Ending the Siege Mentality

The Old Limerick Journal
1690 Siege Edition

This Journal sets out to examine the 1690 siege of Limerick, the forces that brought it about, the military engagement, and the people who led and took part in them. While the siege itself cannot be considered in isolation from the European power-struggle between King Louis XIV of France and William of Orange, it had its own distinctive local characteristics, including the geographical location of the walled city on the Shannon river, the weather and the ferocity with which the Jacobites made their 'last-ditch' stand. There was also, of course, the tangled relationship between the monarchs involved: James II was both uncle and father-in-law to William, whose mother was James' sister, and who was married to Mary, James' daughter, the heir to the English throne until the birth, in 1688, of a male heir to James, William's hereditary princedom.

In December, 1688, James had been forced to leave his throne by the Dutch prince, William of Orange, who had been invited to become King of England in order to maintain the Protestant succession. With this move, the relations of Ireland to England and to the rest of Europe underwent a dramatic change. James, by fleeing to France, became a pawn in the powerful hands of Louis. William was Louis' main enemy and the greatest obstacle to French expansion in Europe, and his decision to accept the English crown was motivated by his need to avert what he feared was in the grand anti-Louis alliance of European powers. Louis, who could have relied on the neutrality of England, as long as James ruled there, used the defeated Stuart against William by sending him to Ireland, ostensibly to win back his throne, but also to stir up as much trouble as possible for the Dutch monarch. In making this move, neither Louis nor James cared much for the interests of the Irish, who were merely used to keep a thorn in William's flank. Over the next century, there were to be many other similar French attempts to exploit Ireland in this way. James had no sympathy whatsoever with the cause of Irish independence, and even if he had won the war in Ireland, the country's status in this regard would have remained unchanged. After his defeat at the battle of the Boyne, James fled Ireland never to return.

On the other hand, William did not want to be in Ireland at all. He regarded the Irish war as a troublesome sideshow which diverted his forces away from the main theatre of battle in Europe. His army at Limerick consisted of about 25,000 men, English, Scottish, Dutch, French Huguenots, Danish and German, with small numbers of Swiss, Polish and other nationalities in the Danish force. The garrison in the City was about 10,000, with, in addition, a cavalry force of about 3,500 based in Co. Clare. These were overwhelmingly Irish, having been deserted by the French, except for a small few. Some of the officers were English and Scottish Jacobites. William's army was largely, but not exclusively, Protestant — his Dutch Blue Guard was mainly Catholic, as were a number in Danish and English regiments.

By all the conventions of seventeenth century warfare, Limerick should not have been defended, and, after the breach had been made, should have surrendered. That was the view of the author of the Jacobite Narrative. That it was defended successfully by the relatively raw Irish troops says much for their courage and desperation. Sarsfield's role in blowing up the siege was crucial, leaving the Williamites, at the end, unable to continue because of shortage of wood and shot, but it is also probable that, had the order on the day of the assault been to storm the breach rather than to take and hold the counter-scarp, and had a competent professional soldier like the Duke of Württemberg been in command, the city would have been taken.

The siege was won and lost on 27 August, when the grenadier companies of the Williamite army, supported by some of the best Huguenot and Danish troops, exceeded orders and assaulted the breach near St. John's Gate. The fierce fighting continued for more than three hours; finishing; ammunition being spent, with pikes and musket-butts.

Estimates of casualties in the siege vary, but, ignoring the obvious propagandists, the best estimates are, on the Williamite side, about 3,100 dead and wounded, of which about 2,300 occurred on 27 August (Württemberg gives, for the 27th, Dames: 136 dead, 305 wounded; English, Dutch and French: dead and wounded, 1,883: total 2,234), and, on the Jacobite side, about 1,100 dead and wounded, of which about 500 were on the 27th (Boisseau gives, for the siege, 1,002 men and 97 officers, total 1,159).

In addition to the work of historians, the siege has been commemorated in song and story. Indeed, few military encounters have generated as much verse and ballads as the sieges and treaty of Limerick of 1690-91. For 300 years, from Diarmaid Ó Brudair to Bryan MacMahon, poets and ballad-singers have kept the memory of the events alive, and in the next century further contributions in verse will, undoubtedly, add to the collection. Ó Brudair, who lived most of his life in Co. Limerick, and who, in 1687, had prematurely celebrated the triumph of James and the Jacobites, was not opposed to the social system, with its rigid class distinctions, but to the invasions of foreigners, with their aristocratic, un-Irish ways. He lavished praise on Sarsfield, and eulogised of his poetic licence in leading the blowing up of the siege train:

He left not a bomb or a copper pantheon
In Bally on the hill that he did not disparce
Like the smoke of a candle up into the sky.

The vast amount of patriotic verse written about the siege, particularly by the Nation and the Young Ireland poets, has left an indelible but totally one-sided impression of the event. (A representative selection of the verse of the sieges and treaty of Limerick will be published, with a critical introduction, in the next year.)

Despite the fact that General Patrick Sarsfield spent most of the siege outside the city, he was, undoubtedly, the hero of the day. With his owing to Ballyneety, he galloped his way out of the mists into Irish folk-memory. The foremost historian of the period, J.G. Simms, described Sarsfield as 'the Rommel of the Jacobite war'. While this is something of an exaggeration, there is little doubt that Sarsfield's daring and inflicted great damage on the Williamites and was one of the principal factors in the Jacobite victory of the siege.

In order to present as complete a picture as possible of the siege, the editors have decided to publish all readily available eye-witness accounts. The presentation of the material in this way will give readers a chronological overview of the event from its beginning on 9 August to its end on 30 August.

The sieges of Limerick in 1690 and of Derry in 1689 were important milestones in Irish history, but their defensive legacy bred and nurtured a siege mentality that has all too often prevailed in Irish life, north and south. We must not remain prisoners of our history. We hope that the publication of this Journal will be a contribution to the breaking down of barriers and the ending of the siege mentality on this Island.