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A Drogheda Schoolmaster: Rev. James Porter

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A Drogheda Schoolmaster—Rev. James Porter.

It is not generally known that this victim of '98 was a schoolmaster on the banks of the Boyne for several years. James Porter was the son of a prosperous farmer and miller of Ballindrait in the County of Donegal where he was born in the year 1753. His father dying when he was about twenty years of age, he left the family home for a more congenial occupation, desiring to become a Presbyterian Minister. As was often the case at that time, he educated himself by educating others. He started a school at Dromore in the County Down, where he married Anna Knox, the ceremony being performed by the Rev. Dr. Black, the local Presbyterian Minister, who afterwards went to Derry and was the bitter opponent of Porter's confrere, the Rev. Wm. Steele Dickson. The Dromore schoolmaster left that place after his marriage and settled in Drogheda where he resided two or three years, and it was there his two eldest children were born. Whilst teaching at Drogheda, about 1784, he entered Glasgow University as a divinity student. On the 31st July, 1787 he was ordained to the congregation of Greyabbey by the Presbytery of Bangor, so that he had a ministry of just eleven years before his execution on the 2nd July, 1798, in sight of his once happy home and his own loved meeting-house. Very little is known of his activities in Drogheda during his few years residence there at the stirring period of the Irish Volunteers.

His eldest son, Alexander, was born in Drogheda and he, we are told, carried a stand of colours for the United Irishmen at the battle of Ballynahinch on the 13th June, 1798, less than three weeks before his father's execution. Young Porter could then have been only about fourteen years of age, and the poor Minister was out on his keeping. After the rout at Ballynahinch young Sandy escaped to his father's people at Ballindrait, where he hid in safety for some time until he was recognised by one of the Armagh Militia who had been at the battle. The militiaman protested, however, that he would not give away such a manly young fellow, but his friends misdoubted Saxon faith and at once sent him off secretly to America, where the intrepid Drogheda-born boy rose to the highest eminence at the bar, eventually becoming Judge Porter.

It is interesting to note that James Porter was not only a lover of the old Irish airs, but had a knowledge of the old Irish tongue. Whether he acquired the language when a boy in Donegal or later in life is not known, nor can I say whether he made much use of it in his school at Drogheda or not, but it is likely he worked on similar lines to his fellow-ministers in Dundalk. His best known and favourite song he wrote to the air of "Savourneen Dilish," and it contains three and four lines of Gaelic in each verse, which goes far to prove his knowledge and respect for the native language.

FRANCIS JOSEPH BIGGER.