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CHAPTER ONE

The Power of Place

THE OLD AND ramshackle walls in a large field in Crook parish in the village of Passage East, on a hill beyond the city of Waterford on the southern coast of Ireland, have been overtaken by grass, broken down over the years and form part of a ruin. It is a ruin with a peculiar and largely forgotten history. When the local historian Patrick Egan walked around the site in the 1890s, he was informed by a local farmer that foreign folk had once lived there, but their attempt to establish a silk industry had failed because of the weather:

You see, sir, these people that came here were great silk wavers [*sic*], and they expected, of course, to go on well at their trade. Myself doesn't know, but as I hears. They set a lot of mulberry trees to feed the silkworms, but sure you know they wouldn't grow, the climate was too damp, so they gave up the place and went back again to their own country.¹

Events that are better remembered are recalled by the plaque that can be found at the site today, stating that here in 1798 republicans were martyred at 'New Geneva Barracks', a dirty and foul prison:

NEW GENEVA BARRACKS 1798. Thousands of United Irishmen were held here under inhumane conditions, many awaiting transportation. Described by Col. Thomas Cloney, a prisoner himself, . . . as the filthiest most damp and loathsome prison devoid of any comfort . . . Remember all who died here, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

An earlier plaque stated, incorrectly, that the buildings dated from 1786 and correctly that New Geneva was 'associated with many dark deeds against the United Irishmen.'²

The Society of United Irishmen, whose original proposed name had been the Irish Brotherhood, for the promotion of ‘the rights of man in Ireland’, was founded in Belfast on 14 October 1791.³ It was inspired by William Drennan, the poet and physician, who in 1784, unhappy with the lack of progress in the Volunteer movement in achieving reform, had begun to speculate about the necessity of Irish independence. In the same year Drennan had published, anonymously, the *Letters of Orellana, an Irish helot*, boldly declaring that the Irish were slaves; the national unity that was required for economic and political progress could only come by means of a union between Catholics, Anglicans and dissenters.⁴ By 1791 Drennan had become a republican, and proposed that men gather together in a secret society, contracting solemnly, wearing a symbol next to the heart, and communicating with ‘leading men in France, in England and in America’ in the hope of cementing ‘the scattered and shifting sand of republicanism into a body’. Drennan’s idea was for a ‘benevolent conspiracy—a plot for the people’ aimed at securing in society the ‘rights of men and the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. Rights and happiness could only be secured by ‘real independence to Ireland’ and the creation of a republic. Drennan told his friend Samuel McTier that ‘such schemes’ should not ‘be laughed at as romantic’, because ‘without enthusiasm nothing great was done, or will be done.’⁵ Theobald Wolfe Tone, a fellow-founder of the United Irishmen, wrote in a pamphlet of 1791 that Ireland was blessed as no other country in Europe with regard to natural resources, which were ‘necessary materials for unlimited commerce’. Ireland had an ‘evil government’ rather than a ‘national government’, so that ‘religious intolerance and political bigotry, like the tyrant Mezentius, bind the living Protestant to the dead and half corrupted Catholic.’⁶ James Napper Tandy, acting as secretary for the Dublin branch of the Society of United Irishmen, declared on 9 November 1791 that as Ireland was in a ‘state of abject slavery’, a ‘sincere and hearty union of all the people’ must be established, seeking a ‘radical reform of parliament’ and ‘the removal of absurd and ruinous distinctions’, and ‘promoting a complete coalition of the people.’⁷

William Drennan was in the chair when the Society reached out to Scottish republicans like Thomas Muir. Scotland was described as ‘the land where Buchannan wrote, and Fletcher spoke, and Wallace fought’, the fear being that it was in the process of being ‘merged and melted down into another country’ (that is, England).⁸ In the London parliament, it was noted that the United Irishmen were linked to the Constitutional Society, ‘which had long existed, but about this time [1792] assumed a new

character', the Corresponding Society, 'which was instituted in the Spring of 1792', and The Friends of the People. These groups embraced 'all the extravagant and violent Principles of the French Revolution' and laboured with 'bigotry and enthusiasm', to propagate 'among the lower classes of the community, a spirit of hatred and contempt for the existing laws and government of the country'.⁹ The rebels responded to what they perceived to be libel by themselves shaming the 'sanguinary system of terror' of the government, and the 'infernal system of terror, slavery and oppression, with all their attendant evils of poverty and famine'.¹⁰ The United Irishmen had embraced Thomas Paine's philosophy espoused in parts one and two of his *Rights of Man* in 1791 and 1792, that the end of every political association was the establishment of the rights of man, that all men were born free and equal, and that sovereignty lay in the body of the nation.¹¹ Such views were fostered in the newspaper *Northern Star*, which was launched by United Irishmen in Belfast in January 1792.

Views that smacked of republicanism were branded treacherous in 1793. Theobald McKenna, the pamphleteer and campaigner for an end to penal laws against Catholics in Ireland, warned in February 1792 that 'the dangers of this age seem to impend rather from the people than the monarch'. McKenna praised the English constitution as 'highly estimable', having 'all eminent writers on its side', and asserted that 'a double experience justifies it; that of England, in which it has produced great good; that of every other form of government, none of which have ever procured permanent and radical happiness'. For McKenna, 'the oppressions of absolute monarchy [and] the convulsions of democracy, constitute alike the panegyric of the English Constitution'.¹² McKenna attempted to prove that republicanism was incompatible with commercial society, which needed inequality to promote the desire for improvement. It was a fact that all historic republics were factious, which meant that republics tended to collapse, and were incompatible with what he termed 'the social arts':

In fact, as nations have improved in the social arts, they have declined from the forms of Republicanism, they found them incompatible with tranquility. Carthage was ruined by the factions which arose from the want of a presiding influence. Rome abandoned her liberties in despair, after the most sanguinary contests ever known in the world. Holland, which was much more adapted by its size than Ireland for a Republic, has subsided into an aristocracy, or rather into a limited monarchy. Inequality of condition is inevitable in society, and the controlled pre-eminence of one [figure in the person of the monarch] remedies

the evils arising from this inequality. From all these reasons, from the experience of other nations, and the experience of our own, we are led to conclude in favour of a limited monarchy; but it is not alone necessary to have a king; he should be invested with power and influence sufficient to keep him so.¹³

Advocates of republicanism such as Paine had to be refuted to prevent the collapse of any state. For McKenna, ‘The example of America, and the small expense of the Republican system, are the principal arguments of Mr. Paine and his adherents.’ In fact, the circumstances of North America were entirely different from those to be found across Europe. As McKenna put it, there were particular reasons for the initial success of republican ideas across the Atlantic, which could never be replicated in Europe, and were likely in any case, sooner or later, to become problematic in North America too:

Paine, having America constantly in view, reasons uniformly wrong, for he supposes uniformly, that every other country is in the same circumstances. Six words refute him completely, *There is no mob in America*. There are yet in that country but two classes, those which correspond to the middle gentry, and to the yeomanry of England. The population of the States not affording such a number of hands, that some find it necessary to minister to the indolence of others, every man is occupied, and there is not leisure for the speculations or the contentious passions which distract Europe. Thus the casualty of the moment renders America the most easily governed country, and guarantees her from the imperfections of Republicanism. She has few sufficiently idle to pursue ambition, sufficiently rich to bribe, or poor to be corrupted. But the series of cause and effect which lead to the dissolution of the American Democracy, or at least to alter it materially, may be easily traced by any man of discernment.¹⁴

McKenna concluded that ‘There can be very little of Republican design in Ireland’, because ‘the wretched speculations which involved France in calamity, can have few admirers’. The true risk was that the prerogative was weakened so as to allow republicanism, the ‘inconvenient [and] boisterous form of government’ to become an option in Ireland.¹⁵ McKenna was entirely incorrect about the attractiveness of republican ideas in Ireland. Once it was accepted that the Irish were not free, and that the British were unwilling to grant further reforms that promised future liberty, especially after the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1791 failed to emancipate

Catholics in Ireland fully, republican ideas became more attractive. To many observers, creating a republic in Ireland presented an opportunity to create a nation in a unified sense, overcoming through shared commitment to republican ideas of equality the divisions that were responsible for the political corruption and economic backwardness of the country. This was what had happened in France, where a diverse and divided nation was becoming a unified, and singularly powerful, republican *patrie*. Paine himself recognised this;¹⁶ the links between the United Irishmen and French republicans were especially strong from 1792, with many prominent figures in the movement spending time in Paris.¹⁷

II

When, on December 14 1793, the United Irish Society issued an address to the volunteer companies of Ireland, calling upon them to take up arms as citizens, to force the government to undertake parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, a Rubicon was perceived by the authorities to have been crossed. Already dealing with widespread Catholic Defender insurrections, what became a war against the United Irishmen was commenced by government. The proprietors of the *Northern Star* and John Rabb its printer, were prosecuted for seditious libel in January 1793. On February 22 1793, an act was passed that prevented the importation or movement of arms without a licence. On April 9 in the same year a Catholic Relief Act extended the franchise to propertied Catholics and allowed them to take a university degree, while the Militia Act established a fifteen thousand-strong force, which was increased to over twenty-one thousand in 1795. On August 16 1793, the government forbade assemblies in the name of the people from preparing petitions to George III or to parliament. By this time French agents such as Eleazer Oswald and the Reverend William Jackson were active in Ireland. The popular barrister and landowner Archibald Hamilton Rowan was found guilty of distributing the seditious proclamation of the United Irish Society of December 14 1792, and on January 29 1794 he was fined the large sum of £500 and imprisoned for two years. He escaped on May 2 and fled to France. The Reverend William Jackson was arrested in Dublin and charged with high treason on April 28 1794, committing suicide in prison almost exactly a year later. William Drennan was prosecuted for seditious libel but acquitted by a jury on June 25. This was a rare victory, as on May 23 the United Irishmen were declared an illegal society, and through the informer Thomas Collins their Dublin premises at Tailors Hall were raided and all their documents

seized. The Society went underground and established close links with other clandestine organisations, and especially the Defenders.¹⁸

Throughout 1796 a large number of United Irishmen were arrested, and others fled to North America or to France, the latter in the hope of promoting the invasion of Ireland. On March 24 1796 the Insurrection Act promised the death penalty for the taking of illegal oaths, legitimised searches for armaments and impositions of curfew and gave magistrates the authority to imprison any person found in an unlawful assembly. Thomas Russell, named as 'an United Irishman', published his *A Letter to the people of Ireland, on the present situation of the country* in September 1796, calling the Protestant landlords of Ireland agents of England and a vile aristocracy. Russell attacked the Whigs as false friends of the people for having betrayed the Irish since the failure of the volunteer movements in the early 1780s, and for failing to create a nation:

No persons reviled the Rights of Man or the French Revolution, or gabbled more about anarchy, and confusion, and mobs, and United Irishmen, and Defenders, and Volunteers, or coincided more heartily in strengthening the hands of that government which they had opposed, and riveting the chains of the people, or to sum up all, plunged this unfortunate country into all the guilt and calamity of the present war, with more alacrity than the gentlemen of the opposition.¹⁹

Russell called the Irish slaves, but argued that Britain was weak, and that if the Irish followed the Dutch, Swiss and North Americans in seeking to restore their lost liberty, nothing would be able to stop them. His work was a call to arms, in the name of an envisaged country-wide coming together and union across religious divides, following the example of the French, which would see the end of aristocracy, the giving of land, called the source of all wealth, to the poor and the creation of a soon-to-be-great nation.²⁰ In the days following Russell's publication the offices of *Northern Star* were once again raided, on 16 September, and Russell and a number of United Irishmen or members of the Jacobin Club were accused of high treason. The Antrim farmer William Orr was also arrested in September 1796, for administering the oath of the United Irishmen, and was hanged in October the following year.

In December 1796 the Bantry Bay expedition to liberate Ireland with French troops failed, but across Ireland societies of United Irishmen continued to organise themselves. In May 1797 the presses of the *Northern Star* were destroyed by militia and further arrests were made. By March 1798, government informers were warning that Lord Edward

FitzGerald had plans for the use of pike-men and riflemen against militias. Revolution was perceived to be imminent and action was taken by the authorities to crush it. Informers such as Edward John Newell and Thomas Reynolds facilitated the removal of the leaders of the United Irishmen, with the Leinster executive taken at Oliver Bond's house in Dublin on 12 March 1798. Ireland was declared by the Privy Council to be in a state of open rebellion and martial law was proclaimed. On 19 May, FitzGerald was arrested, dying of wounds inflicted during the process on 4 June. The arrest of the brothers John Sheares and Harry Sheares followed on 26 May; they were executed on 14 July. Unrest commenced in Meath, Leinster and Wexford at the end of the May. Despite ad hoc victories of the insurrectionists, government and loyalist forces triumphed, and more leaders were hanged, including Henry Joy McCracken and Henry Munro in the north, and Beauchamp Bagenal Harvey and John Hay in the south. Tone, captured on a French frigate, committed suicide in prison.

The great hope of the United Irishmen had been armed support from the First French Republic. The secret committee of war secretary Henry Dundas that amassed documentation concerning rebellion in the 1790s made the point that the French invading forces anticipated aid from the domestic population, and especially members of the 'militia' and 'Irish sailors', in addition to the 'people and the rabble of the country'. Such individuals were not to be incorporated into French formations, but were rather to be formed into new corps of troops under French officers, so that 'no native of the country may become acquainted with the state of our force'. Such views were propagated by General Jean-Joseph-Amable Humbert, the commander of the invading forces that landed at Killala on 23 August 1798. Humbert was instructed to inform the Irish that the French were going to grant them liberty and break their chains:

Bear in mind that all Europe, the eyes of which are now upon you, will judge whether you deserve that your chains should be broken. Nothing is more easy, if you engage in it with determined courage. Rise at once in a mass at every point of your Island. My brave brethren in arms and myself, will be the centre for you to rally round. A force so considerable ensures to you, without striking a Blow, a speedy and complete victory; and in the same manner as the vivifying rays of the sun purify the earth from pestilential vapours, and destroy the insects which they nourished, so from the ardour of your patriotism shall issue that splendour which will banish tyranny, and annihilate its satellites amidst the

unanimous shouts of the Irish and the French, exclaiming Liberty and Equality for ever!²¹

Humbert had only a thousand men, as although he had successfully sailed from Rochefort, a larger force from Brest had delayed its departure. Confident that a greater force was on its way, he was told to declare to the soldiers of Ireland that they ought to join the French to vanquish tyrants, and that they would soon be governed by laws made by their own representatives rather than by their English oppressors:

Be Irishmen Be free! Come and join our ranks! We will shew you the path of honour. In a word, you will learn how men love and serve their Country. Come, and speedily our common enemy will be annihilated. We know that you have long sighed for our arrival. A thousand times have you shewn yourselves free by your heroism, and by your virtues. Let us instantly unite, and let your tyrants disappear. You ought to recognise no masters but the Laws, which, very soon, you will receive from your faithful representatives.²²

Humbert was too late. Although he defeated Irish militia forces at Castlebar in Mayo, and proclaimed the Republic of Connaught at the end of August and planned to take Dublin, things came to naught. Humbert lacked reinforcements, because a British squadron under Admiral Sir John Berlese Warren prevented Admiral Bompard from landing off the coast of Donegal, and captured the leading ship, and Theobald Wolfe Tone with it. Humbert surrendered on 8 September after defeat at Ballinamuck, being faced by overwhelming numbers of loyalists. French troops and rebels added to the numbers imprisoned, including at New Geneva Barracks.

III

That Irish republicans were imprisoned on lands within the fishing village of Passage was portentous. Henry II, the English king who first invaded Ireland, had landed on the beach below what was to be New Geneva in 1171. Oliver Cromwell, whilst laying siege to the city of Waterford, also took Passage in November 1649, killing two hundred of the garrison in the process. Almost a hundred and fifty years on, New Geneva Barracks encompassed a vast open square surrounded by buildings and a high wall. It had been a place where soldiers readied themselves to fight Irish republicans and to maintain British power in Ireland. Afterwards, as the memorial plaque indicated, it became a location for the death of republicans, by

either disease or execution. It was called ‘a monster prison’, where men ‘suspected of treason, or a creed or political opinion to justify the appearance of suspicion’ were ‘cast into gaol without the intervention of judge or jury’.²³ There was enormous irony in this, the site having been called New Geneva because it was supposed to herald the rebirth of the old republic of Geneva. Genevan republicans had once populated the place, with the intention of transforming Waterford, and helping to bring wealth and republican and industrious Protestant mores to Ireland. Planned as an asylum for republicans, it ended up a republican graveyard.

The precise date at which New Geneva was turned into a barracks has been lost. There is a report in *The Times* dated 14 July 1786 stating that New Geneva was being examined as a possible location for a barracks:

Last Tuesday morning the Right Hon. The Lord of Tyrone [George Beresford, 2nd Earl of Tyrone], the Right Hon. Wm. Augustus Pitt, Commander in Chief of his Majesty’s forces in this kingdom, and Major-General [Charles] O’Hara, arrived from Curraghmore, his Lordship’s seat. After viewing Mr Allen’s concerns at Ballytruckle, they visited New Geneva, and on their return Mr Wm Penrose’s ground, for the purpose of fixing on the most eligible situation for building barracks.²⁴

By the outbreak of the French Revolution it had become a place where troops were stationed before departure for foreign climes, especially the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic.²⁵ In August 1793 it was reported that the 64th Regiment of Foot, called the 2nd Staffordshire Regiment, which had seen active service in North America, and in Jamaica after the end of the American wars, was ‘now quartered at New Geneva, to hold themselves in readiness for immediate imbarcation [*sic*].’²⁶ The 64th had been at New Geneva a year earlier, as three soldiers found guilty of leading a mutiny at Limerick were brought in front of the regiment on 1 September 1792, in order to be shot, receive a thousand lashes and receive five hundred lashes respectively. Having been berated by their commanding officer for their ‘criminal and ruinous tendency’, and after a further pause of a minute, the mutineers were informed that the Lord Lieutenant had pardoned them, because of their contrition.²⁷ In September 1793, the 56th Regiment, called the West Essex Regiment, also left New Geneva for Waterford and then Cork, en route to serve abroad. Prior to leaving, it had been involved in crushing a riot in Wexford, on 11 June, and a Major Valloton had been killed with a scythe while advancing on the protesters, leading his troops to fire on the crowd.²⁸ In September of the same year, the 31st Regiment quartered at Wexford was reported to

have marched 'to New Geneva, there to join the other troops, destined for foreign service'.²⁹

In 1798, New Geneva was quickly transformed into a prison for between four and five thousand United Irishmen. It was reported by an anonymous British officer who found himself at New Geneva, that Ireland had experienced 'mobs of poor infatuated creatures armed with pikes and guns everywhere prowling about'. United Irishmen were burning, pillaging and destroying property, and 'madly threatened to rescue their country from the hands of a government which wicked and designing demagogues had industriously represented as hostile to the very name of Ireland'.³⁰ In other words, by the summer of 1798 Ireland was filled with would-be revolutionaries, dedicated to making Ireland into a free state. The first step was to expel the British, and this could only be achieved by violence. The British officer recalled that in his opinion few of the United Irishmen truly knew what they were doing, but had been seduced by cunning ringleaders with promises of liberty once the tyrants were vanquished:

Some had been sworn into it—others drawn into it. It was an endemial [*sic*] mania evidently excited, kept up, and blown into action, by crafty and discontented ringleaders, who, whilst they put the reckless rabblement in motion, had generally cowardice and cunning enough cautiously to keep in the back ground. The machine was in fearful operation, but the springs that set it at work were artfully concealed. The number here incarcerated amounted at this time to between four and five thousand men, in the prime of life generally, full of health and vigour, and who had been urged from their allegiance and their home by the most virulent misrepresentations.³¹

The prisoners were guarded by soldiers of the 5th battalion of the 60th Regiment of Foot, many of them Swiss and Germans who had served in the wars in North America. It was also manned by the Dumbarton Fencibles, a Scottish loyalist regiment.³² The Dumbarton Fencibles had been raised by Colonel Campbell of Stonefield in October 1794, had first been stationed in Guernsey, and then moved to Ireland in 1797. They remained in Ireland until 1802.³³ Irish loyalist volunteers were also stationed in the locality of Waterford. The British officer present at New Geneva whose testimony has survived claimed that the 5th battalion of the 60th Regiment of Foot consisted 'almost entirely of Germans', and that the Dumbarton Fencibles were 'a fine, well-behaved, and steady regiment' commanded by a man named Colonel Scott, said to be 'a most humane and intelligent officer'. It was alleged in consequence that initially the prisoners 'were properly fed, and, under the

circumstances, the most laudable attention was paid to their health'. Such humanity meant nothing, it was reported, because the Irish revolutionaries, being 'like the entrapped hyena', were 'bound, not tamed'. Wild behaviour was the result, which could only be repressed by force:

[T]he indulgence which had been humanely granted, was shamefully abused. Spirits were clandestinely introduced by the visiting relatives, as was very clearly evidenced by the scenes of riot and drunkenness which every day prevailed. To repress these irregularities, orders upon orders were issued; but all common methods of prevention were tried, and failed; and it was at last discovered that the wives and sisters of the prisoners brought whiskey so secreted as to elude the vigilance of the sentries. Various attempts were also made to bribe the soldiers, and to break out of confinement. Scarcely a day passed without uproar.³⁴

The portrait of low humanity bamboozled by demagogues, addled by drink, and deranged by a false cause was commonplace in loyalist accounts of the United Irishmen. Yet no other account stated that conditions at New Geneva were at any time acceptable, or that any consideration was given to the welfare of the prisoners: rather, the opposite. Indeed, the treatment of those who found themselves forced to live within the walls of New Geneva Barracks passed into folklore. New Geneva was a prison of choice and a place where prisoners could be assembled prior to transportation. *The Times*, for example, reported the arrival of thirty-six prisoners on 13 October 1798, to be transported.³⁵ In November, the Athlone cavalry conducted to the barracks the rebel Colonel Maguire and seventeen associates, prior to their court martial, with sixty-eight arriving from Waterford soon after.³⁶ Rebels were still being sent to New Geneva a year later.³⁷ In September 1799, a man named Harris was brought from Waterford to New Geneva for transportation, having been court-martialled for 'administering the United Oath in the county of Kilkenny'. It was reported that 'in the county of Cork many have been taken up for a similar offence'.³⁸ The Dumbarton Fencibles stationed at New Geneva were still looking for hidden caches of arms across Waterford in the spring of 1799, although they only found 'a few old guns'.³⁹

IV

Visiting the site of New Geneva Barracks in the 1890s, Patrick Egan called the remains of the barracks 'a strange enclosure' of eight acres surrounded by a wall between nine and twelve feet in height, with a visible former parade ground and barracks buildings still standing, with room for

approximately sixty officers and just under two thousand infantry. Local peasants regaled Egan with lurid stories of events at the prison. These included tales of the torture of women and the hunting down and murdering of any who attempted escape. Egan called it a place of ‘loathsome horrors’, noting the assertions by the inhabitants that dried blood could still be traced on the stones that formed the ruin, having dripped from the many heads that had been stuck upon the walls.⁴⁰ A similar story was related in the 1930s, when, during an investigation into Waterford memories, it was attested that it was at New Geneva Barracks that the ‘Croppy Boy famed in song and story met his death’. The term ‘croppy’ derived from the tendency of the rebels to have their hair cropped or shaved, in the manner of the French *sans-culottes*. A man named John Colfer, interviewed in the 1930s, gave an account handed down to him by members of the Walsh family, who had lived in the area since the eighteenth century, concerning the killing of United Irishmen, and of their heads being placed on spikes at the gates of New Geneva Barracks. Householders were invited to view the scene as a warning and deterrent:

Beside Geneva Barracks is a small house owned by William Walsh. The Walshes have lived here for many generations. The present man’s grandfather occupied the house in 1798 and witnessed many a heart rending sight of cruelty to the poor peasants. William Walsh gives this incident as related by his grandfather. One night there was a loud knock at the door. Walsh asked ‘who’s there?’ The answer was ‘open in the King’s name’. In fear Tom Walsh opened the door and saw standing there a British officer. Instinctively Walsh lifted his hands above his head but the officer told him he need not fear as he did not mean to harm him. He asked Tom Walsh to accompany him to the gates of Geneva Barracks for he comprehended that the sight of the Croppies’ heads spiked upon the gates made him nervous. Tom Walsh did so.⁴¹

The origin of what Egan termed the ‘the most notorious case of all’ was recalled as a story of a well-bred young prisoner who asked his guard when he might leave the prison for his trial. The guard told him to scale the wall and to go. The young man naively did so and was shot down. (For the story in greater detail, see chapter 10 below.) It was his blood that was said to have seeped into the walls and still to be visible decades later. This rebel was employed as a character in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), in which he said, ‘I bear no hate to a living thing. But I love my country beyond a king.’ Joyce also referred to the song ‘The Croppy Boy’, written by William B. McBurney under the pseudonym Carroll Malone in 1845, which ended ‘At

Geneva Barrack that young man died, / And at Passage they have his body laid. / Good people who live in peace and joy / Breathe a pray'r and a tear for the Croppy Boy.⁴²

Another story goes that a mother named Mrs O'Neil travelled a hundred and fifty miles from Antrim, in the hope of visiting her son, who was held at New Geneva Barracks and selected for service in the Prussian army; prior to the rebellion he had been destined for the Catholic priesthood. After she was accused of bribing an officer in order to see her son, she was stripped 'almost naked' by the soldiers guarding the place, held down on a blanket whilst men held each of the corners, and repeatedly thrown into the air, as a prelude to being further tortured. Whether shame or injury led to her death is not known, but she expired the following day.⁴³ An account of 1814 from someone who conversed with those involved on the military side was the probable source of the story of Mrs O'Neil. It portrayed Colonel Scott, the commander of the Fencibles, as a 'ruffian monster' and 'infamous brute' who enjoyed torturing prisoners and stripping naked female visitors; this was said to be 'to the disgrace of Britain', compounded by the fact that his wife 'was always present at these exhibitions, and took particular delight in their infliction on Irish rebels'.⁴⁴

In total several hundred were executed in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion. Dozens were killed at New Geneva Barracks. Some of the executions occurred by firing squad within its walls. Many of those who claimed that they had been wrongly accused of being rebels remained at New Geneva for twenty months, and had to find two men willing to stand bail in lieu of good behaviour, for the large sum of £200, before being released.⁴⁵ Others were there for a shorter time. Such men confirmed the ghastliness of the place. Thomas Cloney, whose name appears on the modern plaque at the site, wrote a memoir of his life as a rebel, including the days he spent at New Geneva. Cloney claimed he was not a United Irishman. Rather, he was an opponent of the 'general system of tyranny which was then established in Ireland', whereby 'an Eastern Bashaw never exercised more ruthless and despotic sway in his Pachalic than did many of the county Wexford magistrates'.

Cloney took up arms at Wexford, and was appointed colonel in the movement, only, he said, because the Irish were so persecuted by a corrupt class of Protestant landlords, whom he termed 'the Ascendancy faction', governing Ireland for themselves rather than for the people:

I beheld my country in chains and bleeding at every pore under the whip of the executioner and the bayonet of the mercenary. The best,

the most useful, and the most patriotic of her citizens [were] either transported, or obliged to fly from the country of their fathers, to wander on the banks of the St. Lawrence and Mississippi, or to wear the degrading slave cap and the costume of the felon in New South Wales. The functions of the Civil Magistrate [were] superseded by those of the drill sergeant, and the tribunals of justice desecrated by drunkards, profligates, and horsejockies.⁴⁶

Cloney held that he had been set up and falsely imprisoned at Wexford gaol in violation of a promise that in return for giving up his arms he could emigrate to North America. Instead he was transferred to New Geneva, recalling that ‘the very name of the place had something horrible in it, it having been the depot for so many unfortunate people, whom the severity of the Ascendancy faction had exposed to torture, privations of every sort, and perpetual banishment.’⁴⁷ Cloney then described New Geneva as ‘a most damp and loathsome prison,’ which ‘really exceeded any description I could give of it for filthiness and a want of every sort of comfort’. The prisoners, Cloney said, were all wretched. Only the letters Cloney had on his person from prominent Irish friends enabled him to avoid inspection by the garrison surgeon, and allowed him to purchase his own meals from the officers’ mess, rather than putting up with the sustenance provided for normal prisoners. Despite such privileges, Cloney stated that ‘the filth everywhere around us, and the intolerable smell in our sleeping place baffles description, so that it was impossible to eat of the best fare with any degree of satisfaction.’ Cloney also reported the negative treatment of Irish priests. One of them, ‘Gannon, from the county Mayo’, ultimately found his way to Spain, where Lucien Bonaparte, then his brother’s ambassador at Madrid, gave him funds to travel to Paris, after which he was given a living near Versailles.⁴⁸

New Geneva was mentioned in the Irish House of Commons by the attorney-general John Toler, 1st Earl of Norbury, on February 20 1799. Toler presented a bill for ‘Suppressing the Rebellion at present existing in this country’, by giving the Lord Lieutenant a power to punish rebels by military law, and to prevent civil powers from interfering with decision of Courts Martial. In response to arguments that his bill was an attack on the liberties of every person living in Ireland, and amounted to the establishment of a military despotism, Toler replied that if the rebels were punished only through the civil law, the right of Habeas Corpus could only be met with difficulty, because there were so many accused revolutionaries whose persons had to be brought forward for trial. Even if the persons

were carried to trial in accordance with Habeas Corpus, there were not enough juries, or persons willing to serve the law, to process the civil law. This was why military justice had to be relied upon:

In the present state of the country, however, it was impossible to go on—destruction must follow, if the civil and military jurisdictions of the country were continually suffered to clash with each other. The benefit of the Habeas Corpus Act was constantly applied for in the Court of King’s Bench to bring up the bodies of persons convicted before different military tribunals of treasonable crimes, on the clearest evidence, and sentenced to transportation instead of being hanged; and General Johnston, the man who saved Ireland, was at this moment under attachment of that Court for not instantly bringing up from New Geneva a mob of convicts of this kind, who only waited there an opportunity of transportation. The Court of King’s Bench, so long as the law stood as it now does, could neither refuse the motion for Habeas Corpus or attachment; and in disturbed districts where rebellion, or the unequivocal symptoms of it appeared, it would be absolutely for the safety of the country that the military power should be employed to act with promptitude, without the control of the civil law. In many counties, the Judges could not go to the circuit, particularly Wexford and Wicklow; Jurors could not be found to do their duty; and without this strong measure, justice must be at an end.⁴⁹

General Henry Johnston, referred to by Toler, had two thousand troops fighting rebels across the south-eastern counties of Ireland in 1798. Wexford county was said to be full of United Irishmen, being ‘a terrible example of their fury and licentiousness’. John Jeffreys Pratt, Earl of Camden, then lord lieutenant of Ireland, informed his chief secretary at Dublin Castle, Thomas Pelham, that he expected British rule in Ireland to collapse because the Irish rebels were so numerous, and loyalist forces so weak. Camden confessed to having written to the prime minister, William Pitt, to ask him to send large numbers of troops under a general such as Charles Cornwallis, of North American fame, and offered to give up his own office to a military man, as the crisis in Ireland was so great. Camden wrote that if the French invaded, everything would quickly be lost for the British in Ireland: ‘a landing, even of a small body of French, will set the country in a blaze, and I think neither our force nor our staff equal to the very difficult circumstances they will have to encounter’.⁵⁰

Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, then lord of the treasury in Ireland, a member of the Irish Privy Council, and a lieutenant-colonel in the

militia, confirmed that the Wexford area was a hotbed of revolutionary activity:

The rebellion seems to have taken serious root in Wexford. Their force is very great, the body in question exceeding ten thousand men, a considerable proportion of fire-arms, and conducted with an attention to military principles. Wexford is still in their hands, and a very large force said to be assembled in that side of the county.⁵¹

Castlereagh reported that large numbers of rebels were moving towards Waterford via Ross, that crown forces were meagre by comparison with those they were facing, that further action by the United Irishmen was anticipated across Ireland and that if French help came, as was likely, the mainland itself was under real threat:

You know how fully prepared every part of Ireland is for revolt. Nothing but a speedy suppression of the mischief can prevent its becoming general. Your information where you now are will enable you to judge whether an invasion of England is likely to happen. Unless it is inevitable and immediate, Great Britain cannot better employ her force than in sending a large force, were it only for a few weeks, into Ireland. Everything depends on the first successes. It will cost much exertion to reconquer the island should the rebellion establish itself in the four provinces. We want officers much; pray press the sending over our brigadiers.⁵²

Castlereagh went on to assert that ‘the rebellion in Wexford has assumed a more serious shape than was to be apprehended from a peasantry, however well organized’, because of the dedication of the Irish revolutionaries and their large numbers, with ‘their enthusiasm excited by their priests.’⁵³ Camden was speedily convinced that the force at Wexford was so great ‘that it is not thought proper to advance against them’, and that ‘a rising within the city’ of Dublin was imminent.⁵⁴ So grim were the circumstances faced by the British that Castlereagh asked Pelham to beg Pitt to make ‘the militia of both countries what it ought to be, an imperial force, for the defence of the empire at home’. One of the positives of the Irish rebellion in Castlereagh’s view was the loyalty to Britain of the Irish militia, who ‘completely dispelled all our apprehensions as to their fidelity and must remove every jealousy on the part of England in employing them in Great Britain’. The condition of Britain was so bad that Castlereagh foresaw a time when loyal Irish militiamen would be needed on the mainland: ‘the day may come when the plague may have spent itself here, and when England may experience the same struggle.’⁵⁵

V

That New Geneva Barracks became infamous as a prison, a place of tragedy and hurt, of oppression and open brutality, was due in part to the acknowledgement on the part of the British loyalists that they were fighting not only for their own lives but for the very survival of the British state. In the aftermath of the rebellion of the United Irishmen it was asserted that even the local militia were not to be trusted. A report was received by William Wickham, then under-secretary of state for the Home Department, serving the home secretary William Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland, from a government spy at Waterford, and passed on to Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, now the acting chief secretary for Ireland. It advised against the continued employment of a loyalist militia in Ireland on the grounds that ‘friends and foes are all the same to them’. At Waterford, among the militiamen, ‘drunkenness is prevalent beyond anything that I ever witnessed before’ in part because ‘every other house in the town is a whiskey-shop’. This went against Castlereagh’s earlier assessment of the Irish militia as worthy of service across Britain. The spy further advised of the dangers of sending those convicted of treason against the crown into the armed forces. As the anonymous informer put it,

[M]ost of these rascals, it is to be feared [rather than remaining in foreign parts], will find their way to Chatham [the naval docks in Kent]: many of them are uncommon fine fellows, and our regiments will be finally filled with them; if precautions, and the strictest precautions, are not taken on this head, what are we to expect? In my opinion, wherever we send them, we send emissaries. The mode of disposing of them is a dangerous one, and their admission into the navy or army is likely to be attended with consequences equally fatal.⁵⁶

In other words, the United Irishmen were so dangerous that they could never be trusted to be British soldiers, and were likely to foment rebellion wherever they found themselves across the British Empire.

In practice, the destinies of those imprisoned differed. Some were fortunate. It was later claimed that Waterford itself had few United Irishmen, that those who were involved were not ‘persons of education or fortune’, and that ‘the Roman Catholic gentlemen of the county remained loyal to the last’. In the city of Waterford, however, spies uncovered a conspiracy to kill members of the yeomanry. The United Irishmen included a publican named Sargent and a man named Quinn, who was servant of the Dean of Waterford. These men were found guilty but ‘through the intercession

of friends, they were only sentenced to be transported'. Whilst at New Geneva awaiting the arrival of their ship, they were 'permitted to effect their escape'.⁵⁷ The outcome for the majority of the prisoners housed at New Geneva Barracks was initially uncertain. Conditions were cramped in the extreme. It was reported that the 64th Regiment, at the beginning of 1799, 'marched from hence to New Geneva, there they are to remain till transports arrive to convey the prisoners from thence'.⁵⁸ It was also claimed that the ranks of the prisoners were swelled by a thousand peasants, rounded up for being rebels after the battles had ended; an accusation was made that many of them were there not because they had taken part in any violent action but 'for keeping late hours in public houses'. After the king of Prussia expressed a need for additional troops, a thousand of those accused of being United Irishmen were shipped to join his service.⁵⁹ The under-secretary of state for the Home Department, William Wickham, at one point thought that the Prussians were going to reject the proposal, and worried Castlereagh in Ireland that they would have to think of solutions of the problem of what to do with those they termed 'our convicts'.⁶⁰ In August 1799, *The Times* reported that '12 privates of the Kildare regiment, charged with seditious practices, were marched from Limerick to New Geneva, preparatory to their being sent to the Prussian service'.⁶¹ Ironically, one of the men sent to Prussia, who spent nine months at New Geneva, died fighting in Portugal as a lancer in De Berg's French unit against Wellington's infantry; he was mentioned in the latter's dispatches, as reported in the *Dublin Evening Herald* of 28 October 1811, where he was said to have fought gallantly against the British, refused quarter, and before being cut down to have called out, 'Remember I am an Irishman, and my name is O'Finn.' The story then emerged that Edward Finn at the age of nineteen in 1798 had been arrested by British mercenaries looking for arms, for saying that there were no rebels, but that the actions of the soldiers were inciting the people. He was transported to New Geneva, despite protestations by his family of his innocence, and then with two hundred others 'sold like an African slave' to Prussia. Finn was then sent to Emden, forced to serve in the army, and was among those defeated at Jena, at which point he and his associates joined the French army.⁶²

Forced transportation and enlistment was also undertaken to support British regiments stationed in the West Indies. One of the officers sent to organise the transportation recalled at New Geneva Barracks the 'ragged, destitute condition of the prisoners, their filthy habits, and the necessarily crowded state of the rooms'. He also remembered that several hundred rebels attempted to escape and were shot down, and that female relatives

of the prisoners, who were smuggling in spirits hidden in bladders under their clothing, were brutally disciplined for doing so. One morning all of the prisoners were brought out and made to listen to the reading of a Royal proclamation. The proclamation offered a free pardon to any rebel willing to volunteer to serve in the British Army abroad. In the square of New Geneva Barracks the colours of two regiments were placed in corners. The rebels were requested to join either standard, whilst a band played 'God Save the King'. Not a single rebel went forward, all remaining 'sul- len and scowling'. The commanding officer then selected a thousand of the healthiest men and asked the first in line if he would agree to enlist. On refusing with 'an horrid oath' against the king, the man was brought before a drumhead court martial, which was legal because the entire coun- try was under martial law. Once more, on being asked if he would agree to serve in the army of the King, he replied that 'he would rather live on grass like a beast than go soldiering'. The man was then whipped:

Scarcely had the lash crossed his shoulders, when all his ranting and hectoring vanished, and with an effort of loyalty that seemed magically to spring up from under the drummer's cat, he loudly vociferated, 'take me down, your honour—now, I'll serve the King, long life to him.' He was cut down [from the frame holding him still].

All of the other selected men agreed to serve and in due course were marched to the vessel waiting to take them to Martinique, a captured Dutch seventy-four gun ship named the *Admiral de Vries*.

Attempts to free the rebels before they embarked were anticipated, so as they marched slowly towards the ship, before the entire local popula- tion, the waistbands of their breeches were let out, so that each of them had to hold up their own trousers and could only run with difficulty. The British officer recalling this time served with many of these rebels- turned-government troops over the following two decades. He stated that, although only one in fifty survived, 'nothing could exceed the propriety of their behaviour. They became good and valuable soldiers'.⁶³ Other prison- ers were transported in chains to Australia, reputedly without any papers or official notices having been filed.⁶⁴ A report in *The Times* of May 1799 did report that two armed transports bound for New South Wales put into Passage, and eighty prisoners from New Geneva were put on board.⁶⁵ The inhumane conditions at the Barracks were described as the cause of the sickness of prisoners sent from Cork in a ship full of Irish rebels destined for New South Wales; there were so many deaths that the prisoners were removed and the entire ship was whitewashed and fumigated.⁶⁶ An army

surgeon, commenting in 1803 on some of the Irish soldiers who became his charges in a British hospital, noted that the men who arrived from New Geneva Barracks ‘generally brought with them a contagious fever’.⁶⁷

Once the last of the United Irishmen had been killed, transported or released, the prison was turned once again into a barracks. This took some years. As late as February 1803, the Reverend John Roberts, who was acting as clergyman to the convicts in the prison, was asking for remuneration for his services.⁶⁸ Soldiers were then garrisoned at New Geneva for many years. New Geneva in July 1801 was the location for a duel between an assistant staff surgeon and a lieutenant of the Devon and Cornwall Fencibles.⁶⁹ There is evidence of the desertion of a man ‘from the Dunbartonshire Fensibie Infantry, quartered at New Geneva . . . under a forged pass’ called Peter Bain, said to be a ‘private soldier in the above regiments, 5 feet 8 inches tall, 34 years of age, fair complexion, born in Glenorchy’.⁷⁰ Other soldiers found the barracks commodious. An ensign named James Mill wrote letters to his father from October 1810 stating that conditions at New Geneva were so good that his ‘chief wish is that we may remain here the winter’. Mill reported that ‘provisions in general in Ireland are much lower in price than you would suppose’, which meant that the troops ate extremely well, with ‘poultry and fish . . . very cheap; and meat is but 5d. per lb. Pat geese are sold in Waterford at 2s. a-piece, and chickens at 1s. 6d. per pair’. On the other hand, ‘butter and groceries are exorbitantly dear’.⁷¹ Mill argued that the site of New Geneva was excellent, but that the lack of contact with the outside world presented a problem, with the absence of newspapers a particular shortcoming:

In this place, which is an extremely stupid one, one cannot get any news except what comes from the London and Dublin papers. Our barracks are good and commodious. From two of my windows at present I command a very pleasant prospect of the sea, in my sitting-room and a side window to the barrack-yard, besides having a bedroom within.⁷²

Although Mill was especially concerned with the progress of the war in Spain and Portugal, and anticipated being transported into battle under Wellington, troops stationed at New Geneva continued to be used for domestic purposes. Mill related that ‘the only thing in agitation and of real importance here in Ireland seems to be the unanimity and earnestness with which the petitions for the dissolution of the Union are being carried on’. Opposition to the Union of 1801, which united Britain and Ireland, meant that ‘the houses of several gentlemen in this county have been forcibly entered by great numbers of disguised persons, and robbed of their

fire-arms and other means of protection'. What Mill termed 'marauding' he disclosed 'is not confined to Waterford, but, in fact, is practised all over Ireland'. It was not a surprise that his regiment was moved to Clonmel in February 1811, due to the 'well-organised and regular nocturnal meetings [of rebels], for the purpose of drilling and manoeuvring', which resulted in the hanging of eight rebels and fifty men being sentenced to be whipped. The latter, Mill stated 'have the option of that infliction or of enlisting in any Regiment they think proper, I suppose West India Regiments'. He also underlined the brutality of the use of the whip: 'the floggings that soldiers receive, though at times very severe, are as mere flea-bites compared to the floggings these poor wretches have received'. Mill considered flogging to be vital in the army because 'the service is composed of so large a portion of the worst and most unprincipled members of the lowest grades'.⁷³

Further records of the barracks give information about regiments on the move, courts martial and crimes, births and odd deaths and all the stuff of a normal military life. In 1810 one Lieutenant Lawson Huddleston, of the 2nd battalion of the 40th Regiment of Foot, was arraigned at Kilkenny on 27 December 1810 for having, between 3 and 21 December, had a fight with privates of his regiment in 'a petty pot house' [tavern] outside New Geneva barracks. It was claimed that Huddleston had associated with 'women of bad character', whom he had brought into the barracks, refused orders, abandoned his post, 'induced a private soldier, of the regiment, to quit his guard for the purpose of going to his room, at New Geneva barracks, to dance and drink with him' and promised 'to run any man through the body, that should oppose him' whilst 'using highly disrespectful and abusive language' towards his commanding officer.⁷⁴ Huddleston was cashiered early in 1811. In 1817, New Geneva barracks was stated as having space for sixty-two officers and 1,728 private soldiers; it was also stated that it might be disposed of, being surplus to current military requirements. This was the verdict of the deputy barrackmaster of the forces in Ireland, Lieutenant-General Quin John Freeman, who made the proposition to Sir Robert Peel, then Irish chief secretary, on 12 September. It was reported that the barracks was now devoid of troops, and part of the complex had been turned into a coal store. Pilfering of material on a nightly basis became so great that the buildings began to deteriorate rapidly. A man named George Ivie offered £3,000 to purchase the site in 1819, but refused to pay when he realised the extent of the destruction, with sashes, window frames, flags and shutters all having been stolen. A general advertisement for sale, along with several other Irish barracks, was issued in 1821.⁷⁵ In the end, Henry de La Poer Beresford, 2nd Marquess

of Waterford, paid £1,500 for New Geneva. (Another report states that he actually paid £800.) The fact that a Beresford, a scion of one of the families of the Protestant Ascendancy, ended up paying a pittance for New Geneva was of profound significance. Yet Beresford did not have a plan for the site. Rather, walls were dismantled and bricks reused in other places. Beresford sold the houses 'to a Mr. Galway, for almost a nominal price, who disposed of some of the materials on the spot with considerable profit, and conveyed part of the remainder to Dungarvan, where he used them in erecting cabins for his tenantry'.⁷⁶ Oddly, as late as 1833, a fee of £159 was listed as being paid by the British army for the 'annual expense of garrisons at home and abroad' for New Geneva.⁷⁷ By this time, however, history had abandoned the place. The following chapters of this book reconstruct, from a multitude of contemporary sources, the story of New Geneva, and the Genevan and Irish histories that led to the erection of a new town, which then became a barracks and a prison. As is always the case, to make any sense of what happened, we have to start by going backwards.

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