

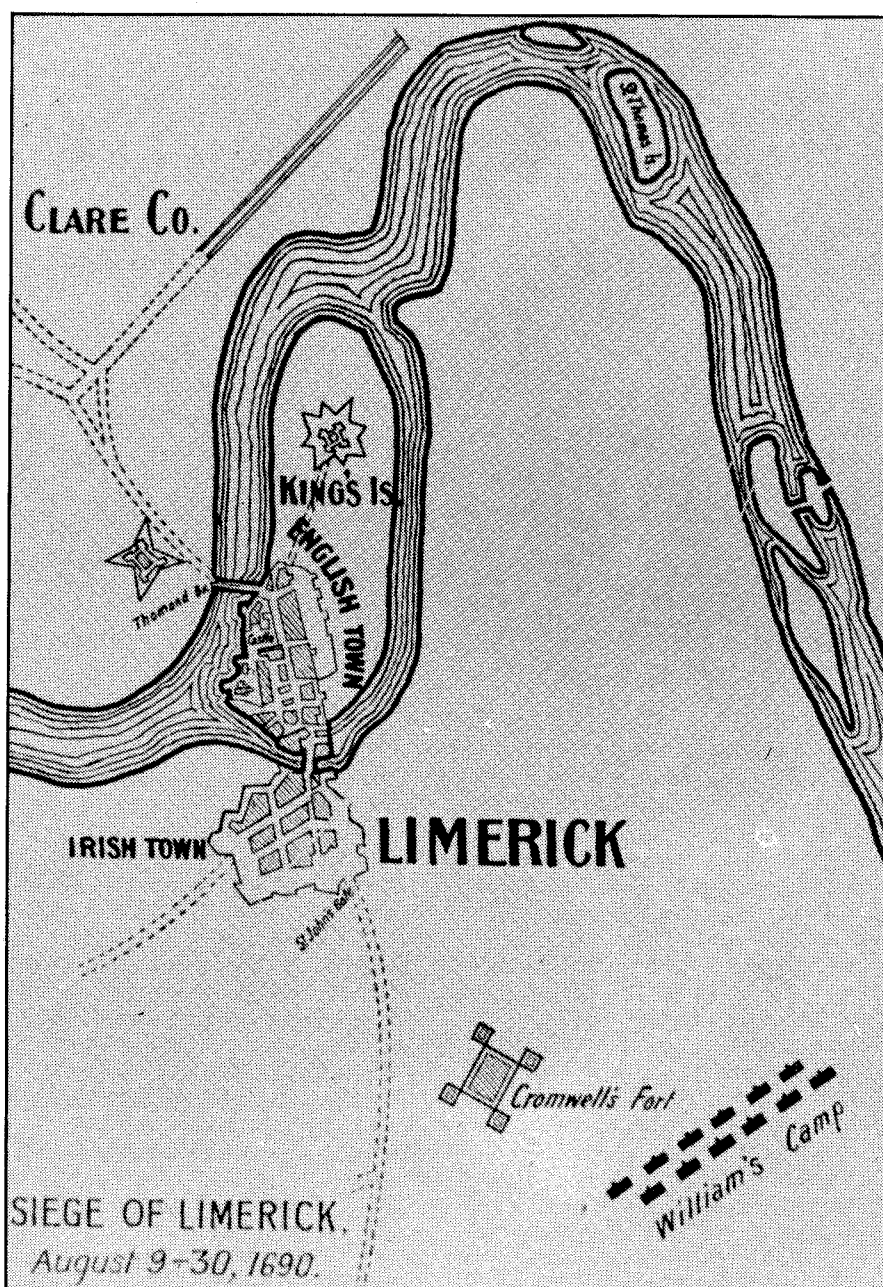
THE SIEGE OF LIMERICK, 1690

BY J.G. SIMMS

The Irish defence of Limerick in 1690 was a remarkable achievement, which produced a dramatic change in the course of the Jacobite war. It came as a rude shock to King William, who had expected to meet little resistance after his victory at the Boyne. It came also as a surprise to Tyrconnell and the French, whose appreciation of the situation was much the same. It was a great restorative of morale for the Irish and a notable success, won by their own courage and energy. The story of the siege is full of incident, and we are fortunate in having a number of contemporary accounts, both Jacobite and Williamite.⁽¹⁾

After the Boyne, the retreating French and Irish troops made for Limerick as fast as they could, and by the middle of July it had become a rallying point for the Jacobite forces. It was a place of considerable natural strength. The main, or English, town was on the King's Island, linked to the Clare side by Thomond Bridge and to the Irish town on the county Limerick side by Ballsbridge, which spanned the Abbey River arm of the Shannon. Both the English and the Irish towns were walled, but the fortifications were old and decayed and, by the standards of the later seventeenth century, inadequate to withstand a regular siege. Lauzun's contemptuous reference to roasted apples is matched by other Jacobite references of a similar kind. Williamite accounts treat the fortifications with greater respect.

William did not reach the neighbourhood of Limerick until more than five weeks after the Boyne, and this gave the Jacobites a much needed breathing space. The delay was partly due to events in England. Panic after the French naval victory at Beachy Head led to demands for William's immediate return and he was reluctant to move away from the east coast of Ireland while there was the threat of a French invasion of England. But the delay was also due to his overestimating the completeness of his victory at the Boyne. He thought the Irish were at his mercy, and from Finglas on the outskirts of Dublin he issued an uncompromising declaration calling on their leaders to surrender uncondition-



ally. This stiffened the Irish will to fight on for better terms, and William's slowness to move on Limerick gave them hopes of being able to do so effectively. Tyrconnell and the French thought further resistance useless, but Sarsfield and a number of the bolder spirits were

in favour of holding out. Lauzun, the French commander, refused to keep French regiments in Limerick. It was too far from the open sea, and he did not want to be mixed up with an Irish army which did not love the French.⁽²⁾ He retreated to Galway with half his powder



*William before the walls of Limerick, 9 August, 1690.
Limerick County Council.*

and his twelve pieces of field artillery. But he left a French major-general to defend Limerick. This was Boisseleau, a good officer who had gained some experience as colonel of an Irish regiment in the previous year.

The force under his command consisted of Henry Luttrell's cavalry regiment, Thomas Maxwell's dragoons and twenty-eight infantry regiments. Lauzun put the infantry strength at about 14,000, but some of them were without arms.⁽³⁾ In addition, there was a cavalry force of perhaps 2,500 under Sarsfield in County Clare. Up the Shannon was a large force of mostly unarmed Ulstermen raised by Hugh Baldearg O'Donnell, a great-nephew of Niall Garbh, who had served in the Spanish army and had reached Ireland a few days after the Boyne. His arrival created considerable excitement in Limerick, as it was prophesied that an O'Donnell with a red mark would deliver Ireland from the English. One story was that Baldearg had foretold that the English would conquer till they came to the well near Singland Hill, just outside Limerick, but that thereafter they would be defeated and driven out of the land. There seems no doubt that Baldearg's arrival contributed to the raising of Irish morale, though a Williamite comment was: 'Tis hard to believe how this dream had obtained among the common sort.'⁽⁴⁾ William's strength at Limerick was less than it had been at the Boyne, as detachments were left at Dublin (where five battalions were stationed) and elsewhere. His numbers at

Limerick may be put at something over 25,000.⁽⁵⁾ His army was an international patchwork. In addition to British troops it consisted of Dutch, Huguenots, Brandenburgians and a corps (itself international) hired from the king of Denmark.

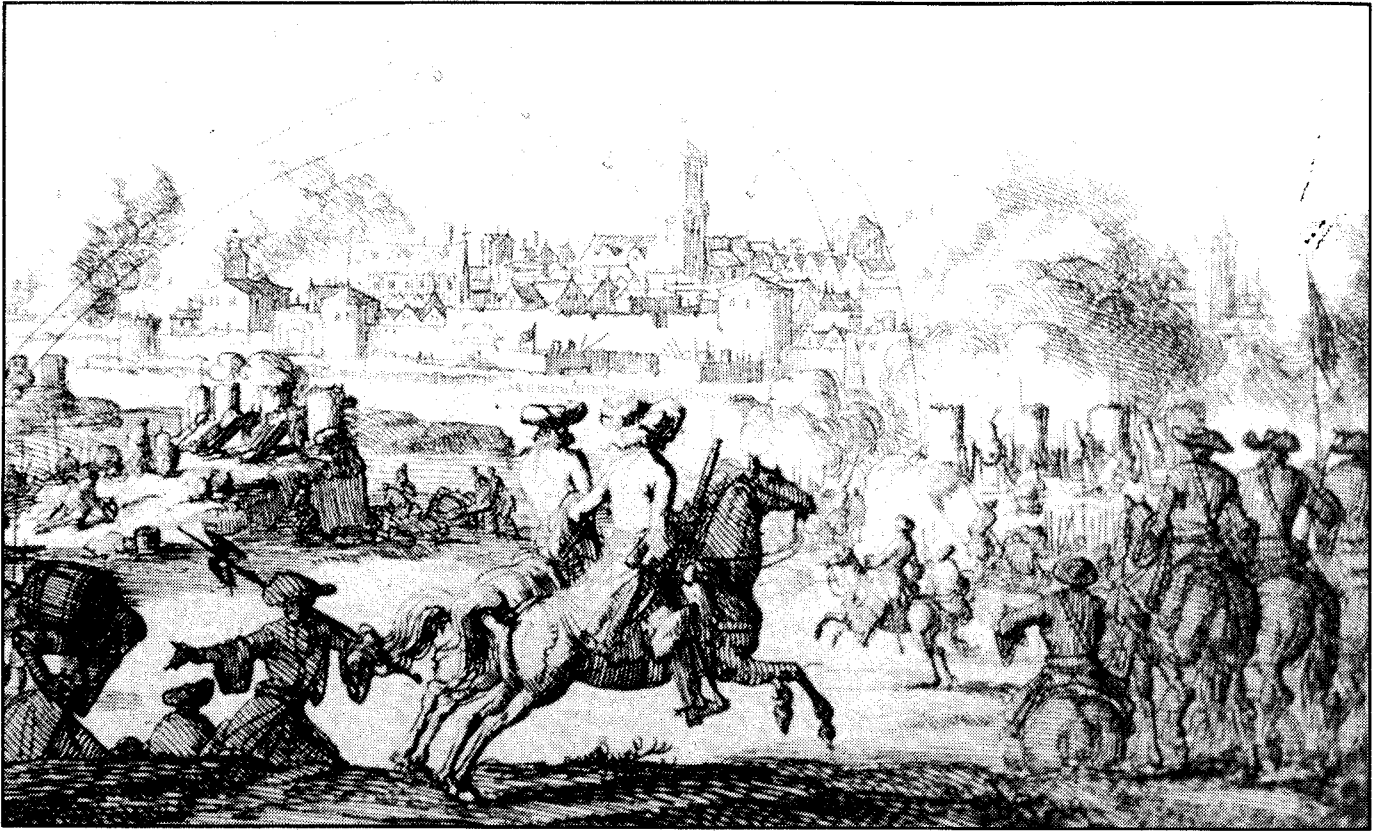
Good use was made of the few weeks available to strengthen the defences. A ditch was constructed outside the walls, with a covered way protected by a palisade on the counter-scarp (or outside bank of the ditch). Some redoubts were built outside the Irish town wall and houses in the suburbs were destroyed to prevent them being used as cover by the advancing enemy. Outside the walls much of the ground was low-lying, but to the south-east the high ground of Singland Hill commanded the approach to the wall of the Irish town. During the Cromwellian siege of 1650-1 two forts had been constructed on spurs of this high ground. To the east was Ireton's fort, rising above the Penny Well, and to the south Cromwell's fort, whose ruins are marked on the Ordnance Survey map near the Garryowen reservoir.

William reached Caherconlish on 7 August. He had only field-guns with him. The heavier guns required for siege operations were still on their way from Dublin – a failure in logistics which the Williamite chaplain, Story, could only explain by supposing that an immediate surrender of the town had been counted on. During the following days, the approaches to Limerick were reconnoitred, and there were some clashes between the Williamites and the Irish

who lined the thick hedges that covered the area. Williamites could hear the enemy talking 'with their damned Irish brogue on their tongues' and shouted back 'Ye toads, are ye there? We'll be with you presently'.⁽⁶⁾ The Williamites advanced, hedge-cutting as they went, and the Irish gave ground before them. Story thought the Irish would have done well to hold Ireton's fort and so delayed the Williamite advance. The Williamite army drew up on the higher ground from Ireton's fort to Cromwell's fort and on to an old 'Danish' fort, where the Danish force was appropriately posted. The line was a crescent about half a mile from the east and south sections of the Irish town wall. William then sent a summons to the commander to surrender, which received a brave reply from Boisseleau that the best way for him to gain the Prince of Orange's good opinion was by a vigorous defence of the town entrusted to him. This was followed by heavy cannon fire from the town walls, which concentrated on William's headquarters near Cromwell's fort, several shots falling near his tent.

The Williamites then crossed the Shannon at the ford of Annaghbeg, which seems to have been rather more than a mile above the present Athlunkard Bridge.⁽⁷⁾ The stream was described as very rapid and dangerous, though the river had not been so low for many years. They did not exploit this move other than to keep a guard on both banks at the ford. Another detachment captured Castleconnell. But serious operations against Limerick awaited the arrival of eight heavy guns from Dublin with the accompanying procession of ammunition carts. On 11 August, 'a substantial country gentleman' named Manus O'Brien came to the Williamite camp with the news that Sarsfield had crossed the Shannon near Killaloe with the pick of the Irish cavalry and dragoons, his objective being the siege train. It was some time before O'Brien could get a hearing, and though William eventually ordered a party to intercept Sarsfield his orders met with near-indifference – perhaps as a result of ill-feeling between English and Dutch which paralleled the Franco-Irish dissensions on the Jacobite side. The intercepting force had barely set out when they saw 'a great light in the air and heard a strange rumbling noise'.⁽⁸⁾ Sarsfield's ride had brought him to Ballyneety in the small hours of 13 August and had taken the siege train completely by surprise.

There are various accounts of this exploit, both Jacobite and Williamite. It was clearly an enterprise of skilful timing and swift execution, which was highly damaging to the enemy. Jacobite accounts naturally make the higher estimate of the Williamite losses; they give the impression that all the guns were rendered useless. In fact it was not



Dutch print of the siege of Limerick, 1690.

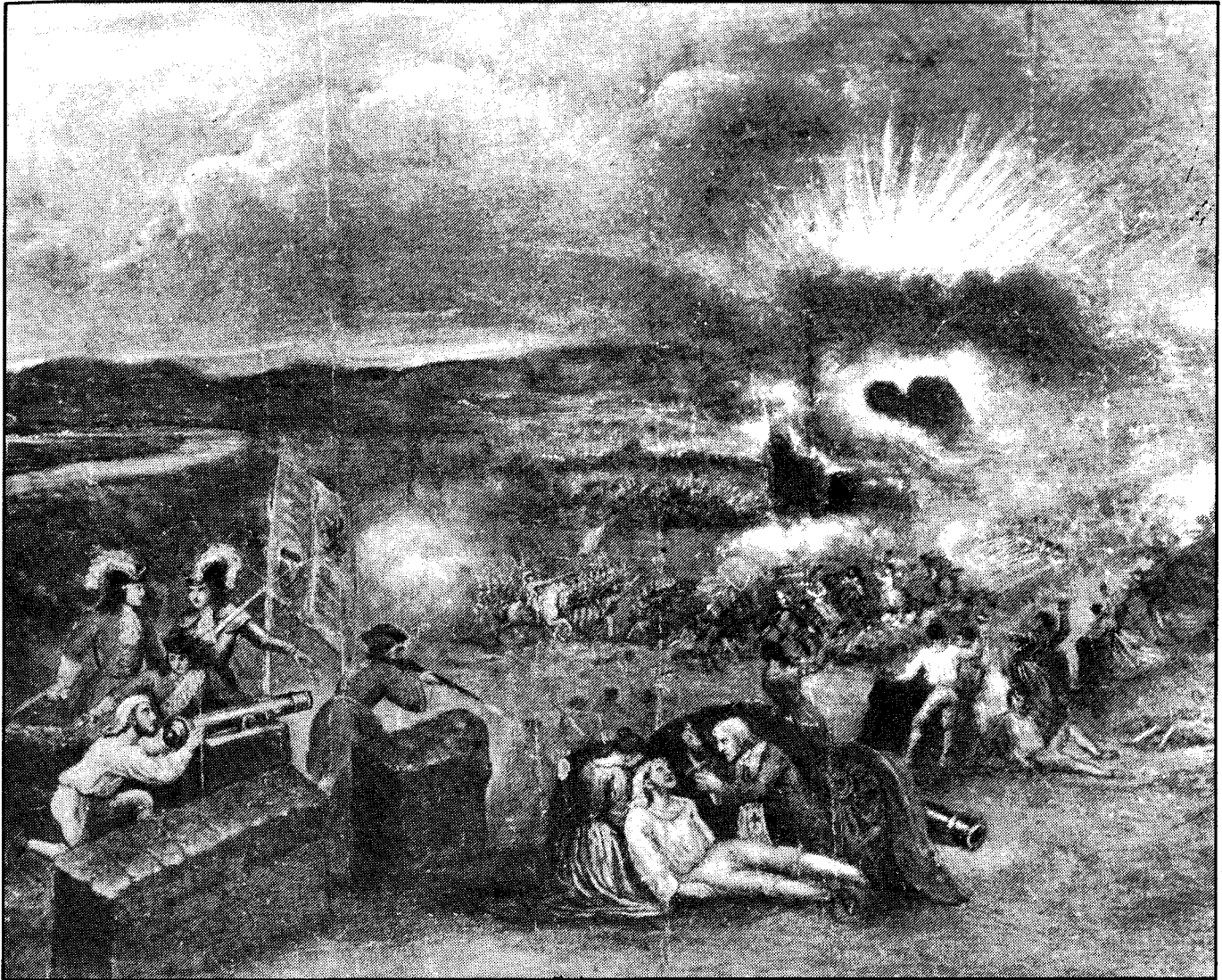
easy to put a gun completely out of action, and six of the eight were salvaged and brought to Limerick after a few days' delay.⁽⁹⁾ Two were destroyed by over-charging, and it appears that Sarsfield spared the life of a Williamite gunner for his technical services in this operation.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the process, however, other guns were blown off their carriages and this saved them from destruction.⁽¹¹⁾ The chief loss was of ammunition, powder, horses and carts. The feat added greatly to Sarsfield's reputation and was an invaluable support to Irish morale and the policy of resistance. It was a severe blow to the Williamites, though in view of the shaky state of English opinion the *London Gazette* tempered the bad news with the comforting assurance: 'this accident will only lose us three or four days, for in that time our cannon (being 24-pounders) will arrive from Waterford; in the meantime our batteries are preparing and all things are put in a posture for a vigorous attack of the town'. In fact, Ballyneety had badly upset the transport arrangements, and the guns from Waterford did not arrive until ten days after. The delay and, even more so, the loss of ammunition were to have serious consequences for the Williamites. The Danish commander stated that besides the guns there were 60 ammunition wagons with 12,000 pounds of powder, 3,000 cannon balls and a great quantity of match, grenades and carcasses (incendiary bombs). Five hundred artillery horses were lost.⁽¹²⁾

The six guns from Ballyneety arrived on 16 August, and during the following days the Williamites made trenches between their positions and the Irish town wall and set up a battery to fire at the wall. The Irish fired back from the town guns and made an effective night attack on Williamites whom they caught asleep in their trenches. The sharpest fighting at this stage took place on the afternoon of 20 August, when the Williamites attacked an Irish redoubt near the south-east corner of the wall. Boisseleau, who describes the post as an earthen redoubt on the side of the marsh, entrusted the defence to Lord Sarsfield of Kilmallock (Patrick's brother-in-law) with a mixed force of infantry and cavalry. His report says that the Irish charged the Danes and Brandenburgers so vigorously that they drove them back to their trenches in much disorder. Further Williamite reinforcements finally forced the Irish to withdraw, but Boisseleau considered that William had to pay dearly for the redoubt. The French account is corroborated by the Danish commander's report, which makes it clear that the fighting was hard and protracted and that the Williamites suffered considerable loss.⁽¹³⁾

With the arrival of heavy guns from Waterford the Williamites pushed their batteries nearer and nearer to the east section of the Irish town wall. Dr. Mullenau, the Williamite diarist, in his entry for 24 August, says that the original battery positions were found to be at too

long a range to be effective and that new positions were established within eighty paces of the wall.⁽¹⁴⁾ This involved moving the guns across low-lying ground, which was practicable only because the season had up to then been unusually dry. The 25 August brought a change in the weather, and the Williamite reports make it clear that this was a severe check to their plans. That day Sir Robert Southwell, Secretary of State, wrote: 'This morning it began to pour down at such a furious rate that some of the trenches have been two feet deep ... I find by this one day's fierce rain a strange damp as to our success among many of the chief officers and that our army must draw off or be ruined if the rain should hold; nay that it would be a great task in these deep ways to get off our cannon'. He added that William himself 'in his dark and reserved way' had hinted that he was thinking of going back to England.⁽¹⁵⁾

The rain was so heavy that firing could not begin till three in the afternoon. Then the weather cleared and the gunners, well plied with drink, fired three hundred shots at the wall. This cannonade was supplemented by carcasses and red-hot shot, which started a number of fires in the town. The defenders tried to protect the wall with wool-sacks, but to no purpose; a considerable breach was made a little to the north of the south-east corner of the wall, where New Road now crosses the line of the wall. The breach was widened



The attack on the Breach, 27 August, 1690.

by further firing on the following day, when, according to Story, it measured 12 yards. Boisseleau, who says it was 42 yards wide, made a retrenchment behind it, on which he mounted cannon.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Williamite assault began on the afternoon of 27 August. The English Jacobite, Captain John Stevens, gives a vivid account of his regiment (the Grand Prior's) being personally led into the breach by Boisseleau himself. They could see the red-coats pouring in, and at first thought they were their own men retreating, till they noticed the green boughs that distinguished the Williamites; the Irish wore white paper cockades. The Irish who had been driven from the counterscarp at first retreated in considerable haste, but they were held up by dragoons near the citadel and then rallied. The Grand Prior's regiment fired effectively from the retrenchment and drove the Williamites out of the breach.⁽¹⁷⁾ The French account pays tribute to this regiment and to Boisseleau's own regiment and also to 'four hundred Irish of MacMahon's regiment who had no arms and threw stones, which gave

considerable trouble to the enemy'.⁽¹⁸⁾ Story corroborates this and adds that the defence was assisted by 'broken bottles from the very women, who boldly stood in the breach and were nearer our men than their own'. His account leaves no doubt of the fierceness of the fighting.

About half an hour after three, the signal being given by firing three pieces of cannon, the grenadiers being in the furthest angle of our trenches leaped over and ran towards the counterscarp, firing their pieces and throwing their grenades. This gave the alarm to the Irish, who had their guns already and discharged great and small shot upon us as fast as 'twas possible. Our men were not behind them in either, so that in less than two minutes the noise was so terrible that one would have thought the very skies ready to rend in sunder. This was seconded with dust, smoke and all the terrors that the art of man could invent, to ruin and undo one another; and to make it the more uneasy the day itself was excessive hot to the bystanders.

According to Story's version, the orders were to hold the counterscarp and stop

there, but the first wave of attackers could not resist the temptation to pursue the retreating Irish through the breach into the town. They were not supported, their ammunition ran out, and the Irish counter-attacked with deadly effect. His account continues:

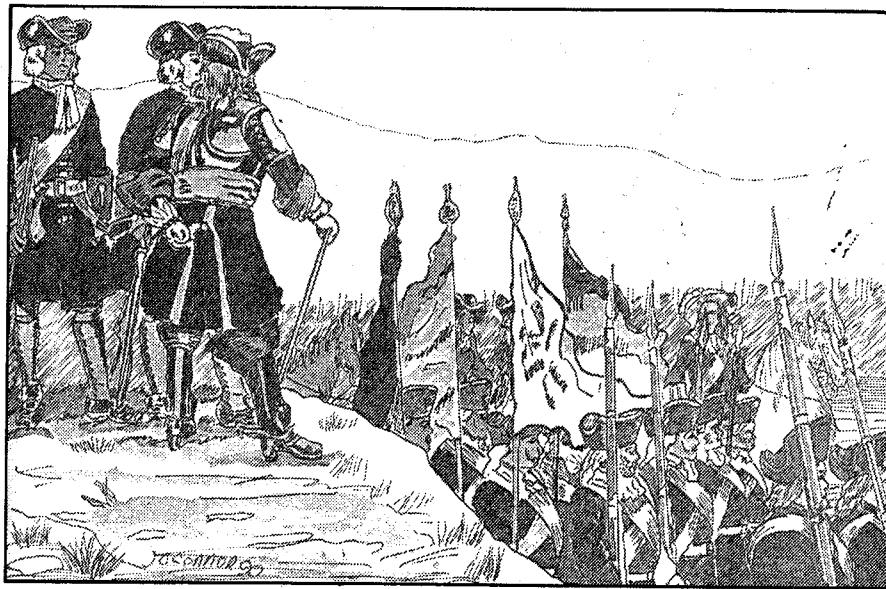
When the work was at the hottest, the Brandenburg regiment (who behaved themselves very well) were got upon the Black Battery, where the enemy's powder happened to take fire and blew up a great many of them, the men, faggots, stones and what not flying into the air with a most terrible noise ... The Danes were not idle all this while but fired on the enemy with all imaginable fury and had several killed; but the mischief was we had but one breach, and all towards the left it was impossible to get into the town when the gates were shut, if there had been no enemy to oppose us, without a great many scaling-ladders which we had not. From half an hour after three till after seven there was one continued fire of both great and small shot without any intermission; insomuch that the smoke that went from the town reached in one

continued cloud to the top of a mountain at least six miles off.⁽¹⁹⁾

After some hours hard fighting, the Williamites were driven back with heavy losses. The Brandenburg regiment was almost wiped out and the Danes lost heavily. The Danish commander had advised against the attempt and considered that further bombardment was necessary to widen the breach. He paid a tribute to the stoutness of the Irish resistance and the effectiveness of their fire.⁽²⁰⁾ On the following day, the Williamites continued to fire at the breach, but rain set in again and anxious consultations took place about a withdrawal. It was pointed out that if there was more rain the guns could not be got away; the Shannon was rising and threatened to cut off the Williamite detachment on the other side. In any case the breach was not wide enough, and even if the Irish town were taken the English town would remain to be tackled.⁽²¹⁾ Dr. Mullenau's journal added a further point: that the 'watery season would undoubtedly bring on the country distemper'.⁽²²⁾ The Danish commander was asked for his opinion and urged that the bombardment should be intensified and the breach widened. He was told that there were no more cannon balls; with the last convoy instead of cannon balls unfilled bombs had been sent.⁽²³⁾ The same point is made by George Clarke, Secretary-at-War: 'the ill success at Limerick is well known to be owing to the want of ammunition occasioned by Sarsfield falling upon the artillery etc. ... so that after a fruitless attack of a breach which we had not powder and shot to make larger the king left the army'.⁽²⁴⁾

On 29 August, it was decided to raise the siege, and next day William took the road for Waterford, a bitterly disappointed man. A postscript to Dr. Mullenau's journal argued that William's discretion in leaving Limerick was no less glorious than his valour at the Boyne. But in fact William's management of the siege had not been distinguished. His delay in reaching the town, the failure to protect the siege train or to provide enough replacements for the lost ammunition contributed greatly to the collapse of the operation. Even if he had taken the Irish town, the English town could still have held out, as there had been no attempt to cut its communications with County Clare.

For the Irish their successful defence had temporarily transformed the situation. Plans had been made for Sarsfield and some 6,000 others to leave for France. Now they would fight on, even though Tyrconnell and the French were still determined to depart. Sarsfield was the man of the hour, the 'darling of the army'.⁽²⁵⁾ During the following winter, his reputation was enhanced by his successful defence of the line of the Shannon. Irish morale rode high and the prospect of French help offered hopes of



William brings up his forces, from a painting by John O'Connor.

ultimate victory – hopes that were to be dashed at Aughrim. When Limerick was again besieged in 1691, the Irish thought that their resistance had gained them better terms than they could have had immediately after the Boyne. Their hopes were to be disappointed, and the treaty did little more than save a few hundred Catholic estates from confiscation and send into exile some thousands of Irish, who remembered Limerick as they fought in foreign lands.

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1. The principal Jacobite accounts are: the Fingall manuscript 'A Light to the Blind', edited by J.T. Gilbert under the title *A Jacobite Narrative*, with an appendix containing the account of the siege published in the *Gazette de France; Macariae Excidium, or The Destruction of Cyprus* by Charles O'Kelly, edited by J.C. O'Callaghan; *The Journal of John Stevens*, edited by R.H. Murray, an eyewitness report by an English Jacobite (referred to as Stevens); French officers' despatches, in Paris archives. The principal Williamite accounts are: G. Story, *The Impartial History of the Wars of Ireland*, by a chaplain in the Williamite army whose book contains the fullest narrative of the siege; S. Mullenau, M.D., *A Journal of the Three Months Royal Campaign*; correspondence of Sir Robert Southwell, Secretary of State for Ireland, contained in H.M.C., *Finch MSS* (referred to as Finch); *The Correspondence of the Danish Force in Ireland, 1690-91*, ed. K. Danaher and J.G. Simms (referred to as Danish force).

2. Archives du ministère de la guerre, A1 962, no. 155.
3. Ibid., nos. 167, 169.
4. Finch, ii. 407.
5. Danish force, p. 47.
6. Mullenau, p. 22, Story, p. 114.
7. Annaghbeg is marked on a map in Ferrar, *History of Limerick* (1786).
8. Story, p. 119.
9. Danish force, p. 67.
10. *Gazette de France*, 31 Aug./9 Sept., 1690 (extract in Gilbert collection, Pearse Street, Dublin).
11. R. Caulfield, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. Rowland Davies*, pp. 136-7.
12. Danish force pp. 55-6.
13. Boisseleau to Louvois, 10/20 Sept., 1690 (Fonds français 5561); *Danish Force*, pp. 70-1.
14. Mullenau, p. 26.
15. Finch, ii. 428-9.
16. Boisseleau, loc. cit.
17. Stevens, p. 178.
18. Gilbert, p. 264.
19. Story, pp. 128-30.
20. Danish force, p. 73.
21. Finch ii. 435, *The Memoirs of the Duke of Berwick* (i. 71, ed. of 1779) give a completely different account of the weather: 'I can affirm that not a single drop of rain fell for above a month before, or for three weeks after'. His memory must have been at fault. The Jacobite Stevens refers to rain at the end of the siege, and the Williamite references, which include letters written while the siege was going on (Finch, ii. 428-9, Danish force, pp. 58-9), are very specific.
22. Mullenau, p. 26.
23. Danish force, p. 74.
24. H.M.C., *Leyborne-Popham MSS*, p. 276.
25. O'Kelly, p. 58.