

The Wild Geese – Snippets of History



Breas the Beautiful 1977 © With the kind permission of [Jim Fitzpatrick](#)

The term ‘Wild Geese’ means the Irishmen who fought in different armies of Europe during the 17th, and more importantly, the 18th century.

The Williamite War in Ireland came to an end in October, 1691, when the treaty of Limerick was signed. By that time, Jacobite soldiers who did not want to serve William of Orange, had been allowed to go free to France, to fight for the deposed James II. By 1692, some 30,000 Irishmen abandoned their heartland, which had been reduced to a wasteland of destruction and desecration. The exiles followed the leaders of the Irish nobility, their rightful leaders. Again and again, the Wild Geese showed unwavering loyalty to the Europeans kings who welcomed them. They won honour and glory on battlefields, out of all proportion to any other group of their size.

The Emperor Franz Stephan of the Holy Roman Empire, and husband of Maria Theresa, wrote about them: “The more Irish soldiers in the service of Austria the better: in this way our troops will discipline themselves – for a lazy Irishman is rare and what they do not like to do, they will do, for honour and glory”.

The Wild Geese integrated well into European Society. Apart from military service, they developed their own businesses – for example in the great wine-producing regions of France - like Bordeaux. Today, certain labels are famous such as Château Kirwan, Pontac-Lynch, Marquie de MacMahon and Hennessy.

The Irish soldiers were like a section of a society which had been ripped from its roots. Those amongst them of high birth worked as counselors for kings and princes and as ambassadors and diplomats. They were given great respect as a special noble class, which often followed an Irish king, as he wandered in exile. Irishmen set up commercial businesses in the ports and cities of Europe and, in addition, they also worked as bankers. Irish doctors qualified in universities in Praha, Montpellier, Lérída and elsewhere.

Young members of the Wild Geese obtained education in Irish colleges on the continent which had been set up when the Penal Laws were being enforced. Many high-ranking leaders in the Catholic Church in Europe came to prominence from these educational institutes – amongst whom the personal chaplain to Louis XVI may be mentioned.

Most renowned amongst the sons of the first Wild Geese were Count Peadar de Lacy, a Marshal and Count Maximilian Ulysses von Browne, a Marshal. De Lacy began his military service in France but transferred to Russian service, as Field Marshal, on the invitation of Peter the Great. He also fought in the Austrian army. He took part in the Great Northern War (1737-1739) in an operation against the Turks in the Ukraine. He was twice seriously wounded. He next fought in the War of Polish succession (1740-1748).

Following this, he had the duty to ensure the coronation of Augustus II of Saxony. During this war, de Lacy fought at Busawitza, where he defeated 20,000 Polish troops, having only 1,500 dragoons, 80 hussars and 500 Cossacks under his command. In gratitude for this, Augustus gave de Lacy a portrait of himself, encrusted with diamonds worth 25,000 crowns, as well as a knighthood in the Order of the Golden Eagle of Poland.

Von Browne also fought in the Polish War of Succession. He too was awarded a knighthood in the Order of the Golden Eagle. He won fame in Italy during the Austrian War of Succession. In the year 1757, he fought his last battle at Praha. With 60,000 soldiers he challenged 140,000 soldiers of the Prussian Frederick the Great. A canon ball struck him and, unable to get medical assistance, he died in the besieged city.

At Fontenoy (May, 1745) the Wild Geese had their most celebrated victory during the Austrian War of Succession. After the English commander had been fighting without a pause, for some time, he launched an attack on the the French front line, with 16,000 troops. The Irish Brigade had been held in reserve in the battle to that point. Seeing the steady English advance, Lord Clare and senior Irish commanders decided to take up a position in the vanguard.

Count de Lally-Tollendal (Tulach na Dála) with 3,800 troops gave the order: “March against the enemies of France and of yourselves, without firing, until your bayonet points are in their stomachs”. [As was usual in Europe at that time, officers of the Irish Brigade held the view that use of the gun was not soldierly – which, as a hand-held weapon, was new.] The Irish charged shouting their war-cry at the top of their voices: “**Cuimhnigí ar Luimneach agus feall na Sacsanach!**” [“Remember Limerick and Saxon treachery”.] In their support, proceeding in the direction of battle, could be heard the music of pipes, fifes and drums to the tune of ‘the White Cockade’. It must have been some sight to see Celtic soldiers once more, in their hour of glory, on the mainland of Europe.

The Irish made a heavy attack on the enemy, despite a withering hail of fire. Many amongst them fell. They advanced sufficiently to allow the French to take the front again and win the day. This was the first occasion when a French king had beaten the English since the time of St. Louis, in the 13th century. Louis XV praised the Irish, rewarded them and promoted them. As wrote an unknown French soldier: “They overcame everything which came against them. In truth they are men like Caesar – not ordinary men – whatever you say, we owe them our victory”.

There are accounts of Irish soldiers in nearly every army in Europe, including the army of Naples, Venice, Prussia, England, Bavaria, Hesse, Sweden, Poland, Spain and Portugal. Baron Gottfried von Bamfield of Austria was the last to be awarded the Order of Maria Theresa. He was an outstanding pilot in the First World War. His grandfather, Thomas Bamfield, came from County Cork. Some 500,000 Wild Geese died fighting for France during the 18th century. It is not possible to estimate the number of the Fallen, throughout Europe, during the 1700s and 1800s.

Descendants of the Wild Geese still live on the European mainland. Here in Ireland, there is a small group of people related to the last kings appointed under the democratic system provided for under the Gaelic Brehon Laws. Their nobility, through a trick of history, is recognized only in the British Army. There is a real need academically to consider again the heritage of the Wild Geese, a powerful and able community. We should learn of their emigration – to seek out justice for their country - of and the disasters which befell them.