

1649-52: Cromwell's Conquest of Ireland

Rathmines, 2 Aug 1649

In January 1649, the Marquis of Ormond negotiated the Second Ormond Peace, securing an alliance between the Irish Confederates and the Royalists. This released an additional 18,000 troops to fight for the King, enabling Ormond to begin rebuilding Royalist power in Ireland. In February 1649, Prince Rupert arrived with a small Royalist fleet at Kinsale in southern Ireland and started raiding Commonwealth shipping in the Channel. To the alarm of the Council of State, the campaigns of Ormond and his ally Lord Inchiquin were successful. While Parliament was embroiled in its power struggle with the New Model Army, Ireland was becoming a centre of Royalist activity and a potential base of operations for Charles Stuart, son of the late King Charles I. When Drogheda surrendered to Inchiquin in July 1649, only the strongholds of Derry and Dublin remained outside Royalist control.

Ormond moved on to besiege Dublin, defended by the Parliamentary governor Colonel Michael Jones. The Royalist army occupied strongpoints to the south of Dublin and cut off the city's water supply. On the night of 1 August, Ormond ordered Major-General Purcell to fortify Baggotrath castle, a mile from the city, under cover of darkness. Purcell was delayed — possibly through the treachery of his guides — and was unable to secure his position. At dawn on 2 August Colonel Jones boldly marched his forces out of Dublin and drew them up near Baggotrath. Observing this movement, Ormond began to prepare his whole army for action. Jones acted swiftly, attacking Purcell's force at Baggotrath and routing them. Panic spread amongst the Royalists. Despite the efforts of Ormond and his officers to rally the troops all but two regiments fled. Ormond attempted to make a stand facing the Parliamentarians as they came out from the city but a regiment of Parliamentary cavalry worked their way around his position and attacked from the rear. With Jones' main force advancing towards them, the Royalists fled the field, abandoning all their artillery and supply wagons. Colonel Jones' spectacular victory secured Dublin for Parliament and prepared the way for Cromwell's invasion of Ireland.

Drogheda, 11 Sept 1649

On 20 June 1649, after the suppression of the Leveller mutinies, the House of Commons appointed Oliver Cromwell Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland and commander-in-chief of the army that was to be sent there. Through July and August, Cromwell made meticulous preparations for the expedition. Colonel Jones' victory at Rathmines on 2 August enabled Cromwell to land unopposed in Ireland and to occupy Dublin, where he arrived on 15 August with 12,000 experienced troops and a formidable artillery train. The Marquis of Ormond fell back to the north. Cromwell immediately marched against Drogheda, a prosperous town at the mouth of the River Boyne, 30 miles up the coast from Dublin and a key strategic strongpoint for advancing into Ulster.

Ormond appointed the Royalist veteran Sir Arthur Aston governor of Drogheda with a garrison of 2,000 foot and 300 horse. The town was protected by a 20-foot high wall punctuated by twenty-nine guard towers. Aston boasted that "he who could take Drogheda could take Hell," so he felt confident in refusing the summons to surrender when Cromwell arrived before Drogheda on 10 September. The Royalist plan was to play for time, hoping that the Parliamentary army would eventually become weakened and ineffective through disease and attrition. Cromwell was also aware of this possibility and wasted no time in deploying his siege guns. With a squadron of Parliamentary warships blockading the harbour, Cromwell's artillery immediately began bombarding the walls of Drogheda, concentrating their fire on the south side

near the church of St. Mary's. By the following day the walls were breached. Cromwell ordered an assault, intending to gain St. Mary's church as a foothold into the town. The assault began on the evening of 11 September but did not go according to plan. The breach was too small to allow the Parliamentary horse to enter and the infantry who succeeded in fighting their way into the town met with fierce resistance. Twice the Parliamentarians were thrown back from the walls with great loss of life. Cromwell himself led a third assault and succeeded in holding the breach until Colonel Ewer came up with reinforcements. As the full force of the Parliamentary army poured through the breach, the defenders were overwhelmed. The church and surrounding entrenchments were seized and the Royalists made a fighting retreat back to the fortifications at Mill Mount. Cromwell, in a furious passion, ordered that no quarter was to be granted to the defenders of Drogheda. The Parliamentary army swept through the town, slaughtering officers and soldiers. The Royalist governor Sir Arthur Aston was bludgeoned to death with his own wooden leg, which the soldiers believed to be filled with gold coins. Catholic priests and friars were treated as combatants and killed on sight. Many civilians died in the carnage. A group of defenders who had barricaded themselves in St Peter's church in the north of the town were burned alive when the Parliamentarians set fire to the church. Around 3,500 people died in the storming of Drogheda; many of those who survived were transported to Barbados. Parliamentary losses were around 150.

Cromwell regarded the massacre at Drogheda as a righteous judgment on the Catholics who had slaughtered the Protestant settlers in the Irish Uprising of 1641. This view was shared by most English and Scottish Protestants. According to the conventions of 17th century warfare, a besieged city that refused a summons to surrender and was then taken by storm could expect no mercy. Despite the massacre of its defenders, Drogheda was not regarded as an atrocity at the time. However, it has lived on in Irish folk memory, making Cromwell's name into one of the most hated in Irish history.

Wexford, 11 Oct 1649

After the fall of Drogheda, Cromwell sent 5,000 troops commanded by Colonel Robert Venables northwards into Ulster. The Royalists abandoned their garrisons at Dundalk and Trim at his approach. While Venables went on to capture Carlingford, Newry, Lisburn and Belfast, Cromwell marched south to the port of Wexford. Not only was Wexford a potential port of entry for Royalist support from France, it was also a base for pirates and privateers whose raids on Commonwealth shipping were troublesome. With the autumn rains setting in, Cromwell also planned to retire his army into winter quarters at Wexford.

The fort at Rosslare, which commanded the entrance to Wexford harbour, was captured by Lieutenant-General Michael Jones on 2 October, allowing the fleet that supported the army to enter the harbour and land Cromwell's artillery. The Commonwealth force of 7,000 foot, 2,000 horse took up position before the town. The mayor, aldermen and many of the citizens of Wexford were prepared to surrender as soon as Cromwell issued his summons on 3 October but the newly-appointed governor, Colonel David Synnott, expected reinforcements from Ormond, so tried to spin out the negotiations. On 10 October, Cromwell's patience ran out and he ordered his artillery to begin bombarding the walls of Wexford Castle which dominated the town's southern defences. Cromwell granted Synnott's call for another truce and a further round of negotiations.

On 11 October, while negotiations were continuing, the commander of Wexford Castle, Captain Stafford, betrayed the castle to the Parliamentarians. When Cromwell's troops appeared on the castle battlements and turned its guns on the

defenders, the Royalists guarding the town walls lost heart and fled. The Parliamentarians launched an immediate attack, scaling the abandoned walls and storming into the town. The Royalists made a stand in the market place, but they were quickly overwhelmed. Cromwell and his officers made no attempt to restrain the troops, who slaughtered the defenders of Wexford and plundered the town. Many civilians were drowned as they tried to escape the carnage by fleeing across the River Slaney. Cromwell regarded the massacre as a further judgment upon the perpetrators of the Catholic uprising of 1641 and also upon the pirates who had operated out of Wexford. His principal regret was that the town was so badly damaged in the sack that it was no longer suitable as winter quarters for the Parliamentarian army.

Leaving a small contingent to guard Wexford, Cromwell marched westwards into Munster. On 19 October, Sir Lucas Taaffe surrendered New Ross on honourable terms. Alarmed at the fate of Drogheda and Wexford, and encouraged by Cromwell's fair dealing at New Ross, the garrisons at Cork, Youghall, Capperquin and Mallow declared for Parliament. The Parliamentarians were further heartened by news of the death of the Confederate leader Owen Roe O'Neill who died at Cavan in early November.

On 24 November, Cromwell besieged Waterford. But sickness was rife in the Commonwealth army. Cromwell was unable to sustain the siege. He abandoned it on 2 December and retired to winter quarters at Youghall. Cromwell himself had been sick throughout November. Up to 1,000 Parliamentarian troops died in the epidemic of dysentery and malaria during the winter of 1649/50, including the veteran Colonel Horton and Lieutenant-General Jones, the hero of Rathmines.

Kilkenny, 27 March 1650

By late January 1650, Cromwell's army had received fresh supplies and reinforcements from England and had recovered from its epidemic of sickness. On 29 January, Cromwell set out from Youghall. His intention was to occupy the Confederate counties of Kilkenny and Tipperary and to reduce the remaining Royalist strongholds in the region. The town and castle of Kilkenny was an important objective. It was the nominal capital of the Catholic Confederacy and the family seat of James Butler, Marquis of Ormond. But rather than directly attacking the strongly fortified base, Cromwell first set about isolating Kilkenny by capturing surrounding towns and castles.

Offered generous terms by Cromwell, the garrisons at Fethard, Cashel and Cahir surrendered with minimal resistance. Kiltinan Castle was bombarded into submission. Callan and Gowran fell after short sieges. By late March 1650, Cromwell was ready to attack Kilkenny itself. He hoped to take Kilkenny without a siege; a Confederate officer, Captain Tickell, had been bribed to betray the town. But when Cromwell arrived at Kilkenny on 22 March he found that Tickell had been discovered and hanged by the Royalist governor Sir Walter Butler.

Cromwell's troops occupied the suburbs around Kilkenny's walls after Butler rejected his initial summons. Cromwell was aware that a direct assault on Kilkenny would be difficult and bloody so he entered into lengthy negotiations. However, his artillery was battering the town walls even as the talks continued. Butler wanted the same favourable terms as Cromwell had granted to other towns, but this was refused. On 25 March, a breach was opened in the town walls. Warning the citizens that their town would be sacked if it was carried by storm, Cromwell demanded £2,000 as compensation to his troops for forfeiting their right of plunder. Butler was persuaded to agree to the terms; Kilkenny surrendered on 27 March.

Clonmel, 18 May 1650

After the fall of Kilkenny, the main Royalist fortresses remaining in southern Ireland were Clonmel, Waterford and Limerick. Although the Council of State urgently wanted Cromwell to return from Ireland to deal with the worsening situation in Scotland, he was determined to conclude the Irish campaign first. Cromwell arrived at Clonmel on 27 April 1650. The town was defended by Hugh Dubh ("Black Hugh") O'Neill, a nephew of Owen Roe O'Neill, and a veteran of the Spanish service. When O'Neill rejected the summons to surrender, Cromwell positioned his artillery on Gallows Hill to the north of Clonmel. This gave sufficient elevation for the gunners to lob shells into the town as well as battering its walls. But O'Neill had the support of the citizens and was determined to hold out for as long as possible. He believed that Ormond was raising an army in Ulster to march south and challenge Cromwell.

O'Neill's skirmishers raided the English lines in an attempt to disrupt the siege, but the walls of Clonmel were breached on 9 May. Unknown to Cromwell, however, O'Neill had strengthened the defences immediately behind the point where Parliamentary gunners were battering the wall. A semi-circular inner fortification of earth, stones and timber had been constructed around the weak point, with a ditch in front and two cannon mounted at the apex. When the Parliamentarians stormed through the breach, they found themselves in an area enclosed by O'Neill's fortification with no shelter from his musketeers and cannon. Unable to advance further and trapped by the weight of numbers of the troops still coming through the breach, the Commonwealth soldiers were cut down by musket fire and chain shot from the cannon. Some estimates say that the English lost 2,500 killed and wounded. Unable to make any progress into the town, Cromwell ordered a withdrawal back to the siege lines.

Although O'Neill had repulsed Cromwell's attack, his men were running short of food and ammunition. Realising that any help from Ormond was unlikely to arrive in time, O'Neill decided to evacuate his troops. The night after the assault, they slipped away from Clonmel and escaped to Waterford. The following day, the Mayor of Clonmel negotiated honourable terms for surrender with Cromwell, who did not realise that O'Neill and his soldiers had left the town. Although he was furious at being outwitted by O'Neill and at the heavy loss of life in the assault, Cromwell nevertheless kept to the terms.

Limerick, 27 October 1651

At the end of May 1650, Cromwell returned to England in order to deal with the growing threat from the Royalists and Covenanters in Scotland. He was succeeded as Lord Deputy in Ireland by his son-in-law Henry Ireton

For three months, Ireton was occupied with sieges. One by one the remaining Irish strongholds surrendered to English forces. The last Confederate field army was defeated by Sir Charles Coote at the battle of Scarriffhollis in June 1650; by the end of August only the fortified towns of Limerick, Galway and Athlone still resisted the English invaders. The town of Limerick on the River Shannon was Ireton's main objective. Hugh Dubh O'Neill, who had outwitted Cromwell at Clonmel, was governor. Limerick was one of the strongest fortresses in Ireland with a modern, triple-walled system of fortification. Leaving Sir Hardress Waller to initiate the siege from the east, Ireton marched north. His plan was to capture Athlone, which commanded the first bridge over the Shannon, and to then march down the opposite bank of the Shannon to invest Limerick from the west. Ireton's plan may have depended on the expectation that Athlone would be betrayed to him; when he arrived

on 16 September and found the town and its bridge heavily defended, he turned back to rejoin Waller at Limerick. By the time he arrived, it was too late in the year to continue the siege.

The siege of Limerick was reinstated during the summer of 1651. On 1 June, Ireton's troops forced a crossing of the River Shannon at Brian's Bridge, which enabled him to establish forces on both sides of the river. After an attempt to storm the town failed with heavy losses, Ireton set about blockading Limerick into submission. He set up an extensive circumvallation, which included two forts (Fort Cromwell and Fort Ireton), then deployed a battery of 28 guns and 4 mortars. Despite an outbreak of plague in the town, the siege carried on until October. Ireton's guns breached the walls on 23 October; Limerick surrendered four days later. Several leading defenders were sentenced to death for prolonging the siege. The sentence on O'Neill was not carried out; he was sent to London and imprisoned in the Tower. Ireton himself died at Limerick on 7 November, either from the plague or from a fever. His body was returned for a state funeral in London on the same ship that carried Hugh O'Neill to imprisonment.

After Ireton's death, his second-in-command Edmund Ludlow took over as provisional commander in Ireland. The surrender of Galway to Ludlow in May 1652 marks the completion of the Cromwellian subjugation of Ireland. The only remaining resistance came from Catholic Irish outlaws, known as "Tories", who continued to raid settlers and landowners and to attack any native Irish who were seen to cooperate with the invaders.