

The Curragh

Crime, Punishment and Reform under the Crown.

Part 2

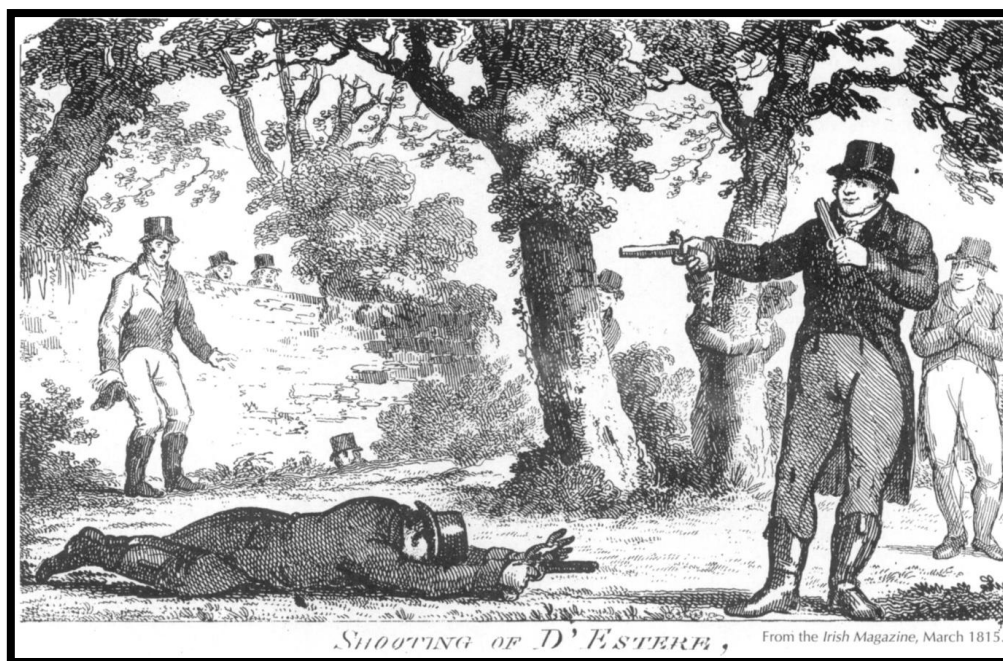
Duelling Times

“A question of honour”

While illicit activity on the Turnpikes remained largely the domain of the rural peasant classes, it soon became associated with Dublin’s urban elites for ulterior purposes, to facilitate the settling of scores and defending individual honour. The phenomenon of duelling amongst the urban elites of late Georgian Dublin became a more frequent practice for settling disputes within high society, exploiting revered codes of honour and a fear of social “ostracism”. The Phoenix Park in Dublin was the preferred location for gentlemen to settle their disputes. The close proximity to the city and ability to disperse quickly after the duel had taken place made it an ideal duelling ground. The location would also prove beneficial should any immediate medical attention be required after a successful duel had taken place. While there was no law criminalising duelling per se, offenders brought before the courts were in many cases released and acquitted in favour of self-defence. In the early nineteenth century duelling in Dublin city was frowned upon and quarrelling parties had to find alternative locations to settle disputes.



One notable duel between Daniel O’Connell and Dublin merchant, John Norcott D’Esterre, took place thirteen miles from the city in the Bishops Court Estate, County Kildare. In an ongoing dispute between O’Connell and D’Esterre, things finally came to a head on 1st February 1815 when D’Esterre challenged O’Connell to a duel late that day. The challenge was accepted by O’Connell and both parties, and their seconds made their way to Bishops Court. At 3 p.m. the duel took place, D’Esterre the more experienced pistol shooter fired first, hitting the ground in front of O’Connell. Immediately O’Connell raised his pistol aimed low and fired, hitting D’Esterre in the lower abdomen. The impact of the bullet dropped D’Esterre on the spot, and despite the best efforts of immediate medical care and surgical intervention back in Dublin, D’Esterre died of wounds the following day. The long-term effects of the duel would haunt Daniel O’Connell for the remainder of his life. In a bid to reconcile with the widow of D’Esterre, he offered her a share of his income, to which she declined, but did accept a yearly allowance for her youngest child.



The pistol duel between O’Connell and D’Esterre 1815

The Curragh plains became another duelling ground outside Dublin city. The duelling parties would arrive by coach from Dublin using the turnpike road system. This location gave a certain amount of privacy and far from the eyes of the law and repercussions in the event of a fatality. One such duel was held between The Honourable Charles J.P. Mahon M.P. (The O’Gorman Mahon) and Mr. J.J. Murphy. However, Mahon was an experienced pistol shot and veteran of a number of previous duelling encounters. The duel which was an “affair of honour” took place on the 13th October 1830, when Mahon and Murphy accompanied by friends made their way to the Curragh plains having been hunted

by the police in Dublin. At the agreed time, both men faced each other at 12 paces, and on the signal, they fired almost simultaneously. The more experienced O’Gorman Mahon hit Murphy on the ring finger of his right hand. However, this deflected the bullet from its intended course and prevented a more mortal injury. Surgeon Mitchell, who was on standby, immediately tended to Murphy’s wounds. It was believed that both men resolved their grievances before returning to Dublin.

Throughout the 1830s, many crimes were committed in the Curragh area. While many were petty crimes in nature, more serious crimes were committed by gangs that harassed the local population and travellers on the turnpike road. In July 1836, Timothy Kinsella, the leader of the infamous “Curragh Gang “was arraigned for burglary and robbery of a house in the curragh area which was owned by a Mr. Farrell. The gang having looted the house and made good their escaped with one hundred guineas in gold. In the following days members of the gang were arrested and tried before the local summer assizes. Kinsella and other members of the gang emigrated for a short period, before returning months later to resume their illicit trade. They too were soon arrested and convicted of the burglary and robbery of the one hundred guineas in gold. The gang leader Kinsella was sentenced to death for his role in the robbery, however the judge taking into consideration that no violence was offered to the family of Mr. Farrell, commuted his sentence to transport for life.

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