The Shannon in Military History

CAOIMHÍN Ó DANACHAIR

In considering the military potential of the River Shannon, or indeed of any river, we must regard it from two points of view: in the first place as an obstacle to be overcome by land forces across whose route it lay, and in the second place as a highway, as a means of communication and transport by those who had the knowledge and ability to produce and to use suitable ships, boats and other craft.

The Shannon has always been a formidable barrier to the passage of armies. The fifty miles of its estuary cannot be forded at any place, and must be crossed by boat. For almost the whole of the remaining hundred and fifty miles of its length, as far as the northern end of Lough Allen, it can be forded only at a few spots and only with some difficulty even in dry weather; in wet weather and flood conditions it is impassable without boats, and much of its course is unapproachable because of spreading floods and marshland, which latter features were much more formidable and extensive before the various drainage and reclamation enterprises of the 19th and 20th centuries. It was, therefore, a serious obstacle in the way of a moving army, and a comforting defence to those who lived beyond it.

The straits to which those endeavouring to cross might be brought, are well shown by the plight of Donal Cam Ó Súilleabháin Béara, flying with his people from the forces of Elizabeth. He had slipped through his enemies in Limerick and Tipperary, but was pushed against the Shannon at Portland, a little north of Portumna. Don Philip O'Sullivan tells of what happened, as follows (Historia Catholicæ Hibernæ Compendium, Lisbon 1621):

O'Sullivan was in the gravest danger since he could not cross the river, here wide and deep; the enemy had removed all skiffs and boats and had threatened to visit the severest penalties upon any boatman who should ferry him across. The strength of the soldiers was also failing for lack of food. Deep despair filled the hearts of all. At this critical juncture my father, Dermot O'Sullivan, declared that he would soon build a boat and also satisfy the soldiers' hunger.

Next day, which was the seventh of January, on the instructions of Dermot, they betook themselves to Brosnach wood, very dense and therefore a safe refuge, and surrounded themselves with a rampart constructed of tree trunks with a small ditch on the outer side. In two days they built two boats of osiers and timber; twelve horses were killed and their hides used to cover the boats, while their flesh was eaten by all except O'Sullivan, Dermot, and Dermot O'Haillachan. The boat which Dermot designed was built in the following way: Osiers fixed in the earth by their thicker ends and bent back to the centre towards one another, were bound in place with cords and these formed the hull of the vessel. To this stout wooden gunwales [solidus tabulis statuimina] and thwarts inside were added. The exterior was covered with the hides of eleven horses; oars and thole pins were also fitted. The bottom, because of the nature of the material and for the purpose of avoiding rocks and jagged points, was flat. The length was 25 feet, the width six and the height five except at the prow which was raised a little higher to throw off the waves.

The construction of the second boat was in the hands of O'Malley's horsemen. It was made of osiers without crosspieces [thwarts]; the bottom was shaped like a circular shield and the sides were much deeper than the bottom required. A single horse-hide was sufficient to cover the bottom.

53
These boats were carried by night on the soldiers’ backs to the Shannon at Port-a-tuilehain [now Portland] and in them O’Sullivan began secretly to transport his men across. Ten of O’Malley’s soldiers boarded their boat. But the vessel being both small and over-weighted by its useless superstructure, foundered with the men in midstream. Dermot’s boat, which would hold 30 men at a time, carried the others across in safety, the horses swimming behind at the ends of halters tied to the stern.

And to show how little had changed over the years, a traveller in 1738 recounted that:

I arrived at Clonfert on Wednesday last, but was forced to swim my horse over the Shannon, and had nothing to go over in but a little cot.*

And if to the hazards of the water-crossing were added the defence of the far bank, the passage of the river was dangerous indeed. Hence the elementary strategy of defending fords, and hence the theme of The Fight at the Ford, even in our earliest legendary history. Thus, in the Fenian romance Bruidhean Caorthain a succession of warriors defends a Shannon ford against the hosts of the Kings of the Eastern World and of Inis Tuile. That prehistoric confrontations were more than legendary is indicated by numerous finds of weapons at fords on the Shannon.

It is in the second aspect of the river — its use as a waterway — that we find the beginnings of the Shannon’s military history, of which, indeed, there is little or none before the coming of the Vikings, except for a few references in the Annals, such as that which tells of the wreck in a storm, in A.D. 752, of 29 out of a fleet of 30 vessels carrying the men of Diarmaid, Lord of Dealguma-Nuadhat, upon which their enemies, the Ui Bhainne, fell upon the weakened Dealguma and destroyed them.

The Vikings were quick to grasp the possibilities of the great river. In an early foray they seized and fortified Limerick, and made themselves masters of the estuary. Vikings from Limerick more than once carried their longships around the falls of Doonass and plundered along the whole length of the Shannon. About 835 came the attack by Thorgest, or Tuigéis, to make himself King of Ireland. He made a double attack from the Irish Sea, with sixty longships into the Liffey and sixty into the Boyne, and smaller attacks through Limerick, Waterford, Dundalk and Sligo. He set up his headquarters at or near Athlone — his wife qued the sea as a pagan priestess at Clonmacnoise — and with a fleet on the Shannon he successfully plundered all of the midlands and might have established a permanent Norse lordship over Ireland had he not been captured, after a reign of nearly ten years, by Maelshechlain, King of Meath, and put to death. A general uprising of the Irish followed, and Túigés’s Vikings retreated up the river to Carrick-on-Shannon, whence they fought their way to Sligo where their ships took them off.

Nor were the Irish loath to learn the lesson of river-borne forays from the Vikings.

In 902, the Annals of the Four Masters tells us that another army was led by Cormac and Flaitheartach against the Uí Neill of the South, and against the Conmaicnians; and they carried away the hostages of Connaught in their great fleets on the Shannon, and the islands of Loch Rì were plundered by them.

In 905 (A.F.M.):

A fleet by Domnall Ua Maelshechlainn and Rinneachtach Mac Conchubhair was on Loch Deiradhéire, so that they defeated the fleets of Munster and great numbers were killed by them.

* In a letter by the artist Blamires to Walter Harris, dated Clonfert Oct. 7th, 1738, as copied by Brash in Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland, Dublin 1875, p. 81.
In 920 (A.F.M.), the Vikings of Limerick sailed up the Shannon to plunder Clonmacnoise and all about Lough Ree. In 922 they returned and plundered the Lough Ree area again. In 928 and 930 they were back again. In 935 (A.F.M.) dog was eating dog for we learn that

Olaf, son of Godfrey, lord of the foreigners, came at Lúnasa from Dublin and carried away as prisoners Olaf Ceanncaireach and the foreigners who were with him from Loch Rí, after breaking their ships.

Doubtless, though the Annals omit mention of it, the Dublin Vikings helped themselves to the accumulated loot of their cousins who had been plundering the area since the previous Christmas.

In 949 (A.F.M.):

Conghalach son of Maelmithigh came with the great fleet of Leath Chúinn upon Loch Déirgdheir. They plundered the islands of the lake and took hostages of the Munstermen, after some opposition.

960 was a busy year on the Shannon. We are told that (A.F.M.):

Ua Maelmhusaidh, lord of Fearsa-Ceall, died. Cúmainn-Mic-Nois was plundered by the Osraighi. Inis-mór in Loch-Ríbh was taken by Marchadh Ua Ceallaigh from Ceallaigh, son of Ruarc, lord of Fearsa-Cáil (Teithbha), i.e. lord of the Sil-Rónain; and he was carried as a prisoner with his fleet into Ul-Maine. The fleet of the men of Munster upon the Sinainn; and they plundered the Termon of Ciaran, from the river westwards. The people of Domhnall, son of Dunchad, set out after them, and the men of Munster left their fleet to them; and a great number of them was slain, after leaving their ships behind.

In 963 (Annals of Inisfallen):

A slaughter of the Tuadmhuma on the Shannon, and they abandoned their vessels and were drowned.

In 988 (A. Inis.):

A fleet of 300 boats by Brian on Loch Rí, and they harried Meath and went to Uisneach. And twenty five boats of these went to Connaught and a great slaughter of their crews was inflicted there, including Dúnáin, King of Raithlenn, Niall Ua hErc, Dúngalach Ua Loingsigh and many others. And Muirgias son of Conchobhar, royal heir of Connaught, was slain by them.

In 993 (A.F.M.) a fleet of Brian Boru was on the Shannon against the people of Breifne.

In 1001 (A. Inis.):

A great obstruction against the men of Munster was placed on the Shannon by Maelsechnaill and by the King of Connaught and by all Leth Chúinn.

In 1016 Donnchadh son of Brian Boru went up the river with a fleet, capturing vessels and taking hostages.

In 1035 (A. Inis.) Clonfert was plundered by men from Breifni with fourteen galleys, but
Donachadh son of Brian Bora came upon them with the crew of one ship inflicting a
slaughter on them around the Suck and the Shannon.

In 1065 (A. Inis.) another raid, from Breifni, was defeated “on the Shannon and
on land” by Aedh O’Conchubhair, King of Connacht.

In 1082 (A.F.M.):

A great number of the people of West Meath, Dealgbhina, and Cuircne, was slain on Loch-
Ribh by Domhnall, son of Flann Ua Maelechlainn; and the battle in which they were
defeated was called the ‘Breach of the Boats’.

The cemetery of the Nuns of Cluain-mic-Nois was burned, with its stone church,
and with the eastern third of all the establishment. Domhnall, son of Conchobhar Ua
Briain, was killed.

1089 was another busy year on the River (A.F.M.):

The fleet of the men of Munster, under the conduct of Muircheartach Ua Briain, arrived
on the Sinainn, and upon Loch Ribh; and they plundered the churches of the lake, namely,
Inis-Clothrann, Inis-bó-fianc, Inis-Aingin, and Cluain-Emhain. But Aidhirceach and
Rechraith were blocked up, after their passage, by Ruaidhri Ua Conchobhair, King of
Connaught. They afterwards came down to Cluain, but they were repulsed back to Ath-
Luain, where Ua Maelechlainn, i.e. Domhnall, son of Flann, King of Teamhair, was in
readiness to attack them; and they left all their ships and vessels to O’Maelechlainn there,
and placed themselves under their protection, and they were afterwards conveyed home in
safety to Munster. Ruaidhri Ua Conchobhair and Domhnall Ua Maelechlainn went in
ships and boats, and plundered Munster as far as Cluain-caein-Moidinog, so that they
scarcely left a single head of cattle so far (as they penetrated), and besides they carried off
captives.

In 1125, A.F.M. tells us that Toirdhealbhach Mór Ó Conchubhair (Turloch
O’Connor) brought a fleet down the Shannon, portaged his ships over the falls of
Doonass, and sailed down the estuary to ravage the country around Foynes and
capture the ships of the local lords.

In 1127 (A. Inis.) Conchobar Ó Briain and Cormac McCarthy had a fleet on Lough
Derg.

In 1135 (A.F.M.) Murchadh Ó Maelisheachlainn had a fleet on the Shannon, and
took hostages.

Two years later, in 1137 (A.F.M.) Ó Connor was striking back:

A fleet was conveyed by Toirdhealbhach Ua Conchobhair upon the Sinainn and Loch
Ribh. This was, indeed, a brave expedition for him, against the fleet of the men of Breifne,
under Tighearnan Ua Ruairc, and against the fleet of the men of Meath, under Murchadh
Ua Maelechlainn, King of Teamhair, where there were two hundred vessels; and Toir-
dhealbhach had but twenty ships.

In 1155, Toirdhealbhach Mór had a fleet on the Shannon at Athlone, and in 1156
he brought his fleet to Lough Derg and took hostages from Toirdhealbhach Ó Briain
(A.F.M.). (Toirdhealbhach Mór died in that year and was buried with much pomp
at Clonmacnois.)

In 1161 (A.F.M.) Turloch’s son, Ruaidhrí Ó Conchubhair, had a fleet on the
Shannon, and took hostages of the Dál gCais.

In 1191 (A.F.M.) Cathal Croibheadarg O’Connor, sailing with his fleet on Lough

56
Ree, was overtaken by a storm. The fleet was scattered and Cathal’s own ship sank with the loss of all its company but six; among the survivors was Cathal himself, but his son Conor, and other nobles, were drowned.

In 1199 (A.F.M.) John de Courcy and Hugh de Lacy marched into Connacht as allies of Cathal Croibhearg against Cathal Carrach O’Connor, but were pushed back against Lough Ree and, when they took to their boats, they were pursued on the lake and defeated with great loss.

All this activity on the Shannon, however, soon came to an end. The spread of the Normans, and especially their building of fortresses and castles, reduced the power of the local Irish lords and the foraying fleets became obsolete. And the river became quiet, except for occasional raids which were more piratical than military, as when, in 1305:

Because the Irish of the surname of Ossergyles and their following and descendants, who dwell in the parts of Monterangaylly, Randon, Kerthen & Athlon, on each side of the water of the Schyen, make from day to day a great multitude of boats with which take divers preys in the King’s land in the parts of Randon and elsewhere upon the King’s faithful men being at peace, and it is feared that worse may happen by such malesfacers who continually remain in the parts of Athlon where the entrance is very narrow in tho King’s land at Connaught: It is agreed by the Justiciar and whole Council of the King in this land, that a galley be made of at least 32 oars which shall constantly remain at Randon, for the defence of the castles of Athlon and Randon if it shall be necessary. (Cal. Just. Rolls Ireland Edw. II, p. 84).

The importance of the Shannon as an obstacle to the movement of armies increased in proportion to the advancing complexity of military might.

To move a lightly armed raiding party across even a deep river is comparatively simple; there have been occasions where such a band is prepared even to swim across. But to move heavily armed troops, wagons, siege engines, heavy guns and all the impedimenta of an army, across a river needed either a shallow ford with a hard even floor or a bridge.

Turloch Mór O’Connor, the greatest leader in Ireland of his time — the first half of the 12th century; born about 1090, he died in 1156 — succeeded in establishing himself as Ard Ri against opposition from almost every other Irish chieftain. We have already noted his activity with ships on the river. He also is to be credited, it seems, with the first building of bridges across the Shannon. In 1120 (A.F.M.) he built bridges at Athlone and Áth Croich (now Shannon Harbour), as well as at Dún Leodha (Ballinasloe) on the Suck.

In 1129 (A.F.M.) he built a fort, apparently a stone castle, at Athlone. In 1133 Murchadh O Maoisheachlainn, King of Meath, and Tighearna O’Ruairc, destroyed both bridge and castle. In 1140 Turloch built two bridges (Clathárochait) at Áth Liag (Lanesboro) and Athlone, to campaign against Meath.

In 1153 (A.F.M.) the clathárochait of Athlone was destroyed and its fortress demolished by Maelseachlainn mac Murchaidh Ui Maelseachlainn, King of Meath. In the same year the bridge at Lanesboro was rebuilt by Turloch, and in 1155 he rebuilt the bridge at Athlone, to continue his subjugation of Meath.

In 1159 (A.F.M.) Ruaidhrí Ó Conchubhair began to make a bridge to attack Meath. Donnchadh Ó Maelseachlainn with the forces of Meath and Tethbha advanced to stop the bridge building, but was thrown back and the bridge was completed. It appears that a wooden bridge across the Shannon at Limerick was made by Dónal
Mór Ó Briain (who built St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick, and Holy Cross Abbey, Co. Tipperary, and died in 1194).

In 1170 (A.F.M.) the wooden bridge of Killaloe was destroyed by the Uí Máine.

The Anglo-Norman expansion was halted for a time by the Shannon, but they commanded two strong points, at Limerick where a stone bridge covered by a great castle was built by King John, and at Athlone where the same King’s Justiciar, Bishop John de Grey, built a bridge and a castle about 1210. These two strongholds, down through the centuries, were the gateways to Thomond and Connacht.

But, all along the river from its mouth to Lough Allen numerous castles and fortifications were erected, some by Government authority but most by private enterprise, at fords, at landing places and at the few bridges. Of these latter none was more notable than O’Brien’s Bridge, between Limerick and Killaloe. This was a fortified bridge held by a branch of the O’Brien’s of Thomond, and was for long a thorn in the Government’s side; in the Annals of Loch Cé (1510) it is described as “droichet crainn”.

In 1511 Lord Deputy Kildare stormed the bridge which he destroyed behind him, and continued to Limerick. In 1535 Lord Deputy Grey decided to destroy the bridge, which the O’Briens had rebuilt and in the following year, 1536, he set out to accomplish this, capturing the castles of Lough Gur and Carrigogunnel on the way. The latter castle was promised to Donough O’Brien for his help in taking the great bridge. An account of the action reads:

On Friday we marched with all the army and with the demiculverin and other ordnance towards the bridge, and by the conduct of the said Donogh and his friends we were brought to it in a secret and unknown way on this side of the water, where never English host or carts came before. On Saturday we came to the bridge. On this side was a strong castle, built all of hewn marble, and at the other end another castle, not of such force; both built in the water at some distance from the land. At this end they had broken four arches of the bridge betwixt the castle and the land. The gunners bent all the ordnance upon the great castle on this side, shooting at it all that day, but the ordnance did no hurt to it, for the wall was at least 12 or 13 foot thick, and both the castles were well warded with gunners, galloglasses, and horsemen, having made such fortifications of timber and hogsheads of earth as the like have not been seen in this land. They had one great piece of iron which shot bullets as great as a man’s head. They had also a ship piece, a Portingall piece, hagbushes, and handguns. The Deputy, perceiving that the ordnance did little hurt to the castle, and also that the shot was spent against the Sunday in the morning, caused each man of the army to make a faggot, of a fathom in length, to fill that part of the water betwixt the land and the castle, and devised certain ladders to be made. He appointed certain of his own retinue and a company of Master Saintloy’s to give the assault which they executed hardily, and they scaled the bridge. The others escaped at the other end by footmanship; and so they lost the bridge, the castles, their ordnance, and all else that was therein. The Deputy has caused the castles and bridge to be broken down to the ground. There were slain of your army two gunners, and divers, hurt; and at the loosing of the joints of the timber the bridge did fall, the Mayor of this city and about 30 persons standing upon the same; albeit their perished no more than a servant of Mr. Saintloy’s and one of this city. The others were saved by swimming and by a boat. (Cal. S. P. Ire.)

The loss of the bridge dismayed the O’Briens. A few years later, in 1540, Lord Thomond was complaining to the government that he was not allowed to rebuild the bridge.

Raids to and fro across the Shannon were commonplace. In 1512 Lord Deputy Kildare crossed at Athlone and plundered County Roscommon. In 1538 Lord Deputy Grey forded the river with an army at Banagher to overawe east Connacht and take submissions.
In 1565 Desmond sent his captain of Galloglas, Manus Óg Mac Sheehy, with 400 Galloglas, 200 Musketeers and some horse across the river in boats to raid Thomond, the booty included many cattle. In 1580 the Lord President of Connaught ferried 400 men across the Shannon at Leitrim, in "cotts".

The lower Shannon played a large part in the wars that broke the power of the FitzGeralds of Desmond. Pelham's campaign was supported by ships on the river, and in the taking of Carrigafcoyle Castle in 1580, the ships' guns joined in the bombardment. Twenty years later, in the final stages of the Elizabethan conquest, the Lord President of Munster, Carew, was supported by ships in his progress down the Shannon shore of Limerick and North Kerry and this made possible the surrender or capture of numerous castles and other strongholds, brought about by the threat or use of heavy guns transported by water. For instance, at Glin, in July, 1600:

The next morning, being the fifth of July, the Armie came unto the Castle of the Glynne, distant from Ballintare but five miles; the Rebels still marching within lesse than two English miles of us; but never offering any skirmish, where we found Captaine Gawen Harvey (according to his direction) at Anchor before the Castle, where hee attended our coming about fourteene days. The Armie was no sooner encamped, but order was presently taken for shipping the Cannon, brought by water in a Boat of the Earl of Thomonds from Limerick; and that night intrenched our felues, before the Castle, betwixt us, and the River: The day following, the Ordnance (which was one Demy Cannon, and one Sacre) was planted before the Castle, without any resistance, or the losse of any one man, by reason of a Parli that was purposely to that end entertained, during the which, the workes was performed.

[This latter, of course, was treachery—not that a minor matter of that kind worried Carew, who, however, was no mean artillerist, as the account (Pacata Hibernia, pp. 62 ff.) shows.]

The next day, when wee looked that the cannon should begin to play, the Cannouniere found the Peace to be cloied, all the art and skill which either the Smith, or himselfe could or did use, prevailed nothing. The President (who is a man that knows well to manage great Artillery) commanded that the peace upon her carryage (as she was) should be abased at the tayle, and elevated at the musle, as high as it might bee; then hee willed the Gunner to give her a full charge of powder, ronle a shott after it; and to give fire at the mouth, whereby the touch-hole was presently cleared, to the great rejoicing of the Armie, which of necessity in attempting the Castle, (without the favour of the Cannon) must have endured great losse. This particular I thought good not to omit, because it may bee an Instruction to othe rs, whonesoever the like accident should happen.

The castle was breacked and stormed and the garrison put to the Sword.

In September 1588 seven ships of the Spanish Armada put into the mouth of the Shannon and spent some days at anchor off Carrigaholt, Co. Clare, carrying out repairs. They tried to communicate with the shore, offering a cask of wine for a supply of fresh water, but the sovereign of Killrush, Master Nicholas Cahane, refused all help (Clare was very firmly in the hands of Elizabeth's followers) and drove off a feeble attempt at landing.

One of the ships, a large vessel from Ragusa, called Anunciada, was found to be beyond repair, and its commander, the Ragusan captain Ivecia, had her set on fire and scuttled. The ship's company, mainly of Portuguese infantry, were taken off by a transport named in the lists as la Barea de Dantzig and reached Spain. The charred timbers of the Anunciada with her guns and other heavy gear are, presumably,
still somewhere in the river off Carrigaholt.

In 1600, on the march to Kinsale, Red Hugh O'Donnell brought his army across the river near Portumna, and, as we have seen, O'Sullivan Beara crossed near the same point during his flight.

During the Confederate War of 1641-53 there was little action on the Shannon until close to the end when there appears to have been some feeble endeavour to hold the line of the river against the Commonwealth; whether by overall strategic design or by local circumstance does not appear. However, apart from the long siege of Limerick from the 3rd of June until the 27th of October there was no sustained action, the war being conducted by large bands or small armies moving here and there, coming into collision with each other or assaulting posts held by the enemy.

For instance: Richard Grace took Meelick, on the Shannon in 1650; the Commonwealth retook it in 1651. As a result of this latter action, a certain Colonel Axtell was suspended by Ireton (a stickler for the laws of war) because he had killed prisoners who had yielded on promise of quarter. Meelick was retaken by Colonel Fitzpatrick in August 1651, who entered the post while the sentries were asleep, but was retaken by the Commonwealth before the end of the fighting.

In the late spring of 1651 Coote and Reynolds brought two separate forces across the upper part of the river, joined forces, and then moved south through Connacht, reaching Athenry, Co. Galway, before the end of May.

Meanwhile Ireton brought the main army to Ballina, opposite Killala, held by a force under Castlehaven, and made preparations to force a crossing, meanwhile slipping 500 foot across with some slight opposition at O'Brien's Bridge, and 300 horse unopposed at Castleconnell. Whereon Castlehaven withdrew northwards and the main army under Ireton crossed into Clare. This was early in June when the river was low, and, in typical Puritan fashion, June the 18th was appointed "a day of thanksgiving for the Lord's mercies in bringing us over the Shannon".

Ireton sent Ludlow north to take Portumna, Ballinasloe and Gort, while Ireton himself laid siege to Limerick, approaching the city from the Clare side having landed cannon and mortars from Parliamentary ships which came up the estuary in support. Two bridges were made, one of boats at Athlunkard and one of timber at Castleconnell, so that the city was invested on all sides. None the less, it held out until the 27th of October.

Meanwhile Coote had secured the other major crossing by taking Athlone, thus winning easy access to Connacht, where the last resistance to the Commonwealth forces soon collapsed. During this war a number of castles, along the Shannon as elsewhere, were 'sighted' by the victorious Parliamentarians, that is to say, so wrecked — usually by gunpowder — that they could no longer be defended. A fine example of what gunpowder can do to a formidable masonry building can be seen at Clonmacnoise castle.

Burratty castle saw some action during this war. For most of the time it was held by Barnaby O'Brien, sixth Earl of Thomond, who, as Westropp put it, "succeeded in being Royalist, Rebel and Roundhead all at one and the same time, and finally contrived to end his days in the odour of loyalty to the King, in full possession of his honours and estates."

Archbishop Rinuccini paid a visit there during this period and has left an enthusiastic account of the castle and its gardens. In 1646 the Parliament took it, and Admiral Penn, father of William Penn (founder of Pennsylvania), defended it bravely
against a long siege by the Confederates, at last surrendering on terms and being permitted to withdraw his ship to Kinsale.

The Shannon assumed a new importance in the War of the Two Kings, 1689–91. After the Boyne, the Williamites easily overran nearly all of Leinster, and in the later part of 1690 almost the whole of West Munster fell easily into their hands. But the failure of Douglas to take Athlone and the repulse of King William himself at Limerick revealed the Shannon as a formidable defensive line, which, in fact, prolonged the war for over a year. This defense of the Shannon was a deliberately adopted strategic policy, in the planning of which the main architect seems to have been Patrick Sarsfield. The whole plan hung upon the two fortified towns, Athlone and Limerick, with a chain of castles and fortifications along the river and strong outposts such as Nenagh, Ballymore and Jamestown some distance in front of it.

In February 1690 Sarsfield wrote to Mountcashel, who was in France [Irish Sword, 1 (1949-53), 24–32]:

I visited in person all the crossing-places of the Shannon on the Connaught side, such as Portumna, Meelick, Banagher, Aghra [recte Racha, later Shannonbridge], Lanesborough and Jamestown. I gave the necessary orders to fortify most of them and I had entrenchments made in the rest. I left at each passage as many men as I found fit for service. Douglas advanced towards Jamestown, and Kirke with a party of those he commanded towards Lanesborough. I had made Athlone our headquarters, as it was the centre of all the other passages. I had there 2,000 men, infantry, horse and dragoons to send help where it would be required.

The first test had come at Athlone in July 1690. A few days after his victory at the Boyne, and with Dublin in his grasp, King William sent General Douglas with 10,000 men, but with inadequate artillery, to take Athlone while he himself moved with the main army towards Limerick. Douglas summoned Athlone, which was commanded by Colonel Richard Grace — whom we have already met defending the Shannon against the Parliamentarians forty years earlier. But Grace, in spite of his advanced age and failing health, had no thought of surrender. It is said that he was playing cards with friends when the call to surrender came from Douglas, and that he did not wait for paper but scribbled his defiance on a playing card, the six of hearts, ever since known as 'Grace's Card'. Douglas tested the defences by a week's cannonade, found them too strong and the defenders too resolute, and withdrew to join William in the advance on Limerick. William's intentions at Limerick were the complete investment of the city and the breaching of the walls by siege guns. In both of these he was foiled by Sarsfield's capture of the siege train, to accomplish which the raiding party of Jacobite cavalry, led by Sarsfield in person, secretly forded the Shannon near Killaloe, surprised the siege train which was coming from Waterford, and blew the lot up. The siege guns were damaged, and, more important, the great store of ammunition was destroyed and the stacks of sheet-metal pontoons — the so-called 'tin-boats' intended for bridging the Shannon so as to surround the city completely, were badly shattered. As we know, this loss caused the Williamites to assault the town prematurely through an inadequate breach, from which they were repulsed with heavy losses after desperate fighting, and thus forced to raise the siege and march away.

During the Autumn and Winter of 1690 and the spring of 1691 the Williamites constantly probed the defences of the Shannon but never succeeded in getting a firm hold on the west bank.
Indeed, Sarsfield could report in February 1691 (Irish Sword, loc. cit. supra):

At all events in spite of our enemies we have preserved our quarters on the other side of the Shannon in the county Westmeath, the King's county and around Nenagh, for not having succeeded in their attempt on the passages of the Shannon, they hoped at least to oblige all the troops we had on the other side of the river to cross to this side, in order to starve us, but we had secured all the passages so well that their plans have been without effect, and, on the contrary, we have extended our boundaries.

I shall remain myself with a strong party in the quarters we have on the other side of the Shannon until the enemy has returned to his winter quarters.

As we know, King William had returned to England in the Autumn of 1690 leaving the command in Ireland to General Jodert de Ginckell, who resolved to break the Shannon defences in the Summer of 1691 by taking the crossing at Athlone. Early in June 1691 he led his army first to assail and capture Ballymore, the main outpost of Athlone, and then to lay siege to the town itself. Colonel Nicholas FitzGerald, who had succeeded Grace as governor, resolved to defend both halves of the town. The Williamites arrived on the morning of the 9th of June and had their first siege battery ready by the evening of that day, and the cannonade began. By five next evening there was a practicable breach and the lightly held eastern half of the town was assaulted and taken, most of the defenders getting away over the bridge which had been prepared for demolition by the cutting of two arches and their replacement by a temporary roadway of planks which were easily thrown down.

The Williamites then settled down to bombard the western half across the river. This, incidentally, was the heaviest cannonade ever known in Ireland, from eight batteries of guns and one of mortars which shot in 12,000 cannon balls, 600 bombshells and many tons of large stones — these latter from the siege mortars. The cannonade lasted for ten days and reduced the greater part of the Connacht half of the town to rubble. Occasionally the firing was halted to allow attempts to force the river, during one of which occurred the most celebrated incident of the siege — the defence of the bridge by Sergeant Costure. A heavy assault on the 29th of June was repulsed, but on the evening of the 30th a strong party, headed by a force of Danish grenadiers, forced the river south of the bridge and entered the town, in a surprise attack. It is said that most of the Jacobite commanders, including d'Usson, the French general who had taken over the command of Athlone from Colonel Fitzgerald, were celebrating the Williamite repulse of the day before, at a party in St. Ruth's camp outside the town. This time the attack succeeded.

A few days later the Jacobite disaster at Aughrim left Limerick as their only hope of holding out until French help came.

The main Williamite army, after securing Galway, now marched for Limerick, crossing the Shannon at Banagher and arriving before Limerick on the 25th of August. The siege began with the usual digging of trenches and setting up of batteries. This time there was to be no mistake. The Williamites took Carrigunnel on one side and Castleconnell on the other, while eighteen of their ships came up the Shannon, bringing more heavy guns and supplies for the siege, and with their own ships' guns harrying the Jacobites on the Clare side. The city was heavily bombarded with shot and bombshells, causing great damage and many fires, so that a Williamite officer could say that the town, when it fell, looked like a heap of rubble.

Finally, the Williamites forced a crossing of the river and constructed a pontoon
bridge near the present Ahlunkard Bridge, thus cutting off the town from all outside contact. There followed a bloody fight at Thomond Bridge with heavy casualties, especially among the Jacobites, many of whom were cut off on the Clare side.

Some days later, on the 24th of September, after a siege of just one month, the defenders asked for a truce; this effectively ended the war.

The next century passed without much of military interest on the Shannon except for a general carelessness and neglect of the river's defences. In token of the carelessness we may cite the two serious explosions of gunpowder in the fortifications, the one at Limerick on the 12th of February, 1633, when 213 barrels of powder were set off by the collapse of a wall and the other at Athlone on the 27th of October, 1697, where 260 barrels of powder and 1,000 charge hand-grenades exploded during a storm, probably struck by lightning. In each of these explosions a large number of townspeople were killed and extensive damage was caused.

As an example of the neglect, Lt. Col. Charles Tarrant, an engineer, reported in 1793 that Athlone castle was in a ruinous condition — “There have been at various times considerable Breaches made in the walls (as I believe) to get stones for private building, which has left the castle in the most ruinous state!"

Meanwhile the intensification of the war on the Continent, and the shock caused by the French landing at Killala, in 1798, turned the thoughts of the military authorities on the possibility of large-scale French invasion. Humbert, with his small force, had seized a large part of Connacht and forced his way over the Shannon at Ballintra, having driven off a hundred troopers holding the Bridge. He and his United Irish allies were surrounded and overcome in County Longford, but the episode showed what might happen if an army had landed, and extensive fortifications were planned and carried out to secure the Shannon against a French invasion.

This was done in three ways. Firstly by the strengthening of the towns of Limerick and Athlone. Secondly by the building of forts and batteries to defend the estuary against ships. Thirdly, by the erection of forts to cover the crossings of the middle part of the river.

On the estuary, forts were built at Kilcredaun, Scattery and Kilkerrin point on the Clare side, at Carrig Island and Tarbert in North Kerry, and on Foynes in County Limerick. At Kilcredaun, Scattery, Kilkerrin and Carrig Island, the batteries were of the same kind, each armed with six 24-pounder guns and a bomb-proof barracks for a garrison of twenty gunners, with two small howitzers for close defence. A larger fortification at Tarbert had sixteen 24-pounds and six six-pounders, while that on Foynes Island was a battery of six 24-pounds with earthen ramparts.

At several places along the course of the river, earthen ramparts or ‘sod-batteries’ were built. But perhaps the most interesting features now remaining are the great stone fortifications at Banagher, Meelick, Shannon Bridge and Athlone. The works at Athlone, to the west of the present military barracks are now largely ruinous, but the great fort at Shannon Bridge, apart from the demolition of one gateway in roadwidening, is still largely intact. A stone battery and a martello tower still stand at Meelick. The defences at Banagher are described by Lewis, in his Topographical Dictionary, in 1836, thus:

Its military defences are very strong: on the King’s county or Banagher side is a teledu-forti mounting three pieces of heavy ordnance, and about a quarter of a mile lower down the river is a circular field work with six pieces of ordnance; on the Galway side to the right is a Martello tower, and on the left a small battery.

63
Extensive remains of these are still to be seen, and steps should be taken to preserve them and the others along the river, both in this area of the middle Shannon and down in the estuary. Recently, for instance, the large fort on Tarbert was demolished in building an E.S.B. generator. A similar fate awaits the others if something is not done to protect them. In their hey-day much of the communication between these strong points was by boat. This continued well into the 19th century, for we read in 1843:

Six Gunboats arrived in Athlone harbour on Saturday, guarded by six men and a second mate named Brown. The boats are to be stationed on the Shannon between here and Hare Island, for the purpose of preventing our garrison being surprised by water. Forty gunboats are, we understand, in preparation for the Shannon. (Ill. Lom. News. 29.7.1843).

The use of boats in connection with the fortifications reminds us that there were associated piers, jetties and boat shelters, most of which have now disappeared but of which some traces remain. These also should be recorded and preserved, or might even be restored to serve the increasing traffic of pleasure boats on the river today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to those sources quoted in the text, the following were consulted:

Cox, Liam: "Athlone in the Civil War, 1641-52", The Irish Sword, 10 (1970-71), 38-55.
Lenihan, Maurice: A History of Limerick, Dublin 1866.