

KILFINANE IN 1798

STORM CENTRE OF REBELLION

THE BRAVE EDMOND WALLIS

IN all Ireland there can hardly be a sight that evokes more heroic memories than that of the Old Thomond Bridge of Limerick against its battlemented background. One recalls such inspiring glories as that enacted nearby by the martyred Bishop of Emly, Most Rev. Dr. Terence O'Brien; by Sarsfield and many another amongst this ancient citadel's defenders away back to the first incursions of the Danes. Yet with all respect to these men of epic courage, there was one Co. Limerick man who most assuredly deserves a niche as high as any of them. He was one of those little-known heroes of '98. I never heard of him until a few nights ago, I chanced to find the account in some loose pages of "Young Ireland" signed by "Colebs," who evidently came from this martyr's own locality.

This old man was Edmond Wallis, locally known as "The Staker" and he was from Kilfinane, in the barony of Cus na Sleithe—the foot of the mountains. Even in the years preceding the Rebellion, Kilfinane was a storm-centre. Popular feeling had been roused against a local despot of a squire; so, one day, in resentment of his cruelty, a multitude of country people swarmed into the town, driving before them a load of hay. This they set alight under the market house. Some adherents of the tyrant were upstairs and it was with difficulty that they escaped.

With the whole British Army behind him, the local autocrat now summoned the militia, and he himself mustered a corps of Yeomanry from the neighbouring esquires.

On a July morning in 1798, a Captain of the Yeos rode forth with his Troop for whatever human blood-sport they could find. Suddenly one of the scouting soldiers spotted a coatless old man running across the fields. The Captain ordered them to ride down the fugitive; but the morning mists gave their fleeing prey the chance to hide in a nearby bog. The search continued.

Now, the foremost Yeoman's horse was seen to plunge up to his girth in a guagmire in the bog—the tradition persisted around Kilfinane that the rider headed into it purposely to give the escaping man a chance of his life. Not so humane was the following Yeoman; for, when he espied the old man he secured him and of to Kilfinane jail he was rushed under heavy guard.

The next day's courtmartial sentence on old Edmond Wallis was flogging for three successive Market days then to be hanged and beheaded.

On the first day of the scourging he was offered freedom if only he would betray his fellow-patriots. "He merely looked at the Captain without condescending to answer," the above Kilfinane narrator stated.

The flogging was carried out with typical sadism, but the poor man, during the three days never groaned, never flinched, never faltered."

"On the third day, when his lacerated back presented a hideous spectacle, the Captain said aloud: 'I bet a guinea he informs to-day!'

"When it was all over and he was taken down from the cart, he said—the only words that escaped this brave man the whole three days—'Well, Captain, you lost your bet!'

"He was hanged next day, beheaded, and his head fixed up on the Markethouse of Kilfinane, till wind and weather bleached the flesh off the skull.

"He was but a simple peasant, without culture, but he had the heart and courage of a hero. He bore the torture of the cruel scourge with a fortitude that could not be exceeded . . . Throughout Coshlea and the neighbouring Munster counties his name is a veritable household word at the firesides of the peasantry. If the blood of nobles had flowed through his veins for twenty generations he could not have shown more undaunted fortitude in a holy cause . . . Who can despair of Ireland's ultimate resurrection when such examples of true heroism are to be found among the men of '98, of whom Edmond Wallis is a worthy representative."

And that was the story of still another of Limerick's martyr-patriots which might have passed unnoticed outside of his own countryside had not the above Kilfinane writer memorised it in his account of about eighty years ago.