

We are familiar with "Derry, Aughrim, Enniskillen and the Boyne". All were pivotal episodes in our history, but perhaps the least familiar of the four is the decisive Battle of Aughrim on 12th July 1691. This article sets out the background and explains the context but, importantly, it applies some spiritual lessons for today. It is also available from EPS as a pamphlet.

After the victory of the Boyne, the Jacobites were beaten back. Most sea-ports, from which vital supplies could arrive from France, were lost. The Jacobites were being driven over the Shannon, deep into Connaught, until Galway and Limerick; their final sea-ports would fall. Ginkel, the new Williamite Commander, wanted a grinding advance, not a great onslaught.

The Jacobite Commander, the Marquis de St Ruhe (St Ruth), had other plans. His tactical errors had lost Athlone. Bent on reversing the balance with Ginkel, he determined to make Ireland his glory or his grave.

Probing Williamite patrols discovered the Jacobites. The place will live on in history: a village called Aughrim. Sunday 12th July 1691 was a foggy morning. St Ruth chose his position with care. Williamite eye-witness, Rev G. Story, reckoned that "nature itself could not furnish him with better." St Ruth purposed to draw Ginkel into battle.

Kilcommodan (Aughrim Hill) was the ridge on which St Ruth would make his stand; it rose out of a bog on all front approaches. A semi-ruined castle defended a narrow causeway which crossed the bog, only passable by two horses riding abreast. On the Jacobite right was the bottleneck of Tristaun Bridge; a stream flowing under it protected their right flank. St Ruth perceived this to be his weakest point. The position was heavily reinforced by cavalry.

The eye of Lt. Col. Hugh Mackay, Ginkel's third in command, surveyed the enemy. Mackay was a shrewd tactician. He proposed a heavy cavalry assault on the side St Ruth expected it - the right flank. This attack was the most concentrated use of cavalry in the Williamite campaign. His action was tactical. St Ruth shifted troops to the point of attack. The left flank by the causeway would now have less troops. An artillery attack had been thundering across the valley. Now came the noise of hammering hooves; Williamites charged into battle across Tristaun stream. Both sides were now in a fighting stalemate. Neither could disengage.

Williamite infantry attacked the Jacobite centre through the bog. The bog was impassable to horse or artillery; infantry went in waist deep. Under fire the Jacobites retreated from hedge and ditch. Williamites fought on furiously. Then disaster struck! The Jacobites streamed downhill on their attackers, pushing them through ditch and hedge. As the Williamites fled for the bog, hidden Jacobites emerged from hedges and cut off or killed large numbers. Gordon O'Neill's regiment beat the Williamites back so far that an artillery position, deep in Ginkel's lines, was overrun! St Ruth's men, in their thirst for Williamite blood, left strong defensive positions in headlong pursuit. Mackay's plan would fail if the Williamite centre collapsed! St Ruth shouted: "The day is ours."

The Williamite Major General Talmash saved the battle. Rallying his men he launched a counter attack. The artillery position was retaken. Retreating Jacobites were now isolated, having lost all cohesion in an impulsive pursuit over the marsh. A Williamite foothold was now gained. The retaking of that artillery position would have cataclysmic results later.

On a patch of hard ground, close to the start of the causeway, a force of Williamite cavalry waited. That narrow causeway seemed only to lead to death. As the sun went down the Williamites rode in with the lengthened shadows of that summer's night. The Earl of Oxford's "Blues" and "Villier's horse" led the charge. Two abreast they rode, hats flew off, men were unseated; twice repulsed, still advancing. Passing under fire forty yards from Aughrim castle, dragoons took cover in a dry ditch, giving supporting fire. The incredible happened: fire from the castle became ragged and almost stopped! The Jacobites had opened fresh ammunition boxes finding, in dismay, wrong ammunition! English ammunition was too big for French muzzles. Desperately they fired brass buttons and pebbles.

St Ruth was confident; a heavy cavalry charge moving downhill would smash the enemy advancing from the causeway. Forming up a fine body of cavalry he exclaimed: "They are beaten..." At this historic moment a Williamite cannon fired. Half a mile away St Ruth paused, directing the fire of Jacobite cannon before the cavalry charge. Suddenly St Ruth's horse fled, a headless body fell from the saddle. St Ruth's head was torn off by a Williamite cannon ball! The momentum of the moment was lost. The horror of the commander's death eclipsed all else. His charge to stem the tide of Williamites failed - they flowed in like water.

Without the support of St Ruth, Henry Luttrell's Jacobite dragoons rode off, leaving the infantry to their fate. The Jacobite left flank collapsed. De Tesse, the successor of St Ruth, attempting a downhill charge, was shot three times and driven back. The "impenetrable" Jacobite right flank held for another half an hour, then broke.

Patrick Sarsfield, the only remaining Jacobite General, executed a fighting retreat under attack from the rear. A Williamite report said: "Sarsfield, who commanded the enemy in their retreat, performed miracles.

Without Sarsfield's action his army would have been completely annihilated. Williamites swept the battlefield; Rev. G. Story said: "Bodies lay like great flocks of sheep for almost four miles." Seven thousand lay dead on the field of Aughrim. A mercifully dark, moonless night aided the Jacobites in the full tide of retreat.

The condition of the Jacobites holds a vivid picture. They had really lost the war, but could not accept it. People go on for years resisting God and his claims because they do not accept they are lost. "We were without Christ... having no hope" (Ephesians 2:12). God is trying to bring you to the point of submission. "Except ye repent, ye shall... perish" (Luke 13:3). They were on a course that could only end in disaster. One by one, opportunity was slipping away....

Aughrim Hill was the best position; "nature... could not furnish him with better." St Ruth made every effort to put himself in the best position. When the battle went well he forgot he was losing the war. Many people make the same mistake. They confuse

condition and position. Christ told a man of high religious position a message that staggered him: "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7). Nature, even at its best, is totally inadequate: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). We may do the best we can, yet die unsaved! Like the upright position St Ruth occupied, we may adopt the stance of morality, charity and even religion. Without Christ's saving sacrifice, accepted for your self, there will be a sad end.

Against the advice of Patrick Sarsfield, St Ruth proposed to stake everything on one battle. His reputation meant everything to him. He would not lose face. We might let peer pressure make us lose our soul - what madness! "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).

Lt. Col. Hugh Mackay took a long hard look at the enemy. Mackay's success lay in taking a careful look at what lay out in front. There is an enemy that lies in front of us all - death. "The last enemy ..is death" (1st Corinthians 15:26). How can I meet the enemy of death? We must square up to this. "For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again" (2nd Samuel 14:14). There is no chance to repeat the battle - no one is coming back! "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:27, 28). Can you say in truth: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me" (Psalm 23:4). Is Christ with you?

The key to victory lay in the storming of the causeway. Every action in battle led to the causeway. The cross is history's supreme moment. "The place which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him" (Luke 23:33). "Christ died for our sins" (1st Corinthians 15:3). Notice some things about the causeway. It was a narrow way. The opening of the way was costly. It was the only way. Christ spoke of two ways and two destinies: a broad way leading to Hell, but "narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life" (Matthew 7:14). The cost of several hundred yards was high. The first two regiments lost 79 men killed and 45 wounded that day. The Bible speaks of a way opened for sinners at Calvary's cross - "a new and living way" (Hebrews 10:20). The previous verse says: "Enter... by the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 10:19). It was the only way. Jesus said: "I am the way... no man cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6).

When St Ruth died the Jacobites fell into confusion. Never trust your soul to any mortal, however great. St Ruth could not safeguard his own soul, never mind anyone else. Never intending to die he had not left a battle plan to his officers. "For we know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4: 14). We must trust a man who will never die - "The man Christ Jesus; who gave Himself a ransom for all" (1st Timothy 2:5, 6). He died, but rose again; He is living "in the power of an endless life" (Hebrews 7:16). He can never die again. "Wherefore He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth" (Hebrews 7:25). Come in repentance and trust Him.