

Between the Sieges, 1690 - 1691

In 1990-91, it had been intended to produce three journals on the sieges, one on the 1690 siege, a second on the intervening year, and a third on the 1691 siege, the Treaty of Limerick and its aftermath. For financial reasons only the first of these could be published. It is proposed to publish articles received for the other two in future issues of the Journal.

by Liam Irwin

Marlborough had obtained permission to bring a separate force to Ireland for the specific objective of taking Cork and Kinsale with their strategically located harbours for Irish contacts with France. He landed at Passage West with over 5,000 troops on September 23rd and began the siege of Cork on the following day. He was reinforced by 1,200 Danish and Dutch cavalry and over 3,600 infantry, mostly Danes and Dutch with some French Huguenots. These had been dispatched by Ginkel, who had succeeded to the Williamite command in Ireland after the departure of Solms, the man whom William had appointed when he hastily left Limerick on August 30th.

Cork was thus attacked from both sides of the River Lee; Marlborough and his English troops on the south and the Danes and Dutch on the north. The Jacobite garrison in Cork consisted of about 4,000 men commanded by Colonel Roger MacElligott, a Kerry-born officer who had served with James II in England in 1688, been imprisoned by William, had escaped to France and returned to Ireland with James in 1689.

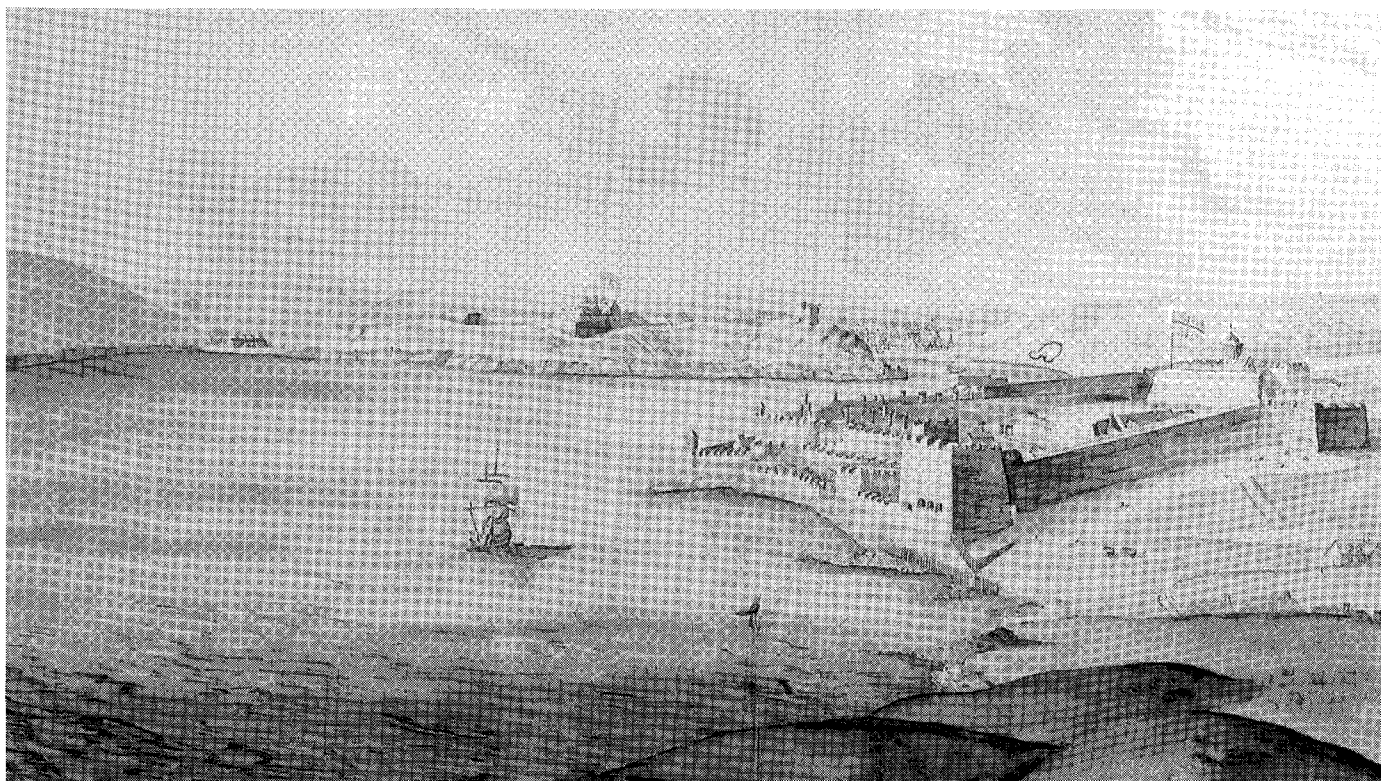
The Duke of Berwick, who had

command of the Jacobite forces, ordered the abandonment of the city, but MacElligott refused. There were deep divisions among the Jacobites on policy, tactics and strategy, which were fuelled further by bitter personality clashes. A major cause of resentment was the failure to give the overall command to Sarsfield, the 'darling of the army' since his escapade at Ballyneety. There was dissension on the Williamite side also, with Württemberg, the Danish commander, claiming seniority over Marlborough. Eventually the somewhat risky compromise of allowing each to command on alternative days was agreed, though tension between them, and among their respective forces, continued.

The siege of Cork lasted less than a week and there is general agreement that the city's vulnerability as a low lying settlement commanded by high ground on both sides of the river made a prolonged resistance impossible. MacElligott tried to obtain favourable surrender terms, initially asking for retreat with the full honours of war. He should have been able to exploit the divisions among the Williamites, as Württemberg was inclined to offer more favourable terms than Marlborough, but in the end his vacillation resulted in the garrison being forced to surrender unconditionally. Both the captured

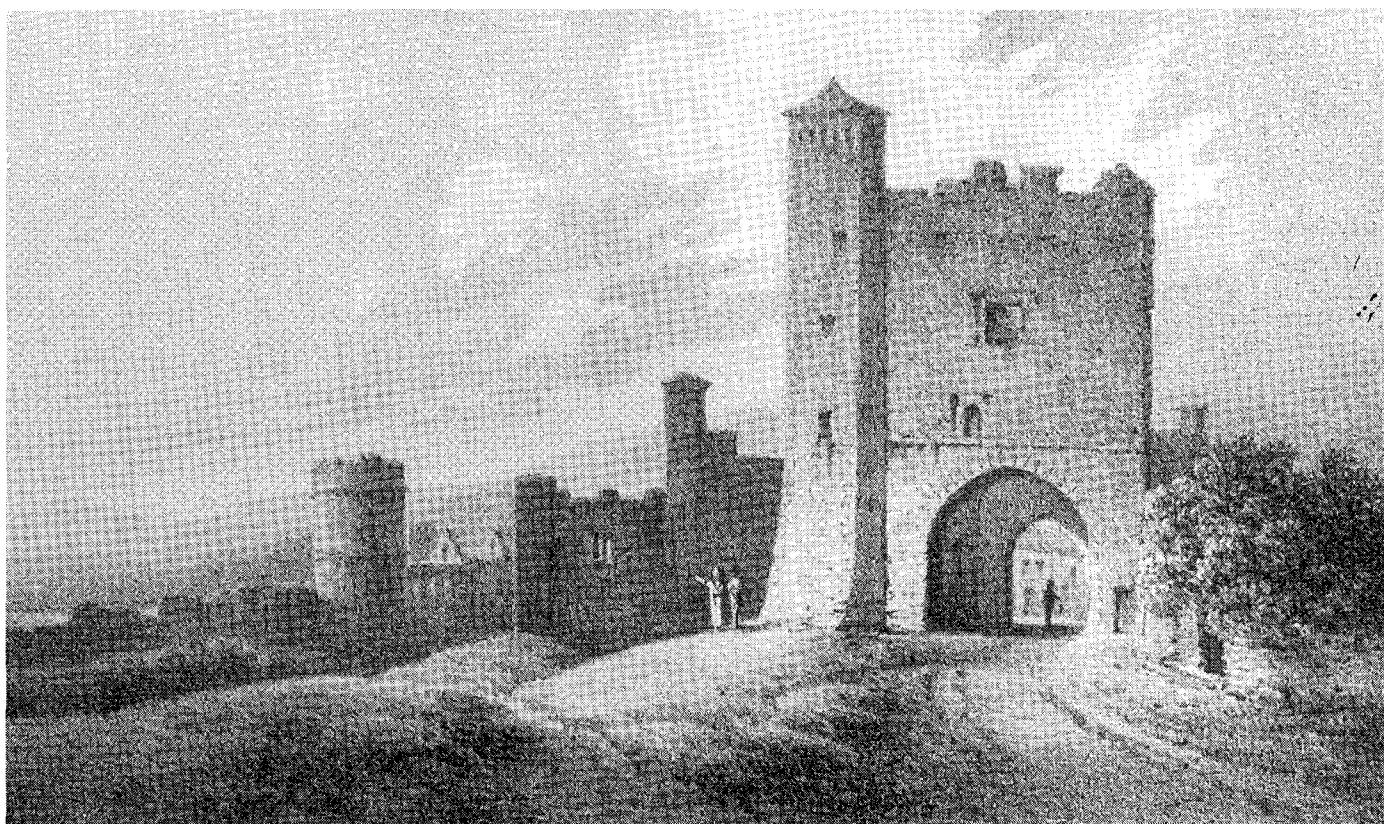
In the immediate aftermath of the unsuccessful siege of Limerick in August 1690, the Williamites received an important morale boost through the capture of the two major southern port towns of Cork and Kinsale. It is to be doubted that William himself derived much satisfaction from these victories, as they provided an unwelcome contrast with his own humiliating failure at Limerick and were achieved by the Earl of Marlborough, a man for whom he had no great affection and with whom his military skills were unflatteringly compared.

Before the debacle at Limerick,



A Prospect of Charles Fort, Kinsale, 1685, by Thomas Phillips.

National Library of Ireland.



The North Gate at Kilmallock, 1822.

Limerick Museum.

combatants and the civilians were harshly treated and the city was extensively plundered.

The Williamites followed up this impressive victory with an immediate assault on Kinsale. This town was not walled and depended for its defence on two forts, one on either side of the harbour. The elderly commander, Sir Edward Scott, decided to abandon the town and both garrison and inhabitants fled to the forts. The older James fort was quickly captured, largely through the skill and bravery of the Danes, which Marlborough petulantly refused to acknowledge. The newer Charles fort held out for two weeks and in direct contrast to the situation in Cork, Würtemberg wanted the garrison to surrender as prisoners of war, but Marlborough allowed them to march out with their arms and retreat to Limerick. This is usually explained by his relief at obtaining the surrender and his desire to return to England to be feted for his achievement. The Jacobites had suffered two major reverses, partly at least through their own ineptitude, and predictable recriminations ensued. Berwick bore the brunt of the criticisms, particularly for not coming to the aid of Kinsale. However, his original advice to burn Cork should probably have been heeded and it was certainly disastrous to have weakened Kinsale by the sending of two regiments to Cork, which clearly, due to its location, could not have withstood a long siege. Even then Charles fort could have held out much longer, but Scott decided on surrender when the besieging army was not attacked by Berwick. To add to Jacobite problems, Kilmallock had also been inadequately defended and unnecessarily lost.

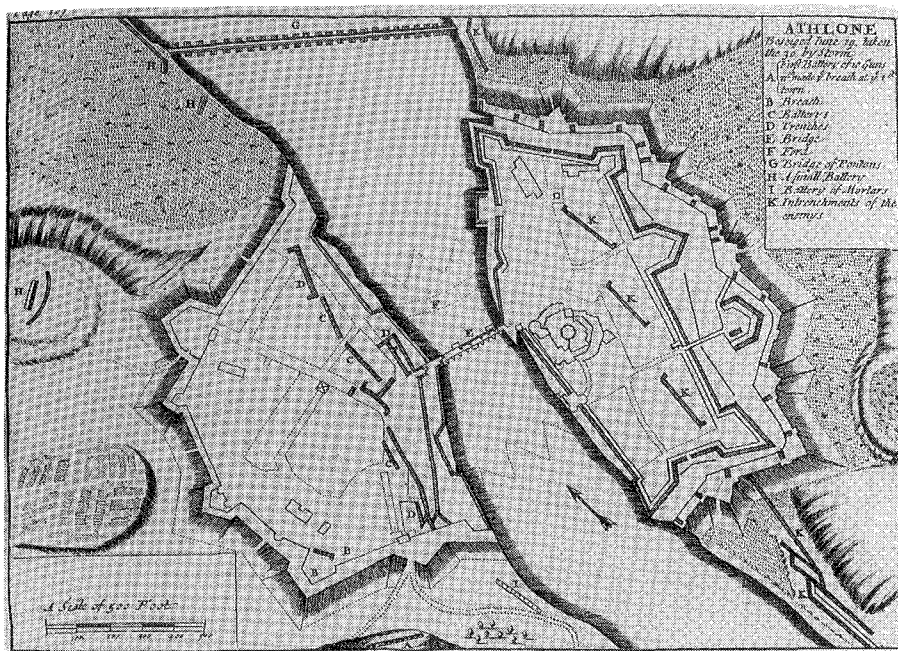
In October 1690, both armies withdrew behind frontier lines, though some military activity did take place during the winter. The Jacobites occupied Limerick and Kerry and the whole area west of the Shannon in Connacht and Clare. The Williamites held most of the rest of Munster, Leinster and Ulster in a line from the Cork coast through Cashel and Mullingar up to Enniskillen and west from there along the Erne to Ballyshannon. A no-man's land frontier lay between them from the Shannon to the Williamite line. This area was constantly plundered and raided by both armies and the inhabitants suffered severely. The Danes, the Rapparees and Sarsfield, who authorised much of the looting on the Jacobite side, were the subjects of particular criticism.

Towards the end of 1690, William ordered attacks on the Irish positions in counties Kerry and Sligo. This was aimed at putting pressure on the leaders to negotiate a settlement. Ginkel argued, with greater insight, that an offer of further concessions would be a better ploy to achieve this end. The attack on Kerry was undertaken in January 1691 by the Danes under Major General Tettau. The Irish retreated to Ross castle near Killarney. Tettau, with no heavy guns, was forced to withdraw without achieving anything. Ginkel and Würtemberg took a force of 4,000 Danes, Dutch and French to attack Kilmallock, which had been re-occupied by the Jacobites. The garrison promptly abandoned the town, burning it as they left. The plan to attack Sligo was also unsuccessful, due largely to the incompetence of the Williamite generals, Douglas and Lanier. After that, Sarsfield very skilfully defended the line of the

Shannon from any other incursions.

For both armies the winter of 1690-91 was one of considerable suffering. Food was scarce, clothing inadequate and living quarters squalid in the extreme. Tyrconnell, who had gone to France with Lauzun in September, returned to Limerick in January 1691. He not only took control of the civil government but also of the army, as Berwick had left Ireland. Not even the grant of the title Earl of Lucan lessened the anger of Sarsfield at being denied command of the army yet again.

The resentments, bitterness and jealousies among the Jacobites were intensified by the various peace initiatives attempted during the winter period. Ginkel was anxious to end the war quickly and felt that generous terms should be offered to Catholic landowners. He used a Catholic barrister, John Grady, as an intermediary and was informed that if Catholics were assured of keeping their estates and were promised the religious liberties enjoyed during the reign of Charles II then they would surrender. Würtemberg even declared that the war in Ireland could be ended by the stroke of a pen. This view was unrealistically optimistic. William was not prepared to make such concessions, as he wanted Irish land for himself and to satisfy the ambitions both of the English House of Commons and of Irish Protestants. With the failure of the winter military activities and their concomitant aim of pressurising the Irish, William adopted a somewhat more flexible approach. In the early spring, Ginkel was authorised to issue a declaration that Irish Catholics had nothing to fear either in terms of religion



The Siege of Athlone, 1691, from George Story's *Continuation of the Impartial History of the Wars of Ireland, 1693*.

Limerick Museum.

or property and would obtain reasonable terms if they capitulated.

These attempts to get a negotiated end to the war sharply divided the Jacobites into peace and war parties. Sarsfield was the leader of the militant group and used his considerable reputation to swing the majority behind him. Those who had regained land after the restoration favoured a settlement, but the limited and vague terms offered by William were not sufficient to persuade more than a minority that there was any alternative to another summer of war.

During the winter, the Jacobites had made efforts to improve the defences of their principal strongholds. At Limerick the breach in the Irishtown wall, near the south-east corner, was repaired and a large earthen rampart constructed behind it on the eastern and southern sides. French engineers reached the city in February and constructed bastions, forts, covered ways and other defensive structures. Considerable attention was also paid to the other vital crossing point of the Shannon at Athlone.

The final phase of the war began in June 1691. William did not return to Ireland and, despite some doubts about his ability, Ginkel was continued as commander. He was well supplied with men, arms and ammunition. The overall size of the Williamite army in 1691 was about 20,000, considerable smaller than the 35,000 that William had commanded at the Boyne the previous year. The Jacobite army consisted of 3,000 cavalry, 2,000 dragoons and about 16,000 foot soldiers. No clear decision had been made about who should command this force. A French general, the Marquis de St. Ruth, had been sent to Ireland in May. His arrival had been eagerly anticipated, not least for the long-promised aid he was expected to bring. In the event, while he had arms,

ammunition, food and uniforms, there were no extra soldiers and no money. Nevertheless, he was universally welcomed and even Sarsfield appeared happy to serve under him. However, Tyrconnell regarded himself as the overall commander and tried to exercise that authority. Most of the army refused to obey him and insisted that they would take orders only from St. Ruth. The responsibility for this ludicrous state of affairs must rest with James II, who did not issue clear instructions, relying instead on the unsatisfactory formula that Tyrconnell had overall authority but that he should defer in all military matters to St. Ruth. This uncertainty in regard to command increased the dissension among the Irish and lowered morale. The army continued to be poorly fed, badly organised and inadequately equipped and it took until mid-June before it was assembled and ready to face the Williamite challenge. Were it not for Ginkel's delay in attacking Athlone the town would almost certainly have been captured easily in early June.

The Williamite forces regrouped for the campaign at the end of May. Mullingar and Cashel were the main meeting points for the divided army. The first objective was to cross the Shannon and, after some discussion, it was decided to besiege Athlone in pursuit of that aim. This would have the additional bonus, if successful, of capturing one of the principal Irish strongholds. The first engagement was at Ballymore, Co. Westmeath, where an advance post for the defence of Athlone had been erected. After a two day bombardment the commander, Ulick Bourke, surrendered. It was then that Ginkel made a serious error. Instead of immediately heading for the poorly defended Athlone, he remained at Ballymore for ten days awaiting the arrival

of pontoons, which he felt would be needed for crossing the Shannon. It was not until June 18th that he linked up with the Danes who had assembled at Cashel. The combined force numbered about 18,000.

Athlone was really two walled towns, termed, as in Limerick, English and Irish town. The former lay on the eastern bank of the Shannon in Leinster, while the latter was in Connacht on the western side. The Leinster town only put up token resistance, mainly to give St. Ruth time to bring up the main body of the Irish army. The camp was pitched two miles west of the Irish town, on which the defence was concentrated. The Williamite attack on the walls and castle of the Connacht town began on June 21st, and for the next ten days the heaviest bombardment of any stronghold in Irish history took place. It was estimated that 600 bombs, 12,000 cannon balls and tons of mortar stones were fired. Despite this massive attack, which reduced most of the defences to rubble, the Williamites could not take the town without crossing the river. The long awaited pontoon bridge could not be erected due to fire from the Jacobites and the existing bridge became the main target. The bridge of Athlone was a narrow stone structure dating from the sixteenth century. The arches at the Irish town end had been deliberately broken down and the main Williamite objective was to repair these. This was achieved with wooden beams and planks on the night of June 27th, but in an act of spectacular bravery 30 men of a Scottish Jacobite regiment were killed as they successfully demolished this work. The sergeant who led the men was named Custume and his name and deed became renowned in later song and story. Ginkel had begun to despair of capturing the town when some deserters informed him of a ford a few yards south of the bridge. Towards evening on June 30th, 2,000 Williamites waded across the river at that point and stormed the breach below the castle. The unexpected nature of the attack and the unlucky accident that only raw recruits were manning the defences at the time led to a swift capture of the town.

The acquisition of Athlone was a major boost for the Williamites. It gave them the facility to take the war into the Irish stronghold of Connacht and provided a distinct psychological advantage at the very start of the renewed campaign. Conversely, it produced demoralisation and further divisions among the Jacobites. They had held a very secure stronghold in Athlone and its loss could only be explained by the ineptitude of the leaders, which was in stark contrast to the bravery and dedication of most of the defenders. A major cleavage now developed on the question of strategy. St. Ruth was determined to engage the enemy in a major field battle. It was widely believed that this was a gamble to avenge his humiliation at Athlone, though he argued, with some justification, that a quick engagement was essential to halt the

rapidly deteriorating morale. Sarsfield and Tyrconnell were uncharacteristically in agreement that this would be a mistake and some of the French officers concurred. Their alternative strategy was to concentrate the infantry in Galway and Limerick, abandon the rest of Connacht and instead send the cavalry across the Shannon to attack the Williamite rear. St. Ruth, however, ignored this strongly argued case and insisted that his view prevail. The site chosen for the battle was on the eastern slopes of a hill near the small village of Aughrim in Co. Galway. It was a good position, with the Jacobite infantry ranged along the hill and protected in front by a river and boggy area with just two passes at either end, which were defended by the cavalry. St. Ruth took up his position on July 8th and the Williamites moved towards him from Athlone on the 11th. Ginkel reached Aughrim on the following day and after some brief skirmishes he decided to give battle immediately. The fighting began around 5.00 in the evening and both armies had roughly the same strength, 20,000 men, and each adopted the same formation with infantry in the centre and cavalry on the wings. It was Sunday afternoon and there are various contemporary accounts of the role that the priests played in urging the Irish to fight. The Bishop of Cork later wrote that 80 priests died in the battle while spurring on the troops with their crucifixes. The Williamites attacked the Jacobite right initially and then switched to an assault on the left, but on both occasions they were driven back. There was very intense fighting, with the Irish defence showing a fierce and unexpected determination. It appeared that victory would be theirs until misfortune struck with the killing of St. Ruth. This calamity was quickly followed by a retreat of the cavalry guarding the northern pass and the advance of the Williamites through it and along the hill to attack the Irish infantry in the rear. This caused panic and an attempted retreat. In their disarray, the Irish were ruthlessly cut down by the Williamite cavalry. To add to the confusion, there was now no commander. De Tesse, who took charge on St. Ruth's death, had himself been wounded shortly afterwards and the role played by Sarsfield is unclear. His earlier cordial relationship with St. Ruth had deteriorated and it is virtually certain that he had received no authority to succeed to the command. He was reported to have made some ineffectual attempts to try to protect the retreating infantry from the inevitable slaughter. Only the advent of nightfall saved the Irish from an even greater massacre. More than 7,000 of the Jacobites died and up to 2,000 Williamites were killed or wounded in the most horrific battle of Irish history. The Jacobite army lost all its guns and baggage, along with all cavalry standards and 32 regimental colours. Many of the Catholic gentry were killed or taken prisoner, including two sons of the Earl of Clanricarde, brothers of Sarsfield's wife,

Hanora. A further cause of anger and demoralisation was the widespread belief that the defeat had been caused by treachery. The cavalry retreat from the northern pass, which allowed the Williamite attack, had been ordered by Brigadier Luttrell, an officer who had originally been part of Sarsfield's war party, but who now apparently wished for an end to the fighting. The subsequent discovery that he was secretly in communication with Ginkel and his ultimate receipt of a Williamite pension appeared to give confirmation of his betrayal. The disastrous defeat at Aughrim, the greatest tragedy in an Ireland addicted to remembrance of misfortune, was now to be long remembered in song and in story. It even gave rise to a fatalistic proverb, 'it isn't the loss of Aughrim'.

The battle was the decisive turning point of the war. There was no longer any doubt about the ultimate outcome and the question from then on was how long the Jacobites could hold out and what final terms could be expected from William. Ginkel had issued a proclamation on July 9th offering a pardon and restoration of estates to those who were prepared to surrender, though officers would have to hand over the areas under their command. The civilian populations of Galway and Limerick were also to be given these terms and, against Ginkel's advice, a vague clause relating to liberty of religious practice was added. This had produced no response, but in the aftermath of Aughrim it was given a new significance, particularly for the inhabitants of Galway, which was now besieged by Ginkel. After a token resistance, which had only been undertaken at the urging of the French general, d'Usson, the town requested a negotiated surrender. Galway townsmen had suffered little in the 17th century plantations, even gaining from the Cromwellian attempt at transplantation and buying further land after the restoration. They had, therefore, a vested interest in obtaining terms and, unlike other Irish Catholics, would gain from the maintenance of, rather than the repeal of, the acts of settlement and explanation. They had been among the most receptive of the Jacobites to Ginkel's peace initiatives during the winter and were further encouraged by his July declaration. Nevertheless, the Articles of Galway were only agreed after intensive negotiation and gave concessions far in excess of what Ginkel had offered before Aughrim. The garrison obtained the options of remaining in Galway, returning to their homes or marching with full honours of war to Limerick, the last remaining Jacobite stronghold. Both soldiers and civilians were guaranteed their property. Freedom for the private practice of their religion was granted to the laity, while the persons and property of the clergy were given protection. Catholics could practice law and carry arms and a sword. These concessions indicate Ginkel's anxiety to avoid another

siege and his desire to bring the war to a speedy conclusion. The Articles of Galway were signed on July 21st and represented, despite their generosity, another victory for Ginkel. Apart from Sligo, the main fortress in the north western area, which was to remain in Irish hands until September 14th, only Clare and Limerick, with a less important area in Kerry, were now left to the increasingly beleaguered Irish and their thoroughly disillusioned French officers.

The main Jacobite army had assembled in Limerick by the beginning of August 1691. It was claimed to be 23,500 strong, but only half had arms and morale was very low. The main strategy was to hold out until October, when the onset of winter would force Ginkel to abandon the siege, as had happened to William in the previous year. To achieve even this limited objective, further help from France was vitally needed. Urgent requests had been sent after Aughrim, but in spite of apparently genuine promises, nothing had arrived, adding to the general demoralisation. Surprisingly Tyrconnell, who had been the leader of the peace party for the previous year, had now become a firm advocate of continued resistance. His death on August 14th created further complications. He died following a stroke, but such was the suspicion and intrigue among the divided Jacobites that credence was given to a rumour that he had been poisoned. Yet again Sarsfield was denied the authority he had long sought and in the popular view deserved. James II placed the civilian government in the hands of two English officials and the Irish lawyer, Sir Richard Nagle. The military command went to d'Usson, the senior French general. These appointments were to be largely paper ones. Sarsfield was seen as the true leader and key figure, not only by the majority of the Jacobites, but by the Williamites as well. When the discussions for the treaty commenced, Sarsfield was universally regarded as the principal negotiator.

Ginkel was reluctant to besiege Limerick. He was acutely conscious of the difficulties involved and of William's failure to take the city in August 1690. His main hope was a negotiated surrender, failing that he favoured a blockade. Only when these options became impossible did he embark on the siege. He waited a full month after the surrender of Galway, hoping that the internal feuding and growing loss of morale would lead to a request for terms. He brought the army across the Shannon at Banagher and marched slowly via Birr and Nenagh to Limerick. The weather had worsened and there was a sharp clash between Würtemberg, who wanted an immediate siege, and the other generals, who supported Ginkel's strategy of blockading the city. Ginkel finally arrived before the walls of Limerick on August 25th. He had received direct instructions from William to vigorously attack the city. The second Williamite siege of Limerick was about to begin.