

FRANCIS DOBBS AND THE ACTON VOLUNTEERS

BY BARBARA BEST

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair....”

(A Tale of Two Cities: Charles Dickens)

The famous opening lines of Dickens’ classic novel, about events in Paris and London in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, could equally apply to Ireland during that time, for it was a period of many great dramatic events the effects of which, in some cases, remain to the present day. In all great dramas there are leading characters and while names such as those of Grattan, Flood, Tone and McCracken are well-remembered, one of those supporting characters who deserves to be better known, is Francis Dobbs.

Who was Francis Dobbs, and what is his local connection?

In his, ‘*Historic Memoirs of Ireland*’ (Vol. 2) Sir Jonah Barrington described Francis Dobbs as “a gentleman of respectable family but moderate fortune.” He was the younger son of the Reverend Richard Dobbs of Castle Dobbs, Co. Antrim, and grandson of Richard Dobbs of Castle Dobbs (1660-1711) who, as Mayor, greeted William of Orange when he landed at Carrickfergus in 1688. Francis was born at Castle Dobbs, on 27th April, 1750. In his ‘Memoirs’ Sir Jonah Barrington, who knew him well, described Francis Dobbs as follows:

“a person of singular reputation whose extraordinary bent of understanding, and the whimsical though splendid extravagances of his eccentric mind introduced him into a notice, which the common exercise of his mind would have effected.... He had been educated for the Bar, where he afterwards acquired some reputation as a constitutional lawyer. He seemed to possess two minds, one adapted for his profession and the usages of society, the other for excursions into contemplative deduction that sometimes decoyed his judgement beyond the frontiers of reason. Each mind fortunately followed its appropriate occupation without interruption from the other and left the theologian and the prophet sufficiently distinct from the lawyer and the gentleman..... Obstinate and headstrong he was gentle and philanthropic and with an ardent temper inoffensive as an infant... ..He had few virtues missing and no vices discernible.”

He was educated at Trinity College Dublin and as a young man he devoted himself to literary pursuits,



Francis Dobbs (1750-1811)

writing plays and poetry. His play ‘*The Irish Chief or Patriot King*’ was presented at the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin. He soon became absorbed with military enthusiasm. He purchased an ensigncy in the 63rd Regiment and remained with them until 1773, becoming Lieutenant and Adjutant. During his career in the army he studied law and in due course was called to the Irish Bar. In 1773 he married Jane, daughter of Alexander Stewart of Ballintoy, Co. Antrim and Acton, Co. Armagh, and settled on the Acton property where he acted as agent for his brother-in-law Alexander Thomas Stewart. He and Jane made their home in Druminargal House.

Nothing is known of Francis Dobbs’ career as estate manager but in light of his other activities and the fact that his brother-in-law was a liberal and humane man, one would expect that he was active and energetic and that his treatment of the tenants would have been better than average. However it was during his time as agent in Acton, that events far away caused Francis Dobbs to become a prominent figure in national affairs.



Acton House built by Alexander Thomas Stewart

Between 1775 and 1782 American colonists fought to secure their independence from Britain. To wage the war against the rebellious colonists, troops normally stationed in Ireland had to be withdrawn and sent across the Atlantic. As a result troop numbers in Ireland were greatly depleted.

The Government could find no money to finance a militia and in light of this situation and with rumours of a French invasion rife, citizens took it upon themselves to organise their own defences. A 'Volunteer' company was formed in Belfast on Saint Patrick's Day 1778 and recruitment was brisk. Their example was quickly followed by gentlemen elsewhere and Volunteer companies sprang up all over the country.

Quoted by T.G.F.Patterson in his notes on 'Co Armagh Volunteers', Lord Charlemont wrote, *"Abandoned by the Government in the hour of danger, the inhabitants of Belfast were left to their own defence, and boldly and instantly undertook it....Ireland was hourly threatened with invasion – The enemy was at our Doors, and Administration had no possible means of Assistance – Unsupported by England and destitute both of men and of money they shuddered at the idea of the most trifling incursion – they feared and consequently hated the Volunteers, yet to them alone They looked for Assistance, for Safety – and They saw, with a Mixture of Grief and Joy, the Country, which They were unable to defend, completely protected by its own Efforts, without that Expense to which they were wholly unequal"*

In June 1778, The Belfast Newsletter reported that the Belfast Volunteers had *"....marched to church in their uniform, which is scarlet turned up with black velvet, white waistcoat and breeches.....The clothing of the majority of the Company was of Irish Manufacture; and the whole made a brilliant and pleasing appearance."*

One of the most enthusiastic mentors of these Volunteers was James Caulfield, First Earl of Charlemont. He urged others to set up Volunteer companies and locally the man to rise to the occasion was his friend, Francis Dobbs. In 1779 under Dobbs' guidance came into being a body of men known as 'The Tyrone's Ditches and Acton Volunteers'. Charlemont was elected 'Commander-in-Chief' and became known as *'The Volunteer Earl'*.

Initially the Volunteers comprised mostly landlords, substantial farmers, merchants and professional men who were the only ones who could afford to pay around £1-15s. for a musket, buy a uniform and suffer loss of earnings while drilling and on manoeuvre. Significantly however, the majority of the Volunteers were Presbyterians who were otherwise excluded from all political influence.

In his notes on the Volunteers in Co Armagh, T.G.F. Patterson states that the first reference to the Acton company arises in a letter from Dobbs to Lord Charlemont, dated from Acton, September 16, 1779, when Francis Dobbs wrote,

"... In consequence of your lordship's obliging favour, I have accepted the association in this neighbourhood, and yesterday I had the pleasure of meeting between fifty and sixty young active fellows, whom I am well satisfied, will not disgrace the county of Armagh. I know not how far right I am in applying to your lordship for arms, but if it is not an improper application, you would very highly oblige me by allowing me sixty stands for which I will give your lordship any security you shall require .."

At first the intention of the Acton company *"was to dress in blue as being more convenient for countrymen"*, however, for *"the honour of being part of a body headed by Lord Charlemont,"* they decided *"to uniform exactly with the Armagh Company."* and so their uniform was the same as the Armagh



Druminalgal House

Volunteers, scarlet faced with white. By the 15th of October they were seventy-strong and forwarded a resolution to Charlemont with regard to forming the Armagh companies into a battalion. In the same month,



Alexander Thomas Stewart

Charlemont Fort supplied sixty firelocks.

The company probably had similar *Articles of Association* to those of the Armagh Volunteers which, in short, were to perfect themselves in military discipline and in general to promote peace, reconciliation and good order in the country.

In May 1779, the Lord Lieutenant, after much heart-searching, agreed to give out to the Volunteers the sixteen thousand militia muskets he had in store. By handing out so many weapons to a force with no legal status, the Lord Lieutenant had advertised his government's acute financial embarrassment and in doing so greatly strengthened the Volunteers over whom he had no control. There were rumours of French invasion and in a few weeks the number of Volunteers leaped from twelve thousand to forty thousand, half of them in Ulster, and most of the new recruits were Presbyterians, who were now armed.

In the early days of Volunteering, the county companies often marched long distances to reviews and conventions. In 1789, for instance, a review was held in Belfast – the Acton and Tyrone's Ditches corps, being one of the most active companies in the county, attended, as did Armagh 1st, Clare, Teemore and Johnston and Richill and others from Co Armagh. The Acton and Tyrone's Ditches corps also attended the Belfast reviews of 1780, 1781 and 1783.

To get to Belfast meant billeting twice on the way – the first night at Lurgan or Moira, second at Lisburn or Lambeg. Coming home was a reversal of the journey. Such exercises of course took people away for a week at a time, and resulted in serious neglect of farm work and business. Belfast Companies, incidentally, rarely if ever made the journey to Armagh.

Volunteers were democratically organised: officers were

elected by the ranks and, for example, a man who had just paid £25,000 for an estate in Larne was content to serve as a private in his local company. Some landlords were alarmed by the radicalism of fellow Volunteers but for the moment they all pulled together to defend their country. Francis Dobbs, not surprisingly, was elected Captain of the Acton and Tyrone's Ditches Volunteers. By 1781, as the threat of invasion receded, it was almost inevitable that the Volunteers would turn their attention to other matters and as their confidence grew, they began to discuss conditions at home and to seek to address the social problems oppressing their fellow citizens.

At the end of the seventeenth century Ulster had been the poorest province in Ireland, and the early part of the eighteenth century was characterised by terrible hardship because of repeated harvest failures. However, the introduction of new technology in linen-making in the 1740s gave a dramatic boost to the province's economy. Added to this, the potato was introduced which provided better sustenance. New markets were opening up in the colonies and as international trading conditions improved Ulster became the most prosperous of the four provinces.



The medal presented to the Acton and Tyrone's Ditches Volunteers

While the success of the linen industry not only brought prosperity to those directly engaged in it but also stimulated the whole economy, by providing a ready market for the produce of farms across the province, it seems that in some cases concentration on weaving and its associated industries led to the neglect of agriculture. Arthur Young, in his journal of 'A Tour in Ireland' 1779 wrote, "I am now got into the linen country, and the worst husbandry I have met with" as he made his way from Ravensdale by an "abominably bad" turnpike road into County Armagh. Yet at the same time he saw that the people were more prosperous than in any other part of Ireland, and he came to appreciate that linen, not farming, was their main source of income.

Approximately ninety percent of the population



Belt-plate of the Belfast Volunteers

(comprising Catholics and Dissenters or Presbyterians) was ineligible to vote or to be elected to parliament. The other ten percent, comprising the members of the Established Church, the Church of Ireland, retained all power.

Another grievance lay in the tithing system. Catholics and Presbyterians had to hand over one tenth of all income to support the Church of Ireland clergy and while some of the Penal Laws had been repealed or allowed to lapse, many restrictions on Catholic and Presbyterian participation in the civic life of the country still applied. *“The food of the common Irish, potatoes and milk,”* said Arthur Young, *“has been used as an example of extreme poverty, but this opinion is very amazing in a country, many of whose poor people are as athletic in their form, as robust, and as capable of enduring labour as any on earth. When I see their men athletic, and their women beautiful, I know not how to believe them subsisting on an unwholesome food”*.

Further tension was evident in rural Ireland, especially in south Ulster, where secret fraternal organisations flourished, principally the *Peep o’ Day Boys* (Protestant) and the *Defenders* (Catholic). Their members were mostly farm labourers and weavers. Sectarian tensions were fuelled by the rapid increase in the population— which had almost doubled since the mid-century to just under five million. This increased competition for land.

Ireland’s constitutional position closely resembled that of the American colonies now in revolt. Westminster alone controlled imperial and foreign affairs, and the Lord Lieutenant and other members of the Irish executive were appointed, not by the parliament in Dublin, but by the government of the day in London. The Irish Parliament – utterly unrepresentative except of the leading landed-interests – met only every other year.

The attitude of the government and ruling elite towards the Volunteers was at best ambivalent, for while the menace of invasion remained, their presence was a comfort if a necessary evil; when the danger passed, the existence of this large armed body over which they had

no control presented a potential threat. As well as this, within the parliament a group led by Henry Grattan and Henry Flood opposed the Government and sought to obtain more genuine power for the Irish Parliament. No one was better placed to forge this alliance between the Volunteers and the Patriots than Charlemont, Commander-in-Chief of the Volunteers and a Member of Parliament.

The 18th century saw the building of many mansions – including Castle Upton, Baronscourt, Castle Coole, Glenarm Castle, Caledon House, Florence Court and many others where great sums were spent on gardens and demesnes.

Such luxury and beauty could be enjoyed only with the acquiescence of the tenantry, who had little to spare for expensive entertainment – though Young wrote that he saw *“a ragged weaver put twenty guineas on a horse at the Maze races,”* and he observed that Lurgan weavers kept *“packs of hounds, every man joining; they hunt hares: a pack of hounds is never heard, but all the weavers leave their looms, and away they go after them by hundreds. This much amazed me”*

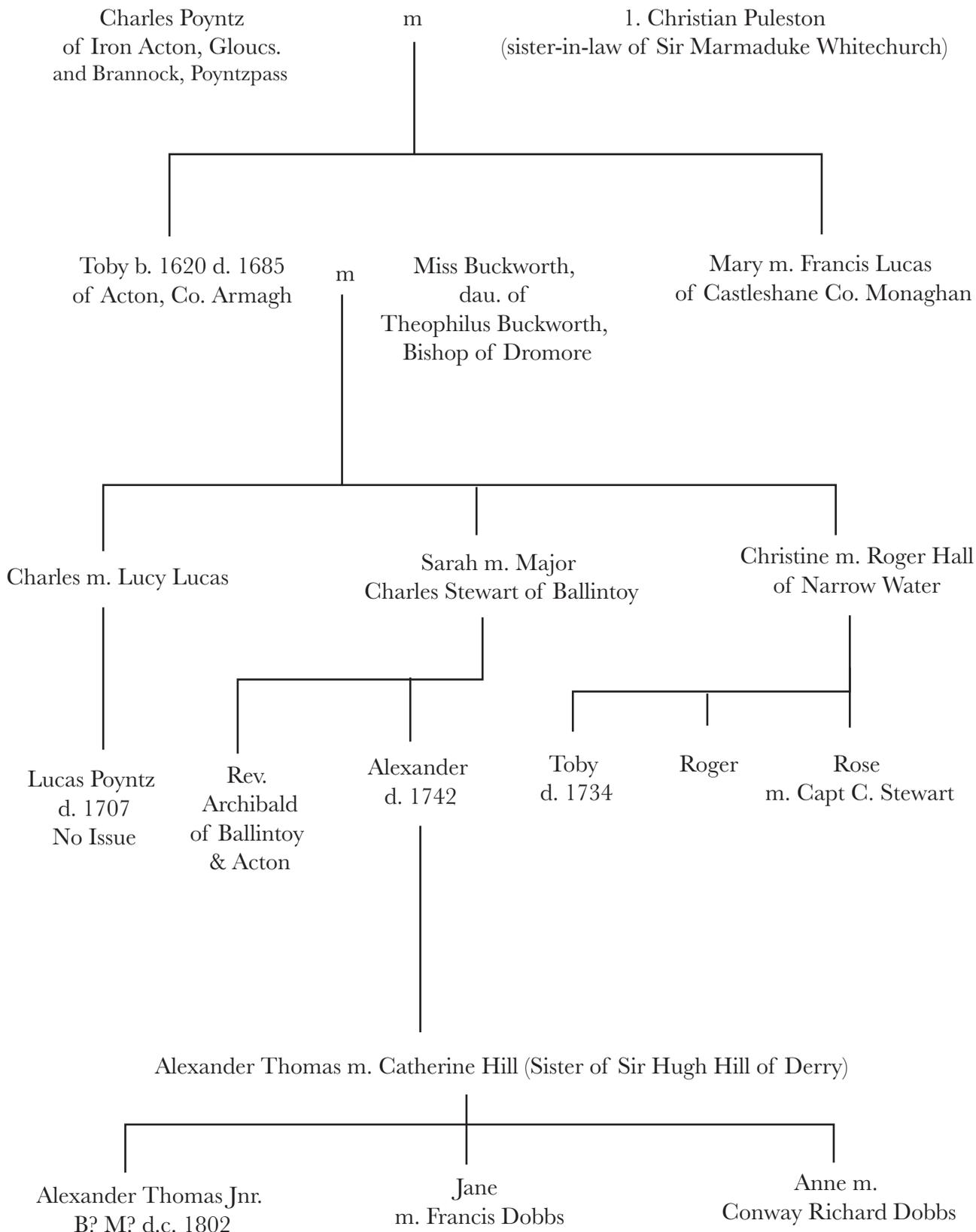
So by 1782, with the American War going badly for the government, the Volunteer force, initially raised to defend Ireland against invasion, was taking on a more political role. A great Convention was held at Dungannon on February 15th 1782 attended by delegates from 147 Volunteer Companies. Francis Dobbs did most of the organising of this Convention and played a central role in drawing up a number of radical resolutions which were proposed and passed at the Convention.

R.B. McDowell in his ‘Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution’ wrote,

“... Francis Dobbs, a soldier, a barrister, an M.P., a playwright, an ambitious historian and an ardent theologian, convinced that ‘a more equal representation of the people is unavoidably blended with other subjects’ prepared for the delegates attending the Dungannon convention in 1783 a comprehensive programme of reforms. It included not only the redistribution of seats and an extension of the franchise to every man who paid hearth money, but also the codification of criminal and civil laws, the creation of provincial and district courts, free trade and the abolition of tithes and all direct taxes. Dobbs’ state religion would have had bishops, a very short subscription for the clergy and a simple liturgy based on the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Besides maintaining this latitudinarian church the state would pay all clergy, Catholic and Protestant, in the country. . . .”

While visionary, much of this was simply impracticable and to say that Dobbs was ahead of his time would be an understatement. It fell to Dobbs to move the address to the king, and he was one of the gentlemen appointed to carry it to London, where in Volunteer uniform, he presented the loyal address to his Majesty and declined the offer of an Irish baronetcy.

Poyntz/Stewart/Dobbs Family Tree



The Tory ministry at Westminster, reeling from news of the defeat in America, felt it necessary to give concessions, and laws prohibiting the export of wool, glass, leather and other goods were repealed.

However, as was typical of Dobbs' eccentric behaviour, shortly after the great success which the conventions had been, he accepted a commission in the Royal Ulster Fencible Regiment as major under the command of Thomas Dawson. It must have seemed an attractive career move for both men who owned little or no land or property. However, when a third Volunteer Convention was held in Dungannon in September 1783, Dobbs was debarred from attending. The Fencibles were a military force raised for service within the British Isles to take the place of regular troops who were away fighting in various wars. The Volunteers saw the Fencibles as rivals for they were controlled by the Government and their formation was seen as the government's bid to undermine the Volunteers, so Dobbs' action was viewed as an act of betrayal. Following this, the Acton and Tyrone's Ditches Volunteers became more or less dormant, and seldom troubled to attend Volunteer assemblies in Armagh or elsewhere. The Fencibles were short-lived however, and were disbanded considerably in advance of the Volunteers.

As the relevance and influence of the Volunteers waned over the next few years, those communal divisions which had temporarily been put aside in the face of a common enemy began to re-emerge. During the 1790s, sectarian tensions mounted, leading to the formation of the Orange Order on the one hand and the United Irishmen on the other and culminating in the futile rebellion of 1798.

During much of the decade, Dobbs was a very marginal figure as events unfolded rapidly. He had published a volume of poems in 1788 and worked on a very ambitious project, a 'Universal History in nine Volumes' published in 1797. In it he set out to prove that the 'Second coming' of the Messiah would be at the millennium (1800) and that he would first appear at Armagh. It was this prophecy which earned him the nickname 'Millennium Dobbs'.

He also devoted some time to his legal career and appeared in 1796 for John Robb, printer of 'The Northern Star' the United Irishmen's newspaper, charged with seditious libel. ('The Rise of the United Irishmen' Rosamund Jacob)

He was still actively interested in the events of the time, publishing various pamphlets on taxation and other matters.

In the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion when United Irishmen were being tried and many were executed or imprisoned, Francis Dobbs took upon himself the office of mediator between the Government and the prisoners. Trying to bring an end to bloodshed and cruelty Dobbs carried petitions from the Government to the prisoners and back, getting agreement from both sides. Some of the United Irishmen were hiding out in the Wicklow Hills, and Dobbs agreed to go personally to mediate with, and try to bring them in – having already got the promise of unconditional pardons for them. The mission had the desired effect, and large numbers came in – and were pardoned and at liberty "to go where we pleased, provided we left the British dominions." (Letter signed by Arthur O'Connor, Thomas Addis Emmet and William James MacNevan, quoted in R.R. Madden's 'United Irishmen Their Lives and Times')

In 1799 he succeeded his friend Lord Charlemont as Member of Parliament for Charlemont. He vehemently opposed the Act of Union. He said that "the independence of Ireland was written in the immutable records of Heaven and that it was impossible that a kingdom, which 'Revelations' showed to be under the special favour of Heaven, could be absorbed by one of the ten kingdoms typified in the image of 'Daniel'.... He identified Armagh with Armageddon and foretold that Armagh would be the site of the Second Coming (W. E. Lecky 'History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century').

Francis Dobbs and his wife Jane had seven children – Richard Stewart Dobbs, born c.1774, married Harriet McAuley; Francis, a member of the Armagh Militia, married Letitia Farrell; Alexander RN; Captain Joseph of the 12th Regiment, killed at Ciudad Rodrigo; Captain John of the 52nd Regiment, married Marianne Wallace in 1817; and Maria, who married her first cousin, Conway Edward Dobbs in 1806. Francis Dobbs' uncle Arthur (1689-1765), was Governor of North Carolina and there is a county in that state called 'Dobbs County'. Arthur's son, Conway Richard Dobbs (1727-1811) married firstly Anne, daughter of Alexander Stewart of Ballintoy and Acton, and sister of Francis Dobbs's wife Jane, and Conway Richard Dobbs and Anne resided at Acton House during the middle years of the nineteenth century.

Francis's older brother Richard (1741-1802) was Dean of Connor 1775-1802, and his younger brother William, RN, died on board the HMS Drake in 1778.

After the Union, Francis Dobbs' eccentricity increased to the point of insanity. He sank into obscurity and died in 1811 'in great pecuniary difficulties,'

The 'Newry Telegraph' of March 11th 1828 reported that "...Jane, wife of the late Francis Dobbs died at her home, Summer Hill, Dublin aged 76 years".