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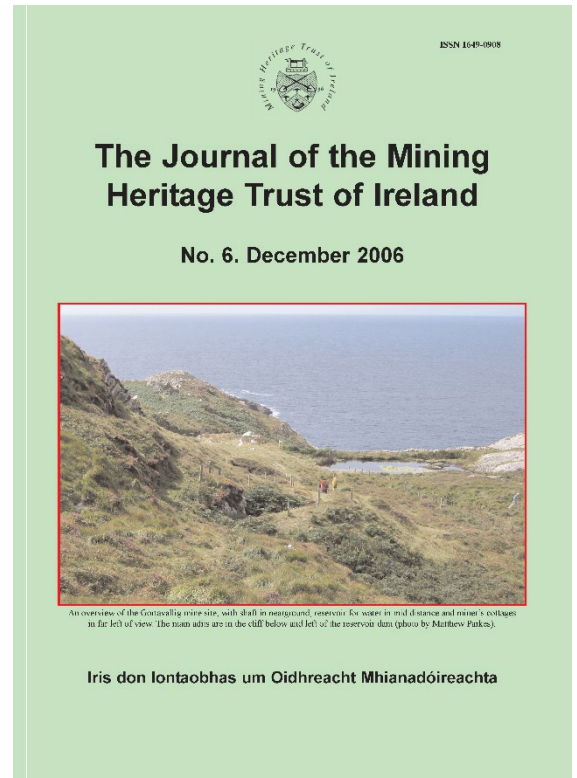
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# THE CAMAC BROTHERS & LATE 18TH CENTURY MINING IN AVOCA

By William Chatterton Dickson

**Abstract:** Turner Camac's name is inscribed on many of the tokens issued by the Hibernian Mining Company of Avoca between 1789 and 1799 as company chairman. While something of his, and his two brothers', patriotic activities during times of heightened political activities had been recorded, nothing had hitherto been published about the family to give context. This is a summary of the mining dimension from a much wider study of the family. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 6, 2006, 37-40.

## CAMAC BACKGROUNDS

The three who were involved in Avoca were the sons of John Camac of Lurgan and Elizabeth Turner. The eldest, Turner Camac (1751 - 1830), joined the East India Company as a Cadet in 1768, following his oldest brother Jacob, a celebrated soldier who had been in India since 1763. Turner had been hoping for an appointment in the civil side, but on arrival in Calcutta he was taken onto the Bengal Military establishment and promoted Ensign in 1769, Lieutenant in 1770 and Captain in 1778. He resigned in 1779 and returned to Ireland reasonably well off. Jacob, who retired in 1782 and had made a considerable fortune died in 1782.

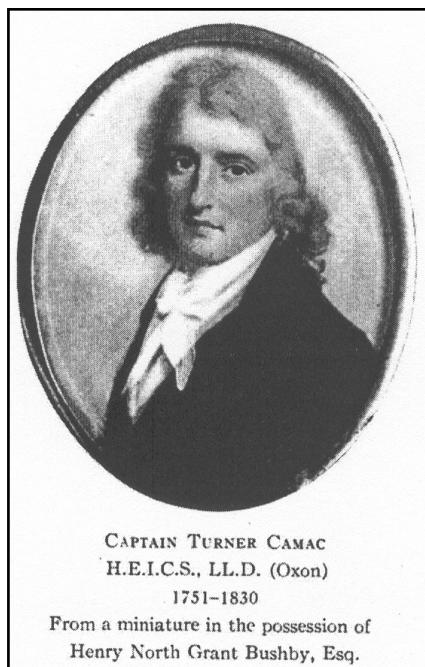
On a number of occasions in the 1780s Turner presented oriental manuscripts to Oxford University and was rewarded with an Honorary Doctorate of Civil Law in 1788. Dr. Turner Camac was appointed a JP for the counties of Louth, Armagh and Down in 1784 and was High Sheriff of Louth in 1789. On his father's death in 1790 he became guardian to his brothers John, then aged 18, and Ynyr Burges, aged 15. With this background it is difficult to know how he became involved in mining in Avoca, much less into radical politics.

The same could be said for his ward, John. He went to

Pembroke College, Oxford, where he matriculated on 16th December 1786 and proceeded to the Middle Temple in London in 1787. After he graduated in 1790, he was admitted to the King's Inns in Dublin in 1793. The third brother, Ynyr Burges (1875-1845) at least had some youthful exposure to dissent. He was educated at Winchester College from 1790 until he was expelled for rebellion in 1793. (*Memoirs*) The reasons are worth recounting.

The "Winchester Rebellion" in April 1793 was caused when Warden Huntingford refused to give permission for the school to attend a performance of the Buckinghamshire Militia Band in the Cathedral Close. One prefect attended anyway, for which Huntingford proposed to punish the whole school. The boys wrote to him pointing out the injustice of this punishment and when they received no answer, wrote a second letter. The Warden did respond to the second letter, but in a provocative manner. This prompted the boys to state that the schoolmasters need not come into school for lessons. The headmaster, Dr Warton, stayed away, but the second master, Dr Goddard, did attend and found himself pelted with marbles. The boys then seized the keys of the school and managed to lock the Warden, Dr Goddard and one of the Fellows into the Warden's Lodgings where they remained for the night.

The Warden offered an amnesty the next morning, but the boys did not trust him and refused. He then attempted to call in assistance from the City, but by then the boys had armed themselves with guns, had taken up the paving stones from one of the courtyards, and were preparing to throw them from the top of the Outer Gate onto any opposition in College Street below. After this, amnesty was offered a second time on terms more acceptable to the boys, but matters quickly descended back into confrontation over the guns the boys had seized. Huntingford wrote to the parents offering the choice of complete submission to him or expulsion. Presumably Turner as guardian stood behind his younger brother who then left Winchester (Winchester Archives).



**Figure 1. Illustrations of Captain Turner Camac (left) and John Camac (right) reproduced from the Memoirs of the Camacs of Co. Down.**

## THE CAMACS, KYAN AND AVOCA

By 1780 John Howard Kyan was mining both sides of the river at Avoca. In 1787 he sold the eastern section (Cronebane and Tigroney) to Roe and Company who had lost the lease of Parys Mountain in Anglesea.. They adopted the name Associated Irish Mining Company (AIMC) for their Avoca operation. Kyan continued to operate at Ballymurtagh. (Cowman, 1994)

How or why Turner Camac committed himself to this operation remains unknown, but not only did he invest in this mine himself, he got his brothers also to do so. The company they set up was named, at that period of nascent patriotism, The Hibernian Mining Company (Act 1792). Turner was the chairman to as stated on many of the tokens while others were inscribed "Camac, Kyan and Camac, the second being John (described fully in Morris 2004).

How Camac's investment was spent was later described: "*They expended an immense capital on a succession of immense but useless surface works, consisting of large smelting works on the sea-shore in Arklow --- building five large conical kilns for calcining ore in only one of which a single fruitless trial was made ---. Little attention was paid to the actual mine workings*" (Griffith). They also had plans for what were topographically impossible projects such as a canal from Avoca to the coal resources of Castlecomer (Act 1792).

A report by a later owner of HMC's Ballymurtagh mine is even more condemnatory: "*They used a very primitive and inefficient means of draining the mines.---- a most precarious and uncertain system and in itself sufficient to prevent all well-doing and in itself sufficient to retard their progress in bringing the miners to the more productive beds of ore beneath*" (Barnes 1864) While there is a possibility that such judgements were politically driven, the wording on the tokens the company issued bear testimony to sheer ineffectuality. John Morris (2004) gives examples of what he calls the "grotesque" misspellings the Camacs with Kyan issued under their names which suggest that their agenda did not include attention to detail such as would be necessary in adapting a mining operation to the various geological exigencies encountered.

Political debate dominated subsequent reportage and the mining detail vanishes. Their last token issue was in 1797, but something must have been happening over the next three years as they were still reported as treating ore in Arklow in 1800. (Fraser). Their AIMC rivals did not last much longer, ending about 1808. That they were almost equally inefficient is indicated by the fact that the mines on both sides of the river Avoca were mined profitably from about 1825 for nearly half a century,

### Politicisation of Avoca Mines

In "The Battle of the Tokens" John Morris (2004) describes one aspect of the rivalry that took place between the UK-based AIMC, east of the Avoca river, and the patriotically named HMC on the west. The early 1790s saw a rapid polarisation of political opinion in Ireland. The previous decade had been

reformist with the Irish Parliament progressively diminishing the force of the Penal Laws against Catholics and Dissenters. Those who opposed such changes considered themselves justified by events in France from 1789: those who considered that liberalisation was going too slowly looked to France for inspiration. Few held a middle position.

Turner Camac was a liberal and made his political leanings clear when he joined a delegation to the King to intercede for Earl Fitzwilliam. When the Earl was appointed Viceroy in early 1795 he tried to hasten the process of reform but was recalled by the king after only ten weeks in office. Turner Camac was one of two delegates appointed by the freeholders of the Co Wicklow to present an address to George III protesting the "*departure of His Excellency the Earl Fitzwilliam from this kingdom and the expression of the sentiments therein, sailed for England yesterday morning at one o'clock*". (Saunders Newsletter - 12 March 1795) Matters became further polarised thereafter, the conservatives having apparently halted reform.

Local landlord, Sir John Parnell, described the effect this had on Turner in a letter informing Dublin Castle of events in Avoca August 1796: "*Mr Camac has desired me to offer his services to raise large bodies of men in any way - he mentioned his general opposition, his being now convinced that it was his interest and duty to do as he offers. I believe as he has never disguised his sentiments that he is sincere, --- He employs 500 miners composed of men of every (?)place, of all descriptions. In general these are the most dangerous body of men to the peace of the county. He has a decided influence with them, his private conduct is humane - perhaps it might be politick to induce him to select a few of the best description in order to gain influence over the body. He appreciates that he will not be trusted and seems agitated to the greatest degree over that supposition.*" (Rebellion Papers 1796). Parnell seemingly admired Turner Camac personally but opposed recruiting miners into an armed force.

The nominal purpose of these volunteer yeomanry was to defend Ireland against French attack as many of the normal regiments stationed here were engaged in the war with France. This was probably the aim of the AIMC yeomen set up across the river complete with uniforms and bands. (Cowman 1994, for refs). Others were more suspect - "a most dangerous body of men" as the conservative Parnell saw the prospect of Hibernian Company volunteers under Camac.

Nonetheless he went ahead and formed the Castlemacadam Regiments. Turner became Captain of the Castlemacadam Infantry, (also known as the Ballymurtagh Infantry) from October 1796. His brother John was Captain of the Castlemacadam Cavalry with his brother Burges as the First Lieutenant. The conservatives were outraged and called a meeting on 23rd November 1796 at Newbridge (Avoca) apparently to force a change in leadership. Turner seems to have carried out something of a coup in having his brother-in-law, a Major Lane, take the chair. In the voting that followed the conservatives were beaten. This caused further dissent and on 14 December 1797 thirty-five local landowners formally disassociated themselves from the Castlemacadam volunteer units.

Positions were further polarised as result of all this. Many of those who joined these units were radical miners, many sympathetic to the pro-French United Irishmen. Increasingly concerned, the conservatives reorganised themselves. A session of the Co Wicklow magistracy formally called attention to the unsatisfactory state of the Castlemacadam regiments on 9 January 1798. A meeting on 6 February called for their disarming and dismissal. To be in breach of such a magisterial order would have set the Camacs against the law and both regiments had to accept the disbandment order on 17 March 1798. The conservative militias from across the river were, of course, encouraged to continue (Rebellion Papers 1798).

### **Subsequent careers of the Camacs**

In the unsettled period after the Rising the HMC collapsed. Both Turner and John were under enormous financial pressure and in fact John spent some time in a debtors' prison. Turner, as executor of his brother Jacob's will, had persuaded many of his family to invest in the mine and these now beset him with requests for their expectations. It was this clamour, and the possibility that he might join his brother in prison, that drove him out of Ireland to his wife's family home in Philadelphia in 1804, leaving her and children behind in London in a financially embarrassed state. They were helped by Turner's younger brother, Burges, who had also made money in India. They, in the meantime, lived in Wimpole Street in London until they were able to join Turner in Philadelphia in 1806 possibly when he had restored the fortunes of her family estate there.

He took US citizenship in 1813 and probably never returned to Ireland. He subsequently played a prominent part in the business and social life of Philadelphia. In 1824 he sent his surviving son William Masters Camac to England and Ireland to meet and get to know his relations and discover the situation of such of his estates as remained. He retained an interest in Irish affairs and attended a dinner in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, to celebrate Catholic Emancipation, sitting on the left hand side of the chairman and drinking toasts to Daniel O'Connell and the Duke of Wellington.

He and Sarah Masters had four children, all born in Dublin, at Lanesville, the residence of his sister Margaret who married William Lane. Only two survived into adulthood: a daughter Mary Masters Camac, who married a Philip Ricketts and William Masters Camac. Turner died in Philadelphia in 1830; five years after his wife's decease.

John, as a partner and company director, was involved in the financial crash following the failure of the HMC and for a brief season enjoyed the hospitality of one of His Majesty's prisons. The experience may have been the cause of deciding his future career, for henceforth he abandoned all commercial enterprises and, on his release in 1804, obtained a commission as an ensign in 39th Foot, from which he was promoted a few months later to a Lieutenancy. He then obtained the rank of Captain in the 1st Life Guards with which he served in the Peninsular War under the Duke of Wellington and was awarded a Small Gold Medal for his role in the Battle of Vittoria.

When the war ended John returned, together with his brother Burges, to England. Thence he passed into Ireland, where he enjoyed for a time the pleasures of country life at his estate of Woodvale in County Wicklow near Arklow, which he had some time previously acquired. He continued to serve in the Army until he resigned in either 1822 or 1824. On 11th August 1821 he married at St Marylebone Church, London, Miss Henrietta Wenvye. The Wenvyes were an ancient family long resident in Suffolk. John moved into their seat, Brettenham Hall a large mansion and reportedly made various changes there. After the death of his wife Colonel John took a house in Hollis Street, Cavendish Square. He stood for election as MP for Wendover in 1832, unsuccessfully. He let Brettenham Hall and the tenant was apparently Joseph Bonaparte, ex-King of Spain against whom he once fought. He went abroad for his health and resided in Brussels, where he died aged 72.

Following HMC collapse Burges, reportedly "had the good fortune to elicit the distinguished patronage of the Prince of Wales (later George IV)" who recommended him for an Indian Staff appointment. He was commissioned as an Ensign in 1800. On reaching Calcutta he joined his brother William, a civilian, who had survived several changes of government and was by then on his way to becoming a Senior Merchant. Burges was appointed a Lieutenant in a "Malay regiment", but served as Assistant Private Secretary to Lord Mornington, the Governor General. There he met the Earl's brother, Col Arthur Wellesley, later to become the Duke of Wellington. On Mornington's departure, he was recommended to his successor, Sir G Barlow, as his Private Secretary and ADC.

He proceeded on leave to England in 1808. Lord Mornington, by now Marquis Wellesley, transferred him to the Embassy of his brother, Henry, Lord Cowley, who was serving as Ambassador in Spain. Burges persuaded Cowley to arrange his promotion to Lieutenant Colonel in the Spanish army, where he was placed under General Blake, and served under him in Murcia, Carthagena and Alicante. After two years, he was summoned by Wellington and detailed to carry the dispatches to Lord Liverpool which contained the news of the French retreat from the Lines of Torres Vedras. For this he received promotion to Major.

He returned to the Peninsula and was employed in carrying orders from Wellington to the Spanish Army, particularly to the Count of Abisbal (General O'Donnell) at Pancorro and took part in various battles there. He had been raised to the rank of Colonel in the Spanish Army and was awarded the Spanish Royal Military Order of Charles III. He then returned to England. Following the peace, he went on a tour abroad with the celebrated Irish poet, Thomas Moore, visiting Venice. They were in Florence in October 1819, parting and then meeting again in Paris in June 1820. In 1821 he fought a duel with a brother officer in the Life Guards outside Calais (because duelling was not permissible in England). He was attended by a relation, Lieutenant Newburgh, and was wounded in the leg.

In 1827 he retired from active duty, having attained the rank of full Colonel. It is said by Burke that "the honour of knighthood

was conferred upon him by His Majesty King William IV in recognition of his meritorious services". Nevertheless, Sir Burges Camac remained a man-about-town. He was appointed Major-General in 1841 and in failing health went to live with his sister Maria (Mrs Bushby) at Duffryn, Glamorgan. He died at the home of J Bruce Pryce in November 1845.

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