

# The Cromwellian Siege of Kilkenny

BY JOHN E. KERRY KEANE

It was on Friday, March 22, 1650 that Oliver Cromwell appeared with a strong force outside the gates of Kilkenny. The city was suffering from plague and this had reduced the strength of the garrison to a very small effective force. Lord Castlehaven had sent 1,000 foot and 200 horse but by the time of the siege there were only 600 men still alive and, of these, only 300 were in fighting trim. Kilkenny was generally regarded as a doomed city and no one was willing to help. Lord Dillon's men—1,500 foot and 600 horse—had refused to come from Carlow to beat off the attack and the small company at Cantwell's Court had decided to surrender rather than to face what they knew would be a very fierce onslaught.

In fact, the men at Cantwell's Castle sent out scouts to offer the Castle (now Sandfort's Court) to Cromwell and they asked for money and passes to go free to serve in armies abroad. Lord Dillon's men in Carlow refused on the grounds that they were "ready to fight against man but not against God." (Murphy p.295.). Ormonde was away in Clare raising an army and he had given Lord Castlehaven the command of Leinster. Castlehaven had appointed James Walsh governor of Kilkenny Castle and Sir Walter Butler, governor of the city. (Castlehaven Memoirs p.120).

The citizens of Kilkenny were in dread of the Cromwellian forces. They knew that if they were to lose the battle and if they failed to keep the Cromwellians outside the walls, they could expect nothing but the most awful retribution. Immediate betrayal was only barely averted by the discovery and capture of an officer of the garrison called Tickle who had agreed to indicate to Cromwell the weakest points of the Kilkenny defences. Tickle was caught just before he could carry out his treachery but this incident must have lent an atmosphere of high drama to an already tense situation. Tickle had been bribed with an offer of £4,000, a high command in Cromwell's army and the governorship of Kilkenny for arranging the betrayal. (Carte Mss vol. xxvi. Belling's *Vindiciae* p.227).

Cromwell's first act was to send a letter to Sir Walter Butler, the governor of the city, demanding a surrender but this was promptly refused. The full correspondence between Cromwell and Sir Walter Butler, governor of the city, and between Cromwell and James Archdeakin, Mayor of Irishtown, is given in Carlyle's "Letters of Cromwell" and in Fr. Denis Murphy's "Cromwell In Ireland" and it is unnecessary to reproduce this correspondence here.

Immediately after Cromwell received Sir Walter Butler's refusal, he directed his artillery to play on the south wall of the town which ran from Talbot's Castle, near the present-day Technical Schools, across to St. Patrick's Gate and from there across to the Castle Stables. Talbot's Castle got a bad battering, probably on the Friday after Cromwell had received Sir Walter Butler's adamant and acrid refusal to surrender. It seems likely that Cromwell knew that he could not hope to create a breach in the wall by spasmodic fire but he knew also that it might encourage a surrender. However, he did not succeed either in creating a breach or in forcing the citizens into an untimely surrender and so he ordered his troops to cease fire and to encamp for the night. A canon ball from this period was found at Talbot's Castle by Mr. W. K. Cleere, the grandfather of the present Mr. William K. Cleere, of the well-known building firm. The canon ball was housed for many years in the museum run by the Old Kilkenny Archaeological Society but it is now in the National Museum.

The Cromwellians had come in to the city by the old road known as Boher na Thoundish—the road of the aged or infirm. There is a tradition that they encamped on the hill above Loughboy and some of the older people still refer to this hill as Cromwell's Hill. The old Boher na Thoundish came into the city by the side of the present St. Patrick's Church and continued on past Talbot's Castle down New Street, then down into Blackmill. The soldiers left this road at the present junction of the Kells Road with the Waterford Road and encamped for the night, most probably close to St. Patrick's Church. So great was the damage done to this church that the site of the foundations cannot now be precisely located. Canon Carrigan declares that the foundations are "no longer traceable." However, it seems likely that St. Patrick's was immediately adjacent to the old

graveyard on the north east side. St. Patrick's Church must not be confused with St. Patrick's Chapel which was of a much later origin and which was in the kitchen garden of Butler House. Cromwell mounted three pieces of ordnance, two demicanon and one culverin on St. Patrick's Church which afforded him a commanding position of the part of the wall near the Castle Stables.

While Cromwell had been setting up his artillery on St. Patrick's Church, Sir Walter Butler had been busy preparing the defences. He had gathered all his men together at the place inside the wall where he now knew that the enemy would try to create a breach. Behind the wall, the governor had erected two works, palisades and engines. Everything was ready for the battle.

In the meantime, Cromwell had tried to gain entry at Irishtown but he had been repulsed. Then, after setting up arms on St. Patrick's Church, he again wrote to Sir Walter Butler, who refused saying "I would sooner lose my life and the lives of all that are here rather than submit to such dishonourable conditions." Now although everything was ready for the battle the armies of the 17th century did not wage war on Sundays so the day passed without incident, although it must have been a day of great anxiety for the citizens who could only wonder about the outcome of the next few days.

The silence at the walls of the city was not to be broken until about 5.30 on the morning of Monday, March 25. It must have been cold, dark and clammy as the first canons boomed out in the morning air and crashed against the city wall. The attack was at a spot beneath the stables and between the castle gate and the rampart. Hour after hour the storming continued unabated and it was not until noon on Tuesday, after over 100 canon shots had been fired, that a breach was made.

Immediately, Lt. Colonel Axtell led on a storming party and rushed the breach and he was followed by another party led by Colonel Hewson. There were two main attacks both of which were successfully held back. Colonel Hewson was slightly wounded. He got a shot in the back which "penetrated his buff coat and a little bruised the flesh." Cromwell lost 70 men, two colonels and some other officers. The city lost 30 men. (viz.

Lingard vol. viii, p.137. Bruodin says 600 Cromwellian troops fell but this must be a mistake).

When Cromwell's men were ordered to attack the breach a third time they refused to do so. They must have been impressed with the courage and fighting skill of the Kilkenny garrison and it is the only occasion of which I know that Cromwell's men were so frightened that they refused to carry out an order to charge. Later, on April 2 in Carrick-on-Suir, Cromwell wrote to Lenthal in England saying: "It was a mercy on us that we did farther contend for an entrance there, it being probable that, if we had, it would have cost us very dear." (viz. Carlyle vol. ii, p.154).

While the battle at the breach in the wall was raging, Cromwell had noticed that all the men of the garrison were occupied in fighting that attack at this spot and that the rest of the city was almost without defence. As a diversionary tactic he pretended to make ready for a further rush on the breach and, in the meantime, he sent Colonel Evers with 1,000 men to Dean's Gate at Irishtown. Irishtown was completely separate from the Hightown or Englishtown and in attempting to take the Irishtown, Cromwell still had the task of storming the Englishtown, of overcoming the garrison and of taking the Castle. However, Irishtown was of great strategic importance because it contained St. Canice's Cathedral which was on a great height and commanded a complete view of English town.

Taylor, in his "Civil Wars," says that Cromwell was about to raise the siege altogether when the townsmen invited him to stay and promised to obtain admittance for his forces into the city. The author of the "Aphorismal Discovery" says that "the surrender was entirely owing to the conduct of the citizens; if the governor were pleased, and the citizens loyal, he might have kept the town for a twelvemonth, if a straiter siege were not laid unto. But the base cowardice and disloyal townsmen betrayed both the gentlemen and did capitulate with the enemy. Which agreed upon, the gates were opened for him, and all unknown to the governor."

Many authorities have been outspoken in condemning the townsmen and in blaming them for the eventual surrender but I think that most of these criticisms are unfair and have little regard for the circumstances. After the fall of Kilkenny the townsmen of Irishtown were blamed and were turned out of

their homes by way of punishment. Eleven years later they sent a petition to the Marquis of Ormonde asking to be allowed back to their homes. This document puts forward the point of view of the townsmen for the first time and speaks eloquently in their defence. Here is an extract: "The siege of Kilkenny having endured for six or seven days, your petitioners, having not sufficient forces to defend the same nor hope of relief, by reason of the plague and great sickness then raging in the same city, after suffering in a high degree all the extremeties of the plague, fire and sword, and four several storms in several parts of the city, which were repulsed, and after a great breach made in the walls by cannon shot of about fifty great bullets; at last, by direction or allowance of Sir Walter Butler, governor of the city and castle, yielded upon quarter."

There are a number of points which need to be remembered. Firstly, Cromwell was a master psychological warfare and he had already succeeded in terrifying the entire country. His massacre at Drogheda was very bloody and his treatment of the inhabitants of the Walsh castle, near Kilkenny at Castle Howell, was very severe. All the inhabitants of this castle were murdered and their bodies were thrown into a hole at the foot of the hill on which the castle stood. The townsmen must have known about these atrocities and they must have been very frightened about the outcome of an unsuccessful resistance to the siege.

Secondly, the plague had taken a very severe toll of the garrison and in the poorer Irishtown, which was overpopulated and where there was little or no sanitation, the sickness and death rate must have been very great. Another point is that the defences of the Irishtown were not nearly as formidable as those of the Hightown and there were no troops from the garrison available to help the townsmen to defend these already inadequate defences. Lastly, the townsmen of Irishtown had already repulsed a force of Cromwellian soldiers on the previous Saturday and their fighting strength must have been even further depleted by this earlier skirmish.

However, it is clear that the arrival at Dean's Gate of a force of 1,000 men as an organised and disciplined army gave the townsmen little alternative but to surrender. This was the only sensible thing to do as any resistance would have been

totally ineffective and it would have made subsequent reprisals a virtual certainty.

Fr. Denis Murphy, S.J., the historian, declared "the townsmen, at the first onset of the enemy, deserted their posts almost without striking a blow" but Cromwell in a letter dated April 2 from Carrick-on-Suir shows that some resistance was made when he says that he lost about three or four men while storming Irishtown and before gaining entry. After the fall of Irishtown, Cromwell realised that his position had improved a great deal and his letters became much more demanding. But, although the correspondence continued, the hostilities did not cease. The Cromwellians attempted to get into the High town at that part of the city wall which ran alongside the Bregagh River at St. Francis Abbey. On Wednesday, March 27, a breach was made with pickaxes in the wall adjoining the Franciscan monastery. The Cromwellians would have succeeded at this point but the governor was warned just in time and came with a party of horse and killed about 30 soldiers before they could escape. Until recently, this was no more than an unconfirmed tradition but this year the remains of about 30 skeletons were discovered buried just on the spot where tradition had indicated that the skirmish took place. (Life of Ormonde vol. iii, p.114).

On the night of Wednesday, March 27, eight companies of foot under Colonel Gifford went across the river above the junction of the Rivers Bregagh and Nore and St. John's was taken with the loss of only a few men. The same party also attempted to pass over St. John's Bridge to get into the city by firing at the gate but they did not succeed and they suffered severe casualties and lost 40 or 50 men. The governor of the city realised, however, that he was now completely out-flanked and, since there seemed to be no possibility of help, capitulation was only a matter of time. (viz. Whitelocke, p.434).

On Wednesday, March 27, a party consisting of Major John Comerford, Captain David Thurnball, James Cowley, Recorder of Kilkenny, and Edward Rothe, Merchant, were sent out to a tent beyond the south wall of the city to parley. Lord Castlehaven's order to Sir Walter Butler was that if the garrison was not relieved by 7 p.m. on March 27, the governor should surrender on the best conditions available if the alternative was

the massacre of the citizens. Sir Walter Butler observed Castlehaven's order and late on the evening of March 27 the terms of surrender were agreed and signed. On the following day, Thursday, March 28, the city and castle were delivered and shortly afterwards, Ireton arrived with 1,500 men to aid the besiegers. The terms of the treaty are given fully in all the standard works but briefly they were as follows.

1. The surrender of the city and castle with all arms etc.
2. A guarantee that the inhabitants were to be free personally and in their possessions and that they were to be given the right to leave the city with all their possessions within three months.
3. The garrison was to march out of the city in full regalia and all arms were to be surrendered at a place about two miles from the city. They were to be allowed to keep 100 pikes and 100 muskets.
4. The men of the garrison were to be guaranteed a safe pass for six days. This meant that, travelling at a rate of 10 miles per day, the men would have a safe journey to the coast.
5. The city was to pay £1,000 to Cromwell as a gratuity on March 30, and a further £1,000 the following May.
6. Major John Comerford and Edward Rothe were to be hostages to ensure that the terms of the treaty were honoured.

Cromwell praised Kilkenny Castle which he described in a letter as follows: "The castle exceedingly well fortified by the industry of the enemy; being also very capacious, so that if we had taken the town, we must have had a new work for the castle, which might have caused much blood and time." Cromwell was also very complimentary about the bravery of the garrison: "I have lost more men storming that place than Drogheda, and I should have gone without it were it not for the treachery of the townsmen." From Carrick he wrote about the importance of capturing Kilkenny: "The taking of the city of Kilkenny hath been one of our last works; which indeed, I believe, hath been a great decomposing of the enemy; it's so much into their bowels."

At the time of the siege, Kilkenny was described in the following terms: "Kilkenny, the seat of the Supreme Council,

the spring-head of an execrable rebellion, the centre from which all the treasons and damnable counsels against the king, country, and religion were so many lines drawn." This illustrates the position of the city in the political situation of the 17th century and it shows why such great efforts were made to prevent it from falling to Cromwell.

The capture of Kilkenny was an important turning point and was of particular significance on account of the Ormonde connection. In his "Elenchus," the historian Bates sums up when he writes: "And so in eight days time, for the siege lasted no longer, Kilkenny was reduced under subjection, which for a great many years had given laws unto the rest."