

Exiled to New York! A United Irishman's Memories

BY JOHN CALDWELL, JR.

FOREWORD

The following excerpt is taken from a memoir written by John Caldwell, Jr., in 1849 and tells about his family's exile to America (and New York) because of involvement in the United Irish Rebellion of 1798. The memoir, Particulars of History of a North County Irish Family, also describes John Caldwell's background and his life in Belfast and membership in the United Irishmen prior to 1798. And it describes his father, John Caldwell, Sr., and his family's experiences in the United States from 1799 to 1849.

On the eve of the Rebellion, the Caldwell family lived near Ballymoney in County Antrim where John Caldwell, Sr., owned a corn mill and linen bleaching business. He lived with his four young daughters and sons Richard, aged 18, and William, 9. Another son, Andrew, was studying at Trinity College. John Caldwell, Jr., aged 29, was a merchant in Belfast.

The younger John Caldwell had joined the United Irishmen in Belfast around 1793. In his memoir he states that he joined "to obtain equal rights for all my countrymen of every religious denomination through an independent Irish legislature." Caldwell was arrested for treason on May 19, 1798 and was held in custody during the Rebellion.

This excerpt describes incidents immediately before and after John Caldwell's family was forced to leave Ireland. It begins in July 1798, with a description of his brother Richard's actions as a United Irish leader in Antrim and the subsequent burning of the Caldwell home—the initial punishment imposed on the family. The excerpt concludes with the family's arrival as exiles in New York City and their establishment of a new life here.

John Caldwell wrote his memoir in longhand. Since his death, several of his descendants contributed to preserving it and transcribing it. These included Edward T. Langford, Mary Langford Edie, and Hope Langford Turvey. It is published here with the permission and support of Mary Midgley, who is the daughter of Mary Langford Edie, and with the editorial assistance of Alice Naughton, who has researched the Caldwell family in New York, Belfast, and Ballymoney, County Antrim.
M.M., A.N.

(Note: This excerpt preserves the style and spelling in the memoir as originally transcribed. Footnotes and subheadings have been added.)

I now for the first time learned that my brother Richard, then in his eighteenth year, had been chosen

[a United Irish] General and placed at the head of a considerable number of undisciplined and but very partially armed men—in fact, almost an ungovernable mass, whose character may be appreciated from the very circumstance of their choosing a young lad of Richard's age to command them. However he did what older and more experienced generals have failed to do, for he kept up the strictest system of subordination, and during his short possession of the Town of Ballymoney,

after the King's troops had fled to Colerain, he not only protected the properties and persons of such Loyalists as remained from the fury of the exasperated mob, but throughout his march to Ballymena, preserved the strictest order and even punished one of his men, who was detected in stealing two fowls from a barnyard.¹ What a contrast was the conduct of the youthful rebel chief to that of the veteran martinets of the Royal Army, who burned and destroyed whatever came in their way, and involved in one promiscuous ruin the innocent, the unoffending and the guilty, not even exempting "suspected" females.

Some time previous to June '98 Richard had left home; his destination totally unknown to our father and sisters, who were not alarmed at his absence, as it was his frequent practice to visit his saltworks and to attend the linen market without giving them particular notice of his whereabouts. Nor dare he have told his father, as the latter was not an United Irishman and knew nothing of their doings, which were concealed from all but the initiated².



Photo: This picture of John Caldwell, Jr., in old age was taken in the 1840s using an early photographic process. Courtesy of Mary Midgley.

John Caldwell, Jr., was born in Ireland in 1769. Raised near Ballymoney, County Antrim, he joined the United Irishmen early in the 1790s. While working as a merchant in Belfast he was arrested on May 19, 1798 and imprisoned for his political affiliation. His younger brother, Richard, was later arrested for leading United Irish forces in Antrim. The Caldwell family was exiled for their activities and moved to New York.

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THE FIRST PUNISHMENT—BURNING THE HOME

On the morning of that woeful and eventful day, whilst my father, sisters, Catherine, Mary, Margaret, and Elizabeth, and my brother William (the two latter being children) were at breakfast, Major Bacon and a party of officers ascended the hill [to our house] and were invited to breakfast by my father in his usual hospitable manner.... Major Bacon, then calling my father out to the lawn in front of the house, pulled out a paper from his pocket, and without exhibiting that tinge or feeling of shame which would have probably suffused the cheek of even an hostile Irishman, (for the Manxman felt no qualm of conscience), abruptly told his victim that this paper contained an order from Lord Henry Murray, the Military Commander of the District, to burn his house and premises and destroy his property, but that as a special favor, he would grant him five minutes to bring out his family. And to suit the action to the word, this military hero held his watch in his hand.³

This benign order being issued...my father... instantly returned to the breakfast parlour and announced to his innocent and unsuspecting family the fiat which had gone forth, and urged them to come out on the lawn and save themselves from destruction, for in a few minutes their all would be in conflagration. The warning was in a moment acted upon and with desperate alacrity and austerity, without fainting or hysteric fits. The tea tray and equipage, together with the very few pieces of plate within reach, together with the immediate furniture of the room, were handed from the already ignited house onto the lawn, whilst our affectionate and intrepid Catherine hastened up the narrow stairway to save the infant son of our elder sister Flora, who was then happily at Bushbank with her uncle. The child was hurried to the lawn by my brother William, then a boy of nine years of age, and was cared for by one of the cotters, who fortunately had ventured to the Hill to render his or her assistance.... Catherine's next object was to preserve a certain chest of drawers which contained some of the house [linen], and the whole of the linen prepared by our elder sister for her approaching accouchement. This chest, with supernatural strength she pushed forward and down two or three steps of the stairs, when the smoke from the burning straw and hay filled every apartment, and had so nearly suffocated

poor Catherine that with difficulty she was dragged over the chest to safety, whilst it was, with all the linen—the labour and savings of years, left to its fate. Within the allotted few minutes, which time was needed to bring hay and straw from the barn, the humble and comfortable dwelling—the seat of genuine hospitality whose door was never closed to the distressed nor shut on the afflicted—with the office houses, barns, stock of hay, grain, etc., were in flames.

The weather being remarkably dry, everything was soon consumed, so that scarcely had the mind time to reflect on the proceeding until the conflagration ceased, and the smoke proclaimed to the affrighted neighborhood that the mansion of that friend who had on so many occasions advised them to peace and submission to the law, and who had persuaded them to throw their instruments of destruction into the [River] Bann, was the first domicile devoted to the fury of a cruel and unprincipled faction; and that this very man, the advocate of the oppressed and the protector of the poor, was now himself, with his family, sacrificed to the jealousy and hatred of upstart, petty tyrants, whose frauds on the public he had ever opposed, and whose insolence of office he had on all occasions endeavored to check and keep within bounds. For to the false representations of these reptiles was Lord Henry Murray, as he afterwards avowed, induced to issue the burning order. The ostensible reason was the rebellion of his son Richard.... But the real cause is already explained and might further be elucidated in his unbending integrity and unyielding love of justice, and the consequent esteem of the enlightened and virtuous.

FOLLOWING THE BURNING

After the departure of the armed banditti, when they were left alone, a realization of their situation so woe worn, so forlorn and deserted, came over them, accompanied however with gratitude to heaven for their personal safety.... At this critical moment, their worthy neighbour James Hunter, one of the Society of Friends, whose residence was half a mile distant, came running across the fields. His presence was cheering; his countenance portrayed sympathy and benevolence; he spoke words of comfort; and like the good Samaritan, he brought with him wine to reanimate that heart which, but for the unprotected family around, would most probably have cracked its strings.

... Their first effort was to fix the carpet they had saved over one of the double hedges planted by our father, and under this shelter they remained some days, being determined to stay together and avoid the risk of bringing persecution on any friend who might afford them an asylum, tho' our Aunt Ball and two cousins, Ann and Flora Caldwell, ventured to accept the pressing invitation of honest James Hunter of Ballinaerce.

At length my father, having ascertained from Lord Henry Murray that the bleach works would not be destroyed, set about fitting up part of the lofts into lodging and one sitting room.... Thus were they situated when I was brought, as I have already stated, a prisoner to Belfast. ... [Simultaneously, our] brother Andrew had quit the college for a time to join the family in their desolation, and I also learned the situation of my brother Richard, who after a variety of vicissitudes was arrested in Scotland, being recognized by his description in a proclamation offering a reward for his apprehension.... [Richard had been] brought over to Colerain where he was then a prisoner under sentence of death by a court martial—subject however to confirmation or rejection of Lord Cornwallis, the Lord Lieutenant.

THE FAMILY IS EXILED

... This and subsequent events convinced me that this cruel play on our feelings was merely a rod of terror held over my father's head to induce him to come to any terms proposed by his implacable enemies.⁴ The basis of such terms, on the parties consenting to the emigration of Richard without further delay or opposition, should be the departure also of every individual of the family, that not one might be left to upbraid them hereafter for their treachery and cruelty, and that they might have a good chance of effecting a confiscation of the property, (a consummation openly gloated on), and that none should be left to expose the plots and machinations which brought about the destruction of the family. Thus they tampered with the feelings, the hopes, and the fears of an almost broken-hearted parent, and females worn down by persecution and affliction, from everyone of whom Lord Henry Murray, who commanded the district, was compelled by the representations made him by our enemies, to require a separate bond and security and acknowledgment of guilt, even that of

Elizabeth [our sister and a child]... When all this was accomplished, Richard was handed over to the custody of... two yeoman officers, with an order to convey him to Derry and put him on board a schooner bound for Norfolk in Virginia.

TAKEN BY A FRENCH PRIVATEER

... [Soon after, most of our remaining family members were] busied with preparations for departure in the brig *Peggy*, (Capt. Watson), an American ship... to sail from Belfast to New York on the 1st of May [1799], having already engaged nearly as many passengers besides our own family as she could hold. ... On Friday the 3rd of May we sailed... with one hundred and forty-four passengers... We had an excellent run for a few days and most of us recovered from sea sickness, when it became quite calm. The weather was remarkably fine when we were overhauled by a small but very fine-looking French Privateer, the *Bordelieu* (Capt. Derry-grande of Bordeaux).

Capt. Watson and... myself were ordered on board with our papers and the Captain [was ordered] to bring his baggage. This was astounding, as intimating that we should be sent into a French port and the Captain detained on board the Privateer. [Capt. Derry-grande]... endeavored to soothe my evident distress by telling me how pleased some of my countrymen then in Bordeaux would be to see and serve me.⁶ I replied that this was a death blow to all our hopes; that nearly everyone had been persecuted by the British Government and were now seeking an asylum amongst their friends and kindred and countrymen in America. He showed me the printed orders of his government, which he dared not contravene, and he must send us in.

My feelings then became intense. I beseeched him to consider the state of misery and ruin he was heaping on my family and all the passengers, whose names were before him, and who never thought of being molested by the French, in whose struggles we had all felt the most lively interest and who had so lately broken their shackles and obtained their own freedom. I observed this appeal had a powerful effect on him who was to fix our destiny.... I then entreated him to consult some of his own officers in the matter, remarking that I thought I saw among them some of my own countrymen. ... [The Captain] made

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Photo: John Caldwell's house in Salisbury Mills, Orange County, New York. Courtesy of Alice Naughton.



four different attempts before he succeeded in procuring, I believe, a unanimous vote for our release. He then returned to me in triumph, shook me by the hand, slapped me on the back, and told me to go back to my passengers and tell them that “the French nation was never so happy as when protecting those who were persecuted by the British.”

...The remainder of our voyage was pleasant and when the weather was favorable we generally amused ourselves on the quarter-deck and in the afternoons with the fiddle and the dance, and spent our mornings in reading, writing, and conversation. On the Banks of Newfoundland we enjoyed the pastime of fishing and ate our cod in the utmost perfection. And on the 11th day of June we hailed with joy the high lands of Neversink, and the next day we landed in New York under impressions of gratitude and thankfulness for the mercies we had experienced, and feelings which I trust will never be obliterated.

A NEW LIFE IN NEW YORK

In New York we had but few acquaintances, fewer personal friends and no relatives. The worthy Mr.

Hinck gave us rooms in his house in Maiden Lane, where we resided for some days. John and Joseph Stevenson, who had preceded us three or four months, were incessant in their good offices, as was William Hill, one of the owners of the *Peggy*. ...In short, our countrymen of every grade and every different political sentiment hailed us with hospitable attentions, and from the natives, we met a cordial reception.

...[In August, 1799, yellow fever] becoming alarming, and our friend John Stevenson having fallen a victim to it, we were advised to quit the city and were urged to move to Peekskill, where dwelt an old acquaintance...a farmer and miller from County Antrim. We accordingly embarked for Peekskill on the North, or Hudson, River about forty miles from the city in a sloop belonging to that place. It was afternoon when we embarked and the sloop was crowded to excess with people who, like ourselves, were fleeing from the dreaded pestilence...[Late the next night] we landed at the Peekskill wharf... The good people had retired to rest, but after a very few minutes they were astir and provided us amply with pies, puddings, cakes, butter, tea, and tolerable bread. Next morning our...aristocratic ideas were not a little surprised on learning that our landlord, the tavern keeper, had been lately elected a member of the Legislature, so little did we know at that time of the democratic and republican system of our adopted country, which has so essentially built up the happiness and prosperity of the nation, and raised the man of virtue and talent— be he rich, be he poor— to that elevation of society which his mental acquirements entitled him to enjoy.

...Everything in and surrounding Peekskill seemed new to us. We were the lions of the day

The spirit which comes itself on your side of the wide water is cheering to the mind; it is pleasing to turn from the melancholy, but true picture of our native country, to that of our adopted country, and to observe among you, a revival of that opposition to Tyranny & that attachment to the free liberal principles of civil & religious liberty, which animated our Countrymen, but which seemed almost annihilated in the breasts of their descendants—

to many of the country folk, who persuaded themselves that the males and females of our family had been Generals and Commanders in many a battle in our own native country. ...My Brother Richard reached Peekskill from Savannah, and...[our meeting there] was such as can only be imagined by an affectionate father and chil-

dren after an absence occasioned by so many thrilling circumstances.

We returned early to the city and rented a larger concern in Water Street, through to Front Street, the store on Water Street being corner of Gouverneurs Lane, and next to it on Water Street was our dwelling house, formerly occupied by Mr. John McVicar and then by the Messrs. Pollock, both being Irish families. Richard and I then entered into partnership under the firm of "John and Richard Caldwell" in the wholesale grocery line, linen, flaxseed, and commission business.

...[A short time later] my father and sisters...hired a pleasant and retired house and small farm in Flushing, Bayside, on the East River.

AFTERWORD

The family of John Caldwell remained involved in the life of New York and their new country. In November, 1802, John Caldwell, Sr., who had sold his remaining property in Ballymoney, purchased property at Salisbury Mills, north of New York City. Most of the Caldwell family moved there, and John, Sr., died there in October, 1803.

John Caldwell, Jr., continued as a merchant in New York City for many years. He was active in the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and continued to support the values of the United Irish movement throughout his life. He lived his last years in a house in Salisbury Mills next to the houses of his brother, Andrew, and his sister, Catherine Parks Chambers. He died at Salisbury Mills in May 1850 in his eighty-second year and was buried in the nearby Caldwell family graveyard. Today the graveyard is overgrown with trees, and falling limbs have knocked down several headstones. Only a footstone remains to mark the grave of John Caldwell, Jr.

Richard Caldwell was commissioned a captain in the United States Army during the War of 1812. While defending the northern border of New York State against British forces, he died of dysentery in November 1812. A small monument to Richard and his regiment stands in Salisbury Mills.

Descendants of the Caldwell family continue to live in or near New York City and the lower Hudson Valley. In Salisbury Mills, three original Caldwell houses still stand in a row, now occupied by others. A mill operated on the site of the Caldwell property in Ballymoney until 1959.

M.M., A.N.

We had almost daily communication by the regular passage sloops and our intercourse was delightful and happy, and that happiness increased by the arrival in June 1800 of our dear venerated Aunt Ball, John Parks, our sister Flora, his wife, their two children – James and Bessy, and our brother Andrew. We brought William from school and employed him in such business matters as would further him in life. . . . Thus we were again in a most providential and remarkable manner brought together under apparently fortunate auspices.

Notes

- 1 Richard Caldwell was one of the leaders of United Irish forces in County Antrim. Their military power in Antrim had a brief existence, and Richard was forced to flee to Scotland where information about his identity led to his capture by King's representatives. Following his arrest, he was sentenced to death by court martial proceedings, with confirmation of this sentence left to Cornwallis, the King's Lord Lieutenant in Ireland. Ultimately it was agreed that Richard would be exiled to the United States, with the proviso that his father, brothers, and sisters meet the same fate.
- 2 Unlike his sons, John Caldwell, Sr., did not join the United Irish movement. As a counselor for peaceful resolution of the movement's issues, his disagreement rested with the strategy of the United Irishmen rather than their goals which he supported. Despite these differences with his sons, the elder Caldwell seems to have been unyielding in his support for them.
- 3 Elsewhere in his memoir, John Caldwell added his belief that an Irishman never would have burned another Irishman's house, and that the attitude and actions of Major Bacon earned for him the epithet "Burning Bacon."
- 4 John Caldwell was convinced that some people, motivated largely by dislike and greed, were exploiting the political difficulties of his father to pursue for themselves his property in Antrim.
- 5 The elder Caldwell refused the demand that each of his children cooperate in filing any bond, security or admission of guilt. He did accede to the understanding that, to save Richard's life, his family would leave Ireland forever and sell their properties there.
- 6 By 1799, a number of United Irish leaders had gone to France, some with hopes of winning greater support for their goals from the French government.