

# The O'Donnell Brothers from Larkfield, Manorhamilton

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*The story of two young brothers from Larkfield who entered the military service of Austria, the greatest power in 18th Century Europe, and who both eventually rose to the highest rank in the Imperial army.*



Larkfield House, home of the O'Donnell family. Acquired by the Land Commission and razed to the ground in 1940. Photo courtesy of Proinsias Ó Duigneáin.

THE DESCENDANTS OF the O'Donnells, Earls of Tyrconnell, gradually migrated from Donegal to various locations in Connaught during the course of the hundred years after the Flight of the Earls in 1607. One of the main branches of the family settled in Larkfield, Manorhamilton in the early 1700s. The first of this line was Hugh O'Donnell (1691-1754) who was considered head of the O'Donnell clan and adopted the title "Earl". He married firstly Flora Hamilton of Convooy, Co. Donegal, and they had two sons John and Con (later known as Karl in Austria). Flora died in 1716, the year after Con was born, and Hugh later married Margaret Montgomery of Derrygonnelly by whom he had four children.

## The Penal Laws and the Wild Geese

The Treaty of Limerick followed the second siege of that city in 1691—the year that Hugh O'Donnell of Larkfield was born. According to the Treaty, Irish soldiers were to be indemnified for all past crimes and offences. Catholics were to be restored to their estates and allowed freedom of worship. Civil and military positions were to be open to them. However, no attempt was made to adhere to the Treaty. Instead a penal code was exercised with renewed vigour. No Catholics could enter Parliament, the army or the important professions. All education was barred to Catholics. Nor could they purchase land.

Consequently when Hugh O'Donnell first came to Larkfield, he was only able to obtain a lease on a holding on the Lane-Fox Estate. However, as the years passed, the O'Donnells seem to have ensured undisputed possession by marrying members of Ascendancy families. Since there were very few prospects though for the sons of Catholics in Ireland during the Penal Laws, it is not surprising that Hugh's two eldest sons John and Con should accept their uncle General John Count Hamilton's invitation to join him in Austria. Thus they became members of that group known as the Wild Geese—Irish soldiers of fortune who freely or as victims of political strife, left Ireland during the 17th and 18th centuries, and joined the armies of France, Spain and Austria.

## 18th Century Austria

At the beginning of the 18th Century, Austria was re-emerging as a powerful European nation. And, when in 1711, Charles VI, the Hapsburg Archduke of Austria became Holy Roman Emperor, he was the most powerful man in Europe, and added the lands of the Empire, which stretched from Silesia (Poland) in the north to Hungary in the south, to his own territory in Austria. Charles' daughter, Maria Theresa, who succeeded her father on the Imperial throne from 1740 to 1780, increased the power and improved the administration of the Empire by a series of

political, military, financial and educational reforms.

However, during the reigns of both Charles and Maria Theresa, Austria was involved in a series of wars with the Turks and various European powers such as France, Spain and England, but especially with the German state of Prussia. The war against the Turks lasted from 1735-1739. The war of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) over who was to succeed the Emperor Charles VI, ended in victory for his daughter Maria Theresa. In the Seven Years War (1756-1763) Maria Theresa had to finally acknowledge Prussia's right to Silesia and some German states. This then was the setting into which the two young O'Donnells from Larkfield stepped when they arrived in Austria in the 1730s. And as we shall see, they both acquitted themselves with distinction.

## John O'Donnell (1712 -1784)

Field Marshal John Count O'Donnell was the elder son of Hugh O'Donnell and Flora Hamilton. He entered the Imperial Service in 1736 and reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1748. He took part in a number of wars preceding the Seven Years War, and was promoted Colonel in 1757 after having fought with distinction at the battle of Kollin

(in present-day Czech Republic). He displayed great bravery and outstanding skill in the handling of his troops at the Battle of Leuthen (Poland) some months later, where by a daring offensive against superior odds, he smashed a determined Prussian cavalry attack. He later destroyed two enemy squadrons, but having pursued them too far, was counter-attacked, his horse wounded, and being struck on the head, was taken prisoner.

He resumed his military career after his release. In 1759 he was promoted to Major General, and his dragoons inflicted a crushing defeat on the enemy Hussars at the Battle of Maxen (Germany). The following year he attained the rank of Lieutenant Field Marshal. Count John was decorated with the Small Cross (7th promotion) of the Military Order of Maria Theresa at the end of the Seven Years War. Some years later he was appointed Governor of the Elizabeth Theresian Institute in Vienna.

John married Anne Corr of Kilkenny, and they had one son Hugh and a daughter Therese. Hugh was killed in action as a Major in the O'Donnell Regiment at Neerwinden (Belgium) in 1793. Therese who was brought up under the direction of the Empress, married a distant cousin Joseph Count O'Donnell of Castlebar who later became Austrian Minister for Finance. A grandson of Theresa and Joseph—Major General Maximilian Count O'Donnell (1812-1895) who was Aide-de-Camp to the Emperor Franz Joseph I, saved the latter's life when he was attacked by a knife-wielding assailant in Vienna in 1853.

### **Con (Karl) O'Donnell (1715-1771)**

Field Marshal Karl Count O'Donnell, the younger son of Hugh O'Donnell and Flora Hamilton, seems to have travelled to Austria with his elder brother John in 1736 to begin his military career. He served as a captain in the Turkish War, being wounded at Krocza (Yugoslavia). Promotion to Major came in 1739, and to Lieutenant Colonel the following year. He attained the rank of Colonel of



Field Marshal John Count O'Donnell of Larkfield (1712-1784), whose portrait hangs in the military academy in Wiener Neustadt, Austria. Photo courtesy of the Irish Embassy, Vienna.

No. 2 Dragoon Regiment in 1742, and was promoted to Major-General in the War of Succession during which he distinguished himself in the field.

Following Lobositz (Czech Republic), the first battle of the Seven Years War, Karl became Lieutenant Field Marshal. He played a prominent part in the victory of Kollin (Czech Republic) in 1757, but was wounded and taken prisoner. On being ransomed he resumed his military career, winning special praise at the Battle of Hochkirch (Germany) the following year. His greatest victory however was against the Prussians at Torgau (Germany) in 1760. Things had not been going well for the Austrians. Karl, after parting with two of his five regiments for support elsewhere, led the remainder in a brilliant counter-attack that put a force twice its size to flight, took the enemy commander General Firkenstein prisoner, and recovered a number of guns previously lost.

In 1762 Karl was Commanding Officer in The Netherlands. Two years later he was elevated to the Privy Council back in Vienna, and in 1765 he became Inspector General of Cavalry. Karl was appointed Governor of Transylvania (now a region of five million inhabitants in Central Romania, but then a "Grand Principality" of the Holy Roman Empire ruled over by the Austrian

Habsburgs), in 1768. He resigned however from this post after two years. He suddenly took ill while preparing to accompany the future Emperor Joseph II to Hungary, and died a few weeks later in March 1771. He was unmarried.

Field Marshal Count Karl was the greatest of all the O'Donnells that served in Austria. He fought in 18 battles and was wounded at least twice. He gave his name "The O'Donnell Regiment" to the 5th Cuirassiers when he became its Colonel Proprietor in 1756. Finally, he was decorated with the Military Order of Maria Theresa in 1761.

### **Larkfield**

The descendants of Hugh O'Donnell (father of John and Karl) and his second wife Margaret Montgomery continued to live on in Larkfield House until 1932. The last of the family to reside there was Capt. John O'Donnell (1862-1932) who was High Sheriff of Leitrim in 1891, and later became a member of the first County Council. He is buried in Creevelea Abbey in Dromahair. The last male descendant of the Larkfield O'Donnells is Hugh, a grandson of Capt. John, who is a Franciscan priest in Harare, Zimbabwe. One of his sisters, Nuala, is an RTE producer and presenter, and another sister, Siobhan, is living in Wicklow. Larkfield House and lands were acquired by the Land Commission in the late 1930s. The house was knocked to the ground in 1940, and the lands were divided up. O'Donnell's Rock which towered above the house is named after the family.

I would like, finally to acknowledge two sources which greatly helped me when I was researching this article: "The O'Donnells in Austria" by Rupert S O'Coilain in *The Irish Sword*, Vol. 5, 1961/2; and "Hugh O'Donnell of Larkfield—Patron of Gaelic Literature (1691-1754)" by Proinsias O'Duineain in *Breifne*, 1986.

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