



THE FRENCH NAVY AT THE TIME OF THE WILLIAMITE WAR

BY JOHN DE COURCY IRELAND

During four comparatively short historical periods, the navy of France was superior to any other in the world. The first of these periods was the 1680s and the second was a hundred years later when, as George Washington acknowledged, the French navy played a decisive part in the liberation of Britain's thirteen rebellious North American colonies calling themselves the United States of America. (There were many Irishmen serving in the French navy in that period). The third was in the late 1850s and into the 1860s. The French had just completed the world's first armour-clad steam-powered battleship, the *Gloire*, which theoretically could have sunk all the 'wooden walls' of any adversary, without damage to herself, in a few hours. They had brilliant naval architects and a system of training to which British admirals paid tribute, including Admiral Mundy, who cooperated with the French during the international crisis set off by the movement to unite Italy.

The disaster of the Franco-Prussian war led to the comparative run-down of the navy, when the need was felt to upgrade the army to prevent a repetition of the events of 1870-1; and, anyway, in the heyday of its industrial and financial supremacy, Britain was quickly able to catch up with and surpass France in the field of naval construction.

Finally, in the 1930s, fear of aggression from fascist Italy and Germany led France to build up a navy constructed with imaginative and far-sighted ideas, and it acted with great efficiency to remain undefeated until the armistice with Nazi Germany was signed, following the army's defeat. The fleet was split, part wishing to continue the struggle against the invader, part considering it impossible to disobey the cease-fire orders received from the French admiralty, then at Vichy. The split was aggravated by Churchill's intemperate orders that led to part of the British Mediterranean fleet attacking the large French squadron anchored at Mers el-Kébir in Algeria. Many of the remaining French warships were sabotaged by their own crews when the Nazis occupied Toulon harbour; others



Louvois, Louis XIV's War Minister.

operated very effectively under the Resistance leader, Charles de Gaulle.

Today, the French navy is probably the best-balanced and best trained of the world's medium-sized navies, that is, those next in size to those of the super-powers. Even at the present time, and certainly in the 1860s and the 1930s, the names of seamen of Irish descent appear in the crew-lists of French naval vessels.

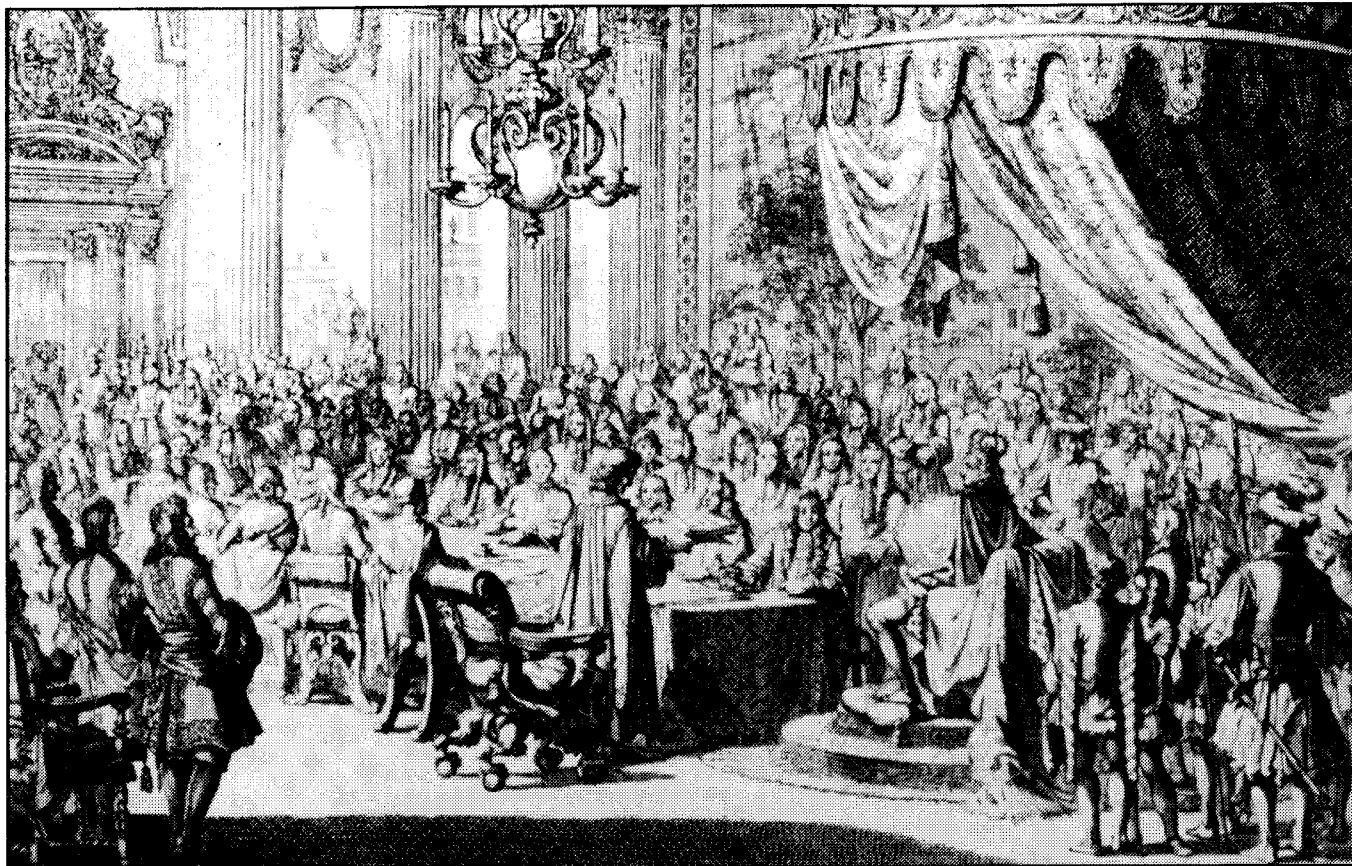
It is evident from this brief sketch of past events that a navy cannot be researched as a thing in itself, abstracted from the society which produced it. Louis XIV's great navy of the 1680s was the product of an absolute monarchy that had evolved in France as the only apparently available means of uniting a rich country divided by the existence within it of many separate cultures and constantly torn and impoverished by feuds and civil wars, stirred up by a powerful and undisciplined aristocratic class. Once the absolute monarchy was well established by events in the reigns of Henri IV (1589-1610) and Louis XIII (1610-1643) and in the early years of Louis XIV, the natural wealth, favourable geographic situation and size of France, then internally at peace, placed huge resources at the disposal of the monarchy.



Jean Baptiste Colbert.

So long as Louis XIV, who was fairly frivolous in his younger days, had wise advisers to whom he listened, like Cardinal Mazarin, his great finance minister, Colbert, and the great engineer, Vauban, France prospered and avoided catastrophe. But, with the passage of time, Louis began to enjoy power more than frivolities, and came under the influence of his war minister, Louvois, who urged him to adopt an aggressive foreign policy for the aggrandisement of France and his own glory, and of the former governess of a batch of his illegitimate children, Madame de Maintenon, whom he married secretly in 1684, and to whom historians attribute a growing inclination in the king to indulge in arbitrary and repressive policies at home.

Louis, whose aunt was the mother of James II, the originator (in so far as one man can be blamed for having done such a thing) of the Williamite wars, looked upon himself, by 1688, as a better champion of the cause of Catholicism than the Pope, (who, as is well known, was allied with Louis's enemies in 1690). He also looked upon himself as the champion of absolute monarchy – the concept of the Divine Right of Kings to rule according to the dictates of their own consciences, without obstruction by



Revoking the Edict of Nantes, 1685 – the decisive act against the French Huguenots which prompted Schomberg's change of sides.

parliaments or other representative bodies. These were the ideological reasons why he was ready to assist his Catholic cousin, James, when he fled from London in 1688, before the challenge of a goodly number of his subjects determined to replace him by his son-in-law, William of Orange, who was not only a Protestant, but ruler of the religiously tolerant and somewhat democratic Dutch.

But Louis had other reasons for welcoming an excuse to intervene militarily in European affairs. He had by then large ambitions, including the ultimate acquisition of the huge Spanish overseas empires (which led him into the last and most disastrous of his foreign wars, only five years after the end of the great war of which our 'Williamite War' was only a part). His ambitions would, he knew, be contested by England under a ruler other than James, and by the Dutch. Here was an opportunity to forestall any attempt on their part to interfere with his grandiose plans, and to keep them divided. And now that there was an opportunity for military intervention in Europe, he had at his disposal a magnificent army and also, he had been assured, a formidable navy, though he personally never understood, and indeed tended to despise maritime matters, and was positively frightened of the sea.

The origin of the French royal navy was quite recent. Many parts of France

had maritime traditions as good as any in the world, and French mariners had contributed handsomely to discovery in North America and the opening up of the Newfoundland fisheries, which greatly influenced the economic and social life of Renaissance Europe. But the French kings, when in need of ships and seamen for their numerous external and internal wars, had always relied on private enterprise and hired merchant vessels (always armed in those days against foreign licensed privateers and pirates of their own or any other country) to fight their enemies by sea and transport their armies for them.

It was Louis XIII's brilliant and ruthless minister, the Cardinal Richelieu (the most peaceful battleship ever built by the French was called the *Richelieu* in his honour; she escaped, uncompleted, to West Africa in 1940 and took part later in the final defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific), who was the major architect of the French absolute monarchy and one of the chief architects of the unity in diversity of the French nation. He founded a French royal navy and chose the hitherto insignificant Breton townlet of Brest as its Atlantic base.

The start made by Richelieu was followed up in the 1660s and 1670s by Colbert, whose major ambition was to turn France into a great manufacturing and trading nation, following the example of the Netherlands, as well as one rich by reason of its agriculture and

fisheries. He founded an East India Company to compete with those that had brought wealth to the Netherlands and England, erected a new port at Lorient in Brittany and developed a new naval base at Rochefort on the Charente, where scores of Irish refugees were later to train as officers for the French navy. He encouraged Dutch shipbuilders to come and work in France, and interested himself in the fishing industry and in French settlements overseas. To protect the overseas trade which he was so busy fostering, he considered that a strong navy was essential, and went to great lengths to develop in France the most up-to-date and imaginative naval architecture. He understood the importance of astronomy for the improvement of navigational techniques and established in France, a full century before England founded one, a state hydrographic service. Above all, he saw the need for a force of easily available and reasonably contented seafarers to man his ever-growing navy. He set up, therefore, the system called the Maritime Inscription – we borrowed his term for our embryo Naval Reserve during the 1939-'45 Emergency. This laid an obligation on all families living in coastal areas with one or more able-bodied young men to provide these – there were exemptions for only sons of widows etc. – to serve in the king's navy, with guarantee of a pension (not a big one, indeed, but a great step forward for the era). This

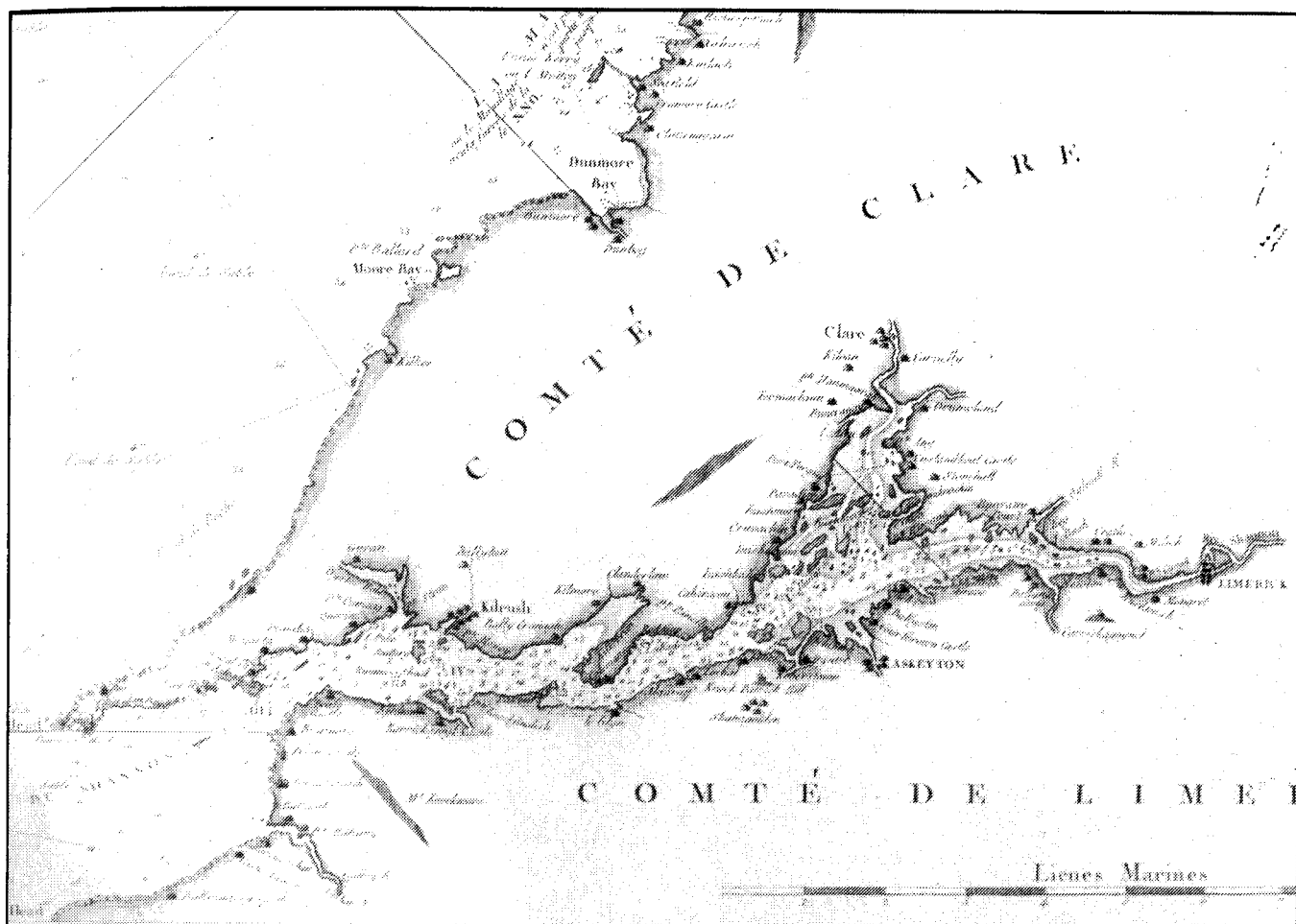


Chart of the Shannon Estuary, carried out by the French Ministry of the Marine, 1690.

system was infinitely preferable to the brutal and haphazard 'press gangs' which forcibly recruited all and sundry into the British royal navy, off merchant ships, British and foreign, in the streets, in pubs, and from farms well inland.

Meanwhile, a number of remarkable naval leaders were given opportunities to show their talents, both in Louis's earlier war with the Dutch in the 1670s, and in various disputes in the Mediterranean with the Genoese and the corsair cities of North Africa. Among these were Abraham Duquesne, who had the distinction of defeating probably the greatest admiral in all history, the Gaelic-speaking Dutch de Ruyter, in the Mediterranean, in 1676, and Jean Bart, a commoner who was ennobled. (An inherent weakness in the French naval structure, which showed itself even in the War of American Independence, and destroyed the navy's cohesion and efficiency when the Revolution of 1789 came, was the reservation for officers from the aristocracy of all high posts).

Colbert died in 1683, but his son, the Marquis de Seignelay, took his place so far as naval affairs were concerned until his death in November, 1690. In 1685, an event occurred which threatened to undo all the remarkable achievements of Colbert and his very capable son in endowing Louis XIV with the world's

finest navy. In that year, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, whereby in 1598 his grandfather, Henri IV, had granted rights, amounting in certain areas to full toleration, to the Huguenots, the French minority Protestant population: it happened that very many, not only of France's best seamen, but also her best shipwrights and sailmakers and her most competent shipowners were Huguenots.

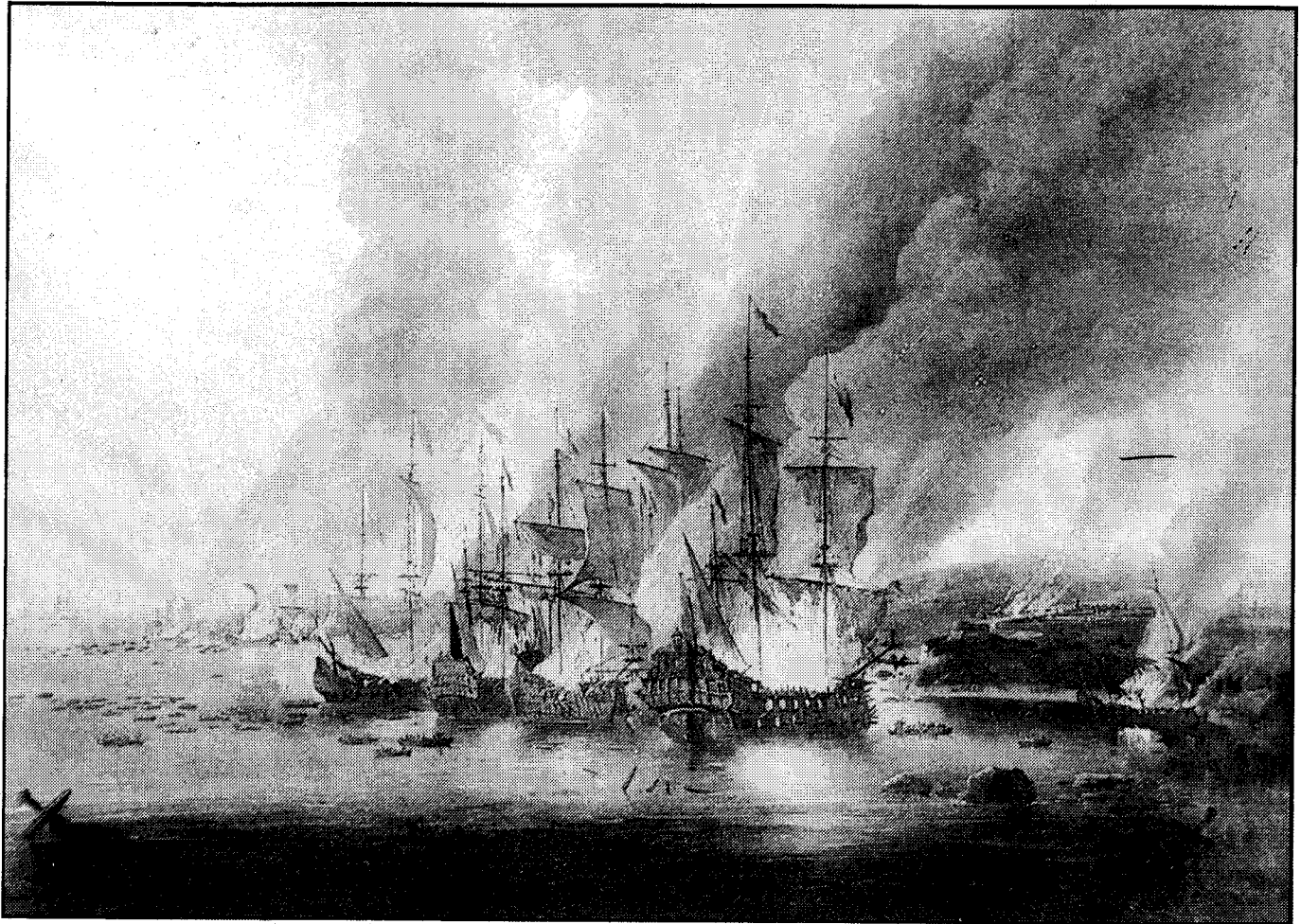
About 10,000 Huguenot refugees settled in Ireland, and their great contribution to keeping active a fragile Irish economy at a critical moment in our history has been examined in depth in *The Huguenots in Ireland: Anatomy of an Emigration* (Coldicott, Gough and Pittion, [eds.], Glendale Press, Dun Laoghaire, 1987). The maritime chapter in that volume shows what remarkable talent in seamanship, shipbuilding, shipowning, seafishing and, above all, sailmaking this country gained and France lost as the result of Louis's action. Before the Huguenot persecution, England imported almost all its sailcloth from France. A few years later, England's sailcloth was being made in factories established by Huguenots in Waterford and particularly in Cork and which, in due course, found a market also in France. Some refugees from the French ropeworks that had flourished under Colbert, especially at Rochefort, found their way to Ireland,

and set up ropeworks here.

How disastrous this forced exodus of talent soon became for the French navy is illustrated in the following quotation (my translation) from the history of the French navy by Vice-Admiral Joubert, of the French Naval Academy, published by Editions Alsatia, Paris, in 1946:

In 1685, he (Louis) committed a more serious fault. Instigated by the Le Tellier - Louvois (family), supported by Mme. de Maintenon, Louis XIV, who since 1682, had been trying by all possible means to convert the Calvinists, revoked the Edict of Nantes. There was immediately an enormous exodus which no amount of repression could stop ... this emigration revealed to the foreigner not only our industrial but also our military secrets, which were used against us. Nine thousand sailors, six hundred officers, ten thousand soldiers were to figure among the best in the armies and fleets which were going to be opposing us.

The historian Jean de la Varendé, in his biography of Tourville, the great admiral who devastatingly defeated an Anglo-Dutch fleet off the Sussex coast in July, 1690 (*Le Marechal de Tourville*), wrote (p. 193): 'Alas, it was ... the Protestant emigration that had carried away the best seamen; at La



The battle of La Hogue, 23 May, 1692, by Adriaen van Diest. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Rochelle, for instance, more than half'.

León Guérin, in a standard 19th century history of the great admirals of France (*Les Marins Illustres de la France*, published by Morizot, Paris) wrote (pp. 231-2): 'Unhappily the (revocation of the Edict), by driving the French Protestants into exile, bitterly distressed the illustrious old man' (Admiral Duquesne, who, in fact, was the sole Protestant to whom the terms of the revocation were not to apply, so great were his services seen to have been). Duquesne did not long survive, in fact, and his remains were refused a proper burial. His son, Henri, himself a prominent naval officer, who fled to Geneva and established for that city on its lake a flotilla of up-to-date warships in case Louis's aggressive ambitions led to an invasion, set up on the Franco-Genevan border a monument, the inscription on which read in part (my translation):

This tomb awaits the remains of Duquesne. His name is known on all seas. Passer-by, if you ask why the Dutch have built a superb monument for the conquered de Ruyter, and why the French have refused burial for the conqueror of de Ruyter, the respect and the fear owed to a king whose power extends far and wide prevents me from answering.

In the last year of the Williamite war, Tourville wrote a letter full of bitterness to the son of Seignelay's successor as Minister of Marine, suggesting that the king might as well leave the defence of the coasts of France to the bishops and clergy, who were so keen to see law and order maintained that when an enemy squadron had approached La Rochelle a short time before, they gave orders to arrest thirty-six newly converted ex-Protestants, who were among the most reliable people in the city, which would have caused riots if he had not stopped it; the commissioner who was told to make the arrests having gone into hiding in fear for his life. (Quoted by La Varende, op. cit., pp. 262-3).

These were circumstances which made it impossible for Tourville, after his great victory of July, 1690, to remain at sea, because of a shortage of reserve seamen. He put into port with, as was the fate of every fleet of that epoch, over 8000 of the crews of his ships (a good third of the total) seriously sick. (Poor diet – though Dutch historians say that the French ships' diet was rather better than that on board Dutch or British ships of the time – and unhygienic conditions had devastating consequences for the crews of ships until well into the 19th century).

In spite, however, of the catastrophic effect on the French navy of the loss of Huguenot seamen and shore personnel (partly made up, ironically enough, in the next two generations by the arrival of Catholic maritime exiles in France from Ireland), the excellence of the Colbertian French navy was the single most important factor in making the Williamite War in Ireland possible. (Deplorably, perhaps, especially if you accept James Connolly's assertion that it made little enough difference to the ordinary Irishman or woman who won; and it is probably safe to conjecture that without the recent memory of French troops on Irish soil, the ascendancy landlords here might have been a little less enthusiastic about proposing new Penal Laws).

Admiral Château-Renault easily evaded the tentative English blockades of the south coast of Ireland, not once, but twice, in the first half of 1689. The first time, in March, he brought James and a few followers successfully back to Ireland, landing him at Kinsale. But for this achievement it seems likely that, when Derry had refused to surrender, the Jacobite cause in Ireland could have begun to wither. Then, in May, the same admiral sailed up Bantry Bay and landed vitally important supplies and troops.



You need to go to Bantry and proceed gently from there, past Bere Island, into open sea, keeping a sharp eye on all the awkward coastal features and on the direction of wind and tide, really to appreciate the qualities of Château-Renault and his men and ships as shown in what followed. (A group of Breton maritime historians and students and staff of Saor Ollscoil na hEireann did precisely this a couple of years ago: it was mind-boggling).

Admiral Herbert's English squadron, which ought to have intercepted the French, both in March and again in May, made its appearance at the entrance to Bantry Bay, just as the disembarkation there was finished, and while most of the French ships were still at anchor, (a curiously similar situation arose in Chesapeake Bay in 1781, when English Admiral Graves's squadron suddenly appeared off the Virginia Capes, while de Grasse was disembarking forces due to move up to Yorktown, De Grasse successfully emulated what Château-Renault did in 1689).

Château-Renault had his frigates on guard off Bere Island, and when they signalled Herbert's arrival, Château-Renault, with masterly efficiency, got his squadron into line of battle and under sail, and proceeded down the bay to attack the English squadron. The comparative narrowness of the channel meant that the handling of each ship had to be exemplary, particularly since any serious error risked seeing a disorganised French squadron running a serious risk of being bottled up in a very awkward situation.

The two squadrons were numerically roughly equal – the French records give numerical superiority to the British. They, on the contrary, tend to give the French a six-ship superiority. What happened was that the French forced Herbert out of the bay and, in a six-hour battle, drove him twenty miles out to sea, seriously damaging two of his ships. English figures admit 96 killed and 250 wounded on their side against 40 dead and 93 wounded in the French squadron, whose gunnery had proved distinctly better than their adversaries. Château-Renault, who played a notable part in Tourville's great victory the next year, was criticised at home for not winning a decisive victory. It is probable that the conditions of wind and sea after the fleets emerged from Bantry Bay was not conducive to continuing close range action. The battle of Bantry Bay was the biggest naval battle ever fought in Irish waters.

Château-Renault sailed safely back to Brest, capturing a Dutch convoy on the way. Herbert eventually reached base at Portsmouth. William III was there to meet him, and pulled off a very intelligent coup. He made his defeated admiral Earl of Torrington, and promoted various officers. This was a



*Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell (1650-1707) by Michael Dahl.
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.*

piece of what we would today call good PR, as it gave the public the impression that a victory had been won, while the officers of the fleet, many of whom, it must be remembered, had served under James (a much more effective admiral than king), were flattered, and had their faltering morale restored.

James wanted Château-Renault to sail up the Irish Sea and operate between Ulster and Scotland, and indeed to convey an army to Scotland and siege guns to Ulster. Seignelay quite reasonably thought it would be unsafe to send a squadron to carry out unspecified duties far from its own base and without any local base to depend on. (Belfast was still unimportant and Carrickfergus, the most used Ulster port, quite unsuitable for a battle fleet). Moreover, Château-Renault's squadron was suffering, as Tourville's fleet was to the next year, from shortage of manpower due to conditions aboard, as already explained,

and to the disappearance of the Huguenot seafaring population. Three frigates, however, were sent to Carrickfergus, and conveyed over to Scotland 300 Irish dragoons who helped the Scottish Jacobite leader to win his celebrated victory of Killiecrankie.

Fleets did not operate at sea in winter in those days, and, for 1690, both navies thought in terms of a decisive encounter in the Channel, upon which future events should depend. The encounter took place off Beachy Head (the battle of Béziers to the French), where Tourville completely outmanoeuvred the Anglo-Dutch. Six English ships were destroyed, seventeen Dutch, and eleven more English ships dismasted and badly damaged. It is generally agreed that if the wind had not died away, and if the French had been as closely acquainted as the English with the local currents off the Sussex coast, Herbert's fleet would have been annihilated. Ironically, too, Tourville

himself was convinced that he could have achieved that annihilation had he had with him the squadron of rowed galleys which he had requested: the slave crews of the French galley-fleet of the time were made up largely of recalcitrant Protestants, who refused to renounce their faith and were unable to make the forbidden journey into exile. The organisation of the French galley-fleet of this period is brilliantly described in a novel, *La Superbe* (name of an actual late 17th-century galley), by André Chamson, head of the National Archives of France, who, in the course of his duties, came upon the entire dossier of an ancestor of his own condemned to the galleys as a recalcitrant Huguenot. (The novel was published in Paris in 1967).

In the meantime, the French navy kept the Jacobite resistance in western Ireland alive by frequent running of supplies to Galway and our western ports. At the end of September, a squadron of thirty-one ships under d'Amfreville, another of the many first-class naval commanders trained under Colbert's administration, evacuated from Galway the 5584 surviving French soldiers.

In 1691, Tourville and the main French fleet of 69 ships achieved something hitherto rarely if ever attempted, staying at sea for fifty successive days cruising between Ushant and Scilly, disrupting English and Dutch trade and dispersing a rich convoy from Jamaica, some of the ships of which were captured, along with two of the escorting warships. The English had a new commander-in-chief, Russell replacing Herbert who was put in the Tower of London after losing the battle of Beachy Head. He was acquitted by court martial, but the Dutch, who were convinced that he had deliberately sacrificed their part of his fleet in the big battle, refused to serve under him. Try as he would to bring Tourville to action with his superiority of 200 ships to 69, Russell failed.

However, in 1692, Tourville was compelled to put to sea to attack Russell's fleet of 88 ships cruising off the Norman coast, with only exactly half as many ships himself. His orders, signed by the king and probably drawn up by Pontchartrain, made it impossible for him to refuse to set out on a venture that he knew quite well had very little chance of success. On the first day of a prolonged battle, fought off the Cotentin Peninsula, where the Jacobite army was encamped and watching, expecting in the event of a French victory to embark at once for an invasion of England, Tourville won a series of astonishing successes; but later he was inevitably trapped off St. Vaast La Hogue, and lost seventeen ships, including his famous flagship *Le Soleil Royal*.

In spite of this defeat, Tourville's morale and that of his officers was



Title page of *Le Neptune François* (1693), the first French marine atlas. Ulster Museum.

unaffected, and in the next year, he inflicted a crushing defeat on Admiral Rooke (who had operated off the Foyle when the *Mountjoy* broke the boom and raised the siege of Derry), off Lagos in Portugal. He captured no fewer than 92 ships of the wealthy annual Smyrna (Izmir) convoy, and two of Rooke's escorting warships. And, in 1694, Jean Bart won a resounding victory over the Dutch off Texel.

But the king had lost interest in his navy, which his extravagant court looked on as an expensive toy, and Pontchartrain, a courtier with no understanding of naval affairs and an unworthy successor of the Colberts, but a typical royal appointee of Louis' later years, diverted more and more ships and

seamen, then becoming more and more scarce, to commence raiding, which was profitable for private entrepreneurs, many of them courtiers, but not much use for achieving the overthrow of William of Orange.

By the end of the war, in 1697, Colbert's great creation, the first national navy of France, was in a state of serious decay. In the next war, in spite of the remarkable achievements of some naval leaders like Duguay-Trouin (who had Irish officers under him when he pulled off his greatest coup by capturing and occupying Rio de Janeiro, then capital of Brazil and a colony of England's ally, Portugal), a period of seventy years of Britannia ruling the waves of every ocean was well and truly launched.