

SACK OF WEXFORD

General Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658)

to William Lenthall (1591–1662), Speaker of the House of Commons (1640–1655, 1659–1660)

Wexford, 14 October 1649

The army marched from Dublin about 23 September into the County of Wicklow, where the enemy have a garrison, about fourteen miles from Dublin, called Killingkerick, which they quitting, a company of the army was put therein. From thence the army marched through almost a desolated country until it came to a passage over the river Avoca, about a mile above the Castle of Arclogh, which was the first seat and honor of the Marquis of Ormond's family; which he had strongly fortified, but was, upon the approach of the army, quitted. Wherein we left another company of foot.

From thence the army marched towards Wexford, where, in the way, was a strong and large castle at a town called Limerick, the ancient seat of the Esmondes, where the enemy had a strong garrison, which they burnt and quitted the day before our coming thither.

From thence we marched towards Fernes, an episcopal seat, where was a castle, to which I sent Colonel Reynolds with a party to summon it. Which accordingly he did, and it was surrendered to him. Where we, having put a company, advanced the army to a passage over the river Slaney, which runs down to Wexford, and that night marched into the field of a village called Enniscorthy, belonging to Mr. Robert Wallop; where was a strong castle, very well-manned and provided for by the enemy, and close under it, in a very fair house belonging to the same worthy person, a monastery of Franciscan friars, the considerablest in all Ireland. They ran away the night before we came. We summoned the castle, and they refused to yield at the first, but upon better consideration they were willing to deliver the place to us, which accordingly they did, leaving their great guns, arms and ammunition, and provisions behind them.

Upon Monday, 1 October, we came before Wexford, into which the enemy had put a garrison consisting of their army, this town having until then been so confident of their own strength as that they would not at any time suffer a garrison to be imposed upon them.

The commander that brought in those forces was Colonel David Synnot, who took upon him the command of the place, to whom I sent a summons, a copy whereof is enclosed, between whom and me there passed answers and replies, copies whereof these also are. Whilst these papers were passing between us, I sent the lieutenant-general, with a party of dragoons, horse, and foot, to endeavor to reduce their fort, which lay at the mouth of their harbor about ten miles distant from us, to which he sent a troop of dragoons. But the enemy quitted their fort, leaving behind them about seven great guns, betook themselves, by the help of their boats, to a frigate of twelve guns lying in the harbor within cannon-shot of the fort.

The dragoons possessed the fort, and some seamen belonging to your fleet coming happily in at the same time, they bent their guns at the frigate, and she immediately yielded to mercy both herself and the soldiers that had been in the fort, and the seamen that manned her. And whilst our men were in her, the townsmen, knowing what had happened, sent another small vessel to her, which our men also took.

The governor of the town having obtained from me a safe conduct for the four persons, mentioned in one of the papers, to come and treat with me about the surrender of the town, I expected they should have done so; but instead thereof, the Earl of Castlehaven¹ brought to their relief, on the north side of the river, about 500 foot, which occasioned their refusal to send out any to treat, and caused me to revoke my safe conduct, not thinking it fit to leave it for them to make use of it when they pleased.

¹ James Tuchet (c. 1617–1684), Earl of Castlehaven

Our cannon being landed and we having removed all our quarters to the south-east end of the town, near the castle, it was generally agreed that we should bend the whole strength of our artillery upon the castle; being persuaded that if we got the castle, the town would easily follow.

Upon Thursday, the 11th instant (our batteries being finished the night before), we began to play betimes in the morning; and having spent near a hundred shot, the governor's stomach came down, and he sent to me to give leave for four persons entrusted by him to come unto me and offer terms of surrender. Which I condescending to, two field-officers, with an alderman of the town and the captain of the castle, brought out the propositions enclosed. Which, for their abominableness, manifesting also the impudency of the men, I though fit to present to your view, together with my answer, which indeed had no effect.

For whilst I was preparing of it, studying to preserve the town from plunder, that it might be of the more use to you and your army, the captain, who was one of the commissioners, being fairly treated, yielded up the castle to us. Upon the top of which our men no sooner appeared but the enemy quitted the walls of the town. Which our men perceiving, ran violently upon the town with their ladders, and stormed it. And when they were come into the market-place, the enemy making a stiff resistance, our forces brake them, and then put all to the sword that came in their way. Two boatfuls of the enemy attempting to escape being over-pressed with numbers, sunk; whereby were drowned near 300 of them. I believe, in all, there was loss of the enemy not many less than 2000; and I believe not twenty of yours killed, from first to last of the siege.

And indeed it has not without cause been deeply set upon our hearts that we intending better to this place than so great a ruin, hoping the town might be of more use to you and your army, yet God would not have it so; but by an unexpected providence, in His righteous justice, brought a just judgment upon them, causing them to become a prey to the soldier who, in their piracies, had made preys of so many families, and made with their blood to answer the cruelties which they had exercised upon the lives of diverse poor Protestants, two of which I have been lately acquainted with. About seven or eight score poor Protestants were put by them into an old vessel, which being, as some say, bulged by them, the vessel sunk, and they were all presently drowned in the harbor. The other was thus: they put divers poor Protestants into a chapel, which since they have used for a mass house, and in which one or more of their priests was found, where they were famished to death.

The soldiers got a very good booty in this place. And had they not had opportunity to carry their goods over the river whilst we besieged it, it would have been much more. I could have wished, for their own good and the good of the garrison, they had been more moderate. Some things which were not easily portable we hope we shall make use of to your behoove. There are great quantities of iron, hides, tallow, salt, pipe, and barrel staves, which are under commissioners' hands to be secured. We believe there are near a hundred cannon in the fort and elsewhere in and about the town. Here is likewise some very good shipping. Here are three vessels; one of them of 34 guns which a week's time would fit to sea. There is another, of about 20 guns, very near ready likewise; and one other frigate, of 20 guns, upon the stocks, made for sailing, which is built up to the uppermost deck. For her handsomeness' sake, I have appointed the workmen to finish her, here being materials to do it, if you or the council of state shall approve thereof. The frigate also taken by the fort is a most excellent vessel for sailing; besides divers other ships and vessels in the harbor.

This town is now so in your power that the former inhabitants, I believe, scarce one in twenty can challenge any property in their houses. Most of them are run away, and many of them killed in the service. And it were to be wished that an honest people would come and plant here, where are very good houses and other accommodations fitted to their hands and may, by your favor, be made of encouragement to them. As also a seat of good trade, both inward and outward, and of marvelous great advantage in the point of the herring and other fishing. The town is pleasantly seated and strong, having a rampant of earth within the wall near fifteen feet thick.

Thus it has pleased God to give into your hands this other mercy; for which, as for all, we pray God may have all the glory. Indeed, your instruments are poor and weak, and can do nothing but through believing, and that is the gift of God also. I humbly take leave.

P.S.—A day or two before our battery was planted, Ormonde, the Earl of Castlehaven, the Lord of Ardes and Clanneboys were on the other side of the water, with about 1800 horse, 1500 foot, and offered to put in 400 or 500 foot more into the town, which the town refusing, he marched away in all haste. I sent the lieutenant-general after him with about 1400 horse, but the enemy made haste from him.

Henry Cary, *Memorials of the Great Civil War in England* (London: Henry Colburn, 1842), II:174–181.