



The Fighting Burkes of Dunsandle

An extraordinary figure in the seventeenth century was Oliver Richard Bourke of Dunsandle Castle near Loughrea, Co Galway. A Colonel in the allied forces against Oliver Cromwell's new model army, Burke's approach was in marked contrast to the quasi-appeasement strategy of his cousin the Earl of Clanricarde. The later books of survey and distribution confirm the vast lands forfeited by this Burke clan (the Earle of Clanmorris/Lord Clanmorris) comprising all their Kilconierin parish lands amounting to well over 3,000 modern acres. Stripped of their titles and estates, these Burkes would never regain their status at home and were 'scattered to the four winds'.

Remarkably, while the story of many families dispossessed in the seventeenth century ends there, this would only be the beginning of the story of this Burke clan. The direct descendant of Oliver Richard Bourke, his great-great-great-grandson to be exact, would gain notoriety and glory on the battlefield for France. Jean Valentin Félix Burke-O'Farrel a.k.a. John Valentine Burke (1784-1862) was born in Bilboa in Spain. Atypical of many Irishmen and those of Irish descent, he joined the French army and was eventually elevated to lieutenant colonel, a knight of the Order of St. Louis (the French military award for chivalry), and awarded the Légion d'honneur for his exploits on the battle-field.

As if that wasn't enough, his son, Count Edmund Julius Valentine Burke (1839-c.1900), joined the French Navy and like his father also had a most distinguished career, and remarkably he was also awarded the French Legion of Honour. The family are among the most remarkable ever produced from the wider Loughrea and it is hoped that one day a detailed study of their lives will be produced.

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