

The Curragh

Crime, Punishment and Reform under the Crown.

Part 3

Time for Law & Order *“Royal Irish Constabulary”*

It was in 1836 that the Irish Constabulary Act was passed into law, and this allowed for a more permanent police force for all of Ireland. Each county would be administered by a county inspector, and the counties sub-divided into smaller more manageable sub-districts, under command of district inspectors. The new establishment allowed for the creation of hundreds of police posts or ‘barracks’ as they would later become know. These barracks were normally occupied by a constable and four sub-constables. The men of the constabulary in their dark green uniforms and were fully armed, educated and a well-disciplined force. The presence of this force was recorded in the book by Johann Georg Kohl, a German traveller to Ireland in the Winter of 1836, he noted that the constabulary main duties were ‘To detect and prevent crime, protect property, and supress disorder. They patrol the roads, protect landlords and their agents, put down faction fights and break up seditious meetings’.

The observations of Johann Kohl were well established and true as the new force took its Code of Conduct from Thomas Drummond, under-secretary for Ireland. The constabulary men who would be respected by local people and gain good opinion of the gentry. Every member of the force was expected to discharge his duties with the utmost tolerance and consideration to all classes of Her Majesty’s subjects and at no stage permit their feelings to get the better of their sound judgement. Within two years of the establishment of the Irish Constabulary, the force had a strength of 7,500 all ranks and by 1840, the force had 8,500 and by 1850 the force had 12,358 serving throughout the country, before settling back down to a regular force of 10,000. With the constabulary force expanding across the country, more barracks were required to house and provide a level of security for the constables in the event of unrest. Many new barracks were designed and built following the passing of the Irish Constabulary Act of 1836.

The well-known Dublin architect Jacob Owen was tasked with designing the new Irish Constabulary Headquarters Depot in the Phoenix Park.

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.

By 1839 a decision was made to build a permanent Irish Constabulary Barracks at the 23-mile marker on the Dublin to Limerick Turnpike on the open Curragh plains. The 'Stone Barracks' as it would later become known, was designed by Dublin Board of Works architect Jacob Owen. The Board of Works usually declined to design any new barracks outside of Dublin but conceded and let architect Owen design a cottage orné style barracks at the Curragh.

The construction of the new station was met with some opposition which was expressed in the editorial column of the Freeman's Journal in July 1845.

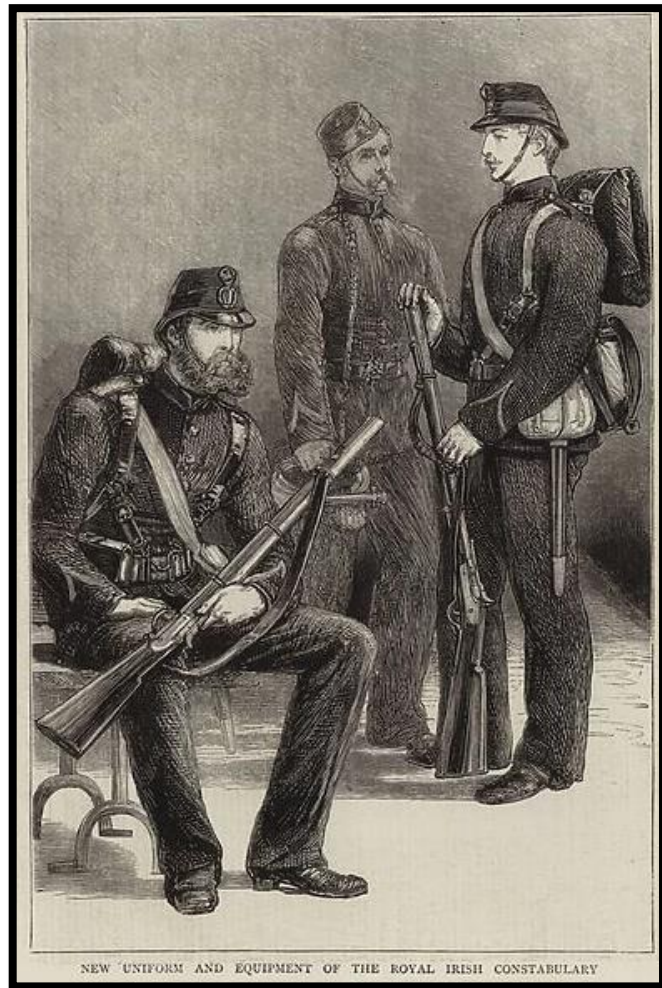
The objection written by Bernard McGarry of Baggot Street in Dublin, refers to the construction as a 'iniquitous assault upon the sacred plain' of the Curragh of Kildare. McGarry also expressed the view that there is now a "unlimited reliance" on the new constabulary which he labels 'the Black Militia'.



The RIC "Stone" Barracks, Curragh, 1839.

The men stationed in this remote barracks would perform their duties in detecting and preventing crime, protecting the travellers and property on the turnpike by patrolling the road by day and night.

By December 1867, a decision to close the 'Stone Barracks' was made by the authorities. This decision was not well received by the public and was expressed in a letter to the editor of the Leinster Express. The letter cites the concerns regarding the reduction of the constabulary force by twelve and the closing of the stone barracks that was built for the protection of travellers on the Turnpike. The letter written by 'A Constant Traveller', highlighted the many functions provided by the constable's patrolling the three-mile section of road that passes the barracks. The letter states that the number of robberies and other acts of violence were



reduced, and that the barracks also provided a place of shelter to travellers stranded by snowstorms or heavy fog on the Curragh plains; guided to safety by a signal light placed on the barracks.

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