

SARSFIELD'S RIDE

BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

It must have been a fantastic weekend. The build-up had gone on for weeks. First, there was the news that James had been routed at the Boyne. Then came the news that the victorious Prince of Orange, William III, was marching on Limerick. James had run off to France, supposedly to raise another army. Was the Catholic cause lost? Had the Irish fought and died in vain? Could Limerick hold out? The Jacobite forces who had survived the Boyne rallied themselves once more for battle. On Thursday, August 7, King William himself marched into Caherconlish. He wasted no time. For those curious onlookers who watched his progress, he did not disappoint.

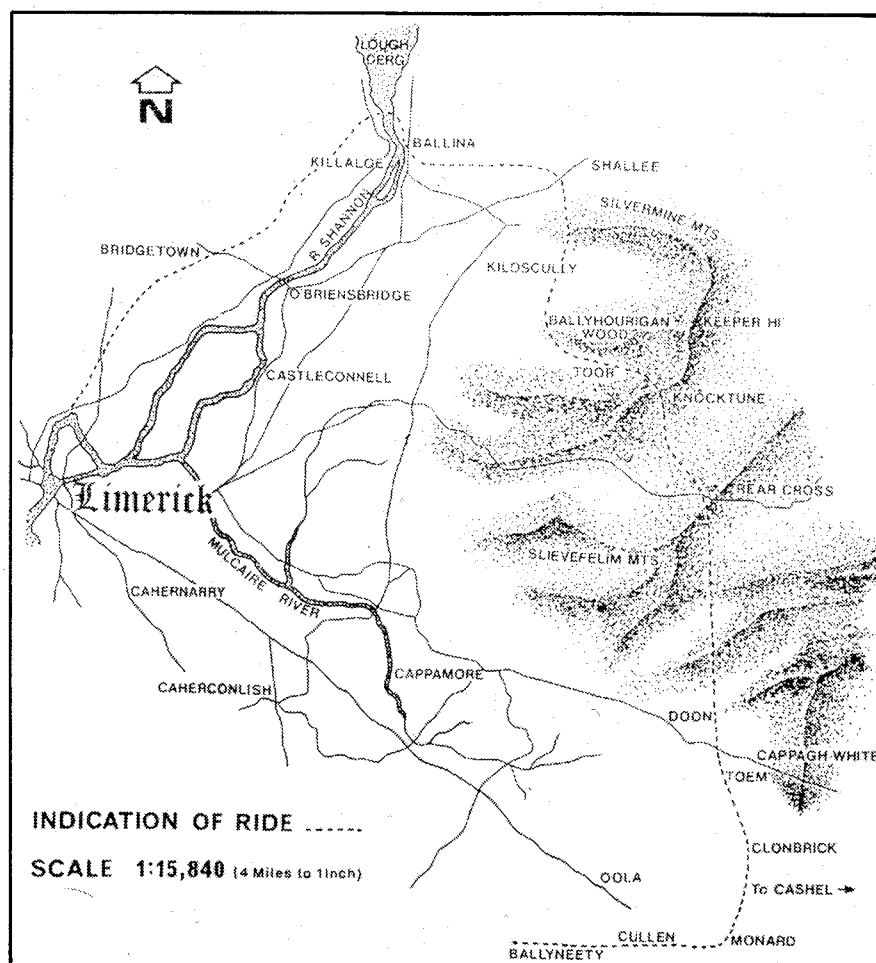
Early on Friday morning, he dispatched over a thousand cavalry and infantry towards the city. The sight must have been a spectacular one. The different colours of the Danes, the Dutch, the Huguenots, the Brandenburgers, the English, must have been wonderful to behold. Then there were glimpses of the great officers like Ginkel, Lord Portland, Lieutenant-General Douglas and Lord Drogheda. In spite of the odds, cannon fire from the city sounded a note of defiance which was deepened by the occasional sally of horsemen through the gates.

This went on for most of the day, heightening tension, and then the king himself rode out on inspection, surrounded by about 300 horse. Darkness fell.

Reveille was early for the Williamites on the Saturday. So early, in fact, that many of them had to leave camp without breakfast! The war-machine was waiting for no-one. An advance party was immediately sent out to cut down all hedges near the city. Then the main army set off, led by the king, as was his custom. Story, the Williamite historian, describes the scene:

... The detached party of foot was upon the advance towards the centre, the horse a little to the right of them, followed by the Earl of Drogheda's regiment, and Lieutenant-General Douglas at the head of them (my Lord Drogheda himself being upon the advance guard). The Danes were towards the left, led on by the Prince of Würtemberg, and Major-General Kirk. The Blue Dutch, and several English regiments, were upon the right. All those were lined with horse, and these supported again with more foot ...

The Irish harassed and worried the advancing army. Then they retreated

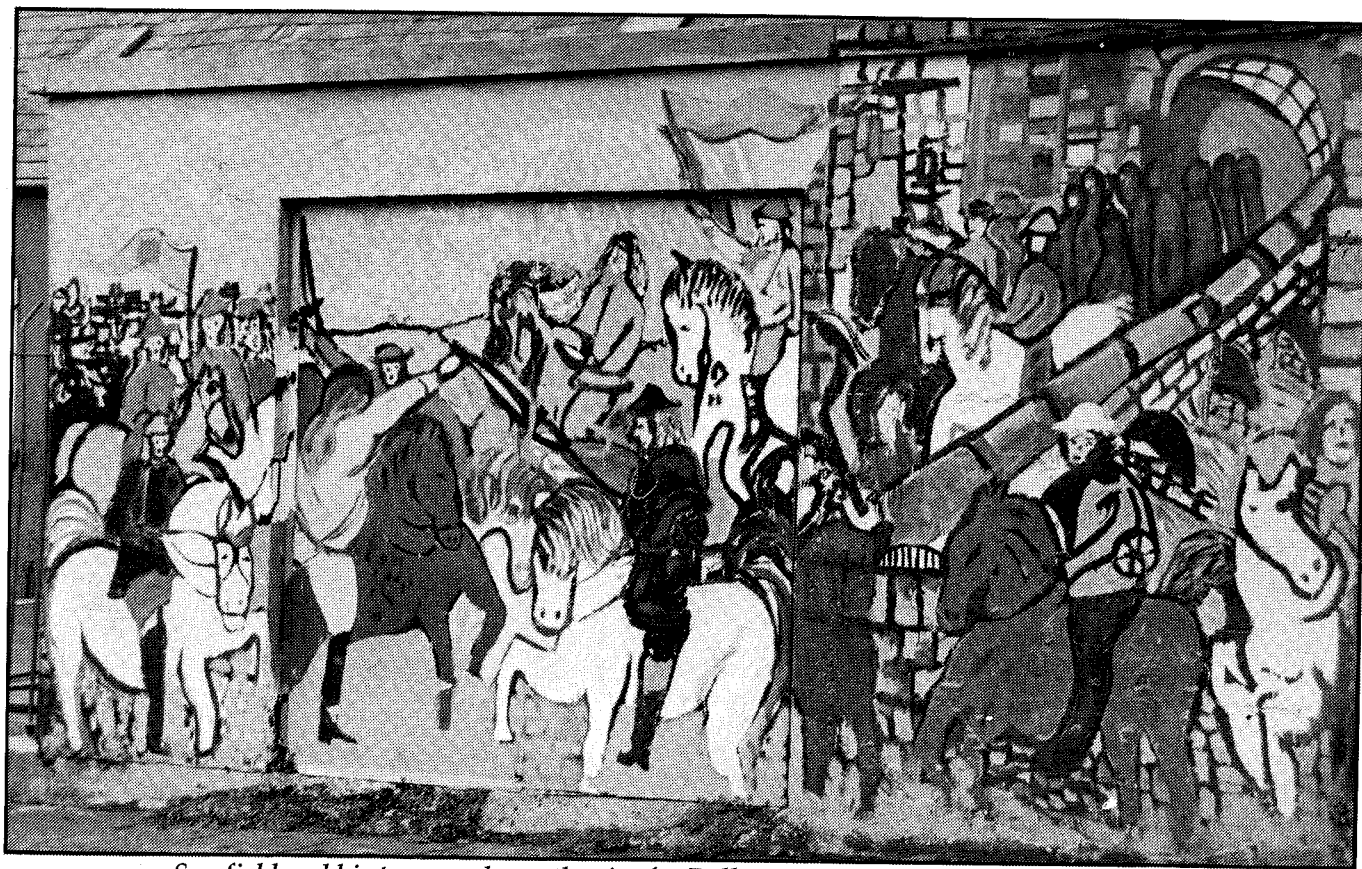


Map of the route of Sarsfield's ride.

quickly under cover of the city walls from which the big guns opened up on the Williamites. But by evening, the ridge of Singland Hill, on which stood the forts of Ireton and Cromwell, built during the Cromwellian siege of 1650-1, had been over-run by William. Trenches were dug and banks were raised. Battle lines were now drawn for the siege.

William's strength at Limerick was estimated at 25,000 men, not enough, it was thought, to take the city. Estimates of Jacobite troops, on the other hand, vary. The French commander Lauzun, who had fought at the Boyne, put the number at 14,000 infantry, plus 2,500 cavalry. The youthful Duke of Berwick, son of James, estimated the number of foot at about 20,000 (of whom not more than half were armed) and horse at 3,500. It might be worth remembering Story's point that one man within the walls was worth four without. A number of sources also mention the presence of Hugh Baldearg

O'Donnell, who had served in the Spanish army and had arrived in Ireland only a short time after the Boyne. He was in or about the Clare hills, accompanied by a few thousand rapparees. The Jacobites could no longer count on the French troops, as they had left the city the week William arrived! They reckoned that the city was indefensible and could be taken with roasted apples. They contended that the Irish, never having seen a properly fortified town, did not know any better ... Lauzun led his men towards the Galway port for embarkation to France, having advised the Irish commander, Tyrconnell, to make terms with William. Tyrconnell was quite prepared to do so but was prevented by Patrick Sarsfield, who had just returned from Athlone and Banagher, where he had been defending the Shannon. Sarsfield, in fact, was convinced that Tyrconnell was a traitor to the cause, while the latter found Sarsfield to be



Sarsfield and his troopers leave the city for Ballyneety. Wall painting at Verdun Place.

rather thick and irksome, to put it mildly.

The antipathy of both men went back away beyond the Boyne. Sarsfield was then in his forties and Tyrconnell in his late sixties. Both men had been around the Continent and had also served as soldiers in England. Sarsfield would have been aware of who Tyrconnell was at the English Court – none other than the 'Lying Dick Talbot', a cynical opportunist and philanderer. Talbot had benefited greatly from James accession, being created Earl of Tyrconnell and Lord Deputy of Ireland. As Alice Curtayne has written: 'He had many of the characteristics of the roving soldier of his period: a heavy gambler, he never opened his mouth without swearing; he swaggered through his days, always ready for a brawl, he liked to disguise his true sentiments under a torrent of rant'.

But like many other Irish Catholics, he had been dispossessed. The resulting twin-motivation of land restoration and opening up of influential positions to Catholics was sufficient to animate him as a soldier. However, by all accounts, he was pathetic at the Boyne and could not make a decision. Sarsfield was detailed to protecting the king's retreat there and was not allowed to get involved. He had to watch while the battle was lost. The soldiery, too, was dismayed, and when Sarsfield challenged Tyrconnell and Lauzun in Limerick, no wonder the army rallied behind him. The Jacobite war-cry went up once more – 'Now or never! Now and forever!'

Tyrconnell would not appoint Sarsfield in charge in Limerick though, and left Major-General Boisseleau instead as governor, with the Duke of Berwick (who was later to marry Sarsfield's widow), Major-Generals Sarsfield and Dorrington, and Brigadiers Henry Luttrell, Wauchope, and Maxwell as his assistants. The last two were Scottish Catholics.

Berwick and Sarsfield appear to have been on good terms at this time, as is fairly clear from a letter from the former to Brigadier-General Sarsfield written in July 1689. It was one of a number of papers left behind in Dublin by the departing Jacobites and found by the Williamites on reaching the city. 'Notorious' was the nickname given to Sarsfield, even in the middle of 1689!

Cavan Parke the 31e July

Dear notorious

This is to give you notice that Marechal Rosen or I will march within three or four days from this place to Balishanon, so that if you looke out sharp this way, you may see us laying on these rebelly and cowering rogues; which may give you also an opportunity of attacking on that side of the water to make a diversion I am afraid the siege of Derry will be raised, and I thank god that I have not nor ever will give my consent unto it. I will say no more of this till I meet you at Balishanon in the meanwhile I remain Deare Notorious

*your kind Friend and servant
Berwick*

*For Brigadier Genll Sarsfield
(seal)*

*Endorsed Duke of Berwick to Sarsfield
July 31 1689*

Late on Saturday evening, William demanded the surrender of the city, but a reply came back that the best way to gain the Prince of Orange's good opinion was by a vigorous defence. The die was cast. There was no more talk of parley. Now or never! Now and forever!

Sunday morning brought the arrival of a deserter from the city with news of Irish deployments and dissensions. Tyrconnell, seemingly, on Saturday, had drawn off the regiments guarding the fords and had headed further into Clare, closer to Lauzun. William took advantage of this opportunity on Sunday and crossed the river to view at first hand, the Irish regiments. There he waited for the heavier guns necessary for siege operations which were on their slow journey from Dublin, under the care of a body of musketeers and two troops of Colonel Villiers' Horse, commanded by Captain Poultney. It was this logistical error, namely, the arrival of William before the walls of Limerick with only a field train, that the Irish chose to punish.

A bold plan was decided upon. The ammunitions train was to be destroyed! By then, it was at Cashel, only two days distant from Caherconlish. Intelligence reported that the train consisted of 6 twenty-four pounders, 2 eighteen pounders, 5 mortars, 153 wagons of

ammunition for the artillery and 18 tin boats or pontoons, with 18 casks of biscuit, and 400 fine draught horses. How could the train be attacked?

There are conflicting reports as to who thought of the plan. The Duke of Berwick credits Lord Tyrconnell; the French historians say that Tyrconnell and Lauzun were responsible for it, while Colonel O'Kelly says that Sarsfield alone is to be given the credit.

The Duke of Berwick had another proposal, as he states in his memoirs. His recounting of events also gives a further insight into the tensions within the leadership:

I had proposed to the Duke of Tyrconnell, as soon as the enemy sat down before Limerick, to pass the Shannon with our three thousand five hundred horse and destroy all the magazines they had left behind them, especially at Dublin, which would undoubtedly have reduced them to a necessity of decamping. As all the towns in this country were open and without defence, I was morally certain of succeeding in my enterprise; and as to getting back, which was objected to me as being very difficult, the knowledge I had of the country had already suggested to me by what means it might be effected, for beside that we should have had the start of the enemy, I had no doubt of making my way into the north, and returning to our quarters by Sligo. The Duke of Tyrconnell, who was become heavy and fearful, would not agree to my proposal: perhaps too there might be some degree of jealousy at the bottom on his side, for as it did not suit with the dignity of Viceroy to become a partisan, and that, besides, neither his age nor bulk were accommodated to such an expedition, the whole conduct of it would have devolved upon me. A short time after, having learned that a large convoy of artillery and ammunition was going to the camp before Limerick, he detached Brigadier Sarsfield, with eight hundred horse and dragoons, to attack it.

While Berwick mentions the figure of 800 men in Sarsfield's party, other sources quote the figure of 500/600 horse. Considering Sarsfield's popularity with the men and their commitment to him, 1,000 or more may have volunteered or wanted to take part in the mission but, generally, it is estimated that 500/600 prepared to travel on a trip that has immortalised him in tradition and song ever since.

Sarsfield waited for the cover of darkness before setting out. As his guide he had chosen Daniel Hogan, a rapparee, who had the nickname of 'Galloping' Hogan. Maurice Lenihan describes him as 'a well-educated, popular man and a brave rapparee'. Even though he was later hanged by other rapparees, his contribution to the defence of Limerick, like Sarsfield's, is celebrated in tradition and song.

Thousands of rapparees, from all

walks of life, roamed the countryside fighting on the side of the Jacobites, and stealing horses and provisions from the Williamites for the regular army. Sarsfield is said to have been very close to the rapparees and recruited 2,000 of them into his army in Connaught. It is also said that he thought of throwing in his lot with them after the Boyne, so disgusted was he with the showing of Tyrconnell and James. That was all behind him now, as he waited on that Sunday night for the blanket of darkness to deepen before setting out, reportedly, through the North Gate of the city with his men, even though his regular camp was outside the walls. Lenihan says that his route lay, through Harold's Cross, near Blackwater, bypassing O'Brien's Bridge, going through Bridgetown and Ballycorney (there picking up a reluctant young Protestant called Cecil) and reaching Killaloe, near where he forded the river. (Up to recently, old people in Blackwater carried the oral tradition of Sarsfield passing by their neighbourhood on his way to the siege train. However, there is another, signposted version of his journey which would have led him north-westward from the city, then circling eastward toward Bridgetown and on to Killaloe).

The bridge at Killaloe was guarded by Williamite troops but Sarsfield managed to cross unnoticed about a mile upstream at a ford between Pier Head and Ballyvalley. Arriving thus far was, by any standards, an extraordinary feat. To transport 600 foot would seem to be difficult enough. But to move 500/600 horse without their presence being discovered, noticed or betrayed appears impossible. Yet, so it happened. The entire party crossed over into Tipperary and travelled, as Lenihan says, across the country, between Ballina and Boher,

coming out on the Boher road, near Labadhy Bridge. When at this bridge, the party, who were conducted by Galloping Hogan, were startled by a curious incident. Sarsfield discovered, near Labadhy Bridge, a number of men on his left, whose presence excited alarm. He ordered the horse to halt, apprehensive that he had been betrayed by Hogan. But the delusion was dispelled in a instant; the men whose presence caused so much alarm were a body of rapparees who had a den or hiding place here, in which they were accustomed to conceal whatever provisions they had taken in their predatory excursions throughout the district. The party passed on through Morrissey's Bogs, and continued on their route through Killoscully, until they reached Keeper Hill, where in the fastnesses of the mountain, they encamped for the night, and where, among many others, Sarsfield it is said was visited by one of the old O'Ryan's of that country, who offered him hospitality.

They were encamped in Ballyhourigan Wood, near Killoscully, having travelled

approximately 35 miles from Limerick. They would have to cover the same mileage on Monday in order to meet the train.

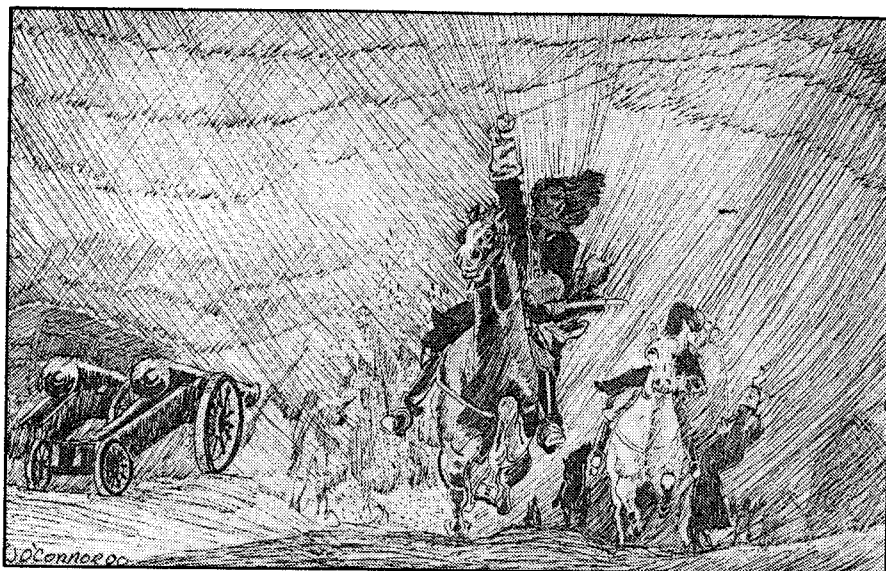
Meanwhile, back at the Williamite camp at Limerick, news of Sarsfield's venture had broken. But, reportedly, for hours it did not register. One Manus O'Brien, 'a country gentleman', found it difficult to convince anybody that his story of Sarsfield's departure from the city was true. 'A great officer called him aside', Story recounted, 'and after some indifferent questions, asked him about a prey of cattle in such a place, which the gentleman complained of afterwards, saying he was sorry to see General Officers mind cattle more than the king's honour'. Eventually, he was brought to William, who then ordered that a party of 500 horse should ride out to meet the guns. Then an incredible thing happened. The king's order was either ignored for hours or taken so leisurely that it was vitiated entirely. Robert Parker has this account:

The king had some information of Sarsfield's going abroad, and, suspecting that his design was on the train, had ordered Count Solms to send away forthwith a good body of horse to join the train, by the time they should reach Cullen. Upon which the count, who commanded immediately under the king, ordered Sir John Lanier to march with a body of horse on that service: But whether the count delivered his orders with that pressing instance which the affair required, or whether Sir John mistook the count, as he pretended; so it was that he did not set out till four hours after he had received his orders. And as it was, had he pursued his march as expeditiously as he ought, he might have saved the train: But he spent his time in making unnecessary halts, till he saw the flash in the air, and heard the bursting of the cannon; then indeed he hastened his march; but before he came up, Sarsfield had done the work, and was gone. Sir John was shrewdly suspected of treachery in this affair, and the more as he had once been a great favourite of King James.

J.G. Simms speculates that the near indifference with which William's orders were met may have been due to the ill-feeling between the English and Dutch, which paralleled the Franco-Irish dissension on the Jacobite side.

Monday for Sarsfield was spent in hiding, while his scouts checked the progress of the train. At nightfall, Sarsfield and his men rode south through Toor and Knockfune. Then they waited in Glengar, where a final check on the train was made by scouts. Lenihan carries a strange tale of how Sarsfield and his men accidentally discovered the Williamite watchword for the camp:

An accident obtained the desired information. One of Sarsfield's troopers, whose horse got lame, fell into the rear of his party: he met the wife of one of



Blowing up the siege train at Ballyneety. Painting by John O'Connor.

William's soldiers who had remained behind the Williamites on their march, and taking compassion on her, he enabled her to proceed on her journey. By this means the trooper obtained the watchword of the English. The word was 'Sarsfield'. Proceeding on, he joined Sarsfield who was in the greatest anxiety for the watchword, but the difficulty was speedily dissipated. Now everything was in readiness to make the grand stroke on which Sarsfield had set his heart, and which was to decide the fate of the campaign, as he had anticipated it would, and as the result, in the judgment of all military men, proved it really did.

The pursuers then followed the train's path through Cullen. Finally, in the early hours of Tuesday morning, they came upon the soldiers, civilians and guns near the old ruinous castle of Ballyneety. Story describes how the Williamites had been lured into a false sense of security:

If they had feared the least danger, it had been easy to draw the guns and everything else within the ruins of that old castle, and then it had been difficult for an army, much more a party, to have touched them. Nay, it was easy to place them and the carriages in such a figure upon the very spot where they stood, that it had been certain death to have come nigh them; but thinking themselves at home, so nigh the camp, and not fearing an enemy in such a place, especially since they had no notice sent them of it, they turned most of their horses out to grass, as being wearied with marching before, and the guard they left was but a very slender one, the rest most of them going to sleep. But some of them awoke in the next world, for Sarsfield all that day lurked amongst the mountains, and having notice where and how our men lay, he had those that guided him through byways to the very spot where he fell in amongst them before they were aware, and cut several of them to pieces, with a great many of the wagoners and some

country people that were coming to the camp with provisions. The officer commanding-in-chief, when he saw how it was, commanded to sound to horse, but those that endeavoured to fetch them up were killed as they went out, or else saw it was too late to return. The officers and others made what resistance they could, but were at last obliged every man to shift for himself, which many of them did, though they lost all their horses, and some of them goods of a considerable value.

Story then gives an account of the casualties and of the rest of the damage:

There was one Lieutenant Bell, and some few more of the troopers killed, with wagoners and country people, to the number in all of about sixty. Then the Irish got up what horses they could meet withal, belonging either to the troops or train; some broke the boats, and others drew all the carriages and wagons, with the bread, ammunition, and as many of the guns as they could get in so short a time into one heap. The guns they filled with powder and put their mouths in the ground that they might certainly split. What they could pick up in a hurry they took away, and laying a train to the rest, which being fired at their going off, blew all up with an astonishing noise; the guns that were filled with powder flying up from the carriages into the air, and yet two of them received no damage, though two more were split and made unserviceable: everything likewise that would burn was reduced to ashes, before any could prevent it. The Irish took no prisoners, only a Lieutenant of Colonel Erle's being sick in a house hard by, was stripped and brought to Sarsfield, who used him very civilly, telling him if he had not succeeded in that enterprise, he had then gone to France.

Sir John Lanier and his troop saw the enormous flash in the sky and realised they were too late to protect the train. However, they did set off in pursuit of the raiders but went in the wrong

direction. Lenihan reports that Sarsfield immediately headed north and crossed the river at Banagher, blowing up an arch in the bridge there, effectively cutting off any pursuers, and then turned south for Limerick.

But the Williamites did not give up the chase easily. Story relates:

... If our party had been fortunate; they had a fair opportunity first to save the guns, and then to revenge their loss, and if either had been done, the town had surrendered without much more battering. Sir Albert Cunningham's Dragoons were abroad also, who met with some of the Irish, killed a major, one Captain James Fitzgerald, and about fifteen more, but the main body marched off secure. Colonel Villiers went also with another party of horse towards O'Brien's Bridge, but the enemy did not return that way.

While everybody acknowledged the bold, daring achievement of the attack, and some recorded Sarsfield's magnanimity towards the sick officer and a gunner for his technical services, there were many who criticised the excessive barbarity of the attack. Captain Parker, in his memoirs, tries to exonerate him:

This was certainly a well conducted affair, and much to Sarsfield's honour, had there not been so much cruelty in the execution of it; for they put man, woman and child to the sword, though there was not the least opposition made. However, we cannot suppose that so gallant a man as Sarsfield certainly was, could be guilty of giving such orders; it is rather to be presumed, that at such a juncture it was not in his power to restrain the natural barbarity of his men.

But in the popular mind Sarsfield needed no exoneration. He was a hero and his success gave a great boost to morale. The news of Ballyneety quickly spread to the continent. Amsterdam and Brussels sent reports to the Vatican. *The Gazette de France* gave a fulsome account of the victory. Only in London was the success played down. The *London Gazette* told readers that the effects of the loss of the train would be minimal.

Tyrconnell and Lauzun were, reportedly, less than enthusiastic about Ballyneety. They saw it as a setback to the peace process and possibly a factor in delaying the French further in Ireland. Tyrconnell, also, would simply resent Sarsfield's success.

But despite these reactions, the hour was Sarsfield's, as he made his way via Portumna on Thursday, 14 August. Within the walls of the city, the news of his raid brought feelings of relief and joy to the beleaguered citizens and soldiery. While these are many fanciful accounts of Sarsfield's triumphant return to Limerick on the following day, the evidence points to him rejoining the cavalry at Loughrea, Co. Galway. For the city Sarsfield's achievement brought time, and for the man himself it meant promotion to the level of folk-hero.