

# The Battle of Aughrim - the Clontuskert Dimension

CHAPTER

8

The Battle of Aughrim has always been associated with the village and parish of that name, and rightly so. It was there that the fiercest fighting and the deciding actions of the battle took place. However, many Clontuskert people do not realise that a considerable proportion of the activities on that fateful day, took place within the boundaries of the parish of Clontuskert. The fact is that as late as six o' clock on the evening of the battle, the Williamite army was still positioned on the Clontuskert side of the Melehan River, which divides the two parishes.

At dawn, on the morning of July 12th 1691, the Williamite Allied army left its encampment on the Athlone side of Ballinasloe and arrived at the River Suck. The English foot soldiers crossed the bridge at Ballinasloe Castle; the Dutch and Danish troops crossed at two fords downriver and the cavalry detachments made their way over the river at a ford upstream of Ballinasloe. Shortly after leaving the town boundary, this army of 20,000 men filtered left along the narrow road leading through Liscappul to the townland of Urraghry in the parish of Clontuskert. In those days, the road from Ballinasloe to Aughrim was not as we know it today. A few

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hundred yards beyond the modern limits of the town, the 1691 road followed the old roadway to the left leading up and over Liscappul hill. Having passed across the Glan road, it rejoined the modern road to Galway at Melehan Bridge, a few hundred yards from Aughrim.

The Commander of the army was Godert de Ginkel, a sixty-one year old Dutchman and friend of William of Orange. Even though he had not previously set foot in the area, he was well briefed about its topography by his military scouts. His staff directed him to the top of Urraghry hill, aptly referred to by the local people as Lios Árd, or the 'high fort'. From this vantage point he was able to survey the positions of the enemy troops to the west and to oversee the deployment of his own forces as they moved to their allotted battle positions.

Urraghry Hill



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As the early morning fog gradually lifted, the panorama that unfolded before Ginkel's gaze gave him food for serious deliberation. To the right, his experienced eye traced the course of the road to Aughrim as it wound its way across a narrow causeway through the surrounding marshes, passing within forty yards of Aughrim castle. Ginkel noted that the area around the village was well fortified by the Jacobite troops who were stationed in the vicinity of the castle as well as behind the thick garden hedges of the surrounding area. As his gaze moved left along the hills of Aughrim and Kilcommadan, he noted an artillery battery and the lines of infantry battalions on the slopes, with their supporting cavalry regiments to the rear. Further to his left, along the southern slopes of Kilcommadan Hill towards Attibrassil Bridge, he picked out further detachments of Jacobite cavalry. Indeed, some of these dragoons were also posted along the near banks of the river. His opponent St. Ruth had chosen the battleground carefully.

Between the opposing armies lay a broad stretch of swampland, difficult to traverse on foot and through which it would be impossible for cavalry to find a passage. Meandering through this morass was the Melehan River which originated in the Aughrim lakes and crossed under the Ballinasloe to Aughrim road from where it ran southwards towards Tristaun. There it was joined by a tributary coming from Attibrassil Bridge, turning sharply eastwards on its way to becoming the Ballinure River. To this day, the Melehan River marks the boundary between the parishes of Clontuskert and Aughrim.

In the meantime, Ginkel's Allied troops were making their way to their assigned battle positions. Having reached Goode's Cross, a combination of Dutch and French Huguenot soldiers, comprising seven regiments of horse and three of dragoons, continued straight on for a few hundred yards before pausing on

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the Aughrim side of Urraghry Hill. They were commanded by the Huguenot General de Ruvigny. Further left on the higher ground, four artillery batteries were drawn up which would later be deployed in strategic locations across the battlefield. Immediately to the left of these were positioned fourteen battalions of Anglo-Irish infantry commanded by a Scot, Hugh Mackay and an Englishman, Thomas Tollemache.

The remainder of the Williamite Allied forces marched towards Attibrassil directly across the fields or could have traversed the Glan road before turning right and marching over Tristaun Bridge towards Hurney's Cross. Near Hurney's Cross, under the command of Hesse-Darmstadt and Meloniere, ten regiments of Dutch, Danish and Huguenot horse, as well as a considerable number of Dutch dragoons, began to prepare for battle. To their left were stationed fourteen battalions of English, Danish, Huguenot and Dutch infantry, commanded by a Prussian, von Tettau. Finally, the far left of the Williamite line took up their positions beside the road within a few hundred yards of Attibrassil Bridge, led by a Huguenot, le Forest-Suzannet, an officer in the Danish army, and by van Holtzappel who was a Dutchman. Under their command were ten regiments of Dutch, Danish and Huguenot Horse, as well as a number of Dutch Dragoons.

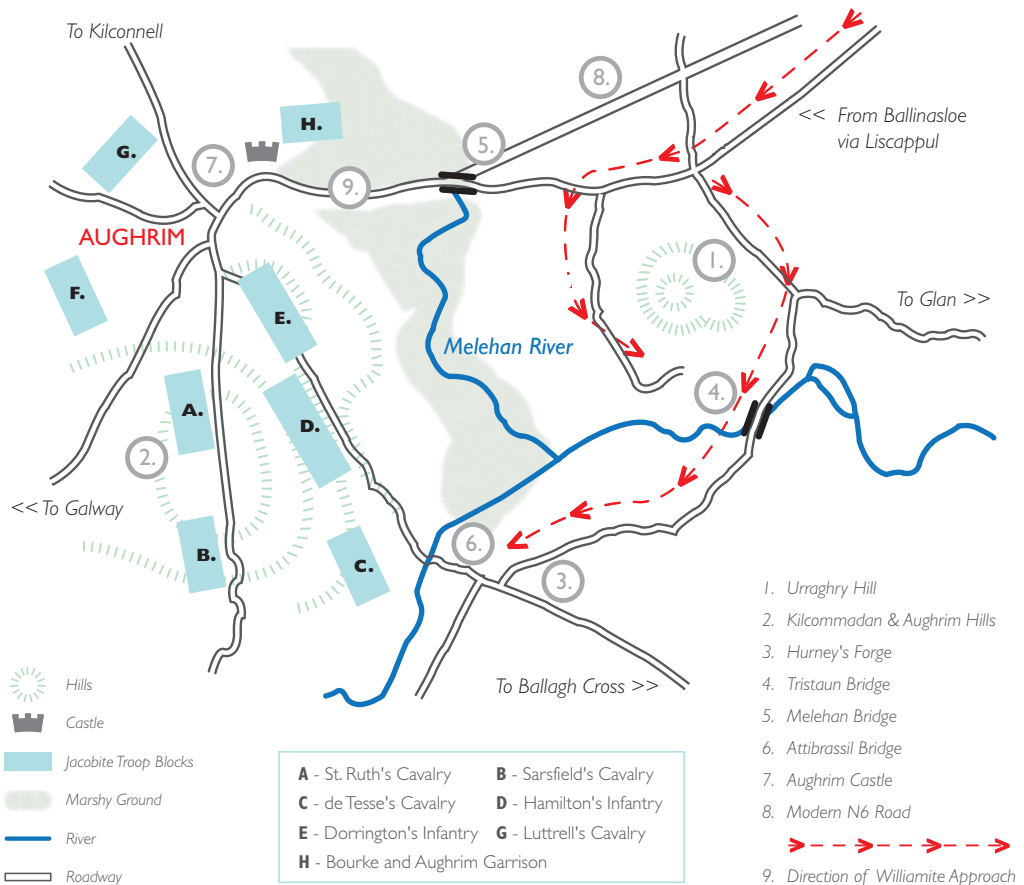
On the opposite side of the Melehan River, the Jacobite soldiers had been awakened from their sleep before eight o'clock and having attended Mass, they were given a rousing address by St. Ruth and by individual commanders all along the line. Despite their understandable pre-battle trepidation, they had reason for a certain degree of confidence. The task appeared to be a simple one – to prevent the Williamite right wing from crossing the marsh along the narrow causeway leading to Aughrim village and to defend the crossing at Attibrassil Bridge at the other end of their lines.

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Between these two extremities lay a broad expanse of marshy ground that prevented a straightforward onslaught by the enemy.

The defences at the village of Aughrim were strong. Four regiments of dragoons under Colonel Henry Luttrell, as well as the foot-soldiers of Walter Bourke, presented a formidable defence. Sheldon's troops were positioned as a reserve force a few hundred yards away on the Kilconnell road.

The main body of the Jacobite army was positioned on the upper slopes of Kilcommadan Hill. On the side nearest to the village were stationed thirteen battalions of infantry under Major-



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General William Dorrington. To their right were a further thirteen infantry battalions commanded by Major-General John Hamilton. Both Generals were English. In front of this imposing array were three lines of musketeers behind an intricate web of hedges which would hinder the progress of whatever enemy troops might succeed in crossing the swampy ground surrounding the Melehan River. The entire army was under the overall command of General St. Ruth himself. Positioned at either end of these lines was a battery of artillery composed in total of four brass and five iron cannon.

The final grouping of Jacobite troops was under the command of a Frenchman, Lieutenant-General de Tessé – St. Ruth's deputy, and assisted by Patrick Sarsfield. This section of the army comprised two troops of Life Guards, four regiments of horse and three regiments of dragoons. Their duty was to prevent the Williamite left wing from crossing at the ford near Attibrassil Bridge.

The stage was now set for the greatest and perhaps the most decisive pitched battle in Irish history. Two evenly matched armies, each of 20,000 men, faced each other across the low-lying marshy ground through which the Melehan River flowed. The Jacobite army was in a more favourable position, strung out as it was across the high ground of Kilcommadan Hill. It was up to St. Ruth's opponents to come to him across the unfavourable intervening terrain and to fight their way against an enemy situated on much higher ground.

The Williamite troops were undoubtedly more experienced and battle-hardened and their artillery had a much greater range and capacity. Before hostilities commenced, Ginkel held a council of war to decide how to plan the course of the battle. Realising that for the present, an attack on the central Jacobite

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position on Kilcommadan Hill should not be attempted, his senior officers turned their attention to the situation on their left at Attibrassil Bridge. This was the only place where Jacobite troops were deployed on the near side of the Melehan River. St. Ruth had ordered dragoons to take up their positions beside a number of derelict buildings between Hurney's Cross and the bridge.

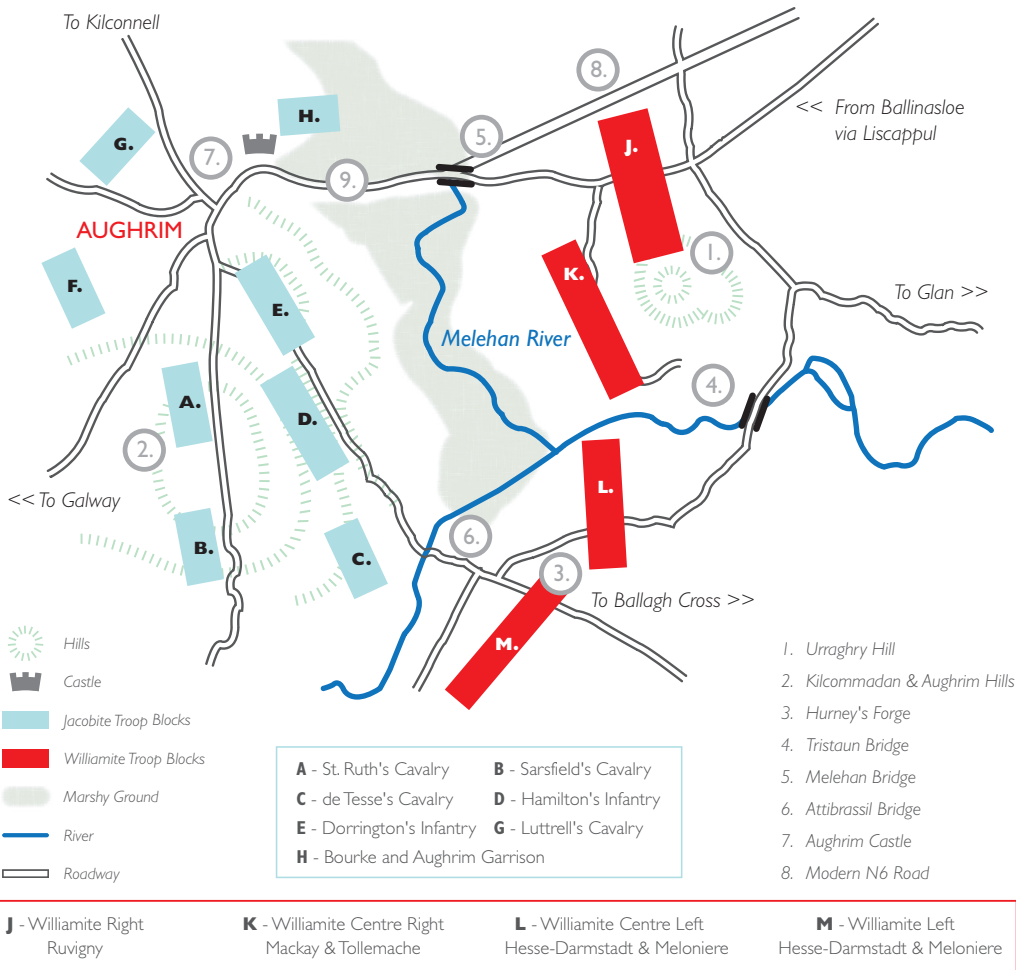
Ginkel was by nature a cautious man. His army had been in position since two o'clock and it was now approaching four o'clock in the afternoon - too late in the day, he believed, to commence battle. He put his views to a Council of War, but his Commanders were anxious to proceed with the battle. The decision was taken to begin an attack at Attibrassil, thereby establishing a position from which to open up an assault toward the central slope of Kilcommadan Hill. By attacking at the area of the bridge, the Williamite commanders hoped that St. Ruth would move large numbers of troops to its defence, thereby weakening the Jacobite defences at the Aughrim end of the line.

The attack commenced at five-thirty when Ginkel sent in a large detachment of horse whose orders were to wipe out the Jacobite dragoons deployed on the Williamite side of the bridge. St. Ruth saw the attack developing and ordered some of his infantry to move from the centre to strengthen the troops in the threatened area. This movement of troops caused a follow-up effect along the Jacobite line. As soon as the infantry moved across towards Attibrassil Bridge, their positions were filled by troops back along the line whose positions were in turn filled by their neighbours further to the left. The consequence was that troops were pulled away from the Aughrim village area, leaving the causeway crossing very exposed and reducing the effectiveness of their defences.

The initial attack on the bridge met with immediate failure. Sarsfield, with six hundred mounted troops charged across the

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river, wreaking chaos among the Williamite ranks, causing them to withdraw in confusion, with heavy losses. Ginkel's first reaction was to postpone any further attacks until the following morning. Mackay was not in favour and argued for an immediate resumption of the assault at Attibrassil Bridge. If it succeeded, it would mean that the Williamites would gain an important foothold on the enemy's right wing and in addition, weaken his defences across the



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whole front. This suggestion was accepted by the Commander-in-chief and von Tettau was detailed to organise another attack on the bridge. At the same time a series of attacks could be launched all along the line, particularly at a point directly across from Kilcommadan Hill, which might prove a useful launching site for a major attack later on.

To the accompaniment of a very loud drumbeat, van Tettau commenced his attack on Attibrassil Bridge. His troops, composed mainly of Danish and Dutch veterans, numbered 2,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalry and 500 dragoons. Sarsfield and de Tessé, noticing the strength of the advancing enemy, asked for infantry reinforcements. They also decided to withdraw the dragoons on the Clontuskert side of the bridge and send them to bolster the defences on Kilcommadan Hill.

Despite the fact that von Tettau's forces had difficulty traversing the marshy ground, Ginkel's stratagem of leading the Jacobites to believe that this was the beginning of an all-out attack on the southern slopes of Kilcommadan Hill, was beginning to achieve the desired objective. In response to von Tettau's advance, the Jacobite leaders had moved a large number of infantry from the left of their line to defend Attibrassil Bridge.

Seven battalions of infantry, led by de la Mélonière and Hesse-Darmstadt, now began their advance across the marshy ground toward the Jacobite front line some hundreds of yards to the right of Attibrassil Bridge. These battalions were made up of seasoned soldiers. Most of them were Huguenots, who had suffered persecution and exile at the hands of Louis XIV, because of their Protestant beliefs. For this reason, they had the added incentive of fighting for revenge against the forces in league with the French Catholic monarch. Now that Hamilton's infantry looked to be coming under threat from this latest development,

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additional troops from Dorrington's battalions were moved in to counter the offensive, further weakening the Jacobite left wing defences.

Hesse-Darmstadt, de la Mélonière and his Huguenots, eventually succeeded in struggling through the mud, which at times reached almost to their waists, before reaching drier ground near the lower reaches of Kilcommadan Hill. Fortunately for themselves, the piece of ground on which they arrived was partly hidden from the eyes of the Jacobites further up the hill. Their position was further concealed by the cloud of black musket-smoke which hung over the hill-side. From here, they would be able to come to the assistance of von Tettau whose advance was stalled at Attibrassil Bridge.

In spite of these developments, St. Ruth was happy with the manner in which the battle was developing at this stage of the day. It was now after six o'clock and he felt it was too late in the evening for another Williamite attack. He was confident that the area around the village of Aughrim, especially the area overlooking the narrow causeway, was well guarded by an artillery emplacement in addition to a group of over two hundred musketeers and a detachment of cavalry. In addition, he believed it would be suicidal for the enemy to attempt the crossing of a causeway so narrow that horsemen would be forced to ride two abreast. However, he failed to take into account that his infantry had become seriously depleted by his previous decision to send large numbers of troops to reinforce the defenders to their right.

Despite the fact that evening was coming on, Ginkel made the decision to make a last major assault on the Jacobite lines. Reinforcements were dispatched to von Tettau at the bridge and an infantry attack was launched across the marsh towards Kilcommadan Hill. If they succeeded in establishing a foothold

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there, it would be an ideal starting point for a major assault on the slopes. Troops could also move from there to attack the Jacobite troops in the vicinity of Aughrim village.



The attack on the Jacobite centre commenced, led by the Scot, Mackay with more than 5,000 men. Supporting him with two brigades of foot was the Englishman, Thomas Tollemache. The terrain which they were forced to cross was a most difficult one, with waist deep mud on either side of the Melehan River. To their rear followed a battery of cannon, drawn with the utmost difficulty across the swampy ground by teams of oxen. The battery, made up of twelve guns, each gun capable of firing a twelve pound ball, was set up on a small patch of raised ground from which they could support the infantry in front of them. To the right of these troops

From Urraghry Hill towards Kilcommadan

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and closer to the causeway, another group of five battalions was struggling across the marsh. It is not surprising that due to the difficult ground conditions, the advancing troops had become somewhat disorganised. Because of this, they were ordered by Mackay not to advance any further than the edge of the wet ground until they received further orders. Despite the stalemate at Attibrassil Bridge, it was intended that a series of attacks would commence all along the line. Everything was now ready for the next stage of the battle.

Meantime, St. Ruth's forces were waiting behind their hedges within twenty yards of the opposition. At close range, they inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and then withdrew to the hedge immediately behind, where they opened fire once again. Despite their losses, the Williamites continued to move slowly uphill. St. Ruth ordered Dorrington and Hamilton to charge, which they did to great effect, aided by the downward slope of Kilcommadan Hill. Unfortunately for them however, they were a rather under-trained and undisciplined force with more bravery than hardened battle skills who now found their defensive hedges more of a hindrance than a help. More than three hundred of them were slaughtered by the volleys of the Williamite gunners.

A little nearer to Aughrim village, the Jacobite infantry had pushed the Williamites back into the swampy terrain and had overrun the battery of cannon so recently set up. Closer to the causeway, the Williamite right wing had made better progress and had reached some cornfields on the higher ground. Although they were still in danger from the opposing forces they nonetheless set up a platform from which a subsequent attack could be launched. The outcome of the battle hung in the balance at this stage. Thomas Tollemache, because of the difficulty in negotiating the unfavourable ground, found himself towards the rear of his troops

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as they crossed the marsh. From this position, he was able to organise two battalions into a unit to prevent the disorganised Williamites from retreating. More importantly, they then started a counter-attack which turned the tide in that quarter of the battlefield.

Just when the outcome seemed to hang in the balance Mackay decided it was time to launch a major attack across the causeway leading to Aughrim village and sent 2,000 men on this perilous journey. This was an undertaking fraught with danger, since the causeway was a narrow neck of land with marsh on either side. Speed was of the essence, as more than two horsemen could ride abreast as they galloped toward their objective. Too long a delay on the causeway could prove lethal to the advancing horsemen. The plan was that the first contingent to succeed in crossing, would group at the exit and protect the next group as they in turn attempted to cross.

Once again St. Ruth was not unduly concerned at this development. Luttrell's and Sheldon's horse would smash those who were not cut down by the bullets from the Aughrim garrison and he himself at the head of his Lifeguards, would take command of the whole counter attack. Unfortunately for St. Ruth, the Williamite artillery battery which had previously been overrun was retaken and immediately commenced a barrage. A stray cannon ball struck St. Ruth, decapitating him. His body was hastily removed, wrapped in a cloak. Regrettably, he had failed to inform his deputy de Tessé of his plans and in any case de Tessé was too far away from the scene to be of any avail.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Jacobite collapse was not solely due to the sudden and tragic death of St. Ruth. The commanders around the village were confused and their numbers had been reduced by the earlier troop movement in support of the

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troops at Attibrassil Bridge. The castle had been subjected to a very serious pounding by the Williamite cannon, greatly reducing their defensive capacity. The charge of de Ruvigny's cavalry had helped considerably to swing the situation in favour of the Williamites. Luttrell had inexplicably withdrawn with his cavalry and they were followed by Sheldon's horse when he realised that they were now heavily outnumbered. De Ruvigny then wheeled left and in the direction of the Jacobite centre and charged Dorrington's battalions causing considerable confusion and damage in their midst as he advanced towards the higher slopes of Kilcommadan Hill. Tollemache was also making good progress. However, a further attack along the line was stopped dead when the troops of de la Mélonière and Hesse-Darmstadt came under withering musket-fire from Hamilton's troops.

St. Ruth's replacement, de Tessé, seeing the tasks that required immediate attention, sped along the line towards Aughrim. Astonished to see that Sheldon had also left the field, he bravely led a charge against the Williamite forces. However, he was badly injured in the process and Sarsfield now took over as overall commander. He quickly realised that in effect the battle was as good as lost. In addition to the withdrawal of Sheldon and Luttrell, the situation of the troops under Hamilton and Dorrington had now become impossible.

The fighting continued despite the capture of both Dorrington and Hamilton. Sarsfield now realised that his primary objective was to organise an orderly retreat using his four regiments of horse – a total of 2,500 men. The total annihilation of the retreating Jacobite army had to be prevented at all costs. The dispossessed Irish nobility, realising that they now had nothing to lose, began to redouble their efforts. They no longer had any hope of recovering their estates which had been confiscated in

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Cromwell's Land Settlement of 1662. Their trust in King James had been misplaced and they were now regarded as traitors by the supporters of King William. Realising that their estates were forfeited forever, they fought on with a sense of hopelessness and desperation. Surrender was not an option and many of them were either killed or captured before the battle ended.

On the slopes of Kilcommadan Hill, the list of casualties grew, largely due to the bloodlust of the Williamite victors. No quarter was given and the disorganised troops were slaughtered in great numbers, among them eighty priests. In addition, the cavalry had been forced to abandon the retreating foot-soldiers to their fate. The Reverend George Story, a Williamite eyewitness, compared the bodies of the slain to 'a great flock of sheep scattered up and down the country for almost four miles'. Another witness, a Danish chaplain named Andreas Claudianus, wrote that the

Looking  
towards  
Urraghry over  
the slopes of  
Kilcommadan  
Hill



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musket fire was so intense that 'the ridges seemed to be ablaze'. He went on to say that 'terrible scenes followed as the English fell on the rear of the fugitives . . . the blood from the dead so covered the ground that one could hardly take a step without slipping . . . the English returned in triumph . . . stretched out their weary bodies on the battlefield . . . others busied themselves in placing corpses as seats in circles around the fires, the light of which lit up the countryside.'

The propaganda machines in London worked so well that many of the statistics concerning the Battle of Aughrim have done more than a little violence to the truth. As we know from the wars of the twentieth century, reports from the battlefields were massaged to mollify the concerns of a doubting public back home and their political masters who were financing these wars. Much capital was made of the supposed numerical superiority of the Jacobites and of the impossible odds faced by their Allied opponents. In addition, reports on the relative casualties for both sides were skewed so as to give the impression that the Jacobite side suffered a vastly greater amount of losses in comparison with those of the enemy. The truth lies somewhere between. An almost equal amount of troops fought on each side and while the Jacobite casualties were undoubtedly higher, they were in no way as great as the figures which were reported back to London. Based on the statistics which had been compiled before the end of July 1691 by the French Commissary Fumeron, the Jacobite casualty list, made up of dead, wounded, deserters and prisoners, came to a total of 3,000. The corresponding figure for the Allied troops was 1,690.

Many historians, in their assessments of the battle, have judged the Marquis of St. Ruth rather harshly. In his defence, it has to be pointed out that he had arrived in Ireland a mere two months before the battle of Aughrim. Consequently, he was afforded very

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little time to get to know the Irish officers under his command. Rumours were circulating that a number of them, such as Luttrell, were on the side of the enemy.

There were communications difficulties at every level in his army. There were problems arising from the fact that St. Ruth was a Frenchman with a negligible knowledge of the language spoken by the majority of his officers. In addition, he had at times neglected to keep his senior staff informed of tactical changes which he had made in the course of the battle. At the time of his death, his second in command De Tessé, had not been informed as to his battle-plans at that stage of the conflict.

There is no denying that St. Ruth's choice of battleground was an excellent one. He had ranged his troops across a sweep of high ground with a river and an expanse of swampland between himself and the advancing enemy. There were only two places on the forefront of the battleground where troops would have reasonably solid underfoot conditions – the dry ground and shallow river-crossing at Attibrassil, and the narrow causeway leading to Aughrim village. In addition, he had adapted the maze of field hedges on the lower slopes of Kilcommadan Hill to form an added hazard for the Allied troops should they succeed in forcing their way across the soft ground on both sides of the Melehan River. Perhaps the most significant consequence of St. Ruth's choice of battleground was that it prevented Ginkel from making earlier use of his crack mounted troops.

St. Ruth erred when he allowed himself to be deceived into believing that the main thrust of the enemy attack was to be at Attibrassil Bridge. The result was that he moved a considerable amount of his central and left wing defenders over to the right of his line, in consequence leaving the vital causeway leading to Aughrim village dangerously vulnerable to attack.

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While no other Jacobite general had come so close to defeating the Williamite forces, it was probably a fatal mistake to have committed his troops to to an all-or-nothing battle at Aughrim. Many of his leading commanders did not agree with his decision and advised him to avoid a pitched battle. Sarsfield believed that the Jacobite army should have withdrawn to Galway and Limerick. Ginkel would not have had sufficient forces to besiege both cities and the war could have been prolonged until the arrival of the hoped-for French assistance. St. Ruth however, possibly in an attempt to restore his wounded pride, ignored all his advisors and settled into his defensive position on the high ground at Aughrim.