

# Battle of the Mendicity



*The Mendicity Institute*

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Moira House, a magnificent mansion, surrounded by lovely gardens, was built in 1752 as a residence of John Rawdon, 1st Earl of Moira. Francis Rawdon, 2nd Earl, as a senior British army officer, had seen service in the American Revolution, where his aide de camp was Lord Edward Fitzgerald, future United Irishman. They remained friends and Lord Edward visited Moira House on many occasions. It is reputed that on the 18th of May 1798, Pamela, wife of Lord Edward, learned of her husband's arrest, while visiting Moira House. Lord Edward been betrayed by Francis Magan, who lived nearby.

The Mendicity Institute was established in 1818 and having been located in a number of premises in the city, finally moved to Moira House. Its aim was to replace begging with self – sufficiency, while providing training, schooling, food and shelter. The Institute members approached all households and businesses in the city for donations. With the introduction of the Poor Law Unions, numbers using the Mendicity dropped. However, at the onset of the famine they rose to the pre poor law numbers of 2900 per day. The neighbours were unhappy with beggars hanging around the Institute, so when a lease was drawn up, it stated a wall would have to be built between the house and the quays and entrance only be permitted at the rear of the house on Island Street.

## The Battle of the Mendicity

On hearing of the cancellation of the Rising in Dublin by Eoin MacNeill, the Volunteers were very disappointed and downcast, none more so than Captain Seán Heuston of D Company, 1st Battalion. On Easter Sunday night his company mobilised in Columcille Hall, Blackhall Street, where they had a large stash of weapons and ammunition stored, and awaited the next move. The following morning, Monday the 24th of April, the call came and Captain Heuston with 12 young men from Na Fianna Éireann assembled in Mountjoy Square whence they marched to Liberty Hall. They were then deployed by Commandant James Connolly, of the Irish Citizen Army, to take up position in the Mendicity Institute on Ushers Island.

Commandant Ned Daly and the 1st Battalion were taking up their position in the Four Courts. The British soldiers were garrisoned in the Royal Barracks (now Collins Barracks) and Captain Heuston's company had the task of delaying their progress into the city when the Rebellion broke out, to give Commandant Daly's men a chance to consolidate their position.

The Mendicity Institute was cleared of its inhabitants and the Volunteers barricaded the building, inside and out with sacks of clay, heavy furniture and whatever they could find. The best riflemen took up position in the windows. Seán Heuston is quoted as saying "when the troops move out of the barracks wait unto they are right opposite you before opening fire". At 12.30 pm, a regiment of British troops left the Royal Barracks and marched down the north quays en route to Dublin Castle. This regiment was 4 soldiers deep. Heuston ordered a surprise attack and the regiment was thrown into disarray.

By Tuesday, the Volunteers John Mc Loughlin and Patrick Stephenson had been sent to the G.P.O. to request food supplies and reinforcements. A small group from Swords, under Lieutenant Dick Coleman arrived and this brought the garrison up to 26 men. However, Stephenson and Mc Loughlin were unable to enter the Mendicity again and food was running out. The British Soldiers evacuated the houses on each side of the Mendicity on the Wednesday. They encircled the building, taking up positions at vantage points in Thomas Street, Bridgefoot Street and Watling Street.

Heuston's small D Company of approximately 26 men was faced with between 300 and 400 heavily armed British soldiers. The ensuing attack was vicious. The Mendicity was assaulted by Lewis machine gunfire and bullets from all sides. The British undercover of fire moved along the Quays where they reached the boundary of the Mendicity, from this location they began to lob grenades into the building. D Company caught as many of these grenades and threw them out but they were now fighting a losing battle. Seán Heuston, wanting no further loss of life, decided to surrender. A group of 26 men had held 300 approximately British soldiers at bay for 3 days. When James Connolly heard the news of the surrender he wept, amazed that they had lasted for so long.