



A Potted Historical Background to Belfast during Bunting's lifetime

by A.G. Malcolm, 1851

Andrew George Malcolm, *The History of the General Hospital Belfast, and the other Medical Institutions of the town* (Belfast, 1851), pp.13-15

... During the reign of Queen Ann, and subsequently, the loyalty of the inhabitants was repeatedly expressed; and, by their prompt measures to repel the threatened invasions made, in the first instance, by the Pretender, and afterwards by the French, they exhibited an attachment to the constituted Government, without, at the same time, yielding their characteristic independence.

It was at this period that the first Volunteers were incorporated. Thurot had landed, and reduced Carrickfergus, in 1760, and was only prevented from falling upon Belfast by the conflicting opinions of his colleagues; and time having been thus secured for the levying of troops, upwards of 5,000 men were soon enrolled, and marched upon Carrick, on which the enemy, in alarm, moved off.

In the year 1779, on the rumour of another French invasion, the Volunteers were again enrolled, to the number, at first, only of 340, and presented, when reviewed, in the following year, by the Earl of Charlemont, the appearance of a well-disciplined corps. Reviews were held, for several years, with amazing "pomp and circumstance"; the numbers greatly increased, and, in 1781, amounted to more than 5,000 men. This movement, it may be mentioned, was general throughout the country, and a most extraordinary political influence was gradually created, which exhibited itself in, first, relieving the restrictions on trade; afterwards, in the establishment of an independent House of Commons; and, in 1784, in the exclusive encouragement of Irish manufacture.

The celebrated Northern Whig Club, promoted by the Earl of Charlemont, sprung out of the abuse of the liberty so suddenly acquired; but it does not appear to have, in any degree, stifled the call for universal freedom. The commemoration of the French Revolution was celebrated on the 14th of July, 1791, with expressions of immoderate joy, and was repeated in the following year with similar enthusiasm.

HISTORY SINCE 1792.

March, 1793, was the date of the extinction of the Volunteers, an event which closely followed the report of the Secret Committee of the House of Lords, which contained evidence of a wide-spread spirit of independence hostile to the English Government. The proclamation against armed associations now issued; yet the frequent arrests and penalties consequent thereon seemed to have made no impression, as we find it recorded that, on the 10th of May, 1795, representatives from seventy-two associations of United Irishmen met in this town, to complete their arrangements for action.

Notwithstanding arrests for high treason were numerous in this and the following year, on the news of the French fleet being off Bantry Bay, on January 7, 1797, the larger proportion of the inhabitants agreed to arm in defence, and both Orange and Masonic Lodges embraced the opportunity of expressing their loyalty. Arrests, prosecutions, and seizures of arms nevertheless continued the order of the day; and in May, 1798, martial law was proclaimed. The rebellion broke out in earnest, and the yeomen of Belfast joined the troops on the 12th and 13th of June, at the Battle of Ballynahinch.

The dispersion of the disaffected immediately followed, and tranquillity was so far restored, that martial law was abolished in May, 1799; and, when on October 7th, Marquis Cornwallis visited Belfast, he received an address in favour of the Union; and, though a few arrests continued to be made for some time after, and an abortive rising took place in 1803, this unfortunate era was virtually at an end.

Upon the passing of the Act of Union, in 1800, a Bill received the sanction of the Legislature, for the municipal government of Irish cities and towns. By this act the government of the town, though still vested in the sovereign and burgesses, established the appointment of Life Commissioners, and a Committee of Police, to be appointed annually, the former being authorized to regulate the paving, lighting, and cleansing of the town as well as other matters affecting the health, safety, and comfort of the inhabitants; and the latter to attend to the contracts, and the levying of taxes for the public expenses. John Brown, Esq., was the first Sovereign under these regulations.

This regime continued in force forty years, and was succeeded in the year 1842, by the present Corporation, which, in conformity with the Municipal Act of 1841, consists of a Mayor, ten Aldermen, and thirty Councillors. George Dunbar, Esq., was honoured with the first mayoralty. ...

Transcribed by David Byers, 17 March 2018, Belfast.