

## The Battle of Keimaneigh

That rugged, romantic part of Cork known as Keimaneigh, came into historic prominence in the latter end of 1822, by reason of a clash between English loyalists and Irish peasantry, and, though through a trick of perverse fates the incident amounted to little more than a hot skirmish, it has been recorded in the annals of Munster history under the dignified heading of the Battle of Keimaneigh.

The Pass and its immediate environs had long become the stronghold of penalized and harried Iveleary peasantry under the leadership of an unknown and mysterious young man, who went under the non-de-guerre of Captain Rock.

From this insurrectionary centre they made frequent incursions in search of arms towards the three adjoining towns - Bantry, Dunmanway, and Macroom. Returning from one such expedition in the Bantry area on a winter's day in the year aforesaid they were closely followed by Lord Bantry and his brother, Captain White, of Glengarriffe, attended by a party of the 39<sup>th</sup> Foot, and about forty mounted gentlemen.

Arrived in view of the apparent cul-de-sac at the mouth of the defile, a council of war was held by the loyalists. The officer in charge of the 39<sup>th</sup> declined to enter the Pass, as it was possible it would prove a veritable man-trap. But Lord Bantry, contemptuous of the rebels, pushed on through the Pass with his party of horsemen, leaving the 39<sup>th</sup> to guard the defile's western exit. It was his lordship's intention to raid the little villages of Ballingearry and Inchigeela, hoping to apprehend some of the insurrectionary ring-leaders.

News of the situation of matters was soon brought to Captain Rock, who laid his plans accordingly. Despatching one of his lieutenants - who went by the appellation of Starlight - with a detachment of sixty men to harass the 39<sup>th</sup> and lure them into the hills, where they could be easily dealt with, he sent another section of his men to undermine a gigantic boulder - poised somewhat like the Balancing Rock in Gray's "Riders of the Purple Sage" - and hurl it down to block the Pass against Lord Bantry's return. Captain Rock himself with the main body of his men took position on the Ballingearry side of the defile.

Wrapped in the customary heavy freize coat, which Spencer has so graphically described as "a fit house for an outlaw and a meet bed for a rebel". They harmonized so well with the surroundings that even to an observant eye they were indistinguishable from the multitudinous rocks that bestrew the place.

Meanwhile, at the western extremity of the Pass, matters were not going as smoothly with Captain Rock's aide-de-com as expected. The 39<sup>th</sup>'s officer, a hardened veteran of the Peninsular war, was too well versed in guerilla tactics to be decoyed into the hills by Whiteboys so, though some sharp hand-to-hand fighting took place, the English losses were nugatory.

Towards the decline of the short winter day Lord Bantry's troop of horsemen returned from a fruitless and dispiriting search of the villages and their environs. Horses and riders were equally fatigued, and they entered the straits in a ragged irregular column.

Captain Rock had by now become uneasy for the success of his plans, for, in addition to Starlight's failure at the western exit, he had had no signal of success from the party sent to heave the colossal rock, and it looked as if Lord Bantry's force would amalgamate with the 39<sup>th</sup> in spite of his schemes.

All might yet have been well if Capt. Rock's organisation not included in its ranks an old man whose two sons, the pride of his life, had been transported under the provisions of the

Insurrection Act for being found in possession of arms in their home at Gougane Barra. His wife had gone to an early grave with a broken heart as a consequence, and the doubly bereaved old man, seeking death in any form, had joined the Whiteboys.

Passing beneath him, now he beheld the one man whom he held responsible for all his misery, and whom he verily believed to be the embodiment of English tyranny in Ireland. He started up from his concealment and, vociferating lurid anathemas, hurtled a large slab of rock at Lord Bantry's head. So true was his aim that, though his lordship just managed to escape the jagged missile, his horse was seriously wounded. Captain White quickly drew his pistol and lodged a ball in the frenzied old man's brain. Down from its airy eminence crashed the body, tossed from crag to crag, until lay on the roadside a mangled bloody mass.

The sight was too much for Celtic blood. Forgetting all the prudential commands of Captain Rock to remain concealed until the enemy was well in the Pass, the Whiteboys started up like Clan Alpine's warriors at Roderick Dhu's command when

"Every tuft of bloom gave life

To plaided warrior armed for strife"

Lord Bantry, wisely decided that a gallop was preferable to a grave, put spurs to his wounded horse, and the whole cavalcade raced up the Pass as fast as jaded horses could take them, while an erratic hail of lead fell on every side, but doing no serious damage.

The party of Rockites set to heave the gigantic boulder worked feverishly to undermine it on sight of Lord Bantry's advent and, just as the last loyalist galloped past beneath it, down it thundered to the roadway with a reverberating crash - a half a minute too late. Instead of cutting off retreat for Lord Bantry, it really cut off pursuit. The cavalcade quickly rounded the point of the Pass and joined the King's troops, and all retreated helter-skelter to the safe haven of Bantry.

So fate, ever against the luckless Irish in those days, turned the tide of a skirmish which could well have been a battle, which many have greatly altered the history of Muskerry.

But it took the King's sappers many a weary hour and many a blast of powder to demolish the huge rock which blocked up

"That wild, romantic Pass

That leads the way to Cappabhee"

