

FATHER MURPHY OF BOOLAVOGUE

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

In Ireland in 1796, the United Irishmen, a brotherhood of concerned patriots, planned a rising. Originally a parliamentary movement among Catholic and Protestant Irishmen organized to negotiate political solutions to their disputes with the Crown, they soon came under attack by the Brits who feared that they had become too powerful. Leaders of the movement were arrested and repressive legislation was enacted to divide the remainder. The British military were encouraged to harass the people and goad them into some foolish premature action that would be their undoing. In their frustration and desperation, the leaders remodeled their organization to seek a military solution. They grasped at the straw of promised aid from Napoleon and lost a significant amount of time negotiating for that support. When that aid would finally come, it would be too little, too late, and arrive at the wrong place.

In 1798, in the parish of Kilcormack, Boolavogue, Co. Wexford, a man of God prayed for guidance as British troops continuously harassed his parishioners. Beseched by his flock for assistance, Father John Murphy finally stepped forward and boldly provided the leadership to oppose the brutality. He called his parishioners in the name of God, united them in the cause of Ireland, and led them into history.

On Whitsunday, 1798, this brave priest, seeing his chapel and home, like so many others in the parish, on fire, and in several of them the inhabitants consumed in the flames, went into a nearby forest, where he was soon surrounded by his besieged parishioners who had escaped the brutality of the Brits. They beseched his reverence to tell them what was to become of them and their families. He answered them abruptly that since there was no way to negotiate an end to the cruelty, it would be better to die courageously in the field than to be butchered in their homes and that for himself, if he had any brave men to join him, he was resolved to sell his life dearly and prove that the Brits could not continue their devastations with impunity. All answered that they were determined to follow his advice and do whatever he ordered. *Well then*, he replied, *we must, when night comes, get armed the best way we can, with pitchforks and other weapons and attack the Camolin Yeomen cavalry on the way back to Mountmorris where they will return after passing the night satisfying their savage rage on the defenseless country people.*

The attack succeeded, and with the arms taken in the ambush that night and in an attack at Camolin Park the following day, Father Murphy's men reinforced their pitchforks with more effective weapons. The following day he won a victory with his pikemen on Oulart Hill and followed that, in quick succession, with the capture of Camolin, Ferns, Enniscorthy, and Wexford. In a few days, the entire southeastern part of the country was in their hands with the exception of Duncannon Fort and New Ross. An attempt was made to take New Ross on June 5, but it failed after desperate fighting and severe losses on both sides. A few days later the towns of Gorey and Carnew were captured and the way to Arklow lay open. Arklow was assaulted on June 9, but by then British reinforcements had arrived.

A pitched battle ensued that lasted from morning to night ending in defeat for the men whose only crime was being Irish. On June 21, the remaining Irish were attacked by overwhelming forces at their last stronghold at Vinegar Hill. About 500 rebels were killed including wounded prisoners. The Enniscorthy courthouse, used as a hospital, was burned down with 80 wounded Irish inside. Father Murphy was captured, tortured and murdered for his part in leading the insurrection and his body was burned upon the rack. In tribute to the memory of this gallant soldier of God and Ireland, Patrick J. McCall wrote the famous ballad **Boolavogue** which relates the exploits of the Boys of Wexford led by Father Murphy. Years later, poet Seamus Heaney wrote a poem called **Requiem for the Croppys** (as Irish Catholics were called) which read, in part:

*The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley. No kitchens on the run, no striking camp.
We moved quick and sudden in our own country. The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown. Until, on Vinegar Hill, the final conclave.
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon. The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin and in August... the barley grew up out of our grave.*

