

The Rothes in Irish and French History

By SIR CHARLES PETRIE

The subject which I have chosen for my address this evening covers so wide a field that when I first contemplated it I was rather at a loss to know upon what principle to proceed. For some two hundred years, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, members of the Rothe family played no inconsiderable rôle in the life of this part of Ireland and also in that of France, while the regiment in the Irish Brigade which bore their name covered itself with glory at the battle of Fontenoy and Laffeldt, to name two of its achievements among many; in the Church, too, there were Rothes of note, as we shall see; while last, and possibly most conspicuous of all the memorials to their existence, is this building in which we are now assembled, and of which the Rev James Graves wrote in 1849 that it “exhibits a most interesting and nearly perfect example of the urban architecture of the period; affording ample accommodation to the opulent merchant’s family, his apprentices, and servants, together with storage for his goods.”

With so much ground to cover it was clear to me from the beginning that concentration on some particular aspect of the fortunes of this remarkable family was inevitable, and, being President of the Military History Society of Ireland, I felt you would excuse me if I laid special emphasis upon their connection with the Irish Brigade, though I shall take care not to lose sight of their achievements in other fields. At this point I should like to acknowledge by indebtedness to Dr. G. D. Burtchaell, whose essay on **The Family of Rothe in Kilkenny** was published, I think, under the auspices of this Society many years ago: a good deal of water has, however, flowed under the bridges since then, and if there is little to add to what he had to say about the Rothe family we know a great deal more about the events in which its members took part.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ROTHES

First of all, however, let us look at their Irish background, familiar though it is likely to be to most of you, and it is no

exaggeration to say that it was in the seventeenth century that the Rothes rose from local to national importance. They were people of note in Kilkenny in the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I, and Robert Rothe, the antiquary, was its first Mayor: in addition to pre-eminence in the world of commerce they gradually came to own a large amount of real estate, both urban and rural. Robert Rothe was agent to the Ormondes early in the seventeenth century, and David Rothe was Catholic Bishop of Ossory from 1618 to 1650. The eighties saw the family at its zenith in Ireland itself, with John Rothe as Mayor of Kilkenny in 1687, and also as Member of Parliament for the city, while his relatives were to be found occupying important positions all over the county, and also in Wexford. With the Williamite conquest, disaster came to the Rothes, as to many another Irish family, and they were forced to regain their shattered fortunes abroad, in their case in France.

Among the earliest of them was Michael Rothe, who was the son of one Edward Rothe, and was born here in Kilkenny in 1665. When the Jacobite War began he obtained a commission in King James's Irish Foot Guards, and with that regiment he served throughout the campaign: in 1691 he went to France after the Treaty of Limerick. A certain number of Irish troops had already been sent there before the battle of the Boyne in return for the French units which had come over with Lauzun and by the military clauses of the Treaty of Limerick it was specified that such Irish officers and men as declared that they wished to go to France should be allowed to do so; unlike the civil clauses, these were carried out in the letter and spirit by both sides. Among those who took advantage of these was Michael Rothe. In accordance with this arrangement the ships of Chateaugrain, which were anchored in the Shannon, conveyed about 4,500 of the Irish troops to France, while the remainder sailed from Cork in vessels furnished by Ginkel. The Jacobite army was continued as a separate entity until the Treaty of Ryswick in 1698 when it was disbanded as such, and the personnel was incorporated in the French, Spanish, and Neapolitan armies. Before this happened, Michael Rothe had served with the Irish Foot Guards all through the campaigns in Flanders, and he had been present at the battle of Landen, where Patrick Sarsfield was killed.

ROTHE'S FRENCH REGIMENT

In those days regiments were not given numerical or territorial designations as is now the custom, but were called after their commanding officer; the colonel under whom Edward Rothe was serving was General Dorrington, so when the regiment passed into the French service it became known as Dorrington's, and Rothe was its lieutenant-colonel.

In this capacity he continued to distinguish himself, particularly at the battle of Malplaquet, and in 1712 Louis XIV honoured him with the rank of Commander of the Order of Saint Louis, while seven years later, on the death of General Dorrington, the regiment which he had commanded was given to Michael, and was henceforth known as Rothes. In this capacity he and his regiment served under the Marshal Duke of Berwick in the war against Spain which took place in the summer of 1719. Hostilities were pursued in a very leisurely manner, and one gets the impression that Berwick's real objective was rather to bring the King of Spain to reason and to persuade him to change his government, than to inflict any signal defeat upon his army, which could only benefit in the long run those who were in reality the common enemies of both France and Spain, namely the English.

The first place to be attacked was Fuenterrabia, which surrendered in the middle of July, and Berwick proceeded to the more formidable task of investing San Sebastian. Ninety-four years later Napier was to write of its siege by Wellington, "San Sebastian, a third-rate fortress and in bad condition when first invested, resisted a besieging army, possessing an enormous battering train, for sixty-three days." Conditions were much the same when Rothe was concerned in the siege of the fortress, except that the Spaniard is, as a rule, a tougher proposition behind fortifications than the Frenchman, and Berwick was more skilled than Wellington in the capture of fortresses. The Queen of Spain, it may be added, was with the Spanish army, which she encouraged by appearing on horseback, pistols at the saddle-ban, dressed in a blue habit embroidered with silver. Her dresses were made, not in Madrid but in Paris, and Berwick placed no obstacle in the way of their delivery to her through the French lines.

San Sebastian capitulated on August 17, 1719, and Berwick

then decided to transfer his army to the other end of the Pyrenees, and to invade Catalonia; but after capturing Urgel he came to the conclusion that the weather was too bad for further operations that year. In the following February the war came to an end with the submission of the Spanish government, and Rothe's regiment, together with the rest of the Irish Brigade, was placed on a peace footing.

AT FRENCH COURT

The year 1720 was a fortunate one for Michael Rothe, for it saw him created a Lieutenant-General, but he was not destined to see much more fighting, for in 1733 he transferred his regiment to his son, Charles Edward Rothe, and retired to his chateau of Hautefontaine in Picardy: there he died as the result of an accident eight years later. Michael Rothe also had a daughter of the name of Lucy who married another exile in the person of Arthur Dillon, who was subsequently guillotined during the French Revolution. According to Dr. Richard Hayes she was no inconsiderable beauty, and was a lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette—surely a considerable social rise for a member of the basically commercial family of the Rothes.

ROTHE REGIMENT IN 18th CENTURY

Charles Edward Rothe had been born in 1710, so he was only twenty-three when he assumed command of the regiment which bore his name. He fought in the earlier campaigns of the War of the Austrian Succession, and was present at the battle of Dettingen in 1743, as well as at the sieges of Menin, Ypres and Furnes in the following year; but his crowning glory, as well as that of the Rothe Regiment and of the whole Irish Brigade, was at Fontenoy. The battle was one of the greatest events in the history of the Rothe Regiment, of the Irish Brigade, and of Ireland itself. The first thing that King Louis did when the British and Hanoverian columns had been driven from the field was to ride down the Irish lines, and tell the troops that he owed the victory to them. Their splendid gallantry was acknowledged by rewards on an unprecedented scale, in which the Rothe Regiment was included, for its Lieutenant-Colonel, Cusack, was given a pension of six hundred livres.

Unhappily, the butcher's bill was also very high; indeed, Fontenoy ranks among the most murderous conflicts of the eighteenth century. In all, the French lost over seven thousand

officers and men in killed and wounded, and this represented a little more than twelve per cent of the total number engaged. The Allied losses were about the same. The Irish casualties were 274 officers, non-commissioned officers and men killed, and 382 wounded, or 656 in all, which was a very high proportion indeed of the 3,870 who went into action. The Rothe Regiment lost two officers and 47 other ranks killed, and 8 officers and 46 other ranks wounded. In a sense, the Irish Brigade never fully recovered from the War of the Austrian Succession, for the losses at Fontenoy and Laffeldt, two years later, were not wholly replaced from Ireland, and in part at any rate the strength was brought up to establishment by the inclusion of men who were not of Irish origin.

WITH THE IRISH BRIGADE IN SCOTLAND

Let us now return to Charles Edward Rothe, whose adventures in the year 1745 had by no means terminated at Fontenoy. In July the Jacobite rising of the Forty-five had begun with the landing of Prince Charles Edward in Scotland, and within a few weeks so rapid had been his success that the greater part of that kingdom was in his possession. The French government soon realized that this was a situation which might be turned to its advantage, and on October 23rd a treaty was made at Fontainebleau between the Marquis d'Argenson, the Foreign Minister of Louis XV, and Colonel Daniel O'Brien, later Lord Lismore, the representative in France of Prince Charles Edward, who was acting as Regent for his father. It was agreed that Louis should supply the Prince with a body of troops from his Irish regiments, "to defend the provinces which had submitted, or should submit, to the Regency; to attack the common enemy; and to follow every movement which should be judged useful or necessary." The commander of this force was to be Lord John Drummond, who was the colonel of a Scottish regiment in the French service.

The detachments from the Irish Brigade which were detailed to serve in Scotland, were known as pickets, and there was one picket from each regiment, or six in all, made up apparently of men selected from the regiment as a whole. The pickets were roughly of company strength, or each of between 55 and 65 officers and men; each had about four officers, two sergeants, and a drummer, while additional officers went too, possibly as volunteers. The British Navy, was, however, fully alive to the

danger that threatened, and it had the supremacy at sea, though not the mastery which it subsequently attained. The ships containing the pickets of the Regiments of Bulkeley, Clare and Berwick were intercepted, and the troops on board were taken into British ports as prisoners-of-war. Among those captured in this way was Charles Edward Rothe, though why he was not on the same ship as the Rothe detachment, which reached Scotland in safety, is not easy to understand. Incidentally, if Louis XV had paid a tithe of the attention to his navy that he did to army, the result of the Forty-Five might have been very different, and much to the advantage of France.

The pickets of the Rothe Regiment, as well as those of Dillon and Lally, covered themselves with glory during the few short months that they were in Scotland. At Falkirk they held up the British at a particularly critical moment in the battle, encouraged by Prince Charles Edward who pointed to the enemy with the words: "Those are the men you beat at Fontenoy;" while at Culloden it was the Irish pickets who enabled such of the Highlanders as did escape to do so. When all was over they surrendered as prisoners-of-war, and among them were three officers of Rothe's. It is pleasant to record that, in contrast with the unfortunate English and Scots, the Irish received honourable treatment at Cumberland's hands, and before long all, including Colonel Charles Edward Rothe, were exchanged, and duly returned to France.

Apart from the pickets which had been engaged at Culloden the Irish Brigade saw no active service in 1746, and it constituted part of the force detailed to guard the Norman and Breton coasts against British raids; also, there was a good deal of reorganisation to be done in view of the heavy casualties at Fontenoy and the reincorporation of the prisoners who had been captured at Culloden or taken at sea. The next big engagement in which the Brigade, including of course the Rothe Regiment, took part was the battle of Laffeldt on July 2, 1747.

ROTHE REGIMENT AT LAFFELDT

While Britain had been distracted by civil war, and the consequent necessity of withdrawing the pick of her troops from the Low Countries, the French had been pushing steadily on, and were by now firmly established in Holland. In the endeavour to prevent their further progress the Allies had

mustered an army of 90,000 men and 250 guns, but their High Command, with Cumberland again as commander-in-chief, was divided against itself, and could do little but watch the movements of Maréchal de Saxe. In the last days of June the immediate bone of contention was Maestricht, which the Allies were defending. When, after some preliminary manoeuvring, the opposing armies came in contact, the key to the Allied position was Laffeldt, in front of their first line.

The fighting for Laffeldt was desperate, and lasted for four hours; the village being taken and retaken four times. Cumberland moved in a continuous stream of reinforcements from the second line of infantry in rear of the village, and replaced them with battalions from the Austrian general reserve, which involved moving some nine Austrian battalions over from the right flank: when these troops had arrived, and the village was still in Allied hands, Cumberland ordered a general advance of the centre of the Allied line, but at this moment a fatal error of discipline ruined the whole scheme. A Dutch cavalry regiment on the right of Laffeldt was unable to withstand a French cavalry charge; it broke; and the stampeding horses crashed through the line of advancing infantry, which was split wide open. Saxe saw his opportunity, and threw the six battalions of the Irish Brigade in the fifth assault on Laffeldt. This was too much for the defenders who were finally driven out; the Allied centre was broken, and the French had won the day.

As may be imagined the casualties were stupendous, and so far as the Irish element in the Brigade was concerned they completed what Fontenoy had begun, that is to say its rapid diminution. Yet if the losses were as heavy as in the earlier battle, the rewards were on an even more lavish scale, and Cusack, by now a Brigadier, received an augmentation of a thousand livres, while Captain Arthur, of Rothe's Regiment, was promoted lieutenant-colonel. A shower of Crosses of St. Louis fell and wounded officers received life-pensions varying from two hundred to six hundred livres. If Laffeldt was the last action of importance in which the Rothe Regiment under that name was to be concerned, it could hardly have been more memorable, and Charles Edward Rothe had every cause to be proud of the men he commanded.

ROTHE REGIMENT TAKES A BOW

In the following year there took place the siege of Maestricht where the Rothe Regiment again distinguished itself, and when its colonel was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-General. With the coming of the Seven Years War in 1756 Charles Edward Rothe was again on active service, and he took part in a number of engagements. He died in 1766.

Mention has been made of another officer of the Rothe Regiment, Richard Cusack, who was a typical Wild Goose. The family originally came from Co. Meath, but his mother was a Martyn from Co. Galway. Richard was himself born in the Low Countries in 1687 for his father had emigrated there during the Cromwellian usurpation, and had taken service in the Spanish army. Richard joined Dorrington's Regiment when he was sixteen, and we have noted his gallantry at Fontenoy and Laffeldt, as well as the awards which King Louis bestowed upon him. He, too, distinguished himself at Maestricht, and was publicly thanked by the French monarch; as a further award he was given a governship in Brittany. Richard Cusack died in his eighty-second year, after a continuous military career of nearly sixty years. Like so many officers of the Irish Brigade, he married the daughter of another expatriate, in his case a lady of the name of Marie Anne Fitzgerald.

With the death of Charles Edward Rothe the regiment that bore his name passes out of our story this evening, for after that event it was first called the Roscommon Regiment, after Lord Roscommon, who became its colonel proprietor, and then the Walsh Regiment. In 1791, when the units of the Irish Brigade were incorporated in the French army it became the 92nd of the line.

ROTHE JESUIT

Earlier this evening I mentioned that the Rothés distinguished themselves in the Church as well as in the army and commerce, so I must say a few words about Father Bernard Rothe, S.J., who had the distinction of crossing swords with no less an adversary than Voltaire. Bernard was born here in Kilkenny in 1693, the son of one William Rothe who was later killed while serving in the French army, and of Margaret O'Doherty, but he was educated at Poitiers, where he entered

the Jesuit Order in 1716. At Poitiers he was a professor for a number of years, and Dr. Richard Hayes has spoken highly of his work there which he considered "revealed much erudition and a fine initial judgment." In due course Bernard Rothe was summoned by his ecclesiastical superiors to Paris, where he was spiritual adviser to Montesquieu in the philosopher's last years. After the suppression of the Jesuits in France, he took up his residence in the Low Countries, became confessor to the Princess Charlotte of Lorraine, and died at Mons in the early days of 1768, a further example of the versatility of the family whose name he bore.

ROTHE INSPIRATION

In more senses than one the history of the Rothes is the history of Ireland, and it is difficult not to speculate on what might have been had not they, and many others of the natural leaders of the country, been driven abroad by what was very definitely a policy of genocide. What was Ireland's loss was the gain of France and Spain, but the activities of the Wild Geese were by no means wasted for the country of their origin. A British statesman, Benjamin Disraeli, who himself came of a race which had endured much suffering, once wrote: "Great deeds are great legacies, and work with wondrous usury. By what Man has done, we learn what Man can do; and gauge the power and prospects of our race." This is certainly true of the Rothes, for their exploits in the past are surely an inspiration to us all for the future.

Dear Sir,

I have noticed that sometimes you put little bits of information on Kilkenny in the **Old Kilkenny Review**. I came on the following advertisement in the **Dublin Weekly Journal** and I am sending it to you in case it would be of interest.

15 May, 1725. The Swan Inn, Kilkenny, is to be Set, with two dwelling Houses, two Stables and two Gardens for a term of Years, Furnished or Unfurnished. Enquire at Alderman Thomas Dates in Kilkenny and be better informed.

Yours Faithfully

EILEEN McCracken (Dr)