



THE AMERICAN WAR SERVICE OF LORD EDWARD FITZGERALD

Although the life of Irish peer and honored revolutionary Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1763-1798) was of a tragically brief span -- dying valiantly at the age of 36 in a failed uprising attempt against British rule in Ireland in late May 1798 -- it managed to contain a remarkable amount of activity and travel for such a young man; including some years spent fighting on behalf of the British in the American war for Independence, and where he crossed swords, perhaps literally, against Lee's Legion at the battle of Quinby Bridge, S.C., 17 July, 1781.

The following is an extract describing his American Revolutionary War record taken from vol. I, pp. 17-28, of The Life and Death of Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1831), written by renown and popular Irish poet and composer of songs, Thomas Moore (1779-1852). Moore, at one time a traveling companion and confidante of Lord Byron, though liked for his writings in this country, took a dim view of Jefferson's Democratic-Republican America when, in 1804, he made a tour of that took him from Norfolk, Virginia, (where he first disembarked) up finally into Canada. He composed several satirical poems on what he perceived to be ochlocracy and lack of culture in the newly established nation; and found himself most at home during his visit chiefly among Federalists and British sympathizers. Ironically, whether his radical idol Lord Edward would have shared his disdainful sentiments is understandably open to conjecture.

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At the beginning of June [1781], Lord Edward's regiment [the 19<sup>th</sup> Regt. of Foot], and the two others that sailed with it from Cork, landed at Charlestown. Their arrival at this crisis was an event most seasonable for the relief of the English forces acting in that quarter, who were, by the late turn of the campaign, placed in a situation of great difficulty. The corps under Lord Rawdon's command at Charlestown having been found hardly sufficient for the defence of that capital, he was unable, with any degree of safety, to detach from his already inadequate force such aid as, in more than one point, the perilous state of the province required. Post after post had fallen into the hands of the Americans, and the important fort called "Ninety-Six," which had been for some time invested by General Greene, was now also on the point of being lost for want of those succours which the straitened means of Lord Rawdon prevented him from affording.

In this juncture the three regiments from Ireland arrived, and gave an entirely new aspect to the face of affairs. Though destined originally to join Lord Cornwallis, they were, with a prompt sense of the exigencies of the moment, placed, by the officer who had the command of them, at the disposal of Lord Rawdon, and thus enabled his Lordship, not only to relieve the garrison of Ninety-Six, but also to follow up this impression with a degree of energy and confidence, of which even his enterprising gallantry would have been without such aid incapable. It was, indeed, supposed that the American general was not a little

influenced in his movements by the intelligence which he had received, that the newly arrived troops were “particularly full of ardour for an opportunity of signaling themselves.”

That Lord Edward was among these impatient candidates for distinction can little be doubted; and it was but a short time after their joining he had the good fortune to achieve a service which was not only brilliant but useful, and brought him both honour and reward. The 19th regiment, being posted in the neighbourhood of a place called Mon[c]k’s Corner, found itself menaced, one morning at daybreak, with an attack from Colonel Lee, one of the ablest and most enterprising of the American partisans. This officer having made some demonstrations, at the head of his cavalry, in front of the 19th, the colonel of that regiment (ignorant, as it appears, of the nature of American warfare), ordered a retreat; -- a movement wholly unnecessary, and rendered still more discreditable by the unmilitary manner in which it was effected: all the baggage, sick, medicines, and paymasters’ chests being left in the rear of the column of march, where they were liable to be captured by any half-dozen stragglers. Fortunately, Lord Edward was upon the rear-guard, covering the retreat of the regiment, and, by the firm and determined countenance of his little party, and their animated fire, kept the American corps in check till he was able to break up a small wooden bridge over a creek which separated him from his pursuers, and which could not be crossed by the enemy without making a long detour. Having secured safety so far, Lord Edward reported the state of affairs to the colonel; and, the disreputable panic being thus put an end to, the regiment resumed its original position.

Major Doyle, now General Sir John Doyle, -- an officer whom but to name is to call up in the minds of all who have the happiness of knowing him whatever is most estimable and amiable, both in the soldier and the man, -- was, at this time, at the head of Lord Rawdon’s staff; and to him, acting as adjutant-general, the official report of the whole affair was made. Without delay he submitted it to his noble chief, who was so pleased with this readiness of resource, in so young an officer, that he desired Major Doyle to write instantly to Lord Edward in his name, and offer him the situation of aide-de-camp on his staff.

This appointment was, in every respect, fortunate for the young soldier, as, besides bringing him into near relations with a nobleman so amiable, it placed him where he was enabled to gratify his military tastes by seeing war carried on upon a larger and more scientific scale, and, it may be added, under one of the very best masters. He accordingly repaired to head-quarters, and from thence accompanied Lord Rawdon in his rapid and successful movement for the relief of Ninety-Six.

It was in the course of this expedition that Lord Edward exhibited, -- or rather was detected in, -- a trait of personal courage, of that purely adventurous kind which is seldom found but in romance, and of which the following particulars have been related to me by the distinguished person then acting as adjutant-general.

“Among the varied duties which devolved upon me as chief of the staff, a most material one was obtaining intelligence. This was effected partly by the employment of intelligent spies in various directions, and partly by frequent reconnaissances; which last were not devoid of danger, from the superior knowledge of the country possessed by the enemy. Upon these occasions I constantly found Lord Edward by my side, with the permission of our noble chief, who wished our young friend to see every thing connected with real service. In fact the danger enhanced the value of the enterprise in the eyes of this brave young creature. In approaching the position of Ninety-Six, the enemy’s light troops in advance became more numerous, and rendered more frequent patrols necessary upon our part.

“I was setting out upon a patrol, and sent to apprise Lord Edward; but he was nowhere to be found, and I proceeded without him, when, at the end of two miles, upon emerging from the forest, I found him engaged with two of the enemy’s irregular horse: he had wounded one of his opponents, when his sword broke in the middle, and he must have soon fallen in the unequal contest, had not his enemies fled on perceiving the head of my column. I rated him most soundly, as you may imagine, for the undisciplined act of leaving the camp, at so critical a time, without the general’s permission. He was, -- or pretended to be, -- very penitent, and compounded for my reporting him at the head-quarters, provided I would let him accompany me, in the hope of some other enterprise. It was impossible to refuse the fellow, whose frank, manly, and ingenuous manner would have won over even a greater tyrant than myself. In the course of the

day we took some prisoners, which I made him convey to head-quarters, with a *Bellerophon* message, which he fairly delivered. Lord Moira gravely rebuked him; but I could never find that he lost *much ground* with his chief for his *chivalrous valour*.”

After the relief of Ninety-Six, Lord Rawdon, whose health had suffered severely from the climate, found it advisable to return to England, in consequence of which Lord Edward rejoined his regiment.

The calm that succeeded Lord Rawdon’s departure from South Carolina, owing to the activity with which he had retrieved the affairs of the royal forces, and thus established an equipoise of strength between the two parties, could be expected, of course, only to last till one of them had become powerful enough to disturb it. Accordingly, in the autumn, General Greene, having received reinforcements from another quarter, proceeded, with his accustomed vigour, to resume offensive operations; and, by his attack upon Colonel Stuart [Lieut. Col. Alexander Stewart], at Eutaw Springs, gave rise to one of the best fought actions that had occurred during the war. Though the meed of victory, on this occasion, was left doubtful between the claimants, that of honour is allowed to have been fairly the due of both. So close, indeed, and desperate was the encounter, that every officer engaged is said to have had, personally, and hand to hand, an opportunity of distinguishing himself; and Lord Edward, who, we may take for granted, was among the foremost in the strife, received a severe wound in the thigh, which left him insensible on the field.

In this helpless situation he was found by a poor negro, who carried him off on his back to his hut, and there nursed him most tenderly, till he was well enough of his wound to bear removing to Charlestown. This negro was no other than the “faithful Tony,” whom, in gratitude for the honest creature’s kindness, he now took into his service, and who continued devotedly attached to his noble master to the end of his career.

It had been intended that Major Doyle, on the departure of Lord Rawdon, should resume the station he had before held on the staff of Lord Cornwallis; but in consequence of this irruption of new forces into the province, he was requested by General Goold [Paston Gould], who had succeeded to the chief command, still to continue to him the aid of his local knowledge and experience, so as to avert the mischiefs which a total want of confidence in most of the persons newly appointed to command now threatened. Major Doyle therefore again took upon himself the duties of adjutant-general and public secretary, and proceeded, vested with full powers, to the scene of the late action, for the purpose both of ascertaining the true state of affairs, and of remedying the confusion into which they had been thrown. Here he found Lord Edward slowly recovering from his wound, and the following is the account which he gives of his young friend: -- “I am not sure that he was not then acting as aide-de-camp to Stuart, as the 19th, I think, was not there. At all events, he had been foremost in the melee, as usual, and received a very severe wound in the thigh. At this same time, Colonel Washington, a distinguished officer of the enemy’s cavalry, was severely wounded and made prisoner; and while I was making preparations to send them down comfortably to Charlestown, Lord Edward, forgetting his own wound, offered his services to *take charge* of his gallant enemy. I saw him every day till he recovered, about which time I was sent to England with the public despatches [sic].”

To these notices of a part of his lordship’s life, hitherto so little known, it would be unjust not to add the few words of comment, as eloquently as they are cordially expressed, with which the gallant writer closes his communication to me on the subject: --

“Of my lamented and ill-fated friend’s excellent qualities I should never tire in speaking. I never knew so loveable a person, and every man in the army, from the general to the drummer, would cheer the expression. His frank and open manner, his universal benevolence, his *gaiete de coeur*, his valour almost chivalrous, and, above all, his unassuming tone, made him the idol of all who served with him. He had great animal spirits, which bore him up against all fatigue; but his courage was entirely independent of those spirits -- it was a valour *sui generis*.

“Had fortune happily placed him in a situation, however difficult, where he could *legitimately* have brought those varied qualities into play, I am confident he would have proved a proud ornament to his country.”

It may not perhaps, though anticipating a period so much later, appear altogether ill-timed to mention in this place, that when Lord Edward lay suffering under the fatal wounds of which he died in 1798, a military man connected with government, who had known him at this time in Charlestown, happening to allude, during a visit to him in prison, to the circumstances under which they had first become acquainted, the gallant sufferer exclaimed -- "Ah! I was wounded then in a very different cause; -- that was in fighting against liberty -- this, in fighting for it."

It is, indeed, not a little striking that there should have been engaged at this time, on opposite sides, in America, two noble youths, Lafayette and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, whose political principles afterwards so entirely coincided; and that, while one of them was fated early to become the victim of an unsuccessful assertion of these principles, it has been the far brighter destiny of the other to contribute more than once, splendidly to their triumph.

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