

# **Friend of Castlereagh**

JOHN STEWART



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In memory of  
**Addie Morrow**  
A man of generous spirit

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# Characters in the Story

(F = fictional; H = historical)

- F BARNTON, Sir Herbert – friend of Mrs Jamieson
- F BENNETT, Andrew – English officer, friend of Elliott
- H BERESFORD, John – Irish MP, chief Commissioner of Revenue; known as ‘King of Ireland’ because he was the biggest borough-owner
- F BRADY, Sean – farmer, Portaferry
- F BURNS, Jim (Seamus Byrne) – agent of Mrs Jamieson
- H CASTLEREAGH, Viscount – Chief Secretary for Ireland 1798-1801; Foreign Secretary 1812-1822
- H CORNWALLIS, 1st Marquis – Viceroy 1798-1801
- H CAMDEN, 2nd Earl (later 1st Marquis) – uncle of Castlereagh, Viceroy 1795-1798
- H CLARE, 1st Earl – Irish Lord Chancellor
- F CALMBURN, Lady – aunt of Lady Sarah
- H CAULFIELD, Dr – Catholic Bishop of Wexford
- H DOWNSHIRE, 2nd Marquis – large landowner, especially in County Down
- F ELLIOTT, Charles – English officer
- H ENNISKILLEN, 1st Earl – County Fermanagh landowner
- H FITZGERALD, Lord Edward – a United Irish leader
- F FITZGIBBON, Professor – John Gray’s old tutor
- F FITZHIBBERT, Lady Ann – friend of Lady Sarah
- H FOSTER, John – Speaker of Irish Parliament
- H FOX, Charles James – famous Whig orator and opponent of Pitt
- F GABBIE, Johnny – servant of John Gray
- H GRATTAN, Henry – led the patriot party in the Irish Parliament, for which in 1782 he succeeded in gaining legislative independence
- F GRAY, James – farmer; younger brother of John
- F GRAY, John – farmer; friend of Castlereagh
- F HAMILTON, Jane – daughter of Robert and Peg
- F HAMILTON, Peg – wife of Robert
- F HAMILTON, Robert – farmer; father-in-law of James Gray
- F HAY, Hughie (‘Big Hughie’) – servant of John Gray
- H HILL, Arthur – see Lord DOWNSHIRE
- F (‘Old’) HUGH – servant of John Gray

H HUMBERT, General – leader of French invasion force  
 F JAMIESON, Hannah – friend of Lady Ann and Lizzie Ross  
 F JAMIESON, Mrs – mother of Hannah  
 F ('Big') JIM – sheep farmer near Bangor  
 F JONES, Mrs – housekeeper of manor near Calmburn Hall  
 H JONES, Sir William – Official in the Indian Service; studied Sanskrit language  
 F JOSIAH – servant from manor near to Calmburn Hall  
 F KIRKCUBBIN PRIEST  
 H LAKE, Lieutenant General Gerard – Commander of Northern District; later to become Commander-in-Chief  
 H LONDONDERRY, 1st Marquis – father of Castlereagh  
 H McCLENAGHAN, Mat – blacksmith, Six-Road-ends  
 F McCLURE, Mrs – housekeeper to John Gray  
 F MARIA– retired actress living at Ripley  
 H McCracken, Henry Joy – Ulster leader of United Irishmen  
 H MOORE, Major-General John – later Sir John of Peninsular War fame  
 H MUNRO, Henry – leader of the United Irishmen at Ballynahinch  
 H MURPHY, Father John – a leader of the United Irishmen in the South  
 H MURPHY, Father Michael – ditto  
 H NUGENT, Major-General George – in command at Battle of Ballynahinch  
 F O'CONNOR, Mary – servant of Lord Sinclair and Lady Sarah  
 F PATRICK, Father – priest, friend of Elliott  
 H PITT, William (Pitt the Younger) – Prime Minister  
 F PORTBAY, Duke of – owner of estate near Calmburn Hall  
 H PORTER, Rev James – Presbyterian minister  
 H 'PRINNIE' Prince of Wales, later Prince Regent and future George IV  
 F ROSS, Rev Jim – rector near Enniskillen  
 F ROSS, Lizzie – sister of Jim  
 F SHAW, Old Sam – farmer near Newtownards  
 F SHAW, Young Sam – son of Old Sam  
 F SIMMONDS, Lady – mother of an Army friend of Andrew Bennett  
 F SINCLAIR, Lord William – scholar, brother of Lady Calmburn  
 F SINCLAIR-WARD, Lady Sarah – niece of Lord Sinclair and Lady Calmburn  
 H SPENCER, Earl – First Lord of the Admiralty  
 F STEENSON, Hammie – associate of Bangor yeomen  
 H STEWART, Robert – see Viscount Castlereagh  
 H TANDY, Major-General James Napper – a united Irish leader  
 H TAYLOR, Thomas – Platonist  
 F THOMPSON, Tommy (Tom) – servant of John Gray  
 F TOOMEY, Pat – Kirkcubbin farmer  
 H TONE, Wolfe – a founder of the United Irishmen  
 F WARD, Lily – aunt of Lady Sarah and Cousin of Lady Calmburn

*Castlereagh:*

The government of it [Ireland] I do not like,  
but I prefer it to a revolution.\*

*Castlereagh to his Uncle,  
the Viceroy Lord Camden:*

You must suffer yourself to be carried by the  
stream, if you mean to moderate its violence,  
direct opposition is fruitless.\*\*

\* John Bew, *Castlereagh*, Quercus, London, 2011, p.54.

\*\* *Ibid.*, p.55.

— CHAPTER ONE —

## County Down 1796

TWO HORSEMEN, their silk hats catching the autumn sun, rode out from Newtownards along the hard mud road to Comber. Behind them were three robust militiamen, their faces red and leathery, the mark of men accustomed to the open air.

The two riders were not dissimilar in appearance. Both had a natural dignity, their features fine, but it was their eyes that made them look like brothers – wide, gentle, reserved yet penetrating.

‘That hill needs a tower,’ the taller man said suddenly, the first words that had passed between them since leaving Newtownards.

‘Who’d pay for it, sir?’

‘Cautious, and sensible as ever, John. Canny, if we use our local tongue – and, John, don’t look at me. Father spent too much on my election to the Dublin parliament.’

‘That was five years ago!’

‘It still hurts – yet the hill of Scrabo with a tower sounds good.’

Involuntarily both men turned right to view the basalt outcrop rising from the flat flood-plain about them. Then they were silent. The sea from Strangford Lough, close to their left, smelt strong, yet pleasant and refreshing.

For half a mile they continued their unhurried progress without a word – a not unusual feature of their relationship.

Before them the road bent right and rose to higher ground. Trees blocked their vision but as they rounded the bend they saw a group of men assembling with spades and forks to march in army style, their wives and sweethearts close or hanging on their arms. One of their number turned suddenly, his eyes wide with sudden fear, but he recovered quickly.

‘My Lord Castlereagh,’ he muttered.

‘Sam, what’s this merry gathering mean?’ Castlereagh reacted.

‘We’re off to dig Maxwell’s prittas,’ Sam replied with obvious honesty. ‘Hullo, John.’

‘Hullo, Sam.’ Castlereagh’s companion nodded in response.

Sam Shaw, an open-faced, tousle-haired man of no more than twenty, was the obvious leader of the band. Marching with spades

and forks looked innocent, but Castlereagh knew, and Sam Shaw knew, he knew, that marching with spades and suchlike was the mark of the insurgents, the United Irishmen. Young Sam was on the slippery slope.

Castlereagh liked the Shaws and old Sam, young Sam's father, was a decent man – indeed, one of his father's best tenants.

'That's a nice horse, sir,' young Sam said guilelessly.

'He is, Sam,' Castlereagh replied easily. 'We call him William, Will or Bill. He answers to all three.'

John Gray remained silent, watching his high-born friend. The Gray family were also tenants of Castlereagh's father, but wealthy and privileged ones. When young, John and Castlereagh, had played together and fished together in the lough nearby Mount Stewart. Their friendship had held even though Robert, now Viscount Castlereagh, was rising quickly as an influence in Ireland's government, and indeed the British parliament, as one of William Pitt's disciples. John Gray smiled, for the horse that young Sam was admiring had been named William because of Robert's allegiance.

For some little time Castlereagh rode beside young Shaw. They talked about the recent harvest, the weather, the price of cattle and of sheep, for Robert Stewart, for all his high aristocratic calling, was still a man of northern Down. However, as they talked, neither mentioned what was prominent in his mind, the United Irishmen.

'Come and visit our stables at Mount Stewart,' Castlereagh said on parting. 'The day after tomorrow, eh?'

Shaw nodded, embarrassed by the invitation, for as far as his fellows were concerned, and regardless of their jokes and smiles, Castlereagh was the enemy.

Castlereagh waved farewell, and soon he, John Gray and the militiamen had moved ahead.

'What a fine bunch of young men,' Castlereagh began, 'but so misled by dreams and fantasy. They're fired by what's been happening in France and believe the French will come to liberate them, whatever that may mean!' He shook his head. 'You can get the French to come to Ireland – that's easy – but by God, who would get them to depart? Has no one ever asked that question? I can't let Sam Shaw's son get caught in this – and the others, John, did you know them?'

'Most of them, by sight. I've seen them at the market.'

'Can you talk to them, my friend, or to their families, for once they've got a musket in their hands there's nothing I can do.'

'I can try, sir – but I'm a friend of their hated enemy,' Gray responded with a sidelong glance.

Castlereagh sighed. 'If only they knew! Damn Bonaparte!'

'Robert, it's not the French alone, for landlord greed and militia brutality have gone unchecked.'

Castlereagh sighed again. 'I know. I sometimes think I have to see to everything myself, for my peers are often blind as bats. The trouble is, the more I try, the more all seem to hate me. I love Ireland too, you know!'

How true, John Gray thought. Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh did try to do it all himself and, in the process, made himself exhausted. But he was able and had a huge capacity for work. He could be stubborn, though, and tended to retire within himself. Indeed, he seemed averse to seeking popularity. This, of course, did not aid his reputation. With his friends, though, he was true and loyal and he expected loyalty in return, for broken trust was something he abhorred. Yet broken trust was what he often was accused of. He had won his seat in the Irish parliament as a Radical. Now most said he was reactionary. France, he argued, was excuse enough for that, but the Radicals saw him as ambitious, their ears quite deaf to all his protestations. John Gray saw it from the inside, as it were. Certainly Robert was ambitious, but his sense of duty was, to Gray, the stronger motive.

Castlereagh's face looked stony as they continued on towards Comber, where he hoped to meet with Cleland, his father's agent. His jaw was set with determination. He would do everything, he grated to himself, everything to stop his father's tenants being trapped by what he saw to be a hopeless and misguided cause. 'United Irishmen,' he muttered sourly. United by coercion and the fear of the assassin's bullet. Yet he had to admit that there were many good and honest men amongst their number. That was the pity of it. Arresting such men was a painful duty. The look in a father's eyes when his son was arrested was not an easy memory. Yet, insurrection was insurrection. Maintaining public peace was not a sentimental thing. John Gray, of course, blamed the authorities. Hard-faced landlords, dressed up as magistrates, who treated their tenants like serfs. John was bitter in his condemnation, but thank God he saw the folly of an insurrection.

'John,' he called across to Gray, 'how long have we been friends?'

'A long time. Father used to have a dram or two with his Lordship and we would play together while they talked. We fished together ...'

'And almost drowned together,' Castlereagh interjected. 'John, you are my friend, my trusted friend. Do all you can to keep my father's tenants out of trouble.'

— CHAPTER TWO —

## John Gray

FAITHFUL TO CASTLEREAGH'S desire, John Gray rode tirelessly about the Londonderry estates and beyond. One day, not long after the visit to Comber, he found himself at Portaferry. Tired of the saddle, he dismounted to watch the tidal race funnelling through the narrow mouth that fed the waters of Strangford Lough. Across the race the town of Strangford, with its white-washed houses, glistened in a watery sun.

'Dinnie move, Gray,' a voice hissed behind him.

Gray obeyed. The muzzle of a pistol pressed firmly in his back was certainly persuasive.

'We dinnie want ye here, Gray. Ony freen' of that butcher Rabert Stewart's no' welcome.'

Angered, and forgetful of the danger, Gray spun round.

'He's nae butcher! He's tryin to keep ye oot o' trouble.' Involuntarily Gray had switched to the local tongue.

'Aye, some help! – He tuck six o' us away the other day.'

Gray's assailant had a muffler round his mouth and a cap well over his eyes, but Gray knew exactly who he was. Patrick McGee – all six feet of him.

'For God's sake, Patrick, put that thing away!' he exploded, pointing at the pistol.

'Ye shudnae ha said that, John, for Ah'll hae tae keep ye here – if Ah let ye go ye'd tell Stewart everything.'

'Ah, Patrick, calm yersel', Gray reacted with exasperation. 'You know me and I know you.' Automatically Gray's speech had switched to the language of his Armagh school. 'I've bought your cattle and you've bought mine. We trust each other's word. As far as I'm concerned, this never happened.'

'What about Rabert Stewart?'

'He'll do nothin' – you have my word.'

'Ye're sure o' yersel.'

'We're freens, Patrick. We played the gither as young yins.'

'Aye, that's right enough, all the country knows it weel,' McGee acknowledged.

Both men looked hard at each other.

'You're a Catholic and I'm a Protestant,' John Gray said bluntly, 'but do ye think he takes much note o' that?' he added, pointing upward.

Patrick McGee smiled. 'That's jest the words Ah said the ither day!'

'Be patient, Patrick – a rising would only end in misery and in suffering. And don't believe this heady stuff about the French. Ireland is a stepping-stone for them. It's England that they want. And if they came, would they politely leave? Think hard, Patrick, very hard. The restrictions on your faith will soon be lifted. Robert Stewart wants it. Grattan wants it. Any man of sense must want it!'

'But the auld King is agin it!'

'Aye, but he'll no' last forever,' Gray reacted.

Gray felt something like a hammer hit his arm a glancing blow. Then almost instantaneously there was the musket-crack.

'What bloody fool ...' McGee began, but John Gray responded calmly.

'No fuss, Patrick – too many eyes are watching. It's only a graze at the worst. We'll walk over to your place and have it looked at.'

Both men moved off slowly, Gray pulling his horse behind him.

'Does it hurt?' McGee asked.

'A bit.'

It was as if the scales had dropped from Patrick McGee's eyes. Only half an hour ago he could have pulled the trigger. 'Mother o' God,' he muttered, 'what's a' this about?'

McGee's farmhouse was newly thatched and whitewashed. Inside it was equally neat and tidy. His three daughters fussed about Gray's arm, and whiskey was produced.

'What about the six men that the soldiers tuck?' McGee demanded suddenly.

'I'll do me best but, Patrick, there're some bad boys around, ye know.'

'That's the trouble. Stewart and his militia's tuck the wrang men!'

'I see – I'll do me best, Patrick. Have you any cattle for sale? – I'm lookin' for a heifer or two.'

'Come t'the byre,' McGee said, rising to his feet, his big frame seeming to fill the room. John Gray followed him. They were outside when Gray said quietly:

'Hide that pistol in the thatch, Patrick.'

\*

After buying two of Patrick McGee's heifers, which McGee promised to deliver, and after another whiskey, John Gray set out for

home. He felt cold and shivery and his arm was hurting. Nonetheless he pressed on, his body hunched and leaning forward in the saddle. He could just make it to his farm before dark if he kept a steady pace. Thank God the housekeeper would have the fire lit. The big house needed it. Maybe his young brother would be there, but it was doubtful. He would be courting. He was always courting, so it seemed. He sighed, thinking of his late wife and the emptiness that her death had left. Take a new wife for that big and empty house, his neighbours prodded, but he had no heart in it. Hopefully his brother would get married soon to carry on the name of Gray for he, John Gray, was not the one to trust for that.

He needed a change, he thought with resolution. Maybe after all he would accept Robert Stewart's oft-repeated invitation to accompany him to Dublin. His brother was well able to manage the farm, and his properties in Newtownards and Belfast, were in the hands of agents. But the times were difficult with insurrection simmering and that could keep him rooted to the farm. In truth there was little he could do but wait events. Then he fell to thinking of his high-born friend. The Stewarts had strong Presbyterian roots. Indeed Robert's grandfather had been an elder in Belfast's first Presbyterian Church, and had been intimately connected with the new-light movement. Grey smiled, while repeating light in the local tongue with a prominent 'gh.' This movement held that salvation lay not in an enforced conformity to articles of faith, but rather in a rational approach. So even though Robert had been sent to the Church of Ireland School in Armagh, the radical thinking of his grandfather and, indeed, his father, was a powerful influence. Robert Stewart was no hard faced reactionary, but he was determined to oppose the radical emotionalism engendered by the upheavals in France.

\*

Two days after Patrick McGee's heifers were delivered, news came from Portaferry that the big man had been shot and badly wounded.

Gray set out immediately. When he arrived McGee's farmhouse was full of red-eyed women and black-suited men. The local priest greeted him.

'It's good that you could come, John Gray,' he said in confidential tones. 'He's low. He's been askin' for ye. Wonderin' if your heifers were all right.'

'He would,' John Gray responded. 'Can I see him?'

The priest nodded, leading him to the bedroom.

The stricken man was lying on his bed, his head propped up with cushions, his weeping daughters close.

'It's geed o' ye tae come,' the big man muttered weakly.  
'The least that I could do, Patrick,' Gray responded.  
'Were the heifers in geed shape?'  
'Perfect, Patrick.'  
'Ah'm deen for, John.'  
'You're a strong man, Patrick.'  
'Aye, but no' strong enough!  
'Who did it?' Gray asked bluntly.  
'What's it matter noo – but that ball that grazed ye, John, cud  
hae been for me.'

'You had enemies?'  
'Some young yins must hae thought Ah was nae green enough.'  
Patrick was too weak to talk, so Gray kept silent; he sighed and  
bowed his head, praying for Patrick and his family; an involuntary  
impulse. Then slowly he lifted his head. The signs were obvious.  
Patrick McGee was dead.

Dazed, Gray left the room. The priest met his eyes and he  
nodded, the meaning clear. Then someone offered him a chair,  
where he sat unspeaking, the sound of women's weeping loud and  
constant.

'Don't come to the funeral, John Gray,' the priest whispered,  
'for the Protestants could be blamed for this.'

Gray grunted with annoyance while rising to his feet.

'I appreciate your warning, Father, but I can't let such fears  
stop me paying my respects!'

The priest looked up at Gray, who was the taller by an inch or  
two.

'Give me your hand, sir,' he said earnestly, and loud enough for  
all to hear. 'Any man who does you harm need not seek the sacra-  
ment!' He looked defiantly round the farmhouse kitchen and Gray  
had little doubt his words would ring the village within the hour.

At that the whiskey came. He downed a tot and then his glass  
was filled again.

Who had pulled the trigger? Gray doubted if it were a Protes-  
tant, certainly not a Presbyterian, for almost all were sympathetic  
to the United Irishmen. Indeed, not infrequently Presbyterian  
clergymen were prominent members, for the Catholic and the  
Presbyterian were allies and shared the aim of Parliamentary  
reform and Catholic emancipation.

John Gray was Church of Ireland, Anglican, as it were, and had  
gone to the expensive Church of Ireland school in Armagh, but his  
mother had been Presbyterian, and his wife as well, so he had  
strong affinity with the Presbyterian farmer suffering from the  
greed of landlords, who were mostly Church of Ireland.

Gray sipped his whiskey absentmindedly.

He shivered, thinking of the French and revolution. It had been hellish in France, and if rebellion came it would be hellish too in Ireland. With French help the hated landlords could be driven out, but what would happen when the common enemy was destroyed? Would Presbyterian and Catholic live in peace? Gray doubted it.

'Who wud want to kill a dacent man like Patrick?' a voice said at his side.

Gray turned to see. It was Sean Brady, a Catholic farmer he often saw at market.

'God knows, Sean. There's a madness in the air at present.'

'Have anither, John.'

Again his glass was filled.

'For God's sake, Sean! My horse may know the way, but I'll need to sit on him!'