

FACT AND FANCY: STORY AND STORYTELLERS OF 1690

BY KEVIN HANNAN

The Williamite sieges of Limerick brought about the most far-reaching changes in the lives of the citizens, and while we are fortunate in having a wealth of first-hand information on so momentous a period in our history, the amount of contradictions and imponderables it offers is bewildering. Yet, it is a fascinating exercise going through the diaries and other accounts of eye-witnesses to the historic events and the work of the historians who came after them, especially when making comparisons between accounts of the same event by observers from both camps, who were, on most occasions, antagonistic towards each other.

The journal of John Stevens has always been regarded an accurate account of events, though his Catholic religion and rank as captain in the Grand Prior's regiment might cause one to make allowances for the vulnerability of his 'impartiality'. He was a fine scholar and was the author of outstanding works on Spanish literature and the ecclesiastical antiquity of England. He has left us some interesting insights into the social life in Ireland during his time here. That part of his journal has been lost is nothing less than tragic. His account of Limerick's 1691 siege and surrender would have been of great interest. It was Stevens who noted so particularly the laying waste of the suburbs by the local people before the approach of the Williamites.

On the other side, Captain Robert Parker, an Irishman in the Royal Regiment of Foot, left us a narrative that can be regarded as reliable and impartial. His fairness and liberality is well illustrated in his reference to the slaughter of the wagoners by Sarsfield's troops at Ballyneety. He softens the horrific incident by suggesting that 'This was 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 much opposition made. However, we cannot suppose that so galled a man as Sarsfield certainly was, could be guilty of giving such orders; it is rather to be presumed that in such a juncture he could not restrain the natural barbarity of his men'. This was a fair and even magnanimous judgement by a

Williamite officer. The Jacobite accounts of the incident make no reference to the slaughter of the innocents. The *Jacobite Narrative* merely glosses over the incident as if it were a glorious and virtuous engagement: 'He surprised it in the night-time. He bursted the cannon, he burned the provisions and ammunition, destroying everything ... having killed about sixty of the soldiers and wagoners, with no loss to his own'.

It can be truly said that the Ballyneety incident 'made' Sarsfield; without the drama and intrepidity of the daring escapade he might be remembered today as just another officer of a defeated army. He might never have enjoyed the exultation and glory if, some days previously when William first stood before Limerick, Tyrconnell had not refused to allow Berwick to go ahead with his bold plan to steal out of the city with a large force and destroy all the arms dumps behind the enemy lines. In his memoirs, Berwick ruefully dwells on Tyrconnell's rebuttal of his plan:

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 very difficult, the knowledge I had of the country had already suggested to me by what means it might be effected; for besides 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 had become heavy and fearful, would not agree to my proposal; perhaps there might be some degree of jealousy at the bottom on his side; for it did not suit the dignity of the Viceroy to become a partisan, and that, besides, neither his age or bulk were accommodated to such an expedition, the whole conduct of it would have devolved on me.

On the face of it, Sarsfield was lucky to obtain Tyrconnell's permission to go chasing after the siege train, for the viceroy had no more love lost on him than he had on Berwick. Sarsfield was still luckier to get

back to the quiet pastures of Co. Clare after his successful raid.

Perhaps Berwick was not too far off the mark in suggesting that Tyrconnell might have been jealous of the possible success of his daring proposal. On the other hand, Berwick may have been jealous of Sarsfield's success in the Ballyneety incident, something that would never have happened if his own proposal had been allowed a few days before.

Some historians, of course, completely lost their sense of balance in their treatment of Sarsfield. For instance, Limerick's best known historian, Maurice Lenihan, promoted him to the supreme command in Limerick during the climax of the first siege. The accidental explosion of gunpowder at the Black Battery was '... no accident; it was all intended in the well-weighed and artistically planned calculations of Sarsfield'. Remarking on the possible consequence of the laying of mines by the Williamites, he goes on: '... counter-mining became absolutely necessary with Sarsfield, who, always wakeful and wary, was thoroughly acquainted with the strategic movements and proceedings of the enemy ... The soul of the defenders was Patrick Sarsfield; he cheered the fainthearted, infused spirit into and gave hope to all'.

All through this deadly engagement and for some days before, Sarsfield was nowhere near Limerick: like a good cavalry officer, he was in the fields of Co. Clare, somewhere between Annaghbeg and Sixmilebridge, taking a well earned rest after the Ballyneety escapade.

Another reliable account of the sieges is to be found in *A Jacobite Narrative of the War in Ireland*. This is believed to have been written by Nicholas Plunket, of Dunsoghly.

A further important Jacobite narrative with the strangest of titles, *The Destruction of Cyprus*, was written by a Jacobite officer, Colonel Charles O'Kelly. After the surrender of Limerick, he retired to his residence at Aughrane in Co. Galway and wrote his famous narrative - in Latin! In this work, he uses fictitious names of people and places but they are all easily identifiable. This unusual stratagem was probably employed to avoid the wrath of those who had no time for Jacobite sympathisers. He has been much quoted by historians of the Williamite war in Ireland, and his work is held in high regard.

Other valuable accounts of the war in



Women defending the Breach, by Aidan O'Sullivan.

Limerick were written by Dalrymple, Mullenau, Harris, Macaulay, Berwick and, of course, Dean Story. The latter came to Ireland in 1689 as chaplain to Sir Thomas Gowar's regiment, and was attached to this regiment until after the surrender of Limerick. He remained on in the city, and married Margaret Water, a Co. Limerick lady. His *A True and Impartial History of the Wars in Ireland* is a sound and reliable work that has remained a basic source document for historians, though the word 'impartial' might well have been left out of the title, for his views are sometimes coloured by his Protestant faith and his allegiance to his sovereign. He will be for ever remembered as the author of the account of the fighting women of Limerick.

Story was not a combatant, and we are told that he was 'at the camp', which may have been a temporary camp nearer the city, and thus he may have been afforded an opportunity of close observation of the conflict during the fighting at the breach. He started a long-running controversy when he referred to '... broken bottles from the very women, who boldly stood in the breach, and were nearer our men than their own'. It is significant that not one of the Jacobite combatants or observers mentions the presence of a woman anywhere near the scene of battle. In his second account of the fighting at the breach Story makes no mention of women.

Dalrymple latched on to Story's dramatic description and gave it further credence: '... the inhabitants of Limerick, eager to give that defeat to King William which those of Londonderry had given to King James, animated the garrison. Even the women, from the same emulation, filled the places which the soldiers had quitted'. The word 'quitted' sets us a poser: did the

soldiers quit because of injury, or even death, or did they run away in terror?

Another account of the Limerick women's involvement in the battle is given in a letter from Limerick to King Christian V of Denmark by Jean Payen de La Foulereuse, but this account is also based on hearsay: 'The very women, prone as they are to violent passions, have since then become furious. It was noticed that during the attack on the counterscarp they caused as much, indeed, more damage than the garrison by throwing huge stones on the assailants, of which a great number thus perished'. Unfortunately, he did not say who 'noticed' the fighting women. This statement must be seriously questioned. Surely, a few women could not possibly cause more damage than the garrison by throwing 'huge' stones with such power and velocity that 'a great number perished'.

It is significant that none of the other people who took part in the engagement and wrote about it afterwards noticed the presence of a woman during the conflict. Boisseleau and Stevens described the action in close detail, and the authenticity of the pictures they paint is established in their similarity, even in the most unimportant details.

The account of the fighting women reminds me of one of those rumours that often spread like wildfire throughout a city. It was Story who set the ball rolling, right up to nineteenth century historians like Fitzgerald and McGregor, who, in their 1827 *History of Limerick*, sympathise with the Williamites: 'Those brave men were assailed at the same time by showers of stones, broken bottles and other destructive missiles from a mixed multitude of men and women'. Leland, in his *History of Ireland* (1727), was content to rely on the

imaginative writings of previous writers, but varies the legend, adding some trimmings of his own: 'Even the women of Limerick mingled with the men, advanced in front, defied the besiegers and assaulted them with stones'. John Ferrar, in his history (1787), cites Leland's contribution to the controversy and advances no personal opinion.

Rev. James Dowd passed away without leaving us a hint as to where he learned of the women 'advancing into the vacant space between the two opposing armies, so that they were sometimes nearer the English regiments than their own countrymen, and when all the missiles failed, attacked them with their tongues'. The inventiveness and latitude of this description makes for some degree of fantasy.

However, the palm for the most vivid imagination must go to Maurice Lenihan, whose eager pen leaps into a merry dance of dramatic fiction:

Burning with insatiable revenge, the women, forgetting their nature, called aloud on husbands, sons and brothers to rally – and showed the example themselves ... the fight raged, the women, in front and centre urged on the soldiers by word and example ... Imagine the wan and wasted figures of those maids and matrons who, forgetful of the gentler influences which reign predominant in the female breast, lost for the moment the amenities of their nature, wild with the excitement of battle – and nerving their arms to hurl death on the heads of the most odious foemen that ever challenged an outraged people to combat:

Indeed Lenihan's whole description of the climax of the first siege is pure, unadulterated invention.

The survival of the belief in the fighting women has for long depended on the powerful and unremitting claims of writers, who, through a refinement of the art of varnishing a stubborn and litigious tale, have left us a heritage of which so many generations of our citizens have been so proud. The few words on which this contention has subsisted for the past 300 years have, in the meantime, stirred the imaginations of those writers who were so delighted with the rare opportunity of enlarging on the tale of a few women equipped with broken bottles and stones attacking a battle-hardened army. The legend has given the women of Limerick a special place in our folk-memory, even if they never handled a stone or a broken bottle 300 years ago. Human nature being what it is, to enlarge on the report of a really dramatic incident is one of the most common dispositions of most people. Even the historical sagacity that should manifest itself in reporting accurately on one's own experiences, the experiences of eye-witnesses and the writings of indirect commentators is often pushed into the background, as has been done with the nineteenth century accounts of the fighting during the attempted invasion of the city by the Williamites.