n approximately 1640, the poet Cúchannacht O Dálaigh wrote, in his Duan Leannbhailocht Sir Seán Mhic Ghearailt (Childhood Poem for Sir John Fitzgerald):

Brat caomhna isua Luinnigh, leabh bhua chearn dá chail bhuidheán, cuir bhuath Bhaille na Triaghe, fear faic cuidin Mháighne.

Guardian mantle of Limerick city-child who'll be head of her warriors, victorious blaze of Ballynatra (1) harbour-sentry of sloe Mague.

Twenty-six years later (1666), in a long elegy written on the father of the above Sir John (Edmund), the then official poet to the family, Dáibhí O Bruadair, addresses the new heir, then living in Nantes, France, where many young well-to-do Irishmen went for their education:

Do ghrásaíth faraí an toirgín trócairigh ní bhallfíthuille is ní thuille le tóirneachalb, ní thráigíthuille inneas, ní mhuirfíd beochtaí ar ndáil in ionaid go bhfille dár bhfíngín.

By the perfect grace of the merciful God war will not drawn nor thunder fell disease not waste nor keen swords kill the man destined to return to us and help.

Sir John Fitzgerald did return to Ireland and, in 1680, was arrested, with other Irish landowners, and sent to London in connection with the 'Popish Plot'. Earlier, in 1673, the presence of France, always in the winter of 1676-7 after the capitulation of Limerick, returned within a fortnight after Limerick was surrendered, the transferred sixty thousand French soldiers to take up service in France. Of these, 8,000 sailed from Limerick, while the remainder took ship at Cork. The last division of the Irish army quitted Limerick on the first of November. Sir John Fitzgerald, during the Jacobite war, was lieutenant-colonel of Mountcassel’s regiment of infantry and, later, colonel of a foot regiment bearing his name and largely composed of his own retainers. After the capitulation of Limerick and the signing of the Treaty in October, 1691, the transfer of Irish soldiers to the continent began. Sir John agreed with this policy and was disappointed because his followers did not share his views. He himself did not believe that the English would keep faith and attached no value to the Treaty. He sent the following to O Bruadair in October, 1691:

From the land I lived in and my ancestors before me not even one or two of that seed follow me:
I make a prophesy for them that will come true:
that the Saxons will soon slaughter them again.

After the surrender of Limerick, about 19,000 Irish soldiers left Ireland to take up service in France. Of these, 8,000 sailed from Limerick, while the remainder took ship at Cork. The last division of the Irish army quitted Limerick on the first of November. In a fortnight after Limerick was surrendered, the expected French fleet, under Count de Château-Renaud, arrived about the twentieth of October at Scattery in the river of Limerick, being eighteen men of war, four fire-ships, and twenty ships of burden, bringing vehicles, ammunition, money and all other necessaries of war...

The French fleet, being informed of the surrender of Limerick, returned within a few-days to France, with deep resentment at their unexpected disappointment. There went aboard of them a part of the Irish soldiers. ('A Light to the Blind, pp 190, 191). From (the
Springfield Castle, once the home of the Fitzgerald family.

dedication to the present poem we learn that Sir John Fitzgerald was one of those who went to France at this time, and that Carrigafoyle, in the county of Kerry, at the mouth of the Shannon, was the port of embarkation. 

O Bruadair’s reply to Sir John shows that the poet had as little faith in the Irish themselves as he had in the English:

Battle-tree for whom I showed great zeal and true friendship from a heart without deceit—though you thought awhile I was indifferent to your fate I am sad to see your back turned on board a ship.

Certain’s my parting from you since the end of the battle by which I though you would be ruling beside me in this land. Your anger was dearer to me than the smooth faces of the gang I must be meek before, for awhile.

The flock that did not follow you under soil and guided your followers to disaster— the excesses they practised in times gone by are still remembered in the people’s minds.

In the defilement that spread this over the land—wounding I won’t call it, but a sacrifice of coasts: the promise of forgiveness you got for them was why they didn’t bother to cheer you on the road.

An insulting bargain for this gang who robbed the English lawlessly—

An insulting bargain for the gang who robbed the English lawlessly—

If John Bull signs the Article not ratified yet and sees no flaw there, he is blind to their history.

Since I am deprived of silver and store of gold and the energy to campaign sword in hand I beg of the charity of the just Creator that you may reach your land alive and unwounded.

Since the men of Ireland are sentenced to bear the heaviest yoke that grew in the woods a pity they go not from shore over the sea with you away from the torture of the heavy harrow.

Both O Bruadair and Sir John were right. The Irish who remained became a mob; the Articles of the Treaty were not ratified; English oppression began again.

The poet describes the aftermath in a long poem, An Longbhristeachadh (The Shipwreck). And, contrary to O Bruadair’s wishes, his patron was not to return to Ireland. His corps kept its old name and fought with the French in the Flanders campaign, and at the battle of Oudenarde, 1693, where the Duc d’Luxembourg defeated William III, and Fitzgerald received a special mark of honour. He fought in the Italian campaign until 1696, and along the Rhine in 1697. Some authorities state that he was fatally wounded at Oudenarde in 1798, but may have confused him with a Brigadier Nicholas Fitzgerald, who was fatally wounded at that battle. One ms.
states that a retired officer of the same name (Sir John Fitzgerald) was admitted to the Hotel des Invalides in 1703, and that in the same year, the colonelcy of the regiment was given to another Fitzgerald. I am indebted to Richard Hayes' Biographical Dictionary of Irishmen in France for the above information and for the following, which shows that Sir John Fitzgerald was as interested in Gaelic culture as his poet was:

Sir John Fitzgerald's name came into some prominence in connection with the somewhat mysterious disappearance of the 'Book of Lecan' from Trinity College, Dublin, during the Jacobite war in Ireland. For some years after the termination of this war the valuable work was in the possession of various prominent expatriated Irishmen in France, and claims to its ownership led to much acrimony among them till its deposit in the Irish college at Paris. Sir John Fitzgerald seems to have been its first possessor and he was said to have sold it to James Terry the Jacobite genealogist. It has always been difficult to understand how the valuable codex came into the hands of the former. The following entry in the Register of Trinity College would seem, however, to throw a suggestive sidelight on the question: 'September 6th, 1689. The college was seized on for a garrison by the King's (James) order, and Sir John Fitzgerald took possession of it.'

The book is now in the Royal Irish Academy.

NOTES
1. In his edition of O Bruadair, Father John MacErlean has the following note: 'Baile na Tráighe', literally Strandtown, not identified. Possibly it may be merely a descriptive epithet of some place situated on the banks of the Shannon estuary. There is a Ballynatra in the parish of Templenoe, barony of Ballymore, Co.Cork, and another in the parish of Kilcrohane, barony of Carbery West, in the same county; but it does not appear that Sir John Fitzgerald had any connexion with either of them! (Poems of David O Bruadair, Irish Text Society, Vol I, 1910, p. 184, XIII).

However, the village of Strand, Co. Limerick, is only a few miles from the seat of the Fitzgeralds (Gort a Tiobraid - Springfield). In Irish, An Tra, not being on the sea, was humorously called An Tra gan Taide, 'The Tidless Strand'.


3. A narrative of the Irish Popish Plot for the betraying of that Kingdom into the hands of the French, massacring all English Protestants there, and after subversion of the Government and the Protestant religion, as the same was successively carried on from the year 1662. David Fitzgerald, Esq., London, 1680.


7. Irish text in MacErlean, Vol. I.


A Victorian artist's impression of James II's Irish troops leaving Limerick to start their exile.