

Walking into it with eyes wide shut -

Irish Philhellenes in the Greek war of independence

By Allan Gregory

I find it amusing how so many British historians seem to insist that all Philhellenes were British Romantics {see Dakin 1955 and 1972, Woodhouse 1969 and St. Clair 1972}, the most notable and celebrated being Lord Byron. This Anglo-centric classification suggests that Byron is no longer Scots but your ordinary honorary Englishman. Similar assumptions are drawn when it comes to Irish Philhellenes. For example, a plaque in St. Paul's Anglican Church in Athens, in memory of Sir Richard {Dickie} Church {1784-1873} from Cork states that he had won the affection of the people of Greece "for himself and for England". Woodhouse described Church {1969, 157} as the "liege lord of all true Philhellenes".

Many Irishmen fought in the Napoleonic wars of the early 19th century, especially during the capture of the Ionian Islands. Sir Hudson {Huddy} Lowe {1769-1844} from Galway was present at the capture of Kephallonia, Ithaka and Lefkhada and was later responsible for the setting up of a provisional administration for the islands. Lowe was accompanied by Dickie Church, who later provided military training for the Greeks, including Kolokotronis. Church's Greek troops captured Paxos and Parga on the mainland. He also assisted in the surrender of Corfu. St. Clair maintains that by then he was "more Greek than the Greeks" {St. Clair, 1972, 320}.

Soon, other Irishmen joined the fray. These included Eddie Blaquiere {d.1832}, a romantic Dublin seaman of Huguenot descent, and Charlie Jimmy Napier {1782-1853} who hailed from Celbridge in County Kildare, a first cousin of Lord {Edward} Eddie Fitzgerald. Blaquiere met John Louriotis in Spain, where he was trying to raise funds for the cause and suggested that London was a better place for fundraising; this led to the formation of the London Greek committee. Early Irish members included Tom Moore and Lord Lavally Nugent {1777-1862}, who was to become a future Governor of the Ionian Islands. Blaquiere was so fired up with the idea of a fight that he headed for Greece, stopping off at Genoa to visit Byron, who was then planning to travel to Latin America. Unfortunately for Byron, Blaquiere persuaded him to return to Greece, advising him to go first to Zakynthos. Instead, Byron sailed for Kephallonia, where the Governor or Resident happened to be the bould Charlie Jimmy Napier from Celbridge in County Kildare. Napier's Director of Public Works was Johnnie Pitt Kennedy {1796-1879}, a Church of Ireland rector's son from Carndonagh in County Donegal. Byron stayed with Napier as a guest, but as guests are like fish-they go off after a few days, Napier found him a villa at Metaxata, south of Argostoli. Byron wasn't bothered. There, he wrote: "Colonel Napier and myself are as decided for the cause of Greece as any" {Woodhouse, 1969, 102}

At Metaxata, Byron met the regimental Irish doctor Jimmy Kennedy {not to be confused with the Jimmy Kennedy who wrote "Red Sails in the Sunset"} , who

taught him Demotic Greek, and the Philhellenes who visited Byron there included the Belfast journalist Jimmy Emerson {1804-1869}, who played a mean harp. Byron left Kephallonia on the 30th December, 1823 and arrived at Missolonghi on the 5th January 1824 hoping he would soon be joined by Napier as commander-in-chief of the Greek army. Sadly, we all know what happened.

Napier never got to be commander-in-chief. He did meet a beautiful Greek lady called Anastasia, who became the mother of his two daughters. He occasionally returned to Ireland where he visited his friend Kennedy in Glasnevin {a renowned Dublin cemetery}, and eventually went on to make his name as the conqueror of Sind in India.

Ireland is noted for its famous people. American President John F. {Jack} Kennedy's ancestors hailed from Dunganstown in County Wexford, President Ronnie Reagan's from Ballyporeen in County Tipperary and President Barack {Barry} O'Bama's from Moneygall in County Offaly, an honour he shares with our esteemed Taoiseach {Prime Minister}, who is famous for being incapable of running a raffle.

Byron, of course, was also of Irish background. His ancestor, by his great-great-great-grandfather, was Paddy BYRNE {pronounced Burn} from Newtownmountkenedy in County Wicklow. The name was mis-spelled from Byrne to BURUN, when Paddy enlisted in the army of Brian Boru' at the battle of Clontarf in 1014. It was later spotted by the lord deputy for Munster, Edmund Spencer, of "Fairie Queen" fame, while attempting to take over {robbing} Kilcolman Castle in County Cork, a former seat of the Byrnes. The name then reversed to its proper spelling BYRNE only to be mangled again into BYRON {pronounced Burn or Burun}, when lord sheriff of Dunshaughlin, Jeremiah Byrne's wife, Mary, gave birth to twins, at the Royal Hospital for Sherriff's Wives in Longford in 1623. The mistake was made at the registering of births. The Byrnes or Buruns or Byrons, in fleeing Cromwell's notorious invasion of Ireland in 1649, moved across the water to England on a raft, and so, British historians insist that all Philhellenes are British Romantics

Allan Gregory, Dec. 2009