight*'; by 9 p.m. he reported that 'Kildare is now up'.⁷ All over County Dublin small parties of United Irishmen engaged with government forces. The plan to stop the mail coaches leaving Dublin, designed by Samuel Neilson to announce the rising to the country, was partially executed. The mails were stopped at Santry, attacked at Lucan, but missed at Clondalkin and Dunboyne. The Cork

4 Francis Higgins to Edward Cooke, 20 May, 30 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/18/14.

5 See Graham's detailed analysis of the Dublin failure: 'Dublin in 1798', pp 71–8; M.M.[?] to Mrs Helen Clarke, London, 'near 12 o'clock', 23 May 1798: N.L.I. MS 13,837.

6 Samuel Sproule to John Lees, received 15 May [1798], 19 May [1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/51/39, 27.

7 Sproule to Lees, 4:30 p.m., 9 p.m. [23 May 1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/51/18, 25.

mail coach escaped capture at Clondalkin but was seized and burned at Naas, County Kildare.⁸

An attempt was made on the morning of 24 May to occupy a semi-circle of positions around Dublin. Rebels rose at Westphalstown and Garristown, in the vicinity of the Naul in north Dublin. Dunboyne and a series of strategic positions in the surrounding area on the Dublin/Meath border were successfully occupied.⁹ Further south rebels gathered at Rathfarnham but realized on their march towards the city that something had gone wrong and were later repulsed at Clondalkin.¹⁰ A serious discontinuity in the rebel 'semi-circle' appears to have existed in the important west Dublin/north Kildare region. A paper found on Lord Edward FitzGerald on his arrest had indicated that north Kildare rebels were to participate in a march on the city along the Dublin/Galway road beginning in Clonard or Cloncurry. While Musgrave later recorded an aborted march, no action was reported in the area until the next day (25 May).¹¹ Francis Higgins had reported on 24 May that a plan to bring 'in a force from the county of Kildare to join with the armed circuitous horde' had been proposed at a meeting a week before the rising.¹² The rebels in north Kildare and west Dublin were closely connected, and Lucan was a key United Irish meeting point previous to the outbreak.¹³ The arrest of Lord Edward FitzGerald caused confusion and hesitancy in the area, since he was the projected leader of a Kildare march on the city and the only leading figure with extensive military experience. Thus the Lucan leader John McMahon (who had been involved in Defender activity in Kildare in 1795) participated in the fighting at Clondalkin on 24 May, not at Lucan.¹⁴

The concerted pattern of United Irish activity followed rebel strategy and did not degenerate as Pakenham suggests 'into a few scattered risings by aimless and leaderless men'.¹⁵ The deployment of rebel forces outside the city depended

8 Camden to Portland, 24 May 1798: P.R.O. HO 100/76/258-9; Richard Musgrave, *Memoir of the different rebellions in Ireland* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1801), p. 217;

9 George Lambert, Drogheda and Beau Parc, both 24 May 1798; George Holdcroft, Kells to John Lees, 24 May 1798; List of insurgents at Garristown, 24 May 1798: N.A.I. RP 620/37/138, 620/37/143, 620/37/147; Kerrane, 'Meath', pp 110-12. The rebels rose at Ratoath, Dunshaughlin, Clonee, Kilbrew, Greenoge, Curraha and Black Lion.

10 Pakenham, *Year of liberty*, pp 113-14; Musgrave, *Rebellions*, p. 223.

11 W. Wilson, Maynooth, 24 May 1798; Col. Gordon, 26 May: N.A.I. RP 620/37/142, 620/27/167.

12 Francis Higgins to Edward Cooke, 24 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/18/14.

13 For example, the Rathcoole United Irish leader Felix Rourke attended Kildare United Irish meetings: R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their lives and times*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1858-60), i, p. 417. See also the close connection between James Smythe (United Irish delegate for Salt Barony in Kildare) and the Lucan leaders, Thomas and Patrick Lynch: Seamus Cummins, 'Pike heads and a calico printer: Leixlip in 98', in *Kildare Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xvi (1985-6), 424; Graham, 'Dublin in 1798', p. 72.

14 Sproule to Lees, received 25 May [1798], [May 1798]: N.A.I. RP 620/51/20, 38.

15 Pakenham, *Year of liberty*, p. 113.

on the moves made by any remaining rebel leaders within Dublin. Higgins reported that the rebels 'had by no means relinquished their plan of attack on the metropolis . . . as messengers were now in the country to procure numbers to come in and join with the rebels in the city, which would enable them to carry (as they say) everything before them'.¹⁶ However, Dublin was now saturated with vigilant troops and the city rebels hesitated. If Sproule is to be relied on, they were confused by the inactivity of the north despite the burning of the Belfast mail coach at Santry, and awaited news.¹⁷

On 25 May rebels at Dunboyne were forced back towards Tara Hill in County Meath by a small force under General Craig. At some point after this it must have been decided to concentrate all rebel forces north of the city on Tara, a logical gathering point in any case, in hopes that a link with the rebels in south County Dublin and north Wicklow might then be formed.¹⁸ North Dublin rebels were attacked and dispersed at Baldwinstown while travelling towards the Tara camp.¹⁹ Meanwhile on 25 and 26 May rebels from north Kildare trickled across the border and were involved in skirmishes at Kilcock and Leixlip;²⁰ rebels commanded by George Cummins and Thomas Lynch plundered Blair's iron works in Lucan and immediately retreated to Tara.²¹ The convergence at Tara Hill, it might have been hoped, would raise the morale of United forces throughout County Meath, and encourage them to forge a link with the north. However, Ulster remained silent and Meath, outside the south-east corner, also hesitated.

The possibility of co-ordination among United Irish forces was illustrated by the rebellion in Kildare from 24 to 26 May. Rebels failed to capture Naas, retreating to Blackmore Hill in north Wicklow, where they established an important base of operations. But at Prosperous, a small isolated village, rebels gained their first victory under John Esmonde and Andrew Farrell. Elsewhere in the county, they gained control of a swathe of territory around Kildare town and Kilcullen (blocking communication routes to Munster), and at Ballitore and Narraghmore in the southeast and around Rathangan in the northwest. Their level of success was partly the result of the extremely defensive policy employed by the government's midlands commander General Dundas, who ordered the retreat of regular troops to Naas, an action which prevented further attacks on the besieged garrison. Key posts on Kildare's further borders also remained in government hands, notably Monasterevan and Castledermot where rebel attacks

¹⁶ Higgins to Cooke, 24 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/18/14.

¹⁷ Sproule to Lees, received 26 May [1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/51/26.

¹⁸ George Lambert, Beau Parc, 27 May 1798; Francis Higgins to Edward Cooke, 25 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/180, 620/18/14.

¹⁹ Captain Barker to [General Lake], 25 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/159; Patrick Archer, 'Fingall in 1798' in *Béalóideas*, ix (1939), 186-8;

²⁰ Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, p. 81.

²¹ Examination of Thomas Connelly, 29 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/203; Court martial of George Cummins, 10 July 1798: T.C.D. MS 872, Courts martial, 1798.

were repulsed on 24–25 May, and Athy which (inadvertently) had not been evacuated by Colonel Campbell's force. Nevertheless, in large areas of Kildare, United Irishmen achieved their immediate objectives. Like the rebels further north they formed a number of strategically located camps near Ballitore, Kildare town, Kilcullen and Timahoe.²²

The failure of the Dublin element of the rising left the rebels in arms in Counties Meath and Kildare stagnant and gave the rebellion a fragmentary and isolated appearance. George Lambert reported from Beau Parc on 26 May that the United Irish 'object of attack is the capital and to cut off all communications from thence to the country and from the country thither. Should they fail they may well turn about and pay us a visit, but we will do our best I promise you to resist them.'²³ The concentration of rebel forces at large camps allowed the government's forces to gather and launch counter-assaults.

However, government forces proved remarkably reluctant to launch a counter offensive; instead there was a policy of concentrating troops in Dublin. The first such assault was made by the Reay Fencibles who arrived in Dunshaughlin on 26 May en route from Cavan to Dublin and rapidly organized local yeomanry corps. Despite the strength of the rebels at Tara (at least 8,000 strong according to the official report) and the position they occupied on the hill, the government troops under Captain Blanche prevailed.²⁴ The battle proved decisive in ending the prospect of a more generalized rising in County Meath.²⁵ Indeed the identity of the leading figures on the rebel side in the area remains unclear, and Charles Hamilton Teeling believed the absence of United Irish leaders was a central aspect of the rebel defeat.

The defeat at Tara, combined with the massive reverse suffered by Carlow rebels on 25 May, resulted in the isolation of the Kildare United Irishmen. The Kildare rebellion reached its zenith by 26 May and then began to slowly disintegrate through lack of active purpose. Rebels at Kilcullen surrendered to General Dundas on 27 May. Two days later a similar surrender of Kildare town rebels was interrupted by a force from Limerick under General Sir James Duff and the ensuing 'Gibbet Rath massacre' resulted in the death of around 350 rebels. Rebels in the Ballitore area stalled in their dealings with the hard-line Colonel Campbell. He then decided to forcibly pacify south-west Kildare on 29 May. Rathangan was also retaken after two botched attempts on 28 May. In the Kildare/Meath/Dublin area, the key United Irish encampment after these defeats emerged in the Bog of Allen at Timahoe (and on its edges at Prosperous

22 Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 72–81. Dundas explained his actions to Castlereagh in a letter dated 25 May 1798: P.R.O. HO 100/76/277–9.

23 George Lambert to [Coole?], Beau Parc, 26 May 1798, part 2: N.A.I., RP 620/37/171.

24 The best account of the battle is that written by Captain Blanche: P.R.O. WO 304/11. See also G. Knox, 5 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/56, on a possible rebel commander.

25 George Lambert, Beau Parc, 27 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/180.

which remained in rebel hands) under the leadership of William Aylmer, Hugh Ware and George Lube who only entered the conflict in early June.²⁶

The disintegration of rebel momentum in this region was the result of the loss of any sense of Dublin-related purpose. However, the 'outer counties' in north Leinster involved in United Irish plans had completely failed to rise, reinforcing the isolation of rebel forces in Kildare/Meath/County Dublin. The success of the rebellion in Wexford (an 'outer county') from 26 May caused an understandable shift in the focus of later narratives from north Leinster in late May. Indeed historians rarely write about why rebellions did not happen (only two pages of Musgrave's enormous tome are devoted to King's and Queen's Counties),²⁷ but in this case the question must be addressed with regard to Westmeath, King's County and Queen's County in any attempt to comprehend the regional significance of the 1798 rebellion in the area.

These three counties had been disturbed during the 1790s by the militia riots in 1793 and in the case of King's County and Westmeath by the Defenders in mid-decade.²⁸ The counties contained relatively strong United Irish organizations on paper from 1796 to 1797, though their return of figures to the Leinster provincial was irregular.²⁹ The arrest of the Queen's County delegates Peter Bannon and Lawrence Kelly at Oliver Bond's in March 1798 possibly explains the lack of figures for Queen's County after February 1798. Patrick O'Kelly, an Athy United Irishman, claimed the remaining Queen's County leaders 'cast the shade of indifference over the system and rendered it languid and ineffective'.³⁰

The minor sparks of rebellion in Queen's County were strongly connected with events in the neighbouring counties. The colliers of the Doonane area in the south east rose on the morning of 25 May, but quickly subsided, having failed to link with the United Irishmen in either Athy or Carlow as anticipated. However, the United Irishmen of the Ballyadams/ Stradbally/Doonane area continued to pose a serious threat.³¹ An attack on Portarlinton was launched from the Monasterevan area on 25 May, possibly as an offshoot from the failure

²⁶ Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 81–6.

²⁷ Musgrave, *Rebellions*, appendix, pp 27–9.

²⁸ Thomas Bartlett, 'An end to moral economy: The Irish militia disturbances of 1793', in *Past & Present*, xcix (1983), 49–50, 53; idem, 'Defenders and Defenderism in 1795' in *I.H.S.*, xxiv (1984–5), 373–94.

²⁹ Westmeath: 20,000 (June 1797), 5,250 (Apr. 1798); King's County: 3,600 (February 1798), 6,500 (Apr. 1798); Queen's County: 11,689 (February 1798). Figures are extracted from *Report of the secret committee*, pp 133, 136, 177, 234.

³⁰ Patrick O'Kelly, *General history of the rebellion of 1798* (Dublin, 1842), pp 281–2. O'Kelly may have been biased in that he blamed Queen's County United Irishmen for not supporting the Athy rebels; see his comments on the colliers of the Doonane area, p. 181.

³¹ Charles Asgill, Kilkenny to Lake, 25, 26 May [1798]; Coote to Henry Moore, 6 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/51/53, 52; 620/38/71; Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, p. 79; Musgrave, *Rebellions*, p. 265.

to take the latter, but the rebels were defeated before reaching Portarlington.³² Apparently unconnected rebel activity did take place in Borris-in-Ossory in west Queen's County, where the house of Walter Kavanagh was attacked on 25 May.³³ On 24–25 May Samuel Sproule reported that John McMahon had set off from Dublin to Wicklow and would 'call at the camps for the King's County'.³⁴ However despite panic in the Edenderry area and the fact that the rebels were reported to be 'in very great force in the King's County' on 30 May, no major attacks occurred.³⁵

In fact it is surprising that such a widespread rebellion in Kildare did not spark a major outbreak to the west, given the close United Irish connections between these counties.³⁶ Indeed a Prosperous rebel was arrested in King's County shortly after the victory in the former, possibly an emissary, and a second Prosperous rebel was arrested in Athlone in early June.³⁷ Edward Cooke believed in late May that 'refugees from Kildare are spiriting up the [Queen's County] colliers'.³⁸

Beyond a limited amount of activity the rebellion as projected did not occur in any of the 'outer counties' under discussion. One possible reason was the hesitancy of United Irishmen in these areas before a successful rebellion to the east had occurred, exacerbated by the process of pacification initiated by government forces in April in King's and Queen's Counties which had already been proclaimed under the terms of the Insurrection Act. However, a similar process of pacification occurred in Kildare, which resulted in the detachment of liberal figures from the United Irishmen but largely left the organization intact, though the government troops and local magistrates failed to coalesce in the implementation of disarming measures.

In Queen's County the pacification was better organized by General Sir Charles Asgill.³⁹ In Kildare the pacification resulted in a partial rebellion in the baronies of Kilkea and Moone, and East Narragh and Rheban. In the three 'outer

32 Earl of Portarlington, Emo, to Sir John Parnell, 25 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/161; Powell, *Portarlington and 1798*, pp 13–15.

33 Asgill, Kilkenny to Lake, 26 May [1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/51/52. See also Morgan Kavanagh, Kilcullen, [1797–8]: P.R.O.N.I., Kavanagh Papers, T.3331/22, which seems to describe the same incident.

34 Sproule to Lees [25 May 1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/51/20.

35 Edenderry Officers to Castlereagh, 27 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/18/11/6; R. Marshall to General Knox, 30 May 1798: N.L.I. MS 56, p. 170.

36 See for example: G. Vignoles to Robert Marshall, 1 Feb 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/35/94. Michael Doorly, brother of the rebel leader at Rathangan (John), was a leader in the King's County United Irishmen and may have infiltrated a fencible regiment in Portarlington: Confession of John Doorly [?], undated: N.A.I., RP 620/51/67; Powell, *Portarlington and 1798*, pp 10–12.

37 Examination of James Jourdan of Prosperous and Richard Morrow of Philipstown, 27 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/167.

38 Edward Cooke to William Wickham, 30 May 1798: P.R.O., HO 100/76/313–14.

39 See, for example, his careful instructions, dated 21 Mar. 1798: N.A.I., 999/37/1; Camden to Portland, 11 May 1798: P.R.O., HO 100/76/168–77.

counties' under discussion, pacification appears to have succeeded to a much greater degree. Brigadier General Dunne wrote from Tullamore on 31 July 1798:

Altho[ugh] there has been no rising in the King's County; the reason to me appears obvious. The delegate arriving as he acknowledges, late in Dublin for a meeting held at Oliver Bond's escaped being taken, has some time since turned approver. The information received from him concerning the immediate leaders of the different baronys [*sic*] was such as to enable me to have counteracted their plans and prevent their intended attempts. Without this information, I should rather think this county would have been as bad as Kildare.⁴⁰

The name of the delegate was possibly Flanagan, from Tullamore.⁴¹ Musgrave recounts a similar scenario, with a religious spin, noting that the Protestant delegate (named Denis) defected after the rebellion had begun because of its sectarian nature.⁴²

A comparable situation allowed government forces to prevent widespread rebellion in Queen's County. Gerard Fitzgerald writing from Maryborough in October 1798, noted that 'Carney the informant, who has stopped the rebellion in this county, and by whose information there are 36 people now indicted for treason, is in the barracks here which is a very improper place for him, for he certainly will be bribed or murdered ...' This report is vaguely consistent with Musgrave's assertion that the leading Queen's County/Dublin United Irish messenger was arrested before the rising. The key point is that the failure of these counties to rise lay in the decimation of United Irish structures before the rising commenced.⁴³

An analogous degree of disorganization among United Irish leaders in Westmeath contributed to the lack of mobilization there during the last week of May. The (admittedly slim) evidence suggests the Westmeath United Irishmen did not initially attempt a rising. Renewed efforts involving the establishment of contact with Kildare rebels (through Jack Brian, an earlier Defender leader) and plans to rise on 27 May and 31 May, were scuppered by indecision and leadership differences, resulting in the arrest of Latin Fitzgerald, Michael Dardis, William Ogle and Francis Nugent, the suspected leadership core.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ General Dunne, Tullamore to Castlereagh, 31 July 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/4/33/6.

⁴¹ Confession of Matthias Horan and Henry Glyn, 26 May 1798; confession of John Doorly, undated: N.A.I., RP 620/37/166; 620/51/67.

⁴² Musgrave, *Rebellions*, p. 258.

⁴³ Gerard Fitzgerald, Maryborough to Thomas Kemmis, 14 October 1798: N.A.I., Frazer MSS 2/94; Musgrave, *Rebellions*, p. 258.

⁴⁴ General Charles Barnett, Athlone to Lord Castlereagh, 29 July 1798, with encls. incl. confession of XY, undated: N.A.I., RP 620/39/124. Similar information was reported independently by Gustavus Rochfort on 30 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/222.

At a regional level the projected rebellion in north Leinster was therefore a failure, not only at its Dublin epicentre but in most but not all country districts. The roots of such a failure in mobilization are difficult to assess but a crucial factor was the disruption of the command structure of the United Irishmen, coupled with the fact that the 'outer counties', those areas furthest from Dublin, depended on a mass rebellion (as occurred in Wexford) to encourage wavering supporters locally.

During the month of June only two major battles were fought in the entire region under discussion, at Kilbeggan on 17 June and at Ovidstown, near Timahoe in north Kildare, two days later. Narrative-driven accounts of the 1798 rebellion have tended to overlook such 'local outbreaks' even though the central focus of the rebellion remained Dublin. Within this context the north Leinster region remained crucial particularly after the setbacks suffered by the Wexford rebels at Newtownbarry on 1 June, which prevented a juncture with the rebels in Kildare, Carlow or Queen's County, and at Arklow on 9 June.⁴⁵ The letters of Francis Higgins to Dublin Castle emphasize continued rebel designs on Dublin. On 5 June he noted: 'Those infernal banditti have not abandoned their purpose of procuring a rising in the city, they hold meetings and consultations, in the vicinity of the metropolis.'⁴⁶ Contact between the Dublin leadership and rebels in the Dunboyne area is indicated by the mission of Fr John Martin, a messenger of the Dublin United Irishmen, to the Dunboyne locality in the first days of June. He was captured on 11 June while engaged in a mission to the Wicklow United Irishmen, to encourage a march on Dublin from the south, which it was hoped would draw troops out of the capital and leave it exposed to assault from Kildare and Meath.⁴⁷ Within a fortnight, however, the rebellion in south-east Meath had been effectively quelled and rebels at Garristown had even entered into a formal surrender.⁴⁸

In early June the pivotal rebel base in the east Leinster region had emerged at Timahoe in the Bog of Allen under the leadership of William Aylmer. The camp had probably been established in the first days of the rebellion and it later provided a shelter for defeated rebels from Tara, Rathangan and elsewhere.⁴⁹ The camp at Timahoe, against which early attacks proved completely ineffective due to the terrain, maintained contact with Dublin through a number of channels. The government was well aware of the threat posed by such a large rebel camp

45 George Taylor, *An historical account of the rise, progress and suppression of the rebellion in the county of Wexford in the year 1798* (Dublin, 1800), p. 66.

46 Higgins to Cooke, 5 June 1798; see also letters dated 2, 4, 11, 13 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/18/14.

47 Dáire Keogh, "'The most dangerous villain in society': Fr John Martin's mission to the United Irishmen of Wicklow in 1798", in *E.C.I.*, vii (1992), 122-4, 133.

48 'Repentance' of the town and parish of Garristown, 31 May 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/37/236.

49 Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 87-92; R.J. Aylmer, 'William Aylmer of Painstown, County Kildare and the battle for the metropolis, May 1798' (unpublished paper).

not far from the capital, and, it seems dispatched the Belfast spy Belle Martin in early June. She worked as a housekeeper for Charles Aylmer (William's father) at Painstown for three weeks until 23 June, and may have passed information to government, particularly since William Aylmer used Painstown as a personal base during the rebellion. How such a notorious spy held so sensitive a position in north Kildare during the period remains a mystery; she was presumably an expert at her profession.⁵⁰

The activities of the rebels in the Bog of Allen appear, on first inspection, to have extended little beyond intermittent pillage of the rich lands of north Kildare, hence Pakenham's comment that by late June, 'Aylmer's army had achieved only one of its aims: to stay alive.'⁵¹ However, even the marauding activities of the rebels had a political dimension: two days after the execution of John Esmonde, the Prosperous leader, in Dublin, the property of Richard Griffith at Millicent was plundered because he had testified at the court martial.⁵² The Timahoe rebels were not in fact under pressure to supply themselves with raw materials.⁵³ Viewed in the context of the ultimate rebel objectives (Dublin) formal rebel attacks made sense. Assaults on Kilcock (1, 4 June) and Maynooth (10, 13 June) resulted in Aylmer's force pushing small garrisons back to Leixlip and in encouraging the desertion of more yeomen to the rebel cause.⁵⁴

On 17 June Kilbeggan on the Dublin/Galway road in south Westmeath was attacked by a large force (possibly 2,000) led by the key local activist John McManus; this was eventually repulsed. The incident was probably linked to the massing of rebels further east along the same road to Dublin on the following day. Westmeath United Irishmen were in contact with Kildare rebels in late May and a Dublin emissary was even captured in Mullingar on 31 May. John McManus himself had links to Lord Edward FitzGerald before the rebellion through Patrick Gallagher.⁵⁵ Mullingar, Mountmellick and Maryborough were all reportedly under serious threat of attack during June.⁵⁶

50 Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 91–2; examination of Belle Martin, County Meath, 23 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/222.

51 Pakenham, *Year of liberty*, p. 275.

52 Musgrave, *Rebellions*, p. 242; Thomas Clere Parsons to Sir Laurence Parsons, June 1798: N.L.I. Rosse Papers, MS 13,840 (4).

53 Richard Griffith believed that they had been allowed to possess much of north Kildare: Griffith, Naas, to Thomas Pelham, 23 June 1798: B.L., Add. MSS 33,105 ff. 445–8; Oliver Barker, Clonard to Lees, 6 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/73.

54 Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 88–9.

55 Richard Nagle to Thomas Kemmis, 17 June 1798: N.A.I. Frazer MSS 2/82; Charles Barnett, Kilbeggan, 18 June 1798; Colonel Lytten to Cooke, 20 June 1798; Gustavus Rochfort, 31 May 1798; Court martial of John McManus, 29 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/171; 620/38/191; 620/37/238; 620/6/68/3; *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 23 June 1798.

56 Gustavus Rochfort, Beau Parc, 22 June 1798; — to Castlereagh [22 June 1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/38/213, 214; *Freeman's Journal*, 16 June 1798. On executions in Mountmellick, see William Kemmis to Thomas Kemmis, 15, 18 June: N.A.I. Frazer MSS 2/79, 80.

On Monday 18 June two mail coaches were stopped at Cloncurry on the Dublin/Galway road. The *Freeman's Journal* reported: 'The persons who stopped the coaches were well mounted and appointed with helmets etc. Parties or patrols of these insurgents were described on the hills near the road, all the way from Cloncurry to Kilcock.'⁵⁷ Furthermore, large numbers of Dublin United Irishmen (particularly from the west of the county) made their way to the Timahoe area on 18 June.⁵⁸ This massing of rebels in north Kildare is best understood within the context of continued United Irish hopes for an attack on Dublin.⁵⁹ Sproule reported new plans in mid-June both in Dublin and with the support of the Kildare and Meath United Irishmen.⁶⁰ The camp at Blackmore Hill in County Wicklow, dispersed in late May, had reassembled by 4 June under Michael Reynolds, who had led the failed attack on Naas on 24 May and was in contact with Dublin leaders. Here too, rebels were massing around 20 June, hoping to launch an attack on Dublin.⁶¹

This context transforms the interpretation of the battle of Ovidstown (19 June) from a localized clash into a crucial battle which prevented an attack on Dublin. On 19 June Prosperous (which had remained in rebel hands from 24 May) was attacked twice by government forces, forcing the rebels back into the bog.⁶² Despite government plans to launch a serious attack on Timahoe, no such event had taken place.⁶³ Ongoing United Irish plans for a counter-offensive to be launched from Timahoe were destroyed on 19 June. A huge rebel army was engaged by a government force from Trim (which had arrived via Kilcock) at Ovidstown, northwest of Timahoe. The rebels were surprised and defeated (with 200 losses), though their unpreparedness for battle is a further indication that the poorly fought engagement on the edges of the bog was not what the rebels had envisaged.⁶⁴

In the aftermath of the battle of Ovidstown, Kildare rebels continued to pose a problem for the Dublin administration, but their relationship with the Dublin

⁵⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 June 1798.

⁵⁸ Edward Clarke, Palmerstown, 20 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/198. See also Musgrave's exaggerated account: *Rebellions*, p. 294.

⁵⁹ Examination of William McConkery, 2 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/67, 96.

⁶⁰ Sproule to Lees, received 16 June [1798], 22 June [1798] and 25 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/51/37, 36; 620/38/232.

⁶¹ William James to Cooke, 4 June 1798; Information of B [Thomas Boyle], 20 June [1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/38/42; 620/18/3; Ruan O'Donnell, *The rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin, 1998), pp 243-4.

⁶² Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 93-4.

⁶³ Cooke to Wickham, 15 June 1798: P.R.O. HO 100/77/163; General Grose, Kilcock, 20 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/193.

⁶⁴ Seosamh Ó Muirthuille argued in 1948 that the force at Ovidstown intended to march on Dublin: *Kildare 1798 commemoration* (Kildare, 1948), p. 12. On the battle see General Grose, Kilcock, 20 June 1798; George Holdcroft, Kells, to Cooke, 21 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/193; 620/38/205. Of particular interest is the account of a captured Dublin participant, Information of Edward Whiteman, 20 June [1798]: N.A.I., SOCP 3089.

rebels may have begun to disintegrate.⁶⁵ Two factors now rendered a Kildare-based assault on the capital increasingly unlikely; first, the stationing of a regiment of Reay Fencibles in Kilcock, and second, the prospect of a reasonable surrender from Dublin Castle now under the new lord lieutenant, Cornwallis, on 29 June. The latter's arrival in Ireland resulted in the opening of channels of negotiation between the Timahoe rebels and the Dublin government.⁶⁶

Another United Irish threat emerged in north Leinster in the form of the rebels who had migrated from Wexford and Wicklow. In the aftermath of the rebel defeat at Vinegar Hill, the United Irish forces there had separated. One force travelled north through the Wicklow mountains; the other under Fr John Murphy chose to travel northeast through Carlow, north Kilkenny and south Queen's County where they hoped to mobilize United Irish support.⁶⁷ Murphy's army camped among the Queen's County colliers at Doonane on the night of 23 June, where they received support from local rebels (who had briefly risen on 25 May). The garrison of the town retreated to Castlecomer which was attacked and temporarily occupied the following day, before the rebels returned to south Queen's County, close to Athy.⁶⁸ Murphy's ultimate objective must have been to gather a large force and proceed towards Dublin. He did receive the support of recognized local United Irish leaders, and John Wolfe, commander of the Kildare Militia, arrested three men at Balbriggan on 24 June whom he suspected of attempting to forge a link between Dublin and the rebels camped in Queen's County.⁶⁹ Around the same time the north Kildare leader John Doorly arrived in the Stradbally area from Timahoe where he planned, with local co-operation, an attack on the town, before a countermanding order was issued from Athy (possibly after Murphy's force left). Stradbally church was burned on 24 June.⁷⁰ The force under Murphy was forced to withdraw south when government reinforcements arrived in south Queen's County from Maryborough, but the colliers had already begun to desert them in any case. Most of the column eventually made it to safety in the Wicklow mountains.⁷¹

65 Alex Worthington, 25 June 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/233.

66 I.H.M. Scobie, *An old Highland fencible corps* (Edinburgh, 1914), p. 191; Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 95-7. The rebels continued to menace and even ambush troops under Fenton Aylmer on 4 July near Castle Browne (Clongowes Wood) outside Clane.

67 On the 'Murphy expedition', see Nicholas Furlong, *Fr John Murphy of Boolavogue 1753-1798* (Dublin, 1991), pp 136-63; Byrne, *Memoirs of Miles Byrne* (Paris, 1863; repr. Shannon, 1972), pp 200-32.

68 Furlong, *Murphy*, pp 147-51; Musgrave, *Rebellions*, pp 536-42. *F.L.J.*, 23 June 1798, claimed that Castlecomer was attacked because the Queen's County colliers had failed to join the rebels.

69 Thomas Fitzgerald, 6 August 1798, encl. court martial of James Murphy, Maryborough, 4 August 1798; Colonel Wolfe, Merrion Square, misdated 20 June 1798 [after 24 June 1798]: N.A.I., RP 620/39/147; 620/38/199. The two men arrested were relatives of the Kildare United Irishman, Malachi Delany.

70 O'Kelly, *General history*, p. 91; *Irish [Catholic] Magazine*, i (1808), 25. Stradbally rebels surrendered in large numbers around 25 July; see lists in N.A.I., RP 620/4/53/3, 7.

71 Furlong, *Murphy*, pp 152-63; Byrne, *Memoirs*, pp 225-32.

The most determined group of Wexford/Wicklow rebels entered the north Leinster region between 8 and 10 July. Under Edward Fitzgerald, Fr Mogue Kearns, Anthony Perry, Joseph Holt and others, they crossed into Kildare from Wicklow and by 10 July had linked up with the rebels at Timahoe under William Aylmer. The next day, with some Kildare support, they launched an attack on the tiny garrison at Clonard to the northwest, which was eventually repulsed. If the rebel force intended connecting with Ulster, Clonard was a strange choice of target. The idea for this move appears to have originated with Fr Mogue Kearns who had been a curate there. Contemporary records suggested Naas and Athlone as other rebel objects of attack.⁷²

Following the setback at Clonard, the majority of the Kildare rebels returned to Timahoe with some of the Wexford force under Edward Fitzgerald. The general direction of the remaining Wexford/Wicklow force was eastwards towards Dublin through the south-east Meath/north Dublin territory (Dunshaughlin/Dunboyne/Garristown), which had been a rebel heartland during the first week of the rebellion. An attack on Clonard may have been a potential launching pad for an attack on the capital and it resembles Lord Edward FitzGerald's projected march along the Dublin/Galway road from a similar point of origin.⁷³ Francis Higgins indicated that a link-up with Dublin was planned and reported an increase in rebel traffic between the capital and Kildare/Meath.⁷⁴

The 'Meath expedition' was however a disaster and aroused little active local support. The rebels were dispersed at Knockderrig Hill on 12 July and were forced north at Garristown. They were subsequently defeated at Knightstown Bog near Slane, and at Ballyboghil in County Dublin, on 14 July.⁷⁵ Meanwhile the Kildare rebels who had remained in the Bog of Allen reopened channels of communication with Dublin Castle and negotiated a surrender; this took place on 21 July.⁷⁶

Those Wexford/Wicklow rebels still out successfully linked up with residual United Irish forces including those active in north Kildare and passive in south Queen's County. However, the government forces were strong enough to threaten or launch attacks on such rebels from the by now well-garrisoned towns. The

72 On the Wexford-Wicklow expedition, see Daniel Gahan, *The 'people's rising', Wexford, 1798* (Dublin, 1995), pp 278-97; Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 96-8; Eamon Doyle, *The Wexford insurgents of '98 and their march into Meath* (Enniscorthy, 1997); O'Donnell, *The rebellion in Wicklow*, pp 276-83; Joseph Holt, *Memoirs of Joseph Holt*, ed. T. Crofton Croker (London, 1838), i, pp 98-101; Martin Kelly, 'Father Mogue Kearns', in *Kildare Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xvii, 3 (1996-7), 348-50.

73 Felix Rourke, the Rathcoole leader who was involved, stated that the intention was 'of marching through the different counties in order to raise them.' See F.R. Wilson [Felix Rourke] to Mary Finerty, 27 July 1798, in R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their lives and times* (3rd ser., Dublin, 1846), ii, pp 77-9.

74 Higgins to Cooke, 12, 15 July 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/18/14.

75 Gahan, *People's rising*, pp 288-97; Doyle, *Mar. into Meath*, pp 28-38.

76 Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare*, pp 98-100.

Doonane colliers and Timahoe rebels proved more reticent about fresh conventional warfare; for the south-eastern rebels these 'marches' were desperate final ventures.

The Dublin-focused designs of the United Irishmen previous to the outbreak of the rebellion ensured that north Leinster was a crucial arena for revolutionary success or failure. Rebel failure was the result of the partial nature of the rising, isolated not only by the still-born Dublin effort but by the general inactivity outside the Kildare/south east Meath area. It is not sufficient to argue that the latter rose because they were better informed of rebel plans, since 'isolated' areas, most notably Doonane, did participate. At the root of the failure to rise was the prior decimation (through arrests) of the county-organized United Irishmen, which in turn provides a negative argument for the United-Irish nature of the rebellion where it occurred. The general failure of the 'outer counties' helped to undermine early rebel successes; rebel-occupied positions in Kildare and Meath were retaken by government forces, not from Dublin, but from positions to the west of rebel strongholds.

However, it is incorrect to argue that the movement had faded in north Leinster by 30 May. The upsurge of rebel activity around 17–20 June illustrates the continued designs of rebels on Dublin, though the battle of Ovidstown virtually ended such rebel ambition. The rebellion had been so weak in King's County that the prominent liberal Sir Lawrence Parsons was able to open a debate on the treatment of prisoners in the county as early as June.⁷⁷ The Wexford incursions into north Leinster in July were an ultimately futile attempt to stir up a widespread, conventional midlands campaign. The historian of the rebellion in north Leinster is hampered by the lack of any narrative by a major rebel commander; no equivalent of Hay, Cloney or Byrne exists for any of the six counties discussed. Nevertheless, the rebellion in this region is crucial in determining the significance, extent and reasons for the failure of the 1798 rebellion.⁷⁸

77 'True Blue', Birr, 21 June 1798; General Dunne, Tullamore to Castlereagh, 31 July 1798: N.A.I., RP 620/38/212; 620/4/33/6; letters of Sir Lawrence Parsons: N.L.I., Rosse Papers, MS 12,840 (4).

78 My thanks to Dáire Keogh and Richard John Aylmer for their assistance while researching and writing this article.