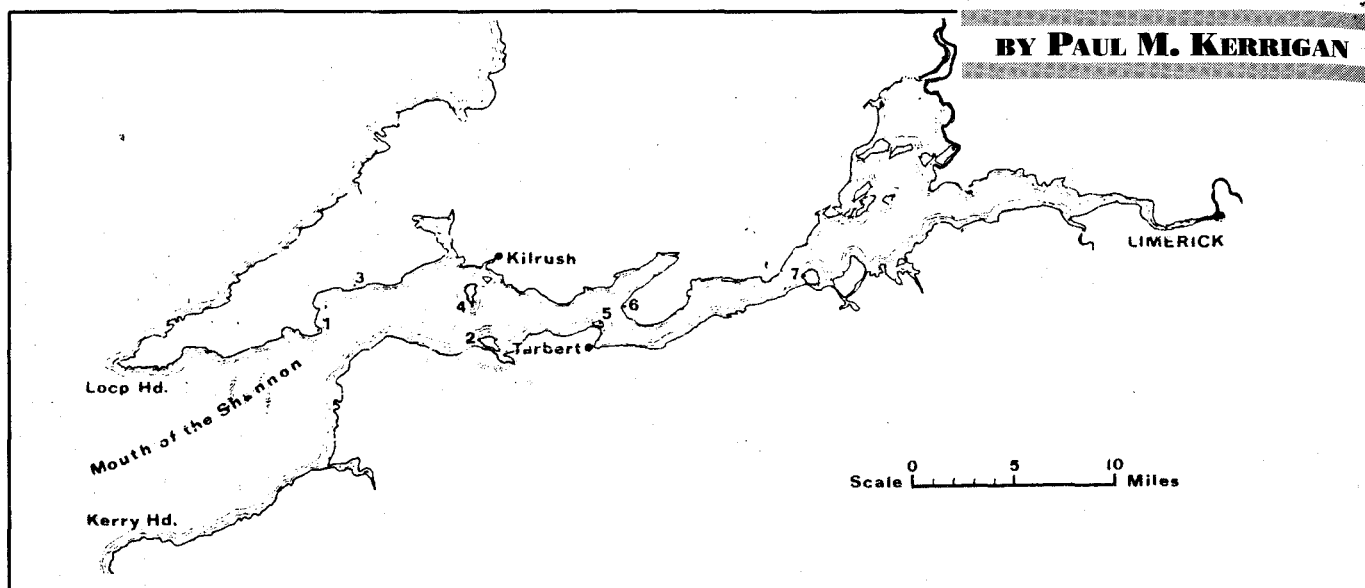




THE DEFENCES OF IRELAND 1793-1815: THE SHANNON ESTUARY



The Shannon Estuary Defences.

The Shannon

The British authorities in Ireland were well aware of the strategic importance of the Shannon. The river barrier had been a significant factor in the closing stages of the Williamite War of 1688-91. On that occasion the attack came from the east, the Irish defence of Connaught being essentially along the line of the Shannon, giving prominence to such fortified river-crossing points as Athlone and Limerick, as well as to other locations with temporary defences such as Lanesboro, Banagher and Portumna.

Between 1769 and 1770, Charles Vallancey, later to become Director of Engineers in Ireland, worked on maps and plans to accompany Lord Townsend's report on the defence of Ireland. The Shannon river-crossings were evidently included in this work.

French invasion plans in 1796 included Galway Bay as a suitable landing place, providing reasonably easy access across Ireland to Dublin, by crossing the Shannon between Lough Derg and Lough Ree. Direct landings at Belfast, Dublin or Wexford were not eventually attempted, due to the British control of the Irish Sea. The various French expeditions between 1796 and 1798 were therefore directed at the south-west, west and north-west coasts of Ireland, in order to avoid contact with units of the British Navy. Of all the proposed or attempted landings in Ireland at this time, perhaps a disembarkation on the shores of Galway Bay, followed by a rapid march inland

across the Shannon and an attack on Dublin would have had most chance of success.

General Humbert's campaign in late August and September, 1798, illustrated the importance of the Shannon, and its lakes (and particularly the strategic importance of the crossing points at fords and bridges) as a line of defence against a French expedition landing in Connaught with the intention of marching on Dublin, the natural objective of any invasion force. The United Irishmen of Longford and Westmeath had assembled to join Humbert, and after heading towards Sligo, he turned south-east having crossed the Shannon north of Carrick-on-Shannon, with the idea of marching on Dublin. He was finally surrounded at Ballinamuck by a British force vastly superior in numbers, and forced to surrender.

The strategic importance of Athlone was also demonstrated on this occasion, as was the importance of the Grand Canal as a rapid means of transporting troops and equipment from Dublin towards the Shannon. The Athlone garrison was increased, the Castle repaired and rebuilt, and during the early years of the nineteenth century extensive fortifications were built to the west of the town.

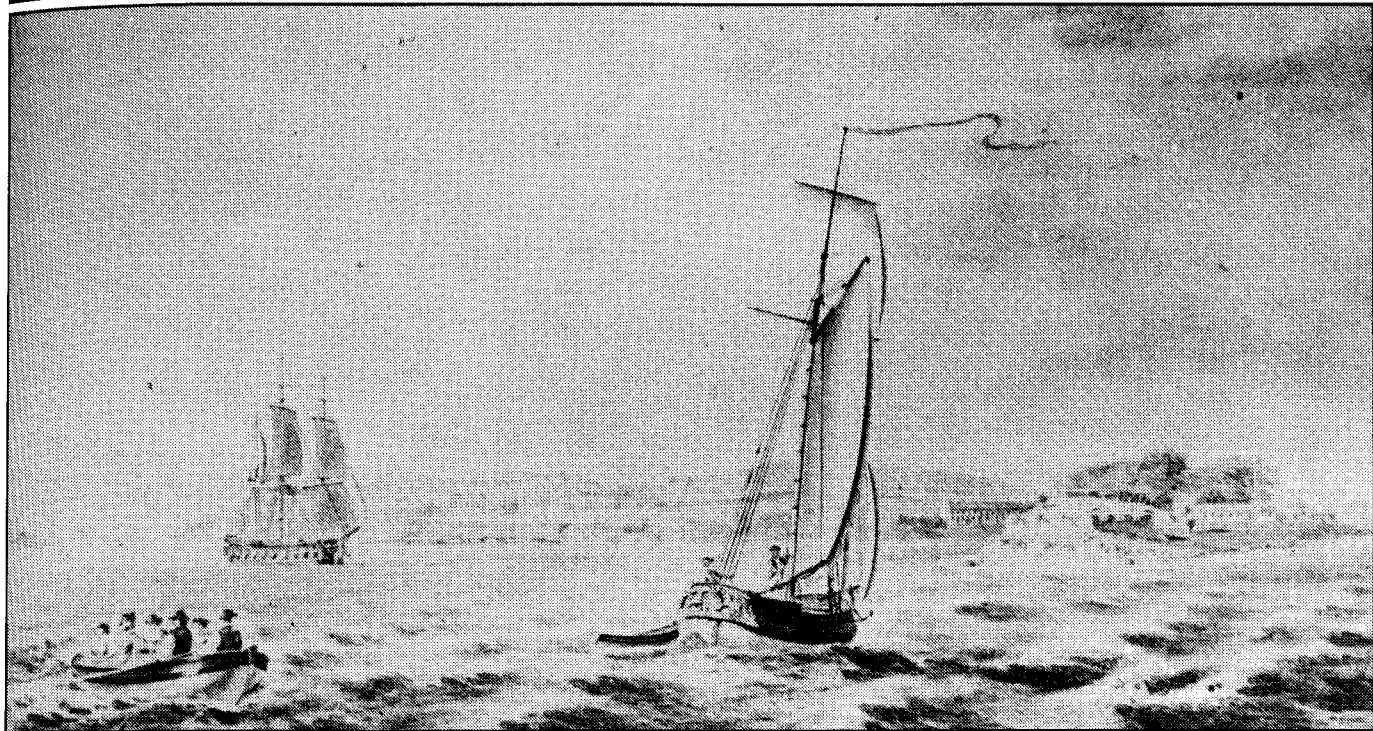
The Shannon between Portumna and Athlone, a distance along the river itself of about 30 miles, was strengthened as a defensive line by works at Meelick and Incherky Island to cover fords, and at Banagher and Shannonbridge to form bridgehead defences.

A striking example during the Napoleonic wars of the effectiveness of fortifying natural features to improve their defensive potential was the construction of the 'Lines of Torres Vedras' by the British and Portuguese forces under Wellington, keeping the French army out of Southern Portugal during the winter of 1810-11. Although the Portuguese mountain terrain is quite different to the comparatively, flat country of the middle Shannon, it is interesting that the 'Lines' were approximately 30 miles long, the same as the length of the Shannon between Lough Derg and Lough Ree.

'A General Statement of the quantity and tenure of land required by the Government for the service of Towers and Batteries along the coast, the works at Athlone, along the Shannon, Clonony and on Bear Island. Engineer Office Dublin, 29th January 1806', (State Paper Office, Dublin Castle 531 No. 230/2) gives details of proposed and existing defences along this part of the Shannon.

The Estuary

The mouth of the Shannon was one of the three invasion areas included in the French Directory's instructions to Vice-Admiral Villaret de Joyeuse in October, 1796, during the preparations of the expedition to Ireland. The suggested landing places in order to preference were given as Galway Bay, Bantry Bay and the Shannon estuary. Part of the orders issued to the ship's captains of the French Fleet that finally arrived in Bantry



The Shannon, near Tarbert.

Bay in December, 1796, included a rendezvous at the mouth of the Shannon, in case of separation and failure to meet off Mizen Head in West Cork.

After several days waiting and indecision in Bantry Bay, Wolfe Tone on board the ship-of-the-line *Indomptable* was in favour of the ships that still remained in the bay on 27th December (seven sail of the line and one frigate) attempting a landing at the mouth of the Shannon. As the ships-of-the-line were each carrying between 500 and 600 hundred soldiers, and the frigates evidently had on board about 250 to 300, a total of perhaps 4,000 men could have been landed.

It is possible that if even this force had been put ashore somewhere in the Shannon estuary it would have had a chance of capturing Limerick, and have been at least as effective as Humbert's expedition in August, 1798, which consisted of only 1,019 French troops.

Small detachments of the government forces regular, fencible and militia, in Kerry, Limerick and Cork had been sent on forced marches down towards Bantry, and were assembling at positions between Bantry and Cork, in such towns as Bandon and Mallow.

Consequently, a French landing at the lower Shannon would certainly have met with little opposition by land forces, the Limerick garrison being at least two days march from Tarbert. The *Irish Militia* by Sir Henry McAnally describes how the Londonderry militia company stationed at Tarbert marched to Mallow, joining the other companies of the Londonderry, and the Louth and Westmeath militia, which had all been marched from Limerick during the first days of the French Fleet being in Bantry.

The Shannon estuary provided several harbours, landing places and anchorages suitable for landing troops and unloading artillery and stores, a good anchorage being provided by Tarbert roads, the part of the river partly sheltered by Tarbert Island to the west and north-west.

The *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* by Lewis, published some twenty years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, describes this anchorage:

Tarbert: Affording a safe and commodious roadstead for about 150 vessels of the largest class, may be considered an asylum harbour. Sheltered on N.W. by the Island of Tarbert-connected by a narrow causeway for foot passengers and cut off by high water springs.

The Ordnance Survey Maps of 1840-42 show a total of six coastal batteries located in the Shannon estuary, together with the site of a battery on Foynes Island further upstream. These batteries were: on the north or Clare shore from the west, at Kilcredaun Point, Doonaha, and Kilkerin Point (opposite Tarbert Island); on the south or County Kerry shore at Corran Point on Carrig Island, and on Tarbert Island; and in the centre of the estuary on the southern point of Scatterry Island.

The battery or fort at Tarbert Island was of a different plan to the other Shannon batteries, and dates from the mid 1790s. It is not shown on Cowan's chart of the Shannon, dating from after 1794, but is indicated on a military map in the National Library (ref. 16L 18), which dates from between 1793 and 1798, forming part of a military survey of Ireland by Vallencey. The remaining batteries were presumably built between

1806 and 1815. No mention of these batteries or their sites is made in the State Paper office list of land required for defence work the east coast, the Upper Shannon and in Bantry Bay, dated 29 January, 1806, (S.P.O 531 No. 230/2)

General Dumouriez, in his *Military Memoir on the Defence of Ireland*, 2 January, 1808, advocated siting batteries at the narrow mouth (about two miles wide) of the river. A battery was subsequently built on the northern shore here - on Kilcredaun Point. He also suggested a battery on Carrig Island and a fort on Scatterry Island; batteries were in fact built in these two locations later. Also proposed were a fort on 'Killahin' promontory (this is presumably Kilkerin Point where a battery was built) and a battery on Foynes Island. Dumouriez does not mention Tarbert Island, presumably because of the seven gun battery already in existence at the time of his report.

Included in his proposal for the defence of the estuary were the use of gunboats (useful in restricted and shallow water, and in calm weather against much larger vessels), bomb-ketches and fireships. These were to be moored or anchored in various locations, below Kilrush, in Tarbert Roads and further upstream. Presumably, some of these vessels would have been manned by the 'Sea Fencibles', the naval reserve of the period made up of merchant seamen and fishermen, and commanded by naval officers.

The Shannon estuary batteries are all of similar layout with the exception of the earlier battery at Tarbert which resembled an obtuse pointed bastion in plan.

The battery in each case is semi-



Kilcredaun Blockhouse.

circular or 'D' shaped in plan, surrounded by a dry moat, with six guns (the only exception being the four gun battery at Doonaha) arranged around the curved part of the perimeter, firing out over the broad parapet, across the estuary. The rear of the battery was protected by a rectangular blockhouse or 'bomb-proof barrack' built in the moat in the centre of the landward side. On the roof of the blockhouse were two 'howitzer' guns.

The sketch of the Kilkerin Point battery illustrates the main characteristics of the layout. A similar battery was built on the upper Shannon; Keelogue Battery on Inchercky Island some miles downstream of Banagher. Similar defence works were built along the Thames estuary during this period but no longer survive. In these Shannon estuary forts we have unique examples of Napoleonic period coastal artillery defences.

1. Kilcredaun Point Battery, Co. Clare

This battery commanded the northern side of the mouth of the Shannon, at this particular point being about 2 miles wide. The battery, forming a 'D' shape enclosure on plan, has had much of the stone facing removed from the scarp and counter-scarp of the dry moat since the site was abandoned as a military post, presumably sometime in the mid- or late nineteenth century. Entrance to the battery was originally across a drawbridge over the moat. The blockhouse or 'bombproof barrack' is in a good state of preservation on the exterior. It was entered from within the battery by a small pedestrian drawbridge. The date 1814 is cut in the keystone of the doorway. The blockhouse had a basement or lower ground floor, level with the base of the dry moat in which it stands. The upper floor, level with the ground-level within the battery, is that approached originally by the smaller drawbridge.

Above this floor level (in this

particular blockhouse the floor structure has collapsed) is the gun-platform, carried on the barrel-vaulted ceiling of the first floor apartment.

Musket loops are provided in the basement level of the blockhouse allowing close defence of the moat in the manner of a caponiere. More musket loops at the first-floor level, evidently originally provided with shutters on the exterior, commanded the interior area of the battery. Other musket loops are arranged on the opposite side of the blockhouse, facing the ground outside the battery, a feature only found at Kilcredaun. On the floor of the building, protected by broad parapets, six feet high, two guns were mounted on traversing carriages; these were howitzers which fired explosive shells – hollow iron shells filled with gunpowder, with a fuse attached, timed to explode if possible on impact.

The traversing carriages, one at each end of the gun-platform enabled the guns to be trained round through an angle of about 270°. The main armament of the battery consisted of six 24 pounder cannon, mounted on traversing carriages and firing over the rampart of the battery. These guns could be loaded with solid iron 24 pounder shot, or with 'canister' or 'grape shot'.

The general remarks describing this battery and its armament are applicable to the other batteries, except that on Tarbert Island.

2. Corran Point Battery, Carrig Island, Co. Kerry

This battery commanded the southern part of the channel of the river between Carrig Island and Scatterry Island, a distance of about two miles. With a similar battery on Scatterry Island the passage of the river here was completely covered by fire from their 24 pounder cannon, which had a range of somewhat over a mile.

The moat and ramparts of the battery at Corran Point have almost disappeared,

the removal of the stonework causing the counterscarp and rampart to gradually collapse. The blockhouse remains; the doorway having been altered and extended in recent years to form an opening at ground level. The roof level gun-platform, with its positions for the two howitzers, is approached from first floor level by a staircase built within the wall thickness. Some loose masonry has fallen from the inner part of the massive surrounding parapet.

The *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* by Lewis notes Corran Point: 'a battery and bombproof barrack for 20 men, it is a station of the coastguard.'

3. Doonaha Battery, Co. Clare

Some 3¹/₂ miles north-east of Kilcredaun Point, Doonaha was similar to the other batteries except that it was slightly smaller and mounted four 24 pounder guns instead of the usual six.

The moat is badly eroded, though it is more complete than that at Corran Point. The 'bombproof barrack' is half demolished, and clearly shows how strongly built these structures were; the iron pivot for the central mounting for one of the traversing carriages is visible at the western end at roof level.

4. Scatterry Island Battery, Co. Clare

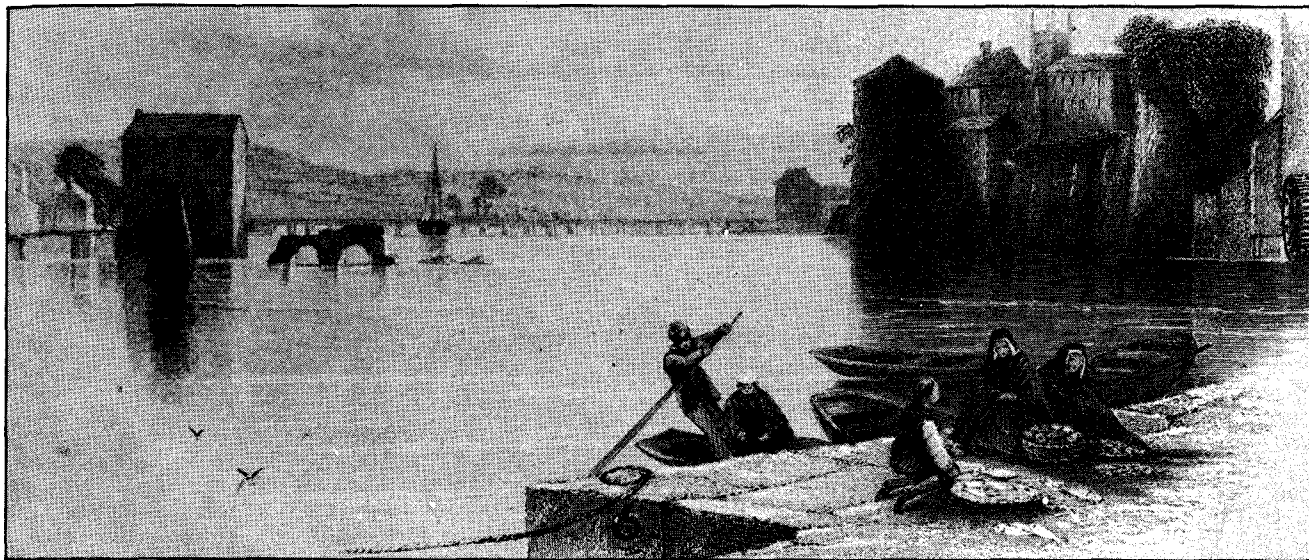
Situated on the southern extremity of the Island, close to the more recent lighthouse, this battery from the evidence of aerial photographs appears to be in good condition, and of the same layout as the other batteries.

5. Tarbert island Battery

Evidently demolished during the building of the E.S.B. power station in recent years, plans show it was five-sided in outline, with two sides facing northwards across the estuary, giving a 'bastion' shaped plan. Of the seven 24 pounder cannon one was positioned centrally at the salient angle of the two northward facing sides. The blockhouse with its howitzers was positioned on the landward or southern side in the moat which surrounded the battery, and having one more gun, it followed the same basic arrangement as the others.

6. Kilkerin Point Battery, Co. Clare

Kilkerin Point is directly opposite Tarbert Island which is just over a mile away to the south-west. In certain wind conditions, ships sailing up-river at this point would be forced to tack or change



The Shannon at Limerick.

course, following the bend in the river. The batteries, on Kilkerin and Tarbert completely command the river here and sailing ships would have been extremely vulnerable, well within the range of the 24 pounder guns. The batteries also had furnaces for heating the cast-iron shot red-hot, which could easily set fire to the wooden sailing ships of the period.

Kilkerin Point is the best preserved example of Shannon estuary batteries that I have seen. (Scattery Island, judging by aerial photographs, appears to be in similar condition). The dry moat still retains a large proportion of the stone facing to the scarp and counterscarp.

The blockhouse is quite well preserved on the exterior, and in the centre of the battery area is a small semi-basement structure covered with earth, shown on some plans as 'shell filling room'.

The gate piers at the main entrance to the battery still retain the small iron pulley wheels for the drawbridge hoisting arrangement.

Some approximate dimensions of the Kilkerin battery and blockhouse can also be used as a guide for the other batteries.

The dry moat is about 20 feet wide, and somewhat less in depth from the exterior ground level. The width of the battery is about 250 feet, while the blockhouse measures approximately 54 feet long by 33 feet wide externally, the walls being about 7 feet thick.

(This compares with the blockhouse at Keelogue battery on Inchercky Island on the Upper Shannon, which is 54 feet long by 32 feet wide, indicating a standard size. The controlling factor would have been the gun-platform for the two howitzers and the size of their traversing carriages.)

The *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* describes Kilkerin: 'on Kilkerin Point, a battery of six pounders, two howitzers and a bombproof barrack for 20 artillery-men.'

The term 'bombproof' suggests that

the massive barrel-vault supporting the gun-platform was regarded as a protection for the apartment below from mortar fire. The blockhouse can be considered as a rectangular equivalent of a Martello tower. As on the Martello, the gun-crews and the guns themselves were extremely vulnerable to a well-placed mortar shell.

Moving further upstream, the first edition of the Ordnance Survey 6" map shows the site of a battery on the western point of Foynes Island (map, no. 7) (another site suggested by General Dumouriez). This was evidently an earthwork or temporary battery, occupied for the duration of the war only.

In Limerick, King John's Castle had barrack buildings built in the courtyard in the 1760's; the rest of the castle was in bad repair in the 1790's; and subsequently at some stage during the next twenty years repairs and alterations were carried out to the towers and gatehouse, and cannon mounted behind new parapets and embrasures. The work here resembles similar alterations carried out at Athlone Castle at the same time.

New barracks were built in Limerick in the early years of the nineteenth century, as the strategic importance of the city as the lowest river-crossing point on the Shannon was clearly recognised.

In General Dumouriez's *Memoir*, Limerick was to be the headquarters of an army division, with various large detachments in Co. Clare and Co. Kerry.

The Shannon estuary defence works were well sited to cause maximum damage to an enemy fleet making its way up-river, or attempting to land an invasion force. In themselves they would not have prevented a French landing in strength.

Only well co-ordinated mobile bodies of troops, supported by strategically placed supply depots and garrisons as suggested by General Dumouriez in his comprehensive proposals would have had a reasonable chance of defeating a

large French expedition. Humbert's successes with his small army, in his short campaign in the summer of 1798, demonstrated this.

Another factor in the Irish situation which Dumouriez allowed for in his *Memoir*, was the probability of another rising as soon as a further French expedition landed, giving the Government forces the dual role of defence and counter-insurgency.

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