



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Count Joseph Boruwlaski in Athlone



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In 1796, Athlone welcomed an extraordinary visitor, 'Count' Joseph Boruwlaski.

Born in Poland, Boruwlaski was an accomplished singer, musician and dancer and he had spent years entertaining kings and queens across Europe. He was a larger than life character but his physical stature had been shaped by a growth hormone deficiency. Although fifty-seven years old when he visited Athlone, Boruwlaski stood a little over three feet tall.

Despite Boruwlaski's claims, he was not actually a count. As a child he had been adopted by a Polish noblewoman who provided him with an education that included dancing and playing the violin and guitar. At the time, it was fashionable for European royalty to have dwarves in their entourage and for about a decade during his teens and twenties Boruwlaski fulfilled this role, spending time with Maria Theresa, Empress of all Austria and Hungary, and the King of France, Louis XV.

It was during these years that Boruwlaski was supposed to have met a young Marie Antoinette, who gave him a diamond ring as a gift. Not long after, Boruwlaski married Isalina Borboutin and the couple would have three children. In order to support his family, Boruwlaski began a series of tours that would take

him across Europe, playing concerts and seeking patrons. He made a couple of journeys to Ireland, travelling all over the country.

'Athlone An Indifferent Town' Boruwlaski described visiting Athlone in his memoirs. Although he mostly enjoyed his time in Ireland, he 'heard that Athlone itself was but an indifferent town'. Nevertheless, he was eager to make acquaintances among the officers in the military barracks, judging that they would be a likely source of patronage. At that time, the British government was obsessed with the threat of revolutionary France and it feared that, if the French were to invade Ireland, Athlone would be targeted.

As such, the town was home to a large garrison of the British army. On first arriving in Athlone, Boruwlaski obtained lodgings in 'a small thatched house' in which the 'walls of my room bent on one side, so as to threaten an immediate fall'. He was tempted to find better accommodation but on finding that 'the whole town consisted of such description of buildings, I became reconciled to my own, and employed my time in making a large acquaintance amongst the officers'.

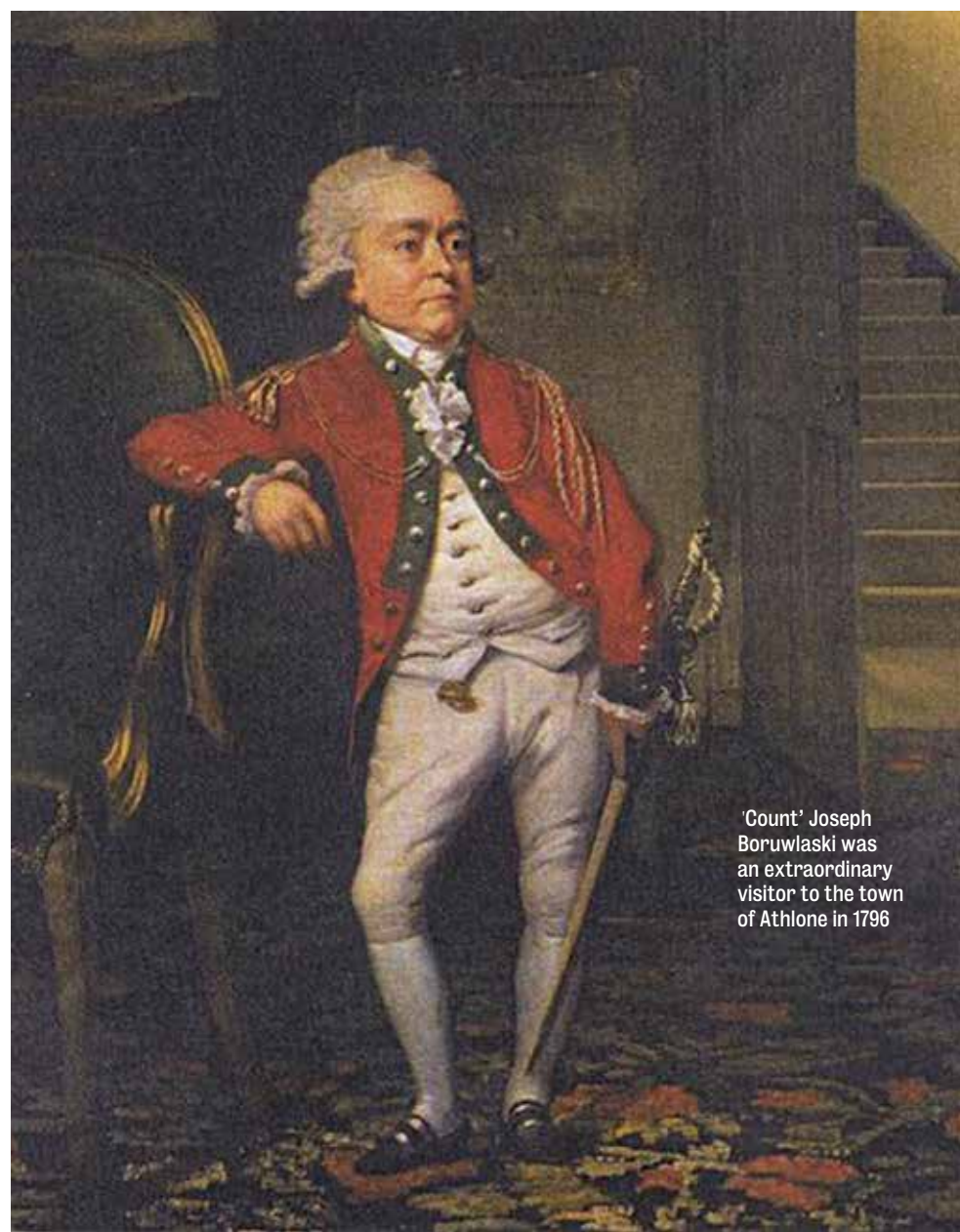
Boruwlaski recalled that the officers in Athlone barracks lived a 'dissipated life', although it was not one to which he was opposed. Of his time in the barracks, he wrote: 'There I spent my time in the greatest luxury, turning day into night, and night into day...' Boruwlaski quickly became a popular figure among the officers, particularly a colonel named

Chapman, and he arranged to hold a concert in the town as a means of raising funds, which were running low.

As the big night approached, he saw 'the ladies of the neighbourhood ordering new gowns' and he expected a large crowd. However, events intervened to disrupt his plans: '...after we had been enjoying ourselves the evening and part of the night preceding my benefit, an express arrives at three o'clock in the morning, that the French fleet with General Hoche, had taken advantage of the opportunity afforded by a thick fog, and landed at Bantry Bay.'

On hearing that news (which turned out to be false as poor weather had prevented the French fleet from landing), the garrison marched from Athlone to meet the French forces, leaving Boruwlaski alone. Boruwlaski, dispirited by the thought of losing out on the concert revenues, returned to his landlord, who was also an apothecary. He found this man to be busy making preparations to deal with wounded soldiers in the event of a French attack on the town. Although an apothecary could be equated with a modern pharmacist, Boruwlaski was unimpressed with the man's pharmaceutical skills, judging that he was more suited to 'the art of pickling beef' than healing wounds.

Seeing little to be gained by remaining, Boruwlaski sought a new destination. He chose Longford, the 'chief town of the county of that name, which, I had also heard, was a pleasant city'. There, he had an enjoyable time: 'On my arrival, I did not fail to meet with a good reception...Their houses



'Count' Joseph Boruwlaski was an extraordinary visitor to the town of Athlone in 1796

were hospitably opened to receive me, and my name spread so far, that it reached the whole neighbourhood.'

Joseph Boruwlaski would later settle in the English town of Durham, where he became a well-known and much admired

figure. He died, aged almost ninety-eight, in 1837.

