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## NEW GENEVA IN WATERFORD.

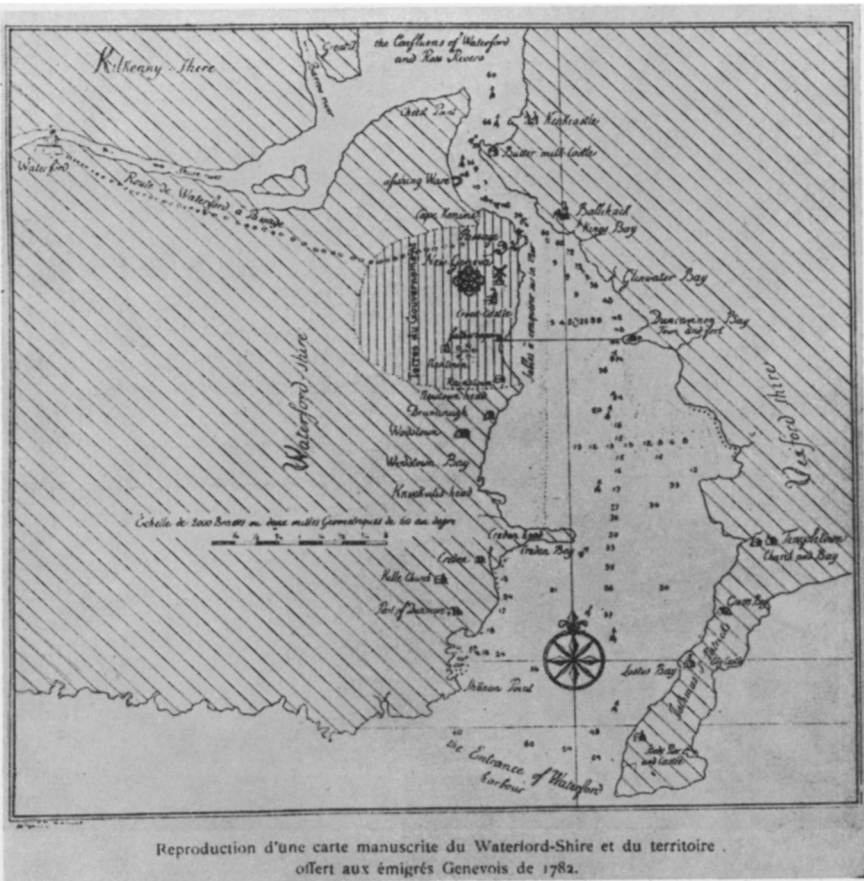
By HUBERT BUTLER, *Member.*

THE little fishing village of Passage lies on the west bank of the Suir, between Dunmore East and Waterford. It still retains a rather special air of antiquity and distinction, but I do not think that many of those who live around it realise how near it once was to becoming the centre of a large and flourishing city with academies of sciences and the arts and many thriving industries. The city was a dream of the late 18th century, but a dream that came very near to realisation. In Ireland itself very little if anything has been written upon this project, but here in Geneva, the mother-city of this future town, I have found much of interest in the archives of the Hotel de Ville, where the records of the City Council, and many documents relating to its history are scrupulously preserved. There are minutes and letters and biographies; there is even a plan of the New Geneva on the Suir.

Why was the plan conceived, why did it fail? I will try to compress into a few paragraphs a complicated story which is woven out of the troubled history of two small states. In the last decade but one of the 18th century, the City of Geneva was in ferment. It had a conservative aristocracy and also a prosperous and ambitious middle-class, which had been deeply affected by the liberal ideas of the time. Rousseau himself had been a citizen of Geneva, and Voltaire at Ferney had lived only a few miles away. Geneva was a hot-bed of humanitarian thinking, very disquieting to its rulers and also to its neighbours in the Kingdoms of France and Savoy. In 1768, at a time of similar commotion in Geneva, Rousseau had given the following advice: "There is a last course left for you to take. Instead of staining your hands with the blood of your compatriots, you can abandon these walls, which should have been the refuge of liberty and now are to become the resort of tyrants. All, all together, in the broad daylight, you may leave the town, your wives and your children in your midst, and, since men must wear chains, you can go and wear the chains of a great Prince, rather than the hateful and unbearable yoke of your equals."—Dardier, *Esaic Gasc*, p. 85.

In 1782 the troubles culminated in a small but bloodless revolution: the middle-class *représentants* overthrew and imprisoned the aristocratic council. But in a very short time the council was restored to power by a joint invasion of the armies of France, Savoy, and the canton of Berne. The disciples of Rousseau and the advocates of democratic ideas were thrown into despair . . . they decided that the only hope for their afflicted city was for the democrats to emigrate in a body bearing with them the crafts and craftsmen, chief among whom were the watchmakers. On them the prosperity of Geneva was based. In those days, in so many ways wiser than ours, refugees were welcomed, and invitations to the Genevese rebels

came from many of the princes of Europe, from the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and the Elector Palatine, from the Landgrave of Hesse-Homburg, and finally, through the medium of an English republican and great friend of Geneva, Lord Mahon, from George III of England. I believe it was the Genevese themselves, who pressed that their colony should be in Ireland rather than in England. In England they feared the jealousy of the English watch-makers, also the competitive claims on English sympathies of the loyalist refugees from the War of Independence in America. Moreover, Ireland was at that time also entering a period of generous idealism and enthusiasm. It was the year of the Convention of Duncannon, when the Volunteer Army was formed, which extorted from England those concessions which made Grattan's Parliament possible. On October 3, the Dublin Volunteers (commanded by Lieut.-General Henry Grattan) assembled at the Royal Exchange



MAP SHOWING PROPOSED SETTLEMENT OF GENEVAN EMIGRANTS IN WATERFORD

and passed resolutions to the effect that "Irishmen armed for the defence of their constitution and liberties ought naturally to be attached to every country or body of men, armed for the defence of a like glorious cause . . . . Therefore, the virtuous Genevese had the most lively claim on their pity . . . . and should be received among them as brothers and friends."

The Duke of Leinster, the Commander of the Southern Branch of the Volunteers, himself offered 2,000 acres to the Genevese, and accommodation for 100 in Leinster Lodge till their houses had been built. Lord Ely, offering them land in Wexford, explained that he was quite disinterested. "I am already extremely rich. . . . I wish to benefit the most enlightened people in the universe, the first Protestant colony on earth. When I am called to leave this earth, I shall repose with the serenity worthy of a man who knows that in giving happiness to you, he has reared a monument more durable than marble and shaped by the most able artist."

The newspapers of the time and the speeches of the Volunteers were filled with eulogies of the "virtuous Genevese," who had "stood up like Catos against Tyrants." Some of them were given honorary rank in the volunteer regiments. However, it was not the Duke of Leinster's land near Athy which was ultimately chosen, but some confiscated property near Waterford Harbour which belonged to the British Government. Lord Temple, the Viceroy, favoured the project, and a grant of £50,000 as well as 11,000 acres, including the Town of Passage, was decreed. From this sum the transport of the citizens' families from Geneva was to be paid and the building of the town was to be started.

There is no need to question the sincerity of the Volunteers, but on the generous motives of the British Government Swiss writers have cast a doubt. The County of Waterford was at that time disturbed by the activities of the White Boys (*les enfants blancs*), and the sinister John Beresford, one of the architects of the Union, was not only a large landowner in the district, but also a member of the commission for the Genevan settlement. Lord Temple himself, in a letter to a friend, explains why a southern rather than a northern site was chosen. "I wished to remove them from the Northern Republicans and to place them where they might make an essential reform in the religion, industry and manners of the south." The Genevans interpreted their *rôle* differently. "We must not overlook the need to conciliate the poor, who cultivate the soil that is offered to us," wrote Clavière, one of the Genevan Commissioners, "the greed and harshness of the great landowners have made the tenants violent and irritable. That is the reason for the disorders of which you have heard. They are in revolt against treachery and abominable outrage. If we behave well we shall gain their confidence."

A group of Genevans arrived in Ireland and rapid progress was made. An engineer visited the site and made plans for a water supply and a cotton factory and a laundry. At the start there were to be 50 houses, a communal bakery and an inn; there were to be a tannery and a paper factory. There was to be a big square in which was to stand a University which it was hoped

would attract, like the Academy of Sciences at Geneva, scholars from all over Europe. It was to have 44 professors and assistants and to cost £4,554 per annum. In the plan of the settlement, a dotted line runs from Passage to the base of Creden Head, including nearly 1,000 acres of tidal land described as *sables à conquérir sur la mer*. To-day the tide still sweeps in, as it has always done, across the great curve of Woodstown Strand, but Swiss engineers were celebrated even then and it is possible their ambitious project would have been realised.

One of the Genevese members of the Commission, Ami Melly, went back to rally the refugees who were assembled at Neuchâtel, and to summon the disaffected watchmakers to emigrate. Four of the principal watchmakers employed 2,000 workmen, and their displacement would naturally be a serious blow to the city. Melly had taken the precaution of securing Irish citizenship, but even so he was clapped into gaol by the rulers of Geneva. He was tried, and despite the protests of the English Government and the personal support of two Irishmen—James Butler, Lord Cahir and another—he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. However, he escaped on a rope of knotted sheets and rejoined the refugees at Neuchâtel. The warder who looked after Melly was arrested. It is characteristic of Swiss scrupulousness and attention to detail that he was punished, not only for conniving at Melly's escape, but also for stealing two of his shirts.

There is a long poem of the period dealing with the escape and describing how Melly was led out of prison by an angel. Though there was a "Nouvelle Genève" printing press at Waterford, which published some French poems, I think this one is more likely to have been printed at Neuchâtel than in Ireland. The poet, not a very good one, exhorts the Genevese craftsmen and scholars to follow Melly to Waterford.

*Pour vous, pour vos enfans une ville s'élève,  
 Déjà l'on voit bâtir la Nouvelle Genève!  
 C'est là que le bonheur, que la prospérité  
 Vous attendent sans doute avec la liberté,  
 Aux bords de Suir en Cook, Dublin vous favorise.  
 Par differens moyens Georges vous est propice.*

—Rivoire, No. 2668).

Readers will be puzzled to know what Cook had to do with it till it is recalled that the old Templars' Castle of Crook was included in the land granted to the Genevese.

Melly had had a discouraging reception from the watchmakers. They were beginning to get used to the new régime and to dread the hazards of the journey to Ireland. The outlook for New Geneva was not so promising. All the same, in July, 1784, Mr. Cuffe, an Irish enthusiast, laid the foundation stone of the projected city. On it was a bronze plaque inscribed with the date, and the reason for the settlement. In a large tent over the spot where a statue of Lord Temple was to be erected, a fête was given to the burghesses of Waterford.

Six weeks later both the Government and the Genevese representatives had decided to abandon the plan—New Geneva never came into being. A few Genevese settlers remained in Waterford, but the majority scattered over Europe waiting for better times to return to their city. The watch-makers never stirred.

Why did the plan collapse? The Genevans attributed it to a change of Viceroy and government policy. The serious Lord Temple had sponsored the scheme, but "the virtuous Genevese" were not to the liking of the gay Duke of Rutland. Moreover, George III began to distrust the Genevese rebels. The aristocratic party at Geneva had a capable representative in London, M. Saladin, a connection by marriage of an English earl. He managed to persuade the Government that Melly, though he might be an Irish citizen, had a wife and family in Geneva, as well as a house and shop. His attempt to cause a widespread emigration of wealth and skill from his native town could not be overlooked. George III recovering from his momentary sympathy with the Genevese rebels, for which Charles James Fox had been principally responsible, exchanged courtly compliments in royal Latin with their oppressors: *pacem tandem recuperavisse*, he wrote, *atque sublata anarchia vestram administrationem stabilivise lubenter intelleximus*. And he signed himself, "Vester bonus amicus, Georgius R."

Louis XVI's agents were working hard to frustrate the emigration. As for the local magnates of Waterford, they found that the Genevans were expecting a far more liberal system of franchise than was current in Ireland. In a very short time, if it was granted, the safe seats of the landlords would be in peril. To others it appeared unwise to establish a body of foreign republicans at the mouth of the Waterford river right opposite Duncannon Fort. Could they be relied on in the event of invasion?

To add to their difficulties, the idealistic leaders in Neuchâtel and in Ireland were beginning to quarrel among themselves, and the Genevese merchants were less and less inclined to give up their comfortable homes and businesses and venture into the unknown. Some time before they had all re-opened their shops. Jean Gosse, the bookseller, had written to his son who was a refugee dreaming of Ireland: "the troops whose drumming I could not endure do not now seem such devils after all." Another of the *représentants*, Etienne Dumont, whose name is still borne by one of the streets in old Geneva, wrote: *Il faudrait pour ranimer notre zèle quelques nouvelles décisions sur notre chère Irlande*. Worse than all this, a solicitor, Richards, came back from Ireland to Geneva, "cruelly deceived in his hopes," and begging for bread for his seven children.

Pensions and jobs were found for some of the disappointed refugees. Of the leaders, several were later to make a considerable mark in history, and it cannot be too much emphasised that they represented the real intellectual élite of Geneva. Their boast that they could transfer the intellectual life of Geneva to Ireland was not an idle one. H. A. Gosse, one of those interested was the founder of "The Academy of Natural Sciences," and his bust now stands outside Geneva University. Etienne Dumont played a

prominent part in French politics before the revolution, and assisted Mirabeau with his speeches. Clavière, whose words I have quoted, became a Girondin leader and took his life to avoid the guillotine. D'Ivernois, the leader of the emigration, later succeeded in interesting Jefferson in the project of transferring the Genevan Academy to U.S.A. Here, too, he failed, but he was later, as Sir Francis d'Ivernois, to play a significant part in British diplomacy.

Ami Melly was the leader of the watchmaking, as opposed to the intellectual branch of the emigration. When Ireland failed him, he obtained the consent of the liberal Emperor Joseph II to set up a colony of Genevan watchmakers in the city of Constance. The interesting story of this refugee settlement is told in M. Chapuisat's *Figures et choses d'autréfois*, 1920. Du Roveray, Gasc, Ringler are well known names in Genevese history, which are also associated with the emigration to Waterford. There is a list of the emigrants in the archives of the Château de Crans, near Geneva, the home of the Saladin family, but it is not at present accessible.

Other books and papers in which the emigration is discussed are:

*Sir Francis d'Ivernois*, by O. Kamin.

*Henri-Albert Gosse*, by Mlle. Plan.

*La Prise d'Armes de 1782*, by E. Chapuisat.

*Lettres de Jean Roget à Samuel Romilly*. 1911.

*Rivoire*, 2530. *Pièces relatives à lasyle offerte aux Genevois en Irlande*.

The original of the accompanying map is in the *Papiers Gosse* in the Geneva University Library.

For many years blocks of stone lay about on the abandoned site. It was proposed to colonise it with American loyalists. Finally, the New Geneva, which was to have been an example to Ireland of the triumph of freedom and democracy, became a prison for Irish patriots.

New Geneva may have dropped out of Irish history, but its name is familiar to all in the old song, *The Croppy Boy*.

However mixed may have been the motives of the British and Irish Governments in encouraging the Genevan colony, it is hard not to regret its failure. The new city was to lie on the very edge of Wexford County, where 16 years later, in 1798, Irish rebels were to fight a last desperate battle. These sober and thrifty disciples of Rousseau and champions of liberty would surely have exercised a moderating influence on the fierce passions aroused by the struggle. In all their dealings they spoke and wrote with friendliness and understanding of the Irish people among whom they were to settle.

In telling this story I have used only such material as I have found in the Archives at Geneva, and also the work of an 18th century German traveller, Küttner, *Briefe über Irland*, in the National Library, Dublin. A closer investigation of Irish sources would certainly throw fresh light on the sad catastrophe that befel the New Geneva.