

# Memorial To A Brave Co. Limerick Patriot Who Was Inhumanly Tortured

Martinstown, nestling in the shade of the Kilfinane hills and situated between Kilmallock and Kilfinane, where Edmond Staker Wallis was executed, was on Sunday, 19th inst., with bunting, flags and banners for the unveiling of a memorial there to the memory of Wallis, the 1798 leader and patriot, who was born in Martinstown, in 1733, the son of a man who fought under General Patrick Sarsfield at the Siege of Limerick in 1691, and who was tortured, hanged and quartered at Kilfinane in 1798 for his part in the United Irishmen.

## MAYOR'S ADDRESS.

The unveiling ceremony, which was attended by over one thousand people, was performed by Alderman G. E. Russell, Mayor of Limerick, who said:

We are gathered here this afternoon to pay tribute to a man whose story of indomitable spirit and outstanding courage ranks as one of the bravest epics of our country's long and eventful struggle for national freedom. Edmond (or William) Wallis—best known as the Staker Wallis—was born in this part of the County Limerick in the year 1733. His people, who came of Norman stock, had lived here for generations and had suffered loss of rights and property for their part in the Rebellion of 1641 and for their opposition to the cruel tyranny of the Penal Laws. In 1691 the Staker's father and uncles fought under General Patrick Sarsfield at the Siege of Limerick and, after the great betrayal, one of these uncles went with the Irish Brigade to France as Captain of the Limerick Brigade.

## EARLY AND ACTIVE UNITED IRISHMAN

The Staker married in 1759 and lived at Tiermore, near Kilfinane, where his two sons and three daughters were born. As far as we know his life passed uneventfully until the founding of the United Irishmen, of which organisation he was an early and active member. In 1798 a reign of terror began throughout many counties of Ireland, where the cruel and outrageous conduct of the Yeomanry drove the defenceless people to rise against their oppressors. It was not long before the Staker became a marked man and eventually orders were issued for his arrest. He was forewarned, however, and made good his escape across the bog to the mountains. Although then sixty-five, years of age he was an active man and, with the help of a dense fog, would surely have made good his escape but for the baseness of a local farmer's son. This young man and others of his class had joined the Yeomen. Most of them had joined under compulsion; others, like the young man in question, of their own volition. The particular young man to whom we are referring was a noted horseman and he—and another horseman named Michael Walsh—gradually outdistanced the other pursuers, and led by a mastiff dog began to close in on the Staker. When Walsh saw they were gaining on Wallis he ran his horse into a boghole and drowned him—and nearly drowned himself—rather than catch up with Wallis. The other rider, however, pushed on and shortly afterwards captured the old man, who was subsequently lodged in Kilfinane Jail.

## FLOGGED THROUGH STREETS OF KILFINANE

The next day the Staker was visited by Captain Oliver, who commanded the Yeomanry in Kilfinane, and offered freedom and money to betray his comrades. The Staker refused and was ordered to be flogged. This was done while he was driven through the streets of Kilfinane, tied to the back of a cart. His unconscious body was later thrown back into jail and a few days later he was again offered freedom if he would divulge the secrets of the United Irishmen. Again he refused and again he was flogged through the town of Kilfinane. This time his wife walked by his cart and, although brokenhearted by his terrible suffering, begged him not to tell the names of his compatriots, who would suffer the same fate as himself.

Again he was flung back into jail and left for a week without attention. Then, for the third time, Oliver visited him again thinking that surely this time the offer of freedom must be accepted by the broken old man. Once more he was answered by a blank refusal and in a rage shouted: "Wallis, you are a fool. You're an old man and I can give you enough to live on for the rest of your life and will see you safely out of the country if you will but tell me the name of one man who was with you in the Society. If you persist in silence you will lose your head."

## TERRIBLE EXHIBITION OF CRUELTY.

The Staker answered, "Far better, Oliver, for one old man to lose his head than for half the young men in the Ballinvarne Parish to lose theirs." When Oliver could secure no information from the Staker he decided to have him publicly flogged at the fair at Ballinvarne in the hopes that some friends in the United Irishmen might be tempted to rescue him and thereby give themselves away. This bloody ruse failed, however, as an officer in the Yeomen named Bennett, seeing the condition of Wallis's body, ordered the inhuman torture of the old man to be stopped.

This terrible exhibition of cruelty so enraged the people that they determined to rescue the Staker from Kilfinane Jail. Unfortunately, however, the Yeomen had been warned and the strengthened defences of the jail defied the efforts of the rescuers.

When Oliver found that neither bribes nor torture could break the old man's spirit he determined to have him executed. A scaffold was erected in the jail yard and without trial or clergyman the Staker was brought out and hanged. After being hanged a short time he was taken down, his head struck off, his body divided into quarters and thrown into a large hole in front of the jail. His head was placed on a stake on top of the Market House in the main street of the town; there it remained, guarded, for six weeks when finally it was removed and buried in the family burying ground at the Abbey, Glenroe.

## TYPICAL OF THE AGE-LONG STRUGGLE.

So ends the story—but not the memory—of the Staker Wallis. In his life and in the manner of his death this "loyal, straight and prudent old man"—as the lament describes him—typified the age-long struggle of his country for freedom, a struggle carried on so gloriously in succeeding generations.

Although more than a century and a half have passed since the Staker Wallis met his brave death, it is good and proper that we, of this generation should turn back our thoughts to those days of suffering and heroism; of loyalty

and treachery and, above all, of unity of Irishmen, North and South, joined together in common endeavour to achieve the noble aim of Tone—"to break the connection with England, to substitute for Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter the common name of Irishman."

As we unveil this worthy memorial to the brave and resolute Staker Wallis, let us resolve to be worthy of his great sacrifice and to try, each one of us, to contribute in a spirit of unity and self-sacrifice to the final achievement of independence, peace and prosperity for all our country.

## ORATION BY MR. MANNIX JOYCE.

Mr. Mannix Joyce began in Irish a stirring oration. Continuing in English, he said—

It is more than a century and a half since Staker Wallis died on the scaffold in Kilfinane. His enemies who tortured and hanged him thought they had finished with him when they flung his mangled body into the pit of shame they had dug for it they never knew that "from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations."

Staker Wallis died, branded a criminal and a traitor by the powerful forces that held his land in bondage; but by dying nobly as he did he handed on a tradition to the generations that were to follow. To-day, the tyranny that sent him to his death is no more; it has been swept away by men who believed in the ideals for which Staker Wallis died. To you, the people of this, his own locality, he is not, nor ever has been, a criminal or a traitor; instead he has always been one of the bravest of Ireland's heroes. And now you have done him fresh honour by erecting here in his memory this noble Celtic cross, which has just been unveiled by the Mayor of Limerick City. We are very proud to have Mr. Russell amongst us to-day. By coming here to perform this unveiling ceremony he has paid his city's tribute and his own gracious personal tribute to a man whom your own forefathers knew, whom they saw strike against the tyranny that crushed them, whom they saw die heroically on the scaffold in Kilfinane.

## BACKGROUND OF THE TIMES IN WHICH HE LIVED.

It is well that we should cast our minds back to-day and recall the story of Staker Wallis and endeavour to set him against the background of the times in which he lived. He was born here in this townland of Tiermore in 1733, his people, who were descended from the Norman family of de Valois, having been settled in the district for generations. His real name was William Wallis; how he came to be called "Staker" no one is quite sure. He held a small farm of six or eight cows, and was married to Hanora Riordan of Glenroe, who bore him two sons and three daughters. Even with this scant information we can form an idea of the kind of man he would have been—hard-working, industrious, intelligent a man of the people.

William Wallis, or Staker Wallis, to give him the name by which we best know him, grew up in Penal Ireland. He had heard often of Sarsfield and Ballyneety; and of an uncle of his own who had helped to defend Limerick's walls and who later had sailed with the Wild Geese to France. When he was thirteen years old he heard the glad tidings from Pontenoy where the Irish Brigade had covered itself with glory. The Gaelic poets of Limerick were busily writing their poems in his day; in all probability he was well acquainted with the great Malgus poet, Aindrias Mac Craith, who was born close to Tiermore in or about the same year as he himself was born. Staker Wallis was, of course, an Irish speaker, for all this district was Irish-speaking in the 18th century and well into the 19th. But the Ireland of the Wild Geese, of the Gaelic poets and of Staker Wallis, was Penal Ireland, broken, crushed, tyrannised Penal Ireland.

## RELIGIOUS AND RACIAL OPPRESSION.

Wallis had lived more than 60 years in that Ireland over which hung the black shadow of religious and racial oppression; and then, as the century drew to a close, he saw a ray of light break suddenly through the Penal darkness. That ray of light and hope came with the founding of the Society of the United Irishmen by Theobald Wolfe Tone when, for the first time in all that terrible century of frustration and hopelessness, Irishmen began to be organised on a national basis.

The prostrate nation was rising to her knees. And somewhere in this countryside a man took a book in hand and, speaking very deliberately, said

"I, William Wallis, in the presence of God, do pledge myself to my country, that I will use all my abilities and influence in the full attainment of a full representation of all the people of Ireland, and that I will labour to promote a brotherhood of affection, an identity of interests, a communion of rights and a union of power amongst Irishmen of all religious persuasions, for the furtherance of the freedom of their country."

It was the oath of the United Irishmen.

The men of all this countryside that you see round about us flocked into the new organisation, and when they looked about them to see who was most worthy to captain their division of the United Men their eyes fell on William Wallis of Tiermore; and it was this man of more than three score years they chose to be their leader. They chose well, as history was to prove.

Irish history had worked itself into a very definite pattern since the Cromwellian Plantation in the mid-seventeenth century. Ranged against the common people who represented that thing which we call the Irish nation were the forces of government and the ascendancy who represented the alien conqueror. The old Irish nation was represented in South-east Limerick in the last decade of the 18th century by Staker Wallis and his comrades; the foreign conqueror by Captain Charles Oliver of Captain's Lane, Kilfinane.

## DESCENDANT OF CROMWELLIAN PLANTER.

This Oliver was a descendant of the Cromwellian Planter Robert Oliver, and was in charge of the local yeomanry corps which, for the most part, was made up of Palatines from the settlement of Castle Oliver. A company of militia was also quartered in the town. As well, Oliver compelled many of the local farmers' sons who owned good horses to join the forces he had mustered for the maintenance of his brand of "law and order" in the neighbourhood of Kilfinane. It was a common sight to see groups of these young men riding into Kilfinane in the evenings to take part in the military exercises organised by Captain Oliver. Two of them were later to play very important but very different parts in the great tragedy that was soon to throw its shadow over the district.

The United Men of Staker Wallis's division met in one of those time-honoured plotting-houses of rebellion in Ireland—a blacksmith's forge. Later, when times grew more dangerous, they met in a remote spot in the hills in Ballinvarne. All the while, Oliver was keeping a close watch on Wallis's movements. In the struggle between those two men and what they stood for was involved the deadly struggle between two nations. The inevitable clash was soon to come. All South-East Limerick knows the story.

## THROUGH THE RED BOG.

It began on that foggy Sunday morning in the latter part of March, 1798, when Oliver mustered his forces in Kilfinane. Northwards out of the town they rode, yeomanry and militia and the farmers' sons who had been pressed into service. They were heading for Tiermore. As they drew near this very spot where we stand a countless man was seen running across the fields: it was Staker Wallis. Knowing only too well what to expect from his merciless enemies, he had taken flight from them, racing straight towards the Red Bog through which, he knew, his mounted pursuers dare not follow.

Looking across that Red Bog close here beside us, can we not conjure up a vision of all that happened there on that tragic March morning long ago. We see fast racing across the soft treacherous ground the figure of a man no longer young; we see the baffled soldiers riding up and down hurling curses and threats after him; we see Oliver compelling the farmers' sons, who know the ground, to go through the bog; we see them move forward, and as they do a rider on a splendid horse bounds clear ahead. He is closing in on Wallis. Then that leading horse rises in the air, takes a flying leap and is soon no more. Michael Walsh of Martinstown has done his noble deed, for sooner than capture the man who races before him he has jumped his horse to its death in a bog hole, risking his own life to do so. Men will soon be singing the praises of that deed, singing the praises of

"A Mhic Uí Walsh an Ioin  
A chuaidh dá bháithhead ins an mholn"

"O Michael Walsh the noble  
Who went drowning in a boghole."

All this we can see in the mind's eye as we look across that boggy ground that holds the bones of Michael Walsh's splendid horse.

## DESPERATE BID FOR FREEDOM.

The rest of the story we can quickly tell. Wallis continued his desperate bid for freedom. He ran on to Kilmurphy, and headed for Cosh. But now his pursuers, having made a detour of the bog, were again thundering behind him. He reached Moorestown, but then his age began to tell, and as he struggled up the steep slopes of Killeen he was captured—and not, alas, by a foreign military man, but by one of the local farmers' sons, a young man who apparently never paused to think either of the fate that would overtake the captive, or of the terribly harsh judgment that the generations to come would pronounce on his captor.

Staker Wallis was taken a prisoner to Kilfinane and lodged in jail. Next day Oliver visited him in his cell and offered him his freedom and a large sum of money if he would disclose the names of his comrades in the United Irishmen. Wallis refused all his offers; and then other methods were tried in an endeavour to make him tell. He was stripped to the waist, his wrists were bound and he was tied to the back of a cart, which was driven through the main street of Kilfinane. And as that cart lumbered through the street Wallis was flogged until he collapsed unconscious under the savage punishment.

## FLOGGED SAVAGELY A SECOND TIME.

A few more days in his cell; another visit and another offer from Oliver, another refusal from the prisoner; and Kilfinane sees Staker Wallis flogged savagely for a second time through its streets. This time the victim's wife witnessed her husband's torture, and continually called on him to be brave and not to divulge his secret. The sufferer kept his silence, and when, for the second time, he was thrown back unconscious into his cell, the names of his companions were still safe in his keeping.

There was to be a fair in Ballinvarne on April 21st, and to that fair Wallis was taken, and publicly flogged for the third time, as a warning to other rebels and, perhaps, in the hope that some of his comrades might attempt to rescue him and so reveal their identity. The flogging was cut short here, however, by the powerful intervention of a humane officer named George Wheeler Bennett, who happened to ride into the fair field.

## ATTEMPT TO RESCUE THE PRISONER.

Kilfinane was attacked some time later and an attempt made to rescue the prisoner. The attempt failed, and Oliver retaliated by sending Wallis to his death on the scaffold. The dead man's head was struck off and, after the barbaric fashion of the times, set up on a stake in the market place of Kilfinane. And ever since that tragic far-off day the story of Staker Wallis has been lovingly told in all this South East Limerick countryside where he lived and laboured, and where he suffered and died so courageously.

How appropriately the words uttered by Terence MacSwiney could be applied to Staker Wallis whom we honour here to-day:

"For one armed man cannot resist a multitude," wrote MacSwiney, "nor one army conquer countless legions; but not all the armies of all the Empires of the earth can crush the spirit of one true man. And that one man will prevail."

Let us remember Staker Wallis then, and the fight he waged against the might of a great tyranny. And let us remember, too, his nameless companions in the United Irishmen, and all the nameless desperate men of that black 18th century, organised and unorganised, who, mindless of torture and death, forcibly asserted their rights to their lands and altars, and showed Ireland might be battered and broken, there was a blow left in her yet.

## NO LIMERICK MAN SO WELL REMEMBERED.

No Limerick man of the past has been so well remembered and honoured among his own people as Staker Wallis has been. They wrote a *caolneadh*—a Gaelic keener for him, of which only a fragment has survived, a fragment that names the two farmers' sons who played such prominent but very different parts in the death

chase through the Red Bog—

"A Mhic Uí Walsh an Ioin,  
A chuaidh dá bháithhead ins an mholn"

Dlí díreach an sean duine  
crionna

Agus scolleadh in a ghno.  
A Mhic Uí Shioda, nar bhuaidh  
Críost leat.

A lean e triú an gceo."

And in Vol. I of Roche's Collection of Irish Music we find a tune called "The Lament for Staker Wallis." A band has been named after him, and various hurling teams about which ballads have been written. And in Chicago, in 1909, a memoir of him was published by the grand-daughter of his grandson. Two plays have been written about him and produced in his own district.

Ballad and song; plays, a book; names of hurling team and band—they have held the name of Staker Wallis in honour for a century and a half. And now there is added this monument of stone. With inscriptions in Irish and in English, it stands in this townland of Tiermore to tell that here was born as brave a man as ever died for an oppressed and outraged people.

## OTHER SPEAKERS.

Mr. Eoin O'Mahony, K.M., B.L., Vice-Chairman of the Anti-Partition Association, Cork; Mr. T. Crowley, T.D., Ballylanders; Mr. P. J. O'Sullivan, Elton, also spoke.

Mr. Frank Roche, Elton, a member of the Committee, who presided and introduced the speakers, said that two things remained to be done in this country: one was the ending of partition and the other the saving of the Irish language. We cannot, he said, sufficiently honour our patriot dead if we do not preserve the Irish language.

Others on the platform were—Mr. W. T. O'Grady, N.T.; Mr. J. Kearney, Treasurer of the Committee, and Mrs. Russell.

The committee in charge of the work of collecting funds for the erection of the memorial, and its erection were:—

President, Mr. Cornelius Kearney; Chairman, Mr. D. Clancy; Joint Treasurers, Messrs. John Kearney and T. Casey; Secretary, Mr. T. O'Regan; Assistant Secretary, Mr. P. Vaughan; members, Messrs. Frank Roche and P. J. O'Sullivan.

## THE MEMORIAL.

The memorial consists of a Celtic cross erected on the roadside, near Martinstown Church, in the townland where Staker Wallis was born, with the inscription—"Erected in honour of Edmond Staker Wallis, who was tortured and executed by the British at Kilfinane in 1798 for the cause of Irish freedom."

The memorial was executed by Mr. K. Hanley, Emly.

## FELS ITEMS.

Prior to the unveiling ceremony, there was a Fels, in which the following contributed items.—

Miss Aine Tuohy, Munster champion step dancer, who gave an exhibition of Irish dancing and also sang; Mr. John Lyons, Bulgaden, who sang; The O'Rourke School of Dancing, Limerick, who gave an exhibition of Irish dancing; nine year old Gearoid O'Tuohy, who gave an excellent recitation and also gave an exhibition of Irish dancing; Gearoid O'Neill and Aine Tuohy, who danced a two-hand reel; music on the accordion by T. Bowman and A. Benson.

## THREE BANDS.

Three bands attended the ceremony. They were—The Staker Wallis Pipe Band, the Kilfinane Brass Band and the Bulgaden Schoolchildren's Tin Whistle Band.

©Irish Newspaper Archives