

"The Battle of the Breeches": the Nenagh mutiny, July 1856

By David Murphy

The militia mutiny at Nenagh in July 1856 was a direct consequence of the end of the Crimean War and the announcement of Government plans to disembody the militia of Ireland. There had been a number of disturbances connected with the militia since it had been embodied in January 1855, but the Nenagh mutiny was by far the most serious incident. When war was declared in 1854, both the government and the army commanders thought that the war would be a short one, as was to be the case in 1914.

By the end of 1854, however, it was obvious that the war was going to continue for some time. The battles of the Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman had resulted in serious losses for the British army and replacements had to be sent from garrisons at home. In light of this reduction of the strength of the regular army, it was decided that the militia should be embodied.

On 1 January, 1855, the 45 regiments of the militia of Ireland were embodied and it was hoped that a force of 30,000 would be raised. There was some difficulty in raising the militia quotas and none of the militia regiments achieved full strength. The enlistment bounty of six pounds was raised to £7.15s and then to ten pounds by the end of 1855, in the hope of attracting more recruits. There was also a one pound grant for clothing and a daily rate of pay of one shilling and one pence.¹

The enlistment bounty was paid out in an initial instalment of ten shillings when the recruit volunteered and then in one-pound instalments at the end of each period of annual training. Any remaining bounty money should have been paid when the militia regiments were disembodied. As a result of this system, the men of the militia of Ireland had received virtually none of their promised enlistment bounty when rumours began to circulate in 1856 that they were about to be disembodied.

There had been a series of problems with the militia, however, both in England and Ireland, during 1855. Breaches of discipline were a major problem and they took several forms. The nominal lists of the militia regiments show that there were numerous cases of desertion during 1855, men being absent without leave and men being confined in the guard-house. Yet such problems were common in all regular and militia regiments. There were also numerous affrays between militiamen and members of the constabulary, far too numerous to mention here.

A typical example took place in Cork in September 1855, when a group of some 50 men of the South Cork Militia pursued two constables who had arrested one of their comrades for being drunk and disorderly. The two constables took their prisoner to the Cork Bridewell and the crowd of militiamen laid siege to the building. It was only when Head Constable Crowley handed over the prisoner to a corporal of the South Cork Militia that the men agreed to disperse.² There were also cases of militiamen assaulting civilians in the towns where they were stationed. In August 1855, the Louth Rifles moved to the Cavalry Barracks in Dundalk and a series of clashes with the local population followed.³

There were also more serious disturbances where militia officers were defied by their men. In September 1855 there was a confrontation between the officers and men of the Clare Militia,

then stationed at the Curragh Camp. The men had taken offence when they were refused permission to use the regimental band for mass parade. The *Munster News* of 3 September 1855 reported that the men had gathered on the parade ground and "shouted the officers off the square. The adjutant got a blow across the face that knocked him down". The ringleaders of this protest were arrested and later court-martialled.⁴

The most serious disturbance that took place during this period of embodiment of the militia of Ireland occurred in Nenagh in July 1856 and concerned the North Tipperary Militia.⁵ Following the peace in April 1856, the North Tipperary Militia were moved from Tralee, Co. Kerry, to Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. In Nenagh they were billeted in barracks in Pound Street and at the main barracks at Summerhill. The Summerhill barracks also held a magazine.

It would appear that the majority of these militiamen had received very little of their enlistment bounty and, as rumours spread that they were about to be disembodied, the relationship between officers and men became tense. It would also appear that the regiment's officers were conscious of the fact that they had a potential mutiny of their hands, as all ammunition had been taken from the militiamen when they left Tralee.

In early July 1856 a number of events occurred in rapid succession which transformed this simmering discontent in the ranks into open mutiny. Firstly, it was announced that any militiaman who wished could present himself to his colonel and gain his discharge, apparently without any of the bounty money due to him. Secondly, it was announced that the remaining bounty money would be paid at a rate of five shillings per quarter, but only while the militia remained embodied. As disembodiment seemed imminent it seemed fairly certain that the best the militiamen could hope for was a further five shillings of their bounty money.

The final spark that ignited the Nenagh mutiny came on Monday, 7 July 1856. The militia had been issued in April with new parade uniforms consisting of boots, trousers, tunic and shako. As this uniform was considered to be only part-worn, orders were given to take back into store the newly issued trousers, tunics and shakos. At the Summerhill barracks in Nenagh, one of the sergeants went around collecting this uniform, ordering the men to strip off there and then. Many militiamen obeyed but one man of No. 4 Company refused to give up his trousers and was sent under arrest to the guard-house.

As the parish priest of Nenagh, Fr Scanlon, later stated, it was unreasonable to ask the men to hand over their trousers and then go "half-naked upon the country, a source of jest to all unthinking boys, in their rags".⁶ The Nenagh mutiny was later christened the "Battle of the Breeches" by some Irish newspapers. When other members of No. 4 Company came to the barracks for drill, things quickly got out of hand. *The Reporter* of 8 July 1856 described the outbreak of the mutiny.

An order also having been received to take up the new clothing issued to the Militia in April last, yesterday morning a sergeant commenced to take up the clothing from the men, when some few quietly gave it up. One man refused to give away his black trousers, whereupon he was sent to the guardhouse. In a very short time afterward the company to which he belonged came down to the guardhouse to rescue him. The guard was ordered to fire, which they did not owing to their having no ammunition. The men, however, desisted, but in a very short time after, the five companies quartered in Pound Street Barracks, came to Summerhill Barracks, as is their custom every day for the purpose of being drilled. Hearing that the man was confined, they fixed bayonets and rushed at the guardroom, flinging the guard away, and with their guns and

stones they broke open the cell doors, and let out all the prisoners, at the same time demolishing the windows, doors, seats, etc.⁷

Lt-Col. Francis Cornwallis-Maude, the officer commanding the North Tipperary Militia, and Major George Frend then tried to calm the militiamen and succeeded in getting them to form up in companies at Summerhill Barracks. *The Reporter* stated that "the greatest excitement prevailed" and the colonel lectured them on the possible consequences of their actions. Fr Scanlon also arrived and tried to convince the militiamen to give up their protest. They in turn declared that they would not give up their arms until they had received the balance of their bounty money and were allowed to keep their clothes. They then agreed to return to their quarters in Pound Street.

At 10 pm that night, however, they came out of the barracks and charged through the town, causing a great commotion. The local constabulary barracks was attacked and the militiamen then stormed Summerhill Barracks in the hope of getting ammunition from the barracks magazine. The officers and the majority of NCOs had emptied the magazine and moved all the ammunition to the gaol on the outskirts of Nenagh and remained there until help arrived.

Sergeant Cole was attacked in Pound Street and a pouch of ammunition taken from him. It would also appear that some local shopkeepers had actually sold powder and ball to the mutineers during the day. The mutineers forced the band to turn out and to play them around the town and they later roamed around in groups, occasionally firing shots into the air. The house of the Petty Sessions clerk, William Bull, was attacked and had its windows smashed. The house of John Kennedy in Silver Street received similar treatment and a crowd of militiamen gathered outside the gaol and pelted it with stones before returning to their quarters around midnight.

On the morning of 8 July, 1856, they left their quarters again and spent the early part of the day rampaging around the town. During the day the local magistrates and others such as Lord Dunally attempted to negotiate with the mutineers. Also Henry William Massy of Grantstown, Co. Tipperary, then a captain in the 1st South Tipperary Militia, tried to convince the militiamen to give up their protest. Captain Massy's son, Lieutenant William Godfrey Dunham Massy of the 19th Foot, known as "Redan Massy", was a well known Crimean War hero. The best that they could achieve, however, was to persuade the mutineers to unfix their bayonets.⁸

Lt-Col. Henry George Hart, officer commanding the depot at Templemore received a dispatch on the morning of 8 July, 1856 telling him of the mutiny at Nenagh. There were depot companies of the 13th Foot, 41st Foot, 47th Foot and 55th Foot at Templemore and he assembled a force of 574 men of all ranks.⁹ At half-past four on the afternoon of 8 July 1856 Maj-Gen. Sir James Chatterton received a message in Limerick telling him of the mutiny and also informing him (incorrectly) that eleven police constables had been shot by the mutineers.

He immediately dispatched a squadron of the 17th Lancers, which had just returned from the Crimea, and later sent 200 men of the 21st Foot. Hart's force reached Nenagh first, having made a forced march of over twenty miles, arriving in the town at around 4 pm. The *Nenagh Guardian* of 9 July, 1856 described Hart's arrival but overestimated the size of his force.

At about 4 o'clock the military, consisting of 1,000 soldiers of the 13th, 41st, 47th, and 55th depots, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Hart, entered Barrack Street from Templemore, and were halted opposite the church. Here they received instructions to fix bayonets and load with ball cartridge, to march on the barrack of Nenagh and take possession of it.¹⁰

The account continues:

On reaching the barrack gate the Colonel demanded admittance. There was no reply.....it was a moment of dread suspense! He placed his hand on the gate and it opened to his touch. He advanced, followed by his men, who opened into single file and surrounded the barrack walls.¹¹

The militiamen inside the barracks surrendered rather meekly, but there were other smaller groups roaming around the town and some of these men gathered outside the barracks. Private Stephen Burns of the North Tipperary Militia and another unknown private each fired a shot through an open side-gate at the regular troops assembled inside the barracks. Private Curley of the 41st Foot was killed while Private Patrick Reilly of the 47th Foot was hit in the hip. Both of these soldiers were Irishmen and Crimean veterans. Private Reilly had been wounded in his other hip during the war.

Hart then set out to subdue the remainder of the mutineers who were believed to be in the Pound Street barracks. A group of mutineers had gathered at the market cross and, when Hart and his men arrived there, several volleys were exchanged. The mutineers were short of ammunition and it was later claimed that they fired pebbles, marbles and even tunic buttons at the regulars. The regulars for their part tried not to inflict serious casualties on the mutineers and were initially ordered to shoot in the air. The *Nenagh Guardian* reported:

The result must have been awful only that the line [the regulars], not wishing to take away life, there being many persons in the streets at the time, fired into the air to deter the Militia.¹²

When one considers that the regulars were armed with Minié rifles, extremely accurate rifles that had inflicted serious casualties on the Russians in the Crimea, the death-toll appears amazingly small. Despite the fact that this exchange of fire took place at short-range and in a confined area, only two militiamen were killed and six wounded.¹³ Eight regulars were also wounded. The rest of the mutineers then fled back to the Pound Street barracks and after a brief fight, in which another nine militiamen were wounded, the majority of them threw down their weapons.¹⁴

Some militiamen had managed to get away and on the next day, 9 July 1856, men of the 21st Foot, under the command of Col. Charles Crutchley, and assisted by John Stephen Dwyer, JP, rooted the mutineers out of houses in Peter Street and then in the fields around the town. The pursuit of the last of the mutineers went on for the rest of the week, the 17th Lancers patrolling the area around the town and taking militiamen prisoner. There were also some Crimean veterans among the mutineers. The *Nenagh Guardian* described the capture of one man who had served with the Commissariat Department in the Crimea.

Constable Aubrey, of the Nenagh Station, apprehended in a cornfield at Annebrook, Thomas Cawley, of the Tipperary Militia, who took a most prominent part in the encounter between that corps and the regulars, his wrist was broken by a gunshot wound received on that occasion. When arrested he wore a straw hat and outside coat. Cawley formerly served in the line, and was more recently employed in the Commissariat during the Crimean Campaign.¹⁵

Several civilians, including two children, had also been wounded during the fighting and one Nenagh man, Peter Gibbons of Pound Street, had been killed when a bullet hit him in the head as he stood in his doorway watching the fighting. Gibbons had been an army pensioner and the inquest into his death concluded that at least ten shots had been fired by men of the 55th Foot into the doorway of his house. Despite concluding that "such firing was unjustifiable", no action was taken against any men of the 55th.¹⁶

Private Curley of the 41st Foot, who had been killed in Summerhill Barracks, was buried with full military honours in the Roman Catholic graveyard in Nenagh. He was only nineteen and had fought in the battles of Alma and Inkerman, had survived the first winter in the Crimea and had served during the siege of Sevastapol. At his graveside Lt-Col. Hart paid him tribute, describing him as a man who had "done honour to himself and his country, in gallantly assisting to uphold the glory of the nation against its enemies in the Crimea". The two dead militiamen, Private Denis Toohey and Private Patrick Treacy, were apparently buried without any ceremony.

The official reaction to the mutiny was surprisingly lenient. On 15 July 1856, the men of the North Tipperary Militia were paraded and informed that they would be discharged and that each man would receive ten shillings and fourteen day's pay. There were some 90 courts-martial, however, for the ring-leaders of the mutiny. Private Burns, who was positively identified as the man who had killed Curley, was sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted to transportation for life and he was released in 1876. Five other ring-leaders, Privates Gleeson, Devereux, Tumpene, Cawley and Skelton were sentenced to transportation for life, but their sentences were again reduced to ten years which they served in Mountjoy Gaol. Three other men also served four years in gaol.¹⁷

The newspaper coverage of the mutiny in local newspapers, such as *The Reporter*, *Nenagh Guardian* and *Limerick Observer*, was quite sympathetic. This is perhaps surprising, when one considers the terror of the local inhabitants and the damage caused in the town. These newspapers pointed out that it was the shoddy way in which the militiamen had been treated which had caused the mutiny. Had the Government paid the bounty in full, the problem would never have arisen. The demand that the newly issued uniforms be returned to store only served to add insult to injury. Perhaps it is more surprising that English newspapers, including *The Times*, took a very similar line and placed the blame for this mutiny firmly at the Government's door. *The Times* also published large extracts from the Irish newspapers which followed this line.

On 1 September, 1856 the militiamen assembled and were read an address from Gen. Lord Seaton, the commander-in-chief in Ireland. They were then paid and sent home. The officers were later criticised by Gen. Lord Seaton for failing to deal with the mutiny promptly. In October 1856, Lt-Col. Cornwallis-Maude demanded a court-martial to clear the names of the regiment's officers, but this was refused. One officer, Captain Josiah G. Hort, from Co. Kilkenny, resigned due to the criticism levelled at him by Major Frend and went to India.¹⁸ It must be said, however, that the actions of the officers in emptying the magazine probably prevented the mutiny from becoming a much more serious event.

The Nenagh mutiny of July 1856 was a most interesting event as it outlines the potential disciplinary problems inherent in the regiments of the militia of Ireland. One can only assume that morale in all these regiments was low after this event. What is certain that the men of the North Tipperary Militia were very poorly treated. The penny-pinching attitude of the Government was caused directly by the end of the Crimean War and a desire to save money now that the militia was perceived to be no longer needed.

The outbreak of the Indian Mutiny ensured that the majority of militia regiments remained embodied in both England and Ireland. Despite the fact that the other regiments of the militia of Ireland remained embodied due to the shortage of soldiers caused by the Indian Mutiny, the North Tipperary Militia was not re-embodied.

The indiscipline of some of the regiments of the militia of Ireland remained a problem. In December 1857 and January 1858 the Royal Dublin City Militia was stationed in Lancashire and there were a number of disturbances at Bradford, Burnley and Ashton-under-Lyne where companies of the regiment were stationed. The worst disorder was at Burnley on New Year's Eve 1857, when groups of the Dublin City Militia got drunk and became violent "striking with their belts all who came within reach". The behaviour of the regimental picket, which turned out to deal with this problem, was as bad as that of the original offenders, if not worse! There were numerous violent assaults in the town and also much damage caused. The inquiry that followed decided to send the regiment to Aldershot.¹⁹

The history of the regiments of the militia of Ireland was indeed a chequered one during this period. There had been an initial difficulty in actually finding enough recruits and also NCOs to train them. Thereafter there had been numerous cases of indiscipline and insubordination in the regiments of the militia of Ireland. What makes such breaches of discipline more interesting is the fact that they often involved large groups of men from the militia regiments.

When faced with a perceived injustice, Irish militiamen would appear to have engaged in collective protests and even mutiny, rather than individually trying to gain some form of redress. The Nenagh mutiny of July 1856 illustrates the potentially disastrous results of treating Irish militiamen badly. The whole event could have been avoided, however, if the Government had acted honourably towards these men when the Crimean War ended. As the *Nenagh Guardian* later stated: "they had been unjustly treated and badly rewarded for their patriotism and loyalty".²⁰

FOOTNOTES.

- 1 Rod Robinson, "The Nenagh Mutiny", unpublished paper presented at the Crimean War Research Society conference in Dublin, April 1999.
- 2 *Cork Examiner*, 3 Sept. 1855.
- 3 Brendan Hall, *Officers and Recruits of the Louth Rifles, 1854-1876* (Dun Laoghaire Genealogical Society, 1999), p. 14.
- 4 *The Munster News*, 3 Sept. 1855.
- 5 There were two militia regiments raised in Co. Tipperary. Their full regimental titles were the Duke of Clarence's Munster Artillery, 1st South Tipperary Militia, and the 2nd North Tipperary Militia (Light Infantry).
- 6 Robinson, "The Nenagh Mutiny".
- 7 *The Reporter*, 8 July 1856.
- 8 Robinson, "The Nenagh Mutiny".
- 9 H.G. Hart, *Annual Army List* (1860), p. 56, p. 70. Lt-Col. Henry George Hart was the publisher of Hart's *Annual Army List*. His actions in July 1856 represented the only active service of his career and he devoted no less than nineteen lines in subsequent editions of the *Annual Army List* to describing his part in the Nenagh mutiny. In contrast, the officers on either side of his own entry, veterans of the Sikh Wars and the Crimean War, were only allocated seven line entries!
- 10 *Nenagh Guardian*, 9 July 1856.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*

- 13 The two men of the North Tipperary Militia who were killed were Private Denis Toohey and Private Patrick Treacy.
- 14 Robinson, "The Nenagh Mutiny". See also *Nenagh Guardian*, 9-10 July 1856.
- 15 *Nenagh Guardian*, 10 July 1856.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 15 July 1856.
- 17 Robinson, "The Nenagh Mutiny". See also E.H. Sheehan, *Nenagh and its Neighbourhood* (Ormond Historical Society, 1976), pp 91-7.
- 18 Sheehan, *Nenagh and its Neighbourhood*, p. 93.
- 19 Robert J. Williams, "Royal Dublin City Militia riots in Lancashire". In *The Irish Sword*, xiv, no. 55 (Winter 1980), pp 195-6.
- 20 *Nenagh Guardian*, 9 July 1856.

- 13 The two men of the North Tipperary Militia who were killed were Private Denis Toole and Private Patrick Treacy.
- 14 Robinson, "The Nenagh Murders," See also Nenagh Guardian, 9-10 July 1856.
- 15 Nenagh Guardian, 10 July 1856.
- 16 Ibid., 12 July 1856.
- 17 Robinson, "The Nenagh Murders," See also E.H. Sheehan, Nenagh and its Neighbourhood (Oxford: Historical Society, 1976), pp. 91-2.
- 18 Sheehan, Nenagh and its Neighbourhood, p. 93.
- 19 Robert J. Williams, "Royal Dublin City Militia riots in Lancashire," in The Irish Gazette, xiv, no. 52 (Winter 1980), pp. 195-6.
- 20 Nenagh Guardian, 9 July 1856.