



FROM THE DIARY OF GÉDÉON BONNIVERT

BY ROBERT H. MURRAY

I came out of London the 6th June, 1690, and lay at St. Alban's. We were to guard five carriages loaded with 250 thousand pounds for the pay of the army in Ireland. Our army went before Waterford and, after the town was surrendered, the king went to lay the siege before Limerick, whilst General Douglas was gone to endeavour with part of our army to take Athlone, but he had no better success there than our men at Limerick, where, through the ill-management of Captain Poultney, who, having had the conduct of eight big pieces of artillery and several other provisions, unadvisedly ordered his detachment to unbridle and turn the horses to grass, for Sarsfield having notice of this fell upon 'em with a very considerable party and cut most of the men to pieces, took the cannon, nailed them, burned the carriages and all the ammunitions, and so caused by so long a delay, and the weather growing bad, to raise the siege. The king, having left that place with the loss of many men, took shipping for England. (The Diary of Gédéon Bonnivert).



Gédéon Bonnivert was the son of Paschall and Judith Bonnivert of Sedan, in Champagne. He was probably a Huguenot, and on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, he succeeded in coming to England. Some of his papers, in prose and verse, are preserved in the British Museum. It is evident that he was an enthusiastic scientist. Among the Sloane manuscripts there are a treatise on the elements of geometry and fortification, with diagrams, a notice of the comets of 1680 and 1682, and curious receipts for several diseases.

The letters he wrote show how great was his love of botany. Unlike the people of his day, he cared much for the beauties of nature, though this feeling is seldom to be noticed in English literature till the days of Thomas Gray ... As a soldier he marched from place to place; and in the course of his walks he found rare plants ... Many of his letters are written to the famous Hans Sloane, and there is one letter, dated 15 October, 1696, from the latter to Bonnivert. Sloane's botanical zeal was not disinterested, for he begs his correspondent to remember 'where this (plant) was found by you, for it was a true truffle such as makes the delicious dishes ...'.

A letter of 24 June, 1703, records his transfer to Cork ... On 3 August, 1703, he again writes from Cork to Sloane ... He mentions the fact that the Duke of Ormond was very civil to him. He observes a curious piece of architecture in Limerick, speaks of the silver mines there, and finds a pretty geranium growing on the walls of that city. He also talks of the Giant's Steps about six miles from Cork, and alludes to his probable departure for Portugal. From his letter to Sloane on 29 September, 1703, his destination was changed to Limerick ...

According to Bonnivert, the bad weather caused the raising of the first siege of Limerick ... Though Corporal Trim was not an exact historian, there is no reason for disbelieving

his recollection of the state of the weather. His description of the siege in Tristram Shandy (1759-'67) seems to have been taken by Laurene Sterné from an old soldier who had been present:

"We were scarce able to crawl out of our tents at the time the siege of Limerick was raised, and had it not been for the quantity of brandy we set fire to every night, and the claret and cinnamon and Geneva with which we plied ourselves, we had both left our lives in the trenches. The city of Limerick, the siege of which was begun under his majesty King William himself, lies in the midst of a devilish wet, swampy country; it is surrounded with the Shannon, and is, by its situation, one of the strongest fortified places in Ireland; it is all cut through with drains and bogs; and besides, there was such a quantity of rain fell during the siege, the whole country was like a puddle. Now, there was no such thing after the first ten days, as for a soldier to lie dry in his tent, without cutting a ditch round it to draw off the water; nor was that enough for those who could afford it without setting fire every night to a pewter dish full of brandy, which took off the damp of the air and made the inside of the tent as warm as a stove".

John Stevens, who was a Jacobite officer serving in the besieged town, writes on 29 August: 'The night was extreme cold, dark and rainy'. The 3 September 'was appointed a general day of review for the garrison in the King's Island, but the weather proving extreme foul, it was put off.' The entry of the 29th shows in what sense he uses the word 'foul', for there he writes that 'the weather began to grow foul with extreme rain.' Story records that 'a storm of rain and other bad weather began to threaten us, which fell out on Friday the 29th in good earnest, upon which his majesty calling a council of war, it was concluded the safest way was to quit the siege.' Dumont de Bostaquet, an eye-witness like Story, says that before the siege was raised, because 'la pluie avoit tombé en telle abondance que je ne doutai pas que j'aurois de la peine à la passer or du moins au retour' (the rain had fallen so heavily that I knew I would have difficulty in crossing or at least in crossing back') from one side of the Shannon to the other. Captain Maupas informed Dumont 'son guide craignoit que la rivière ne grossît et qu'elle ne fût plus guéable ... La pluie continuant violemment nous fit une peine extrême, le terrain étoit gras, les chevaux ne pouvoient tenir pied, et les cavaliers aimoient mieux être à cheval que pied à terre: la pluie continua toute la journée'. ('his guide feared that the river would rise and that it would not be fordable ... The rain continuing to be heavy caused us severe suffering, the ground was slippery, the horses could not keep their feet, and the cavalrymen preferred to be on horseback than on the ground'). In the Clarke correspondence occurs the significant statement: 'I wish the inclemency of the weather does not incommode the progress of the siege of Limerick'.

Williamite and Jacobite authorities agree that rain fell.

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