



Sir Richard Church and the Irish Philhellenes in the Greek War of Independence

Patrick Comerford

Introduction

Many are familiar with the Philhellenes — those foreigners who devoted their lives to Greece at the beginning of the 19th century. But few are aware of the many Irishmen who fought in the Greek War of Independence or of their roles as Philhellenes. Reading many British historians (see Dakin 1955 and 1972, Woodhouse 1969 and St Clair 1972), it is easy to believe that all the Philhellenes were British romantics, the most noble and enthusiastic being Lord Byron. There may have been a smattering of Americans, but the French among them were portrayed as rogues and knaves, and other nationalities, particularly Russians, as susceptible. This typecasting was so Anglo-centric that both Byron and the eccentric Lord Cochrane are no longer Scots but honorary Englishmen. So too with the Irish Philhellenes, especially Sir Richard Church from Cork: a plaque in Saint Paul's Anglican Church in Athens claims he won the affection of the people of Greece 'for himself and for England'. Yet Church was the leading Irish Philhellene, and was once described as the 'liege lord of all true Philhellenes' (Woodhouse 1969, 157) And there were many more Irish heroes who filled those ranks.

The first Irish Philhellenes

The Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century, and the capture of the Ionian Islands brought the first future Irish Philhellenes to Greece, including Sir Hudson Lowe, (1769–1844) from Galway. Lowe is often remembered as Napoleon's jailer, but his campaign for the abolition of slavery is forgotten. He was second-in-command in the expedition to the Ionian Islands, was present at the capture of Kephallonia, Ithaki and Lefkhada, and he later framed a provisional administration for the islands. The Greek population appreciated him so much that they presented him with a sword of honour on his reluctant departure.

Lowe was accompanied by Richard Church (1784–1873), who was born into a prominent Quaker merchant family in Cork. When he ran away to join the army he brought disgrace on his Quaker parents who were disowned or excommunicated for buying him a commission. As a 16-year-old ensign in 1800, he visited Greece for the first time and wrote home: 'The Greeks, who are slaves to the Turks and are Christians, are ... a brave, honest, open generous people, continually making us presents of fruit' (Ferriman 1917, 112; Woodhouse 1969, 20). After the British captured the Ionian Islands in 1809, Church quickly raised a Greek regiment of light infantry, and within six weeks had Greek troops involved in the fighting. He conducted the landing on Zakynthos, and went on to distinguish himself at the capture of Ithaki and Kythera.

When he was posted to Zakynthos, Church began providing military training for the Greeks, including Theodoros Kolokotronis, who fought with distinction alongside Church and Lowe at Lefkhada and became a captain in the new regiment. When Church's arm was shattered at the storming of the bastion, he went on sick leave, visiting Athens, travelling through northern Greece, and reporting to the British embassy at Constantinople. Back on Zakynthos, he recruited more Greeks, and soon reported that 6,000 to 8,000 Greeks could have been recruited, so overwhelming was the interest. One Greek leader promised that if Church could train his men they would win for him the fame of Miltiades, Leonidas and Themistocles. In 1812, Church went to London seeking permission to raise a second regiment. As he left he was presented with

one memorial describing him as ‘illustrious chief’ and another asking for British assistance in liberating Greece. But, although Church was raised to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and was given sanction to raise a second regiment of Greeks, he did not win the political support he hoped for. On his way back to Zakynthos, he stayed in Vienna with Count Laval Nugent (1777–1862) from Co Wicklow, a field marshal in the Habsburg army and a life-long advocate of the cause of Greece.

Church’s Greek troops captured Paxos and the town of Parga on the mainland. He later left Zakynthos for Naples, where he assisted in the negotiations for the surrender of Corfu. By then he was, in the words of St Clair, ‘more Greek than the Greeks’ (St Clair 1972, 320). He argued unsuccessfully behind the scenes at the Congress of Vienna for an independent, sovereign Greek state. Instead, he was ordered to disband his Greek regiments, the Ionian Islands became a British fiefdom, and in an act of treacherous betrayal, Parga was sold to Ali Pasha. Disappointed, Church left Greece for a military career that took him to Austria and Italy.

Irish Philhellenes join the struggle

Meanwhile, a new wave of Irish radicals became interested in Greece, including Edward Blaquièrre, (d. 1832), a romantic Dublin seaman of Huguenot descent, and Charles James Napier (1782–1853) from Celbridge, Co. Kildare, a first cousin of Lord Edward FitzGerald. Blaquièrre first came into contact with the Greek revolutionaries when he met John Louriotis, who was raising funds in Spain and Portugal. Blaquièrre’s suggestion that London was a better place for fundraising led to the formation of the London Greek Committee, marking a crucial stage in the Greek cause. Early Irish members of the committee included the poet Thomas Moore, and a future Governor of the Ionian Islands, Lord Nugent.

Blaquièrre soon headed for Greece, stopping in Genoa to visit Byron, who was planning to travel to Latin America. Blaquièrre persuaded him to return to Greece, advising Byron to go first to Zakynthos. Instead, Byron sailed for Kephallonia, where the British governor or resident was Napier from Celbridge. Byron first stayed as a guest of Napier, who later found him a villa at Metaxata

south of Argostoli. There Byron wrote: 'Colonel Napier and myself are as decided for the cause of Greece as any' (Woodhouse 1969, 102). Among Byron's friends at Metaxata was the regimental Irish doctor, Dr James Kennedy, who taught him demotic Greek, and the Philhellenes who visited Byron there included the Belfast journalist James Emerson (1804–1869).

Napier, faced with continual opposition from British administrators in Corfu, was worried that Byron's presence and his visitors threatened his own position. Byron left Kephalaria on 30 December 1823, and arrived at Missolonghi on 5 January 1824, hoping he would soon be joined by Napier as commander-in-chief of the Greek army. But Byron died there on Easter Sunday, 18 April 1824; the day before he had said: 'I wish Napier and Hobhouse were here, we would soon settle this business.' Three days after Byron's death, Blaquièrre arrived back in Zakynthos with the first instalment of a British loan; within days, Byron's coffin began its journey back to England on board the *Florida*, the ship that brought Blaquièrre back to Greece. Blaquièrre now tried to recruit either Church's friend, Count Laval Nugent, or Napier, as commander of the army.

Napier had first arrived in the Ionian Islands in 1819. On a confidential mission from Corfu to Ali Pasha, he was converted to the Greek cause, and when the war of independence began on 25 March 1821 he started supplying military intelligence to the Greeks and publishing pamphlets in English supporting the struggle. Despite his reputation as a radical and a Philhellene, Napier was appointed British resident of Kephalaria, where he was an 'enlightened despot', providing roads, bridges and public buildings, assisted by his Director of Public Works, John Pitt Kennedy (1796–1879), a Church of Ireland rector's son from Carndonagh, Co Donegal.

Napier and Kennedy erected the elegant, circular Doric lighthouse at Aghios Theodoros, along with market places, a marine parade, quays, courthouses, prisons, hospitals, and schools. They criss-crossed the once-impassable island with a network of roads and bridges, laid out broad streets and wide squares in Argostoli and Lixouri, and provided a tree-lined avenue to the Monastery of Aghios Gerassimos. Napier also broke the feudal privileges of the island aristocracy, putting agriculture on a firm footing. John Augustus Toole (ca. 1792–1829), who came to Kephalaria as a member of Napier's staff, worked

closely with Kennedy on building the roads and bridges. By the winter of 1826 and 1827, he was among the supporters of Kapodistrias who organised their activities from Corfu under the cover of a charitable committee.

Napier's time in Kephalaria 'was probably the happiest in his life' (DNB xiv, 46): there he fell in love with a Greek woman, Anastasia, who became the mother of his two daughters. Long after Byron's death, Napier continued to hope he would become the Greek commander-in-chief, hopes harboured too by his friends among the Greek leadership, including Kapodistrias and Mavrokordatos. But the appointment never came and Blaquièere and Kolokotronis, who turned first to Laval Nugent, then offered the command to Church. Napier eventually left Kephalaria, leaving his Greek-born daughters behind. He returned occasionally to Ireland, visiting his friend Kennedy at Glasnevin, but eventually made his name as the Conqueror of Sind in India.

Church returns to Greece

When the War of Independence broke out in 1821, Church expressed the hope that he might become involved once again in the Greek cause. Blaquièere worked hard politically to have Church invited back to Greece to lead the armed forces, but while he waited on Zakynthos for Church's return, his hopes appeared to be in vain. Two weeks after Church's marriage to Elizabeth Augusta Wilmot, sister-in-law of the Earl of Kenmare and distantly related by marriage to Byron, and two weeks after the fall of Athens to the Turks, the Greek government finally invited Church to assume command.

During this period of waiting, his old friend Kolokotronis had written to Church asking:

'What are you doing? Where are you to be found? My soul has never been absent from you – We your old comrades in arms ... are fighting for our country – Greece so dear to you! – that we may obtain our rights as men and as people and our liberty – How has your soul been able to allow you to remain away from us, and to withhold you from combating with us? I expected you here before other Philhellenes ... Come! Come! and take arms for Greece: or assist her with your talents, your virtues, and your abilities, that you may claim her eternal gratitude ...' (Dakin 1955, 137, 141–2; St Clair 1972, 321).