

THE CAMPAIGN OF THE IRISH ROYALIST ARMY IN CHESHIRE, NOVEMBER 1643—JANUARY 1644

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AT Dublin, in November 1643, royalist troops in Ireland cheerfully began to embark for service in England. Together with a couple of regiments of foot and cavalry already serving in England they were intended to provide Charles I with a small army in the North-West. After several encouraging encounters with the parliamentarians in North Wales and Cheshire this "Irish Royalist Army", as it came to be called, suffered a crushing defeat outside the key town of Nantwich on 25 January 1644, and ceased to exist as an effective operational force. Particular episodes in its short-lived campaign, such as the siege and relief of Nantwich itself, have been described in detail on more than one occasion,⁽¹⁾ but no adequate attempt has yet been made to trace its history from first to last against the national as well as the local background of the Civil War.

Throughout the period between 1642 and 1646 there was a close connexion between the privy council in Dublin and the royalist leaders in Cheshire, North Wales and Lancashire. With misplaced but unquenchable optimism the latter looked to Ireland for reinforcements and supplies while the council feared they would be cut off completely from England and the king's headquarters if the coast opposite should succumb to parliament. For his own part, Charles I dreamed of raising a vast army in Ireland for his salvation in England and regarded North Wales and Cheshire as its potential area of assembly.

Charles had first cast envious eyes on Ireland in the summer of 1643. By that time it was only too plain that he could not reckon on a quick decision and indeed that the parliamentarians might wear down his resources unless he could somehow increase his military strength. His ultimate aim was to tap the endless manpower of the Irish Catholic Confederacy but his immediate concern was to transfer to the English theatre of operations the greater part of the government troops who had

⁽¹⁾ See the note on sources used below p. 75.

been on active service in Ireland ever since the rising in Ulster in October 1641. The problem was how to effect their release.

A consequence of the rebellion and the outbreak of civil war in England was that no fewer than four independent authorities existed in Ireland, each exercising control over a greater or smaller area of territory. The largest area was dominated by the Catholic Confederacy or Confederation of Kilkenny, inaugurated in October 1642, and pledged to obtain complete tolerance for the Catholic church as well as political and economic concessions. The confederates never ceased to proclaim their abiding loyalty to the crown of England. Already they had asked the king for a truce and had offered to put their resources at his disposal provided he would give a firm guarantee to redress their grievances once restored to power. The other three parties in Ireland were the royalists, governed by the king's council based on Dublin, the parliamentarians—mostly small, scattered detachments, and the Ulster Scots. With these parties the Confederacy was openly at war; between the royalists on one side and the parliamentarians and Scots on the other there was a tacit truce.

Apart from a few strongholds inside the confederate perimeter the royalists were reduced to enclaves in Leinster and Munster with their backs to the sea. Desperately short of food and ordnance through the calculated failure of the parliament in London to send supplies, they were having to bear the brunt of the confederate military effort. Their position was also being undermined by the many Puritan sympathisers within their quarters who wished to see them surrender to the parliamentary commissioners in Ulster.

The king was powerless to alleviate their distress, for he had neither men, nor money, nor supplies to spare. At the same time, to accept the Confederacy's offer of a truce might prove disastrous. All but a few of his supporters abhorred the Irish Catholics for their allegedly barbarous treatment of captured Protestant settlers during the opening phase of the rebellion and there was danger that such a truce might antagonise them, even drive them in revulsion into the enemy camp. But since to do nothing was to lose Ireland anyway, he resolved to run the risk.⁽²⁾

If at first Charles's primary object was to relieve the pressure on his loyal Irish subjects, there is no doubt that the opening

⁽²⁾ He first commanded the Irish government to arrange a truce as early as 23 April 1643. T. Carte, *The Life of James Duke of Ormond* (6 vols., London, 1857), Vol. V, p. 445.

of negotiations between parliament and the Scots and the consequent probability of Scottish intervention added a far more compelling motive. A truce in Ireland then became essential so that he could counter-balance the numerical increase to the other side by bringing over the royalist troops.⁽³⁾ Accordingly, on 2 July 1643, he instructed the lords justices to issue a commission under the great seal of Ireland to the marquis of Ormond⁽⁴⁾ empowering him to negotiate for a truce of one year provided that means could be arranged for maintaining the army during that period.

After much haggling, a truce was finally declared on 15 September. The way was now clear for discussions to begin over the despatch of a Catholic army to England. At once, plans were prepared for shipping most of the government troops to England, and Ormond could congratulate himself upon having obtained the promise of a subsidy for the upkeep of those who were to remain in Ireland.⁽⁵⁾

Characteristically, Charles had already been counting his gains. On 7 September, eight days before the truce was arranged—when indeed, had he but known it, the discussions had apparently reached deadlock—and several weeks before the news came to Oxford, he had commanded the lords justices and Council: "That you doe consider and advise of the best meanes of transporting the rest of our army in that our province of Leinster (excepting such as are to be kept in our garrisons) into our kingdom of England."⁽⁶⁾ Nor thereafter did he heed the sombre warnings of Ormond and others as to the risk involved in stripping the Irish royalists of their main defence. As usual he was neither interested in Ireland for its own sake nor in anticipating emergencies. Reinforcements were required at once and reinforcements he must have. George Digby, who had recently joined Nicholas as a secretary of state with special oversight of Irish affairs, was given the task of arranging for their transport in collaboration with Ormond.

The limited objective of the expedition was quite clear. It was to disembark at Chester or "the most commodious haven in North-Wales", in the language of the king's own directive,

⁽³⁾ It was believed that the invasion of England by the Scots would be made possible only by the evacuation of their troops from Ulster. Quite illogically, this seemed a further reason for withdrawing the royalist troops from Ireland. Cf. Nicholas to Ormond, *ibid.*, p. 467.

⁽⁴⁾ Lieutenant general of the army. Soon to be appointed lord lieutenant.
⁽⁵⁾ *History of the Irish Confederation and the War in Ireland* (ed. J. T. Gilbert, 7 vols., Dublin, 1882-91), Vol. II, pp. 364-84.

⁽⁶⁾ Carte, Vol. V, pp. 465-7. This order was received by Ormond on 26 October. Royalist troops in Munster were to sail for Bristol and reinforce Hopton in the South-West.



By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

Plate 7. JAMES BUTLER, FIRST DUKE OF ORMOND

and then combine forces with other royalist detachments in the general area of Lancashire and Cheshire. The problem is to ascertain what it was supposed to do afterwards, to determine whether any master plan was devised at all. Four possibilities may be distinguished: first, simply to establish control over Lancashire and Cheshire as an end in itself⁽⁷⁾; secondly, to bar the way southwards of the Scots on the supposition that they would make their descent down the west coast;⁽⁸⁾ thirdly, to winter quietly in the North-West avoiding any major action and then to join the king's main army for the opening of the spring campaign;⁽⁹⁾ and, fourthly, to do what seemed sensible to its commanders on the spot. From the evidence, it would appear that the first three possibilities were at least not overlooked but that it was the fourth which was adopted with dire consequences.⁽¹⁰⁾

This conclusion is supported by the bungling of the appointment of the commander-in-chief. The Officer in command of the general area of Cheshire at this time was Lord Capell¹¹—of whom the citizens of Shrewsbury, his headquarters, had “not onely a meane, but a malignant estimation”⁽¹²⁾—but informed opinion considered him incompetent and there was never any intention of trusting him with the Irish troops. Instead, it was planned initially that Ormond should take over his command. This must have been considered the logical appointment. Besides being of the requisite military calibre Ormond was the only man who could be guaranteed to hold the army together, since there were doubts about its morale and its loyalty. And from his rear base in Dublin he could organise the movement of the expedition and direct its first operations.

At a later stage it was announced that Ormond's presence in Ireland was so essential to the royalist cause that he must remain there. An intrigue in the war council probably lay

⁽⁷⁾ The expectation of the Lancashire royalists (*Ibid.*, p. 527). It is to be noted also that George Digby informed Ormond that a good party of Lancastrians would join the army (10 November, p. 504).

⁽⁸⁾ It was the general opinion that their function was to neutralise the Scots. Cf., for example, A. Trevor to Ormond, 21 November 1643: “The expectation of English Irish aydes is the dayly prayers, and allmost the dayly bread of them that love the Kinge and his busines; and is putt into the dispensatory and medicine booke of state as a cure for the Scots.” Carte, Vol. V, p. 521. See also Vol. III, p. 35.

⁽⁹⁾ Clarendon, *Rebellion*, Vol. III, p. 322, described them as the principal source of reinforcements for the spring.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Whatever the plan Ormond insisted that the troops must be kept busy so that they would have no time to become discontented.

⁽¹¹⁾ “. . . Lieutenant Generall under the Prince of Wales, in the Counties Worcester, Salop, Cheshire and North Wales . . .” *H.M.C.R.*, Vol. XII, App. XI, p. 39.

⁽¹²⁾ Carte, Vol. V, p. 507.

behind this change of plan.⁽¹³⁾ Certainly Ormond was not consulted about it; on the contrary Digby adopted a conciliatory tone when conveying the news to him. Significantly, however, the troops were to be encouraged to believe that Ormond would cross over with the last contingent in order to assume supreme command. In the end Prince Rupert became supreme commander when it was too late for him to make effective use of the army.

Thus, for all practical purposes, the army's fate lay in the hands of its field commander, Lord Byron;⁽¹⁴⁾ Ormond's part in the enterprise was confined in the event to embarking the troops and to insuring a suitable reception for them on the other side. It did not follow of course that all would have gone well had Ormond been retained as commander-in-chief or had Rupert been appointed sooner. But it was indisputably unwise to bring over an army which the royalists could ill afford to lose without appointing at once a supreme commander of proven ability who was thinking in terms of the general conflict with parliament and to whom the operational commander was directly answerable.

Apart from this question of command, other knotty problems confronted the planners. First, there was a shortage of transports. Owing to the parliamentary blockade Dublin had ceased to function as a commercial port and ships could not be had there at any price. The other ports in royalist hands were in similar plight. In the end Digby arranged for seven ships⁽¹⁵⁾ to report from Bristol and Ormond, with great difficulty and in part at his own expense, hired a few more from the confederates, who were slow to supply him with the subsidy promised under the terms of the truce. Even so, there were still not sufficient to carry all the available troops in a single convoy and, as it turned out, there were to be three crossings, the last being so delayed that the troops aboard were too late to take part in the decisive action before Nantwich.

In short supply also were arms and stores. Ormond informed Orlando Bridgeman who, together with the archbishop of York, had been ordered to prepare for the army's reception, that he could furnish only twelve barrels of powder

⁽¹³⁾ Apparently there was a division in the council as to whether or not Ormond should be appointed. The archbishop of York advised against Ormond's appointment (Carte, Vol. V, pp. 506-8) but it is difficult to believe that his advice carried much weight.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Created Lord Byron as recently as 24 October. Technically Byron was under Capell's command as to Cheshire and that of Newcastle as to Lancashire.

⁽¹⁵⁾ With his usual exaggeration Digby reported on 10 November that thirteen ships had sailed from Bristol, *Ibid.* pp. 503-5.

for the first wave. In an attempt to provide a modicum of arms in England, Ormond also issued passes to any Irish ships' captains who would convey them to a port in the North-West, guaranteeing payment in ready money and safe return. Digby regretted that supplies could not be expected from Oxford because of parliamentary activity in North Wales. Resident at Beaumaris, the archbishop of York complained of an acute shortage of necessities and implored Ormond to help him out. Although Ormond may have exaggerated the paucity of his own resources in order to discourage laxity in England, it must be assumed that the army set sail woefully under-equipped. This could partly account for its speedy investiture of so many parliamentary strong points, since its main object may have been to capture stores.

Still more disturbing was the low state of the soldiers' morale. Two years of bitter warfare, in all weathers, on hard rations, for the most part without pay, had made them tough but disgruntled. They might well perform heroic deeds; on the other hand, their smouldering resentment might lead to mutiny and to wholesale desertion when they returned to England. What specially worried Ormond was the extent to which puritanism had infected all ranks. At this very period parliamentary agents were known to be tempting the troops to change their allegiance by promising instant settlement of their arrears of pay. If this subornation had gone far, they were past trusting. In his opinion, the only way to be sure of their loyalty was to give them a generous welcome in England. That he was preoccupied with this human problem is borne out by the number of times he referred to it in his letters and by the fact that he regarded even solicitude for the troops' creature comforts an uncertain safeguard: "And if the case bee such, that plentiful provision cannot bee instantly readie, it is absolutly needfull that a compitent strength of horse and foote, of whoes affections you are confident, should bee in readinesse by force to keepe the common souldier in awe; And whatever provision is made for them, this will not be amis; . . ." ⁽¹⁶⁾ The high proportion of Welshmen with the colours was a matter of special concern, since he envisaged them sneaking away to visit friends and relations, never to report back for duty.

Though much more prevalent, disaffection among the officers nonetheless caused less alarm. The malcontents were so conspicuous that it was comparatively easy to weed them out. Even so, when aboard ship, those officers who survived

⁽¹⁶⁾ Ormond to Bridgeman, 11 November, Carte, Vol. V, pp. 505-6; see also his letter to the mayor of Chester, 15 November, Harl. MSS., 2135, f. 14.

“screening” were obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to the king. Two only refused.⁽¹⁷⁾

For once promises were kept on the English side.⁽¹⁸⁾ Orlando Bridgeman, a well-known personality in the North-West, M.P. for Wigan and son of the bishop of Chester, was sent specially from Oxford on the king’s orders to make the necessary arrangements for the troops’ reception. He performed his task with energy and resourcefulness, scouring Cheshire and North-Wales for assistance. His own claim to have obtained a plentiful supply of clothes and money is endorsed by Byron in his subsequent report to Prince Rupert. Pay and allowances to the other ranks were also deemed generous: “. . . a month’s entertainment; for every common soldier half-a-crown, a suit of clothes, shoes and stockings . . . the men have had free quarters and 12d. a week, which is more than they ever had in Ireland.” And five hundred suits of clothes destined for the Irish remained in store at Shrewsbury.⁽¹⁹⁾ Such solicitude for the men’s welfare, reinforced no doubt by the menacing horsemen lined up at the quayside, earned its due reward, for, some backsliders apart, the army fought with fair courage even during its final debacle.

Ormond’s last problem was how to evade the parliamentary frigates patrolling the Irish coastline. At one stage they were blockading Dublin harbour and he was afraid the convoy might be penned in indefinitely. However, his request that the royalist fleet be instructed to protect the crossing must have been favourably received since the parliamentary squadron withdrew and later on, for several days before Christmas, an eye-witness observed eight royalist men-of-war riding at anchor in Liverpool Bay.⁽²⁰⁾

By 11 November the first wave, consisting of 2,000 foot under the command of Sir Michael Ernle, was safely embarked and only waiting for a fair wind. Horse, artillery and more foot, were standing by to follow when the transports had returned.⁽²¹⁾ The weather must have been slow to change, for it was not until 16 November that the convoy weighed anchor.

⁽¹⁷⁾ One of the objectors was George Monk. He joined the army subsequently however and fought bravely when the time came.

⁽¹⁸⁾ The king himself had promised Ormond to pay the troops the same rates as those prevailing in England and to make up their arrears of pay (7 September, Carte, Vol. V, pp. 465-7). See also Bridgeman’s long letter to Ormond, 29 November, pp. 525-9.

⁽¹⁹⁾ E. Warburton, *Prince Rupert and the Cavaliers* (3 vols., London, 1849) Vol. II, p. 376; Sir John Mennes to Rupert, p. 374.

⁽²⁰⁾ *Discourse of the War in Lancashire*, pp. 44-5.

⁽²¹⁾ Apparently there should have been 3,000 foot and 300 horse (Ormond to Bridgeman, 19 October, Carte Vol. V, pp. 477-9.)

Various proposals had been put forward for a suitable landing-place. The king had recommended Chester. Ormond apparently originally favoured somewhere in Wirral (Worrall). On 2 November Digby mentioned Beaumaris. From that vantage point itself, the archbishop of York cautioned that the nearby coast had been made unsafe by the steady advance of a strong force of parliamentarians; it might be necessary to force a passage into Liverpool or to land at Holyhead despite its barren, unfriendly surroundings.⁽²²⁾ In the event, having lain at anchor for two days waiting for a storm to drop, the convoy hove to at Mostyn in Flint on 20 November without fuss or hindrance. The town and castle had only just surrendered to Brereton, the parliamentary leader.

The apparition of this "army of papists" struck terror into the local population, and the parliamentarians, who had been carrying all before them for some time, rapidly retreated. Recent months had witnessed a general royalist collapse in the North-West. Although several garrisons, notably Lathom House and Chester itself, continued to show defiance, there was no army to take the field. Seizing advantage of this situation, a combined force of Lancastrians and Cheshiremen under the command of Sir William Brereton had made a sweep into North Wales. Forcing the Dee at Holt, Brereton had captured Wrexham and then overrun Flint and Denbigh. But for the advent of the Irish army nothing could have prevented him from occupying the rest of North Wales⁽²³⁾ and the city of Chester.

News of the Irish expedition gravely disconcerted Brereton, despite the fact that he had been forewarned. Although his force numbered 3,000 (roughly) as against 2,000 under Ernle's command, and although the Irish could not have been in their best fighting trim after six days at sea in crowded vessels, he did not consider giving them battle. At first, while helping to circulate the rumour that the enemy were Irish papists, he tried to seduce them by sending a letter to Ernle, when he was still aboard ship, in which he praised the army's valour in Ireland, admitted the troops had been shabbily rewarded for their arduous service and promised that they would be given their full

⁽²²⁾ Archbishop of York to Ormond, 12 November, Carte, Vol. V, 506-8. Of course, York's suggestions probably arrived after the convoy had sailed.

⁽²³⁾ Cf. Sir William Brereton to Speaker Lenthall, Hawarden Castle, 15 November 1643: "The whole country hereabouts tremble and dare not make any opposition, and Col. Davies and Col. Mostyn are fled and their commanders dispersed. The Bp. of York, Bps. of Chester, S. Asaph and Bangor, and the grandees of the country are at Conway, which they have exceedingly fortified, expecting the landing of the Irish army under the command of the Earl of Ormond." (*H.M.C.*, Thirteenth Report, Portland MSS, p. 153).

arrears of pay if they would only declare for parliament. Ernle stiffly replied that he could not enter into discussion with one who was in rebellion against the king.⁽²⁴⁾ Upon this, Brereton quickly fell back across the Dee and issued warrants for all men between the ages of 16 and 60 to take to arms and repulse "the bloody Irish rebels" who were invading their country.

To be just, Brereton's headlong retreat was by no means due to mere panic. Though he estimated the Irish army at 500 fewer than his own he believed that many more—up to 10,000—were on their way.⁽²⁵⁾ He had received reports not only of Byron's advance northwards but also of Newcastle's march into Lancashire. Powder was in short supply. In any case, the Lancashire contingent insisted upon withdrawing on the grounds of owing its first duty to the protection of Manchester.⁽²⁶⁾ And so his army split into two parts, the Lancastrians making for Warrington and Manchester, the Cheshiremen going to Nantwich.⁽²⁷⁾

At Oxford, Brereton's earlier crossing of the Dee at Holt, denoting the severing of communications with Chester, had so alarmed the council of war that it resolved to send a relief column under Lord John Byron. Byron was to lead his own regiment and orders were issued for the Lancastrian regiments serving with Prince Rupert to march with him. Intending to join forces with Lord Capell at Shrewsbury, Byron left Oxford on 21 November with 1,000 foot and 300 horse under his command.⁽²⁸⁾

Byron, formerly lieutenant of the Tower and one of Rupert's cavalry commanders, enjoyed a high reputation for tactical skill and bravery. He was shortly to be made governor of Lancashire and Cheshire, but there is no evidence at this juncture of any intention to put him in command of the Irish army. Indeed, though irrepressibly sanguine, the court could not have been at all sure when that army would land—it might

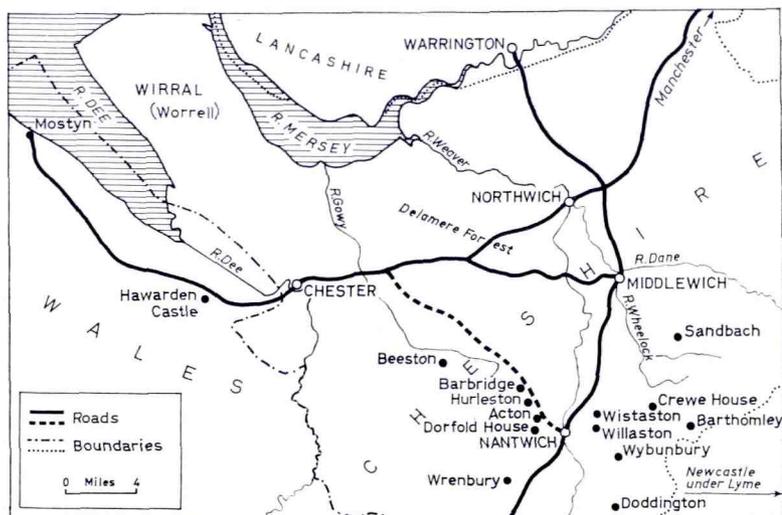
⁽²⁴⁾ *Mercurius Aulicus*, week ending 2 December. J. R. Phillips, *Memorials of the Civil War in Wales and the Marches* (2 vols., London, 1874), Vol. II, p. 101.

⁽²⁵⁾ Brereton to Sir Thomas Skeffington, *Portland MSS*, *op.cit.*, pp. 162-3; see also Sir Thomas Stanley to William Lenthall (p. 156):—11 ships laden with Irish troops have already landed in the Wirral (*sic*); altogether 19 ships with 10,000 troops are to come over.

⁽²⁶⁾ The parliamentarian force consisted of volunteers mustered for a particular campaign who considered themselves free to return home at any time in case of emergency. In other words the Lancastrians were not prepared to soldier on in North Wales when the home county was in danger.

⁽²⁷⁾ *Cf. Perfect Diurnall*, No. 21, 18 December: ". . . and the Manchester men are returned home, to divert General Kinges design against Manchester or into Chester."

⁽²⁸⁾ Charles to Rupert, 11 November, 1643, Warburton, Vol. II, pp. 330-1; Nicholas to Rupert, *ibid.*; Trevor to Ormond, Carte, Vol. V, p. 521.



Drawn by D. H. Birch

Figure 3. THE CHESHIRE CAMPAIGN, 1643-4

not be for several weeks. A month previously, Prince Rupert had evidently contemplated despatching Byron to the North for the purpose of re-establishing the royalist position in Lancashire,⁽²⁹⁾ but again it is improbable that the scheme had been discussed with the Council. Thus, as far as the Council was concerned, Byron was simply to relieve Chester so as to insure that the expected Irish troops would have somewhere safe to disembark. What then happened may have been as follows. Byron's progress north synchronised with the unopposed march along the coast towards Chester of the Irish army and the precipitate retreat of the parliamentary forces. Thus Byron's objective was achieved without the slightest effort. Whereupon, perceiving that an entirely new situation had been created in the North-West, the royalists now temporarily up, the parliamentarians down, Rupert's plan came to mind and Byron saw himself enjoying the honour of putting it into operation. Such a reconstruction is not entirely speculative. Byron himself requested permission to assume command of the Irish royalists only after they had reached Chester.⁽³⁰⁾

⁽²⁹⁾ Specifically Rupert wished to relieve Lathom House; check Manchester; relieve Newark; and strengthen the marquis of Newcastle.

⁽³⁰⁾ Warburton, Vol. II, pp. 326-7. Warburton also cited Byron in a letter dated 7 November thanking Rupert for appointing him general "in Lancashire and those parts" (*Ibid.*, pp. 328-9.)

While Byron was proceeding north, the Irish troops were disembarking at Mostyn. In poor shape at first, they soon recovered. Some of the Welshmen sidled off just as Ormond had feared but the wastage was not serious and the men, no doubt glad to find their feet on native soil again, marched along the coast towards Chester in good heart.⁽³¹⁾ It is evident from subsequent complaints that they had not lost the habit of plundering which they had picked up in Ireland.

Two companies, assisted by about 600 Welshmen who had hastened to join them, were detached from the main force in order to lay siege to Hawarden Castle which stood close by the line of march. At first occupied by the royalists, Hawarden Castle had been captured in the course of Brereton's triumphant foray into North Wales. The parliamentarians had gained entry, so royalist accounts had it, through the treachery of its commander. It was now garrisoned by 120 troops under the command of a captain. The royalists thought it would give them little trouble but it is significant that upon his arrival in Chester, Ernle successfully asked the assembly to send 300 citizens to support the besiegers. Lord Capell may also have brought troops from Shrewsbury to assist in the siege.

To a summons to surrender delivered on 22 November the garrison replied with a propaganda address beginning: "Wee are sorry you have made such an unhappy exchange of enemies to leave Irish to fall upon English, and Papists to fall upon Protestants. . . . What course the Court of England runs, how destructive to the Protestants, and favourable to the Papists, you cannot but know with or by sad experience." Lest their cajolery be ascribed to timidity, they affirmed in conclusion that they would trust in their weapons and firm purpose if they had to do so.

Alas, after twelve days of siege, whether through lack of food and water, as parliamentary apologists alleged, or through lack of martial spirit to match their brave words, the garrison capitulated, having requested and been assured of honourable terms, namely, "That the (y) shold depte wth one Color flyinge and the other Rowled up, wth helpe of theire Armes, & some Truncks & goods." The Irish companies kept their word

⁽³¹⁾ Cf. Capt. Byrch to Ormond's secretary, George Carr; ". . . they being newly landed (after six days being at sea many of them), many arms unfixed, many of them disaffected to ourselves, and very many straggled among their friends, (though now we miss scarce any that came over with us)". (Carte's collection of letters, ed. 1739, Vol. I, p. 29.)

but the Welsh volunteers assaulted the parliamentarians as they were making their way to Wrexham.⁽³²⁾

In the meantime, the main body had reached Chester on 29 November only a little in advance of Byron's arrival from Oxford. Shortly afterwards they were joined by the party from Hawarden Castle and then about 6 December the second contingent from Ireland, consisting of 1,200 foot and 140 horse, also reported for duty.⁽³³⁾

The army came: "in very evill equipage to Chester, and looked as if they had been used hardship, not having either money, hose or shoes."⁽³⁴⁾ The men were "faint, weary and out of clothing". But when the mayor had sent "through all the wards to get apparel of citizens who gave freely, some whole sutes, some two, some doublets, others breeches, others shirts, shoes, stockings, and hatts to the apparelling of about 300",⁽³⁵⁾ their spirits lifted and they were soon sampling the pleasures of Chester with gusto. Many of them had money to spend which they had obtained either by selling the clothes they had just received or cattle (*sic*) and goods they had pilfered on their way to Chester. (Apparently some citizens were not above "receiving"). The high jinks of the troops so alarmed the corporation that on 1st December, presumably on the morrow of the first night of revelry, they offered to deliver to Lord Capell for the king's service £100 worth of the city's ancient plate, more if it should be thought necessary, if only "the soldiers be removed forth of this Cittie to quarters else where by Monday next".⁽³⁶⁾

Wanted calm was not restored as soon as the citizens hoped, but the troops were not billeted on Chester a day longer than it took the quartermasters to equip them. On 9 December the senior officers received a message of encouragement from the king. Three days later the army marched out, a column of 4,000 foot supported by 1,000 cavalry. Heartened by the easy capture of Hawarden Castle, the subsequent surrender of Bretton Castle, and the apparently craven retreat of Brereton, they were eager for action.

⁽³²⁾ Rushworth, *Historical Collections*, Pt. III, Vol. II, p. 298; see also Broster, *History of the Siege of Chester*; pp. 29-30. In his letter to George Carr, *op.cit.*, Captain Byrch observed: ". . . (the articles) were not so well performed as I could have wished".

⁽³³⁾ Lack of provisions prevented Ormond from sending them sooner, the convoy having returned on 23 November; see also Ormond to the mayor of Chester, 1 December, Harl. MSS., 2135, ff. 15 and 60.

⁽³⁴⁾ *H.M.C.R.*, Vol. XX, App. XI, p. 41.

⁽³⁵⁾ Harl. MSS., 2125, f. 135.

⁽³⁶⁾ City of Chester Assembly Book, f. 64v. Their anxiety to get rid of the soldiers must have been acute because they had been intensely relieved at their appearance. Brereton's advance into Wales had cut off supplies and some of them had been finding life very hard. Harl. MSS., 2125, f. 135.

The parliamentary headquarters at Nantwich was Byron's main objective, but he intended first to mop up all the parliamentary strong points in its general vicinity.⁽³⁷⁾ Byron obviously attached exceptional importance to investing Nantwich at once because there was much to be said against the venture. The weather was already bad and likely to deteriorate so that even allowing for their undoubted hardiness there was grave risk that the troops' effectiveness would be neutralised by cold and a high rate of sickness. The occupation of Liverpool would have been comparatively easier and of the greatest strategic value. Indeed, several Lancastrian officers had devised a plan for its capture under the impression that the king had instructed the Irish to assist them in operations within the boundaries of their own county.⁽³⁸⁾ Ormond also considered Liverpool a vital objective.

On the other hand, Byron may have wished to win fame for himself while the going was good. After all, as far as he knew, Ormond would shortly assume operational command. Contrary to general expectation, morale was high. The parliamentarians had run for cover without striking a blow. Thus the occupation of Nantwich seemed to present a somewhat simple task. Why pursue smaller game or remain inactive when the key to command of the whole of the North-West lay so nearly in his grasp? Byron may have wished also to eliminate Nantwich before reinforcements could be despatched from elsewhere. Whatever his motive, the decision appears to have been entirely his own, there being no record of an appropriate order from the council of war.

The first obstacle encountered on the army's line of march was Beeston Castle which had been in the possession of parliament since the previous February. There were only sixty men in the garrison but the defence works were formidable. Even so, it yielded without a struggle. There is no reason for disbelieving that it was betrayed by its own commander—a common habit it would seem—a certain Captain Steele. Just before dawn on 13 December Captain Sandford, a bombastic artillery officer from Cheshire, broke into the upper ward by scaling the steep rocks which fell precipitously away from one side of the castle and were judged to be impregnable. Steele

⁽³⁷⁾ Cf. N. Byron to Rupert, 12 December, Warburton, Vol. II, p. 333: "This day is appointed our march out of Chester, into those parts, have been most useful to the rebels, and when we come upon the place, shall dispose of ourselves according to the best opportunities we shall meet withall."

⁽³⁸⁾ Bridgeman to Ormond, 29 November, Carte, Vol. V, pp. 527-8. The Lancastrians had a notion that 2,000 men in the north as well as Newcastle in the east would also come to their assistance.

gave him dinner while his eight daring subordinates were plied with flagons of ale. Being allowed to march freely away, the garrison went straight to Nantwich where Steele had to be protected from a crowd of irate townsmen. Subsequently he was tried for treason, found guilty and shot. His motive for surrendering to such a small number and then proceeding to headquarters where he was bound to face charges remains a mystery. Beeston Castle with its commanding view was an important acquisition for the royalists. It must also have given them ironic satisfaction to find that many of the local gentry had stored valuable movable goods there for safe keeping.⁽³⁹⁾

As the army advanced a parliamentary detachment of cavalry charged the forward elements near Barbridge and inflicted considerable damage. Its commander, Sergeant-major Lothian, was captured. The failure of Byron's cavalry to protect the foot-soldiers was highly significant in view of what was to come.

On 22 December the army crossed the river Weaver and made for Northwich in order to cut communications between Nantwich and Manchester. Some troops obviously proceeded to the neighbourhood of Nantwich itself for the town had no peace from this time forward until its relief one month later. On Christmas Day the royalists occupied the village of Barthomley. A number of villagers, all male and all probably armed, who had taken refuge in the church were smoked out, stripped naked and put to the sword. Byron and other royalists subsequently claimed, and he may well have told the truth, that having asked for and been granted quarter they fired on his troops killing one of them.⁽⁴⁰⁾ To parliamentarians, however, this was a cold-blooded, unprovoked massacre and Byron himself a merciless butcher. Henceforth, he and his troops had a bad name which they never lived down and which undoubtedly fired the parliamentarians with a desire for vengeance.

The low estimate in which the Irish army was held by parliamentarians cannot be put down to malice alone. There are good grounds for believing that this army did introduce licence and cruelty into the fighting in the North-West which had hitherto been conducted with essential chivalry on both sides. That it was guilty of plundering on a large scale is evident from the reactions of the Chester corporation. A few royalists also commented

⁽³⁹⁾ Most of the facts in this brief description of the capture of Beeston Castle are taken from the contemporary narrative by Thomas Malbon which is also the main source for the siege of Nantwich. See below p. 75. See also Broster, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-4.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Cf. E. Hinchcliffe, *Bartholemey* (1856), pp. 41-2.

unhappily on its treatment of prisoners and its behaviour in the villages through which it passed. Byron himself appears to have been a ruthless man.⁽⁴¹⁾

News of the royalist advance on Nantwich had emboldened the Lancastrians based on Warrington to lay aside their fears for their own county and to speed to its relief. About 1,500 men under the temporary command of Colonel Rigby arranged a rendezvous with Bereton at Middlewich. Byron's brother, Colonel Robert, prepared to confront them at Sandbach, a place, so he noted with pleasurable anticipation, famous for its strong ale. In the event there was a skirmish only with some 200 enemy horse in front of Sandbach and then he entered the town without opposition. There was no ale to be had.

The main parliamentary body had assembled in Middlewich apparently in ignorance of the proximity of the royalists. The skirmish at Sandbach sounded the alarm and the troops were drawn up in defensive formation outside the town. Byron, whose numbers exceeded theirs by three to one, naturally elected to attack. For some reason, however, only his own regiment engaged with the enemy and an hour of fierce fighting ensued without a decision. At this point Colonel Gibson's regiment intervened and the parliamentarians retreated, firing as they ran. About 300 of them took refuge in Middlewich Church while the rest ran pell-mell through the streets hotly pursued by the royalist cavalry. Eventually they managed to break contact, but only after they had been scattered in confusion over a wide area. One parliamentary account fixed their losses at 30 killed and 100 prisoners. Byron claimed 300 killed and 274 prisoners. He himself had been wounded in the fighting and was still in pain more than two weeks later. His regiment had born the brunt of the fighting and he insinuated that the Irish troops generally had avoided action. This may of course have been

(41) While there may have been some provocation, there was no excuse for the Barthomley massacre. Byron condemned himself by his own testimony for he wrote to the marquis of Newcastle on 26 December: "... I put them all to the sword, which I find to be the best way to proceed with these kind of people, for mercy to them is cruelty."

Captain Sandford was a fire-eating bully whose utterances bordered on the farcical. Even so, he issued several summons to surrender couched in violent terms which must have had some foundation. On one occasion he threatened: "I presume you very well know, or have heard of my condition and disposition, and that I neither give nor take quarter. I am now with my firelocks (who never yet neglected opportunity to correct rebels) ready to use you as I have done the Irish . . . if you put me to the least trouble or loss of blood to force you, expect no quarter for Man, Woman or Child". Again "Sirrah behold the messenger of death, Sandford and his firelocks, who neither use to give, nor take quarter".

As for the looting of the troops, we find that the Chester Assembly was forced to issue a proclamation against plundering in Chester, Denbigh and Flint as early as 1 December. City of Chester Great Letter Book, 1599-1650, Vol. 2, f. 290.

his way of blowing up his own part in the encounter. Both estimates of the casualties were the product of wishful thinking. So also was Byron's boast to have dispersed the parliamentarians beyond any possibility of their reforming. The troops were certainly demoralised and widely scattered but Brereton finally succeeded in reassembling them and they were soon to renew acquaintance with Byron in a somewhat different setting. Nevertheless, parliamentary morale had been rudely shaken whereas the encounter at Middlewich acted as a spur to the royalists.⁽⁴²⁾

Headily elated, the royalists went on to record a series of gains. The garrison evacuated Northwich even before they came within striking distance. The defenders of Crewe House repelled one assault, killing no fewer than sixty men, but then sued for quarter because they were short of ammunition and feared there could be no relief. Royalist units were soon ranging here and there unchecked. Wrenbury surrendered on 30 December even as detachments were being reported at Wistaston and Willaston. Dorfold House, on the edge of Nantwich, submitted on 2 January, and two days later nearby Doddington House gave up after a perfunctory show of resistance, even though the well-provisioned garrison totalled 100 men. When Acton Church, situated but one mile from Nantwich and also strongly manned, surrendered following a surprise attack and some hectic hand-to-hand fighting, Nantwich stood fully exposed.

For several days the royalists were busy taking up positions around the town. Far from being intimidated the defenders made one or two offensive sorties on their own account. One patrol sallied forth on 6 January and appropriated several cartloads of provisions. The royalists retaliated by setting fire to several outbuildings and hayricks. By 10 January the encirclement was complete and Byron stood poised to strike.

At this time the market town of Nantwich was scarcely more than a village, a cluster of houses with thatched roofs, distinguished by a church, alms houses, a town hall, a recently built hospital and a school. Its not inconsiderable prosperity was based on the manufacture of salt. Sir Thomas Fairfax described its defences, which consisted basically of a low mud wall, as slender, but he may have underestimated their effectiveness. The cost of building the wall had been £335-8-7 which suggests

⁽⁴²⁾ We have two accounts of this action: that of the parliamentarian, Malbon, and Byron's own. Paradoxically Malbon's account casts far more discredit on his own party than does that of Byron; it is also garbled. Robert Byron's report may be taken therefore as fairly accurate.

that it was quite substantial.⁽⁴³⁾ There were also a number of ditches. Nor was the garrison, temporarily under the command of George Booth in the absence of Breton, a negligible quantity. The local volunteers had been reinforced by those Cheshiremen who had retreated from Wales following the landing at Mostyn. It is evident, too, that the townsfolk were far from being cowed. At least they were not desperately short of necessities for though "... the Markett was lost & non durst come to Town to bring either any p'vision or fuel, nor fetch any Salte; nor any yssue forth or come In; yett (blessed be God) theire was not for the prsent any want of any needfull thinge". But the royalists were convinced that the town was defensively weak, its provisions exiguous, its mood despondent. As Sir Nicholas Byron informed Prince Rupert, the assault would prove easy and the army could thereupon turn its attention to the reduction of Lancashire.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Through the west side of Nantwich the river Weaver flowed from south to north. It was not very wide, no more than twenty feet, and in normal times quite tranquil. A stone bridge spanned the road leading to Acton Church; on the same road there was a second bridge spanning a stream which was easily covered by the defenders. Downriver there was a newly erected stone bridge known as Beambridge. Beyond this again the royalists built a temporary bridge (a platt), presumably to facilitate the crossing of such a heavy traffic in troops, horses and equipment. It would seem that Byron moved his cavalry to the east side of the river except for the patrols he sent out from time to time to report any significant movement of enemy troops. His cannon probably remained on the west side together with a substantial part of the foot lying up close to the town and some troops at Acton Church. Why he decided to keep no large cavalry force west of the river in order to prevent a relief column from forcing its way into the town along the main road is not clear. Presumably he believed there was no likelihood of such an operation being undertaken. Conditions for the men encamped around Nantwich must have been appalling for there was deep snow on the ground and frost in the air.

Plainly hoping the townsfolk would prefer to submit rather than risk the consequences of resistance Byron issued the first of two summons to surrender on 10 January. He promised a general pardon, except for those who had been proscribed by

⁽⁴³⁾ J. Partridge, *History of Nantwich* (1774), p. 74. In general this is a trifling work both in length and quality.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Shrewsbury, 1 January, Warburton, Vol. II, pp. 355-6. Nicholas was Lord John's uncle. He had been sent to Shrewsbury to bring up supplies.

the king, safe-conducts as required and the protection of life and property. He gave them two hours in which to formulate their reply and offered a *laisser-passer* for one soldier and one townsman to come out and discuss terms.

The town's defiant answer was delivered *fortissimo* at the gates for the sake of uplifting the defenders within earshot as well as apprising the royalists. To test their metal the royalist cannon ranged on the town and set fire to a number of buildings. Anticipating a sudden attack, the men stuck to their posts at the walls while their womenfolk dashed to stamp out the flames. On the next day, a heavy cannonade from Dorfold House caused further fires and the first fatal casualty, a young girl. The garrison obtained some revenge when one of their patrols captured three persons of whom one, a woman, carried twenty half-crowns in her pocket. On 16 January another patrol killed a number of royalists and captured arms and ammunition for the loss of only two men.

On the same day Byron issued his second summons in which he accused the town corporation of deliberately distorting the language of the first summons so as to mislead the people. He warned them that the wretched condition of the town was fully known to him from the reports of prisoners and again invited two representatives to parley. And again the town was staunch. In their written reply, signed by George Booth, they denied tampering with the first summons; on the contrary, they had caused copies to be printed and circulated.

Seeing the inhabitants were strongly armoured against propaganda, Byron and his officers evolved a plan for seizing the town by a surprise attack to be concerted from all sides. As dawn was breaking on the 17th, a single shot broke the silence to signal the assault. Thereupon raiding parties, equipped with scaling ladders, struck simultaneously at five different points while the cannon directed their fire on the town. The orders of one of the commanders were probably typical: ". . . with that regiment under his command and the Fire-locks⁽⁴⁵⁾ and all the Dragoons armed with Fire-locks or snaphances to fall on first so neer unto the fall of the river as may be, on the left hand of the bulwarks, to be seconded by 100 musketeers, then a body of pikes, then a reserve of musketeers. Let the soldiers carry as many faggots as they can."⁽⁴⁶⁾

According to tradition the walls were thinly manned when the attack began but a young boy sounded the alarm and the

⁽⁴⁵⁾ A musket fitted with a flint-lock.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ This particular order was found in the pockets of Captain Sandford. It was signed by Colonel Gibson, one of the five regimental commanders.

garrison were soon massed in their places.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Fierce fighting raged for about one hour, the assault troops struggling to break out of the earthworks. One party managed to force its way into the town at the Pillory Street end, but the defenders closed the gap behind and it was obliged to fight its way back. Eventually the royalists were compelled to withdraw leaving behind many dead and some of their arms. Among the slain were the egregious Captain Sandford, Lt. Colonel Bolton and a number of senior officers. By contrast the garrison suffered minimal casualties, only three dead and three wounded, and remarkably little damage was inflicted on town property despite the weight of shot poured in from close range.⁽⁴⁸⁾

This was a painful reverse, but Byron gave no thought to raising the siege. Clarendon subsequently charged him with foolhardiness and criticised his troops for the uncommon reason that they were too keen. In his view, the only sane policy at this stage would have been to desist.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Yet, once committed, Byron was probably correct to persevere. The town could not withstand several such assaults nor were its supplies inexhaustible.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Furthermore, withdrawal following a setback would have been generally interpreted as an admission of defeat besides lowering the morale of his army and damaging Royalist prestige throughout the adjoining counties. Nor could he have been happy in such circumstances about taking his troops back to the grudging hospitality of Chester.

But though Byron's decision was reasonable enough, his position was becoming precarious. A supply train *en route* from Shrewsbury was caught unawares by a sudden night attack at Ellesmere. Its commanders, Sir Nicholas Byron and Sir Robert Welles, together with 100 officers and men, were taken prisoner. All the precious supplies and 250 horses were lost. Only half of the accompanying cavalry contrived to rejoin Byron.⁽⁵¹⁾

Meanwhile parliament had peremptorily ordered Sir Thomas Fairfax to effect the relief of Nantwich without delay. At this time Fairfax was resting after the relief of Gainsborough and in no mood for immediate action. "I was the most unfit of all their forces," he later noted, "being ever the worst Paid, my Men sickly and almost naked." But taking his cavalry with him, he

⁽⁴⁷⁾ *Cheshire Sheaf*, no. 527. Another tradition concerned the amazonian part played by the townswomen particularly a certain Mrs. Brett who poured hot brine on the attackers as they tried to scale the walls.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Malbon, pp. 104-5.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Of course it was easy for Clarendon to be wise after the event.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ By the 18th the town was beginning to feel the pinch (Malbon, p. 110).

⁽⁵¹⁾ Carte, Vol. III, p. 42; *A true relation of a notable surprise, &c, at Ellesmere*; Robert Byron to Ormond, 31 January, Carte (ed. 1739), Vol. I, p. 40.

set off almost at once for Manchester, travelling by way of Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the hope of picking up recruits. If Byron is to be believed, he got wind of Fairfax's mission, sent a force to intercept him, caught him by surprise at Newcastle, and inflicted great damage. Byron may have reported truthfully, for the success of a daring and opportunist raid of this kind would help to explain why Fairfax took a long time to reach Manchester and why Byron so confidently assumed that Nantwich would not be relieved. Whether put in disarray or not, Fairfax was nevertheless soon in Manchester where he was met by Brereton and Ashton. Some difficulty was experienced in attracting recruits and reassembling the stragglers from Middlewich, but eventually Fairfax had about 2,500 foot at his disposal in addition to the 1,800 horse and 500 dragoons who had accompanied him from Lincolnshire. From his subsequent remarks it is evident that he was anxious about their poor quality and embarrassed by the jealous rivalries of his senior commanders.⁽⁵²⁾

Fairfax left Manchester on 21 January but made such slow progress through the snow that it took him three days to reach Tilston Heath where the army bivouacked for the night. On the following day, he made his first contact with the royalists at Delamere. A brief skirmish ensued and thirty or more prisoners were captured. Six miles further, at Barbridge, his passage was obstructed by a force of about 200 men who had been sent forward by the royalists to keep watch and guard on the Manchester road. An attack by foot and dragoons put them to flight and more prisoners were taken. Approaching Acton Church, his forward troops came under desultory fire without suffering any casualties. The battle of Nantwich was about to begin.⁽⁵³⁾

Byron had long since heard of his steady advance and the strength of his command. It is not certain how he first reacted. According to Clarendon he decided there was no reason to apprehend an attack. Byron himself later claimed that after consultation with his senior officers he prepared to confront Fairfax despite being inferior in numbers. In the light of Byron's unbalanced deployment of his army it is not improbable that Clarendon knew what he was talking about.⁵⁴ It is also not with-

⁽⁵²⁾ Fairfax submitted a short but pithy account of the relief of Nantwich to Lord Essex (Rushworth, Vol. V, p.302). He also referred to it in his memoir of the campaign in the North. See the short note below p. 75.

⁽⁵³⁾ See the sketch map p. 57. To reconstruct the battle of Nantwich is peculiarly difficult. See below pp. 75-6.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Many of Byron's statements concerning this episode are suspect. Indeed, his whole object seems to have been to bury the truth under a blanket of evasions and irrelevancies.



By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

Plate 8. THOMAS AND ANN FAIRFAX

out significance that Fairfax himself concluded from his own appreciation of the situation that he would be well advised to gain access to the town without getting involved in a full-scale battle.

From the first intelligence reports which he received Fairfax may well have assumed that this would be comparatively easy since they must have placed most of the royalists on the east side of the river. The day before he reached Nantwich, however, he was informed that Byron had raised the siege and moved a number of his troops back to the west side. This dramatic transformation had been brought about by a change in the weather. His arrival had almost coincided with a sudden thaw and heavy rain which had turned the flat land about Nantwich into a quagmire. Byron had managed to move a good number of his foot across the wooden bridge—Beambridge had collapsed—to the high ground in the area of Acton Church but the bridge had then been swept away by the turbulent waters and he, together with part or all of his cavalry and an uncertain number of foot, had been left isolated on the east side. The nearest bridge was about two miles away which, in terms of time, put him between one to two hours away from the rest of his force.⁽⁵⁵⁾ It would appear that when Fairfax first examined the royalist dispositions on the ground the royalist army was still divided. From other evidence it may be inferred that Byron was even then urgently making his way across the river.

To destroy the enemy troops at Acton Church before the other half of the royalists could join forces or to refrain from attack was the problem that now confronted Fairfax. He held a council of war and it was decided not to run the risk but to take the shortest route across the fields and through the hedges into the town. When the decision was taken, it was about two o'clock.⁽⁵⁶⁾

The start of the advance was seriously delayed while Fairfax waited for his rear to come up. Consequently, before his troops had travelled far he was informed that that part of the enemy's force which had been on the east bank were approaching from behind. Realising he had now no choice but to force his way

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Probably Shrewbridge. It is difficult to understand why Burne and Young (*infra*) should have assumed that Byron proceeded six miles downriver to the bridge at Minshull. He himself specifically stated that he travelled six miles altogether. It is noteworthy also that Robert Byron, who fell back to the west of Acton Church during the coming battle, reported that his regiment was finally saved by joining the horse.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ Fairfax's reports are very confusing. Nevertheless, Burne and Young have no justification for assuming that he did decide to attack.

into the town Fairfax promptly ordered two regiments of foot and his own regiment of horse to face about and prepare to receive the shock of their charge.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Meanwhile, the regiment in the van, for which pioneers were cutting a passage through the numerous hedges, clashed with the royalists. The time was between three and half-past three o'clock.

Under the command of Gibson, temporarily replacing Ernle who was sick, the royalist regiments had taken up a defensive posture at a short distance from Acton Church. Of the five regiments at his disposal, Gibson had stationed one regiment, commanded by Colonel Huncke, behind the church, its task being to act as a reserve and to guard the stone bridge leading into Nantwich in case the garrison should hazard a sortie. His cannon were located in the grounds of the church. The four regiments he intended to commit were drawn up in enclosed fields at some distance from each other.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Colonel Robert Byron was on the left flank, Gibson himself on the right, the regiments of Ernle and Warren bridged the centre (the battle). It is to be presumed that the head of Fairfax's advancing column was halted by the regiments of Warren and Gibson, while the rest of his army were engaged by the two left flank regiments which must have wheeled right. At any rate Fairfax's whole army, divided in two parts separated by about a quarter of a mile according to his own reckoning, was instantly at grips with the royalists. The opposing foot were roughly equal; if anything, Fairfax had a slight advantage.

Warren's men wilted at the first thrust of pike and broke ranks. Monk, who was serving as a volunteer, rallied them only to see them fall back headlong in face of a second charge. At least a few went over to the enemy and actually fired on their former comrades.⁽⁵⁹⁾ The other regiments staunchly held their ground, however, the two wings in particular giving as good if not better than they received. Unable to exploit the gap left by Warren's fugitives, the parliamentarians thrust in vain all along the line. Indeed, Fairfax later described the close support given by the horse in immensely difficult conditions as indispensable. What the outcome might have been is uncertain if about 800

⁽⁵⁷⁾ Fairfax's reference to this force descending on his rear is the only hint that we have of when and where Byron himself may have appeared on the scene. Indeed, it could be that Fairfax's informants had seen only a part of the royalist cavalry or that they wrongly assumed that the regiments of Robert Byron and Ernle—which must have wheeled right at some point—had advanced from the other side of the river.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ Lord Byron described the site of the battle as an enclosed field. This could have been a slip. In any event, it was wrong. Robert Byron recorded that the army was drawn up in enclosed fields.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ The number should not be exaggerated (see below p. 73).

musketeers had not made a timely sortie from the town as dusk was falling, swept aside the party covering the bridge which, contrary to orders, numbered only 100 instead of 400 men, scattered the regiment in reserve, captured the cannon at Acton Church, and fallen on the royalist rear.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Harassed on two fronts, Ernle's regiment broke into pieces. Fairfax's centre swarmed into the great gap now separating Byron and Gibson and wheeling left and right pressed against their flanks. Byron kept a tight grip on his men and eventually joined up with his brother's horse, having lost only ten men in the whole course of a furious action. Gibson was less fortunate since he could not escape from the enemy squeezing him on all sides. As night descended, most of the senior commanders, including Ernle, Warren, Monk and Gibson himself, were forced to surrender. About 200 dead were left on the field: 1,600 troops were taken prisoner.⁽⁶¹⁾ Apart from prisoners, the parliamentarians also took possession of a great quantity of equipment and ammunition, in addition to money and plate. By contrast, their own losses were negligible: 4 lives in the town (the fight at the bridge?) and 20 in the field.⁽⁶²⁾ No wonder the victory appeared to Fairfax little short of a miracle.

Fairfax was too modest. He had kept a cool head and skilfully exploited every advantage. He might also have given some thanks to Lord Byron, for it was his astonishing failure to play any part in the battle which really settled the issue. His foot were a match for Fairfax's; his own horse distinctly superior. He tried to explain away his inactivity thus: "The ground was so enclosed the horse could do no service and some of them, who were struck with a panic fear, so disordered the rest, that though they did not run away, yet it was impossible to make them charge", and sought sympathy by telling a pathetic and utterly unconvincing tale of how he spent two hours after the battle vainly trying to recover the cannon and carriages. It has not previously been suggested, and Byron himself would scarcely have admitted it, but surely the likeliest explanation of Byron's passive role is that his horses were too tired and too excitable to be of any use after galloping about six miles over close, waterlogged country. In any case he had not Fairfax's tactical gift

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Fairfax paid tribute to the value of their intervention.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Among them were a number of women (a female regiment, according to one parliamentary source), armed with long knives. Like the woman with the collection of half-crowns in her pockets, these were obviously camp followers, but horrific stories were to be circulated of their savage appearance and their participation in the army's battles. Their presence assuredly helped propagandists to bring the Irish army into further disrepute.

⁽⁶²⁾ Malbon, pp. 113-6; Rushworth, Vol. V, p. 302.

for rapidly appraising a complex military situation and taking appropriate action.⁽⁶³⁾

While the church bells were pealing for miles around and the townsfolk of Nantwich were rejoicing,⁽⁶⁴⁾ Byron limped back to Chester with his unscathed cavalry and about 1,300 foot as against three times that number with which he had confidently marched out only six weeks previously. Even among these there were walking-wounded "besides many cartloads that brought to Chester that were wounded and maimed". Towards the end of January he was reinforced by two more regiments and four troops of horse from Ireland. Three more small contingents consisting of 900 men in all quickly followed. But the Irish army never again flourished as an effective fighting formation.

Its destruction marked a notable victory for parliament. The occupation of Nantwich would have left the royalists in virtual command of the whole of the North-West. And, in the Spring, the addition to the king's forces of an army with such a record of success would have gone far towards reducing the impact of the Scots. As things were, the victory was so complete that it could not fail to exalt parliamentary spirits even as it disheartened faithful royalists.

At Oxford, news of the disaster caused shock and dismay felt all the more deeply because earlier reports of the army's progress had been uniformly encouraging. The council of war was particularly upset by the high proportion of key officers who had been taken prisoner. Even so, Charles and Digby were soon consoling themselves that the total loss had not been serious. They shared a remarkable facility for dismissing such catastrophes as matters of small moment. Within a week Digby was once again imploring Ormond to reinforce the garrison at Chester, as though the gods of war would give them a second chance.

The royalist leaders also sought to blame the rank and file for the defeat; some had proved treacherous, while others had lacked courage. The coincidence that many of them hailed from North Wales and Cheshire had made them "very subject to bee corrupted in their owne countryes".⁽⁶⁵⁾ This was Byron's own excuse. As he explained to Ormond when requesting reinforcements: "I wish they were rather Irish than English, for the

⁽⁶³⁾ There is no question that the conditions were extremely bad for cavalry action; the ground was cut up, ditches and hedges hampered movement, and the lanes were narrow. But unhappily for Byron's case Fairfax somehow made good use of his horse.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ For a century or more the townsfolk of Nantwich celebrated the anniversary of this victory (Holly-Holy-Day) by wearing sprigs of holly. Partridge, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁽⁶⁵⁾ Digby to Ormond, 8 February, Carte, Vol. VI, p. 33.

English we have already are very mutinous, and being for the most part these countrymen are so poisoned by the ill-affected people here, that they grow very cold in this service". And both Byron and Digby specifically recommended that only native Irishmen should be sent over in the future.

In fact, the evidence of treachery is scarcely convincing. According to the estimate of the royalist Sir John Mennes, 500 of those captured at Nantwich joined the parliamentarians, 200 others having previously done so.⁽⁶⁶⁾ A grand total of 700, almost certainly inflated for effect, out of 5,000 or upwards was not unduly high, especially as these were first and foremost professional soldiers hiring out to whatever authority would provide for their pay and subsistence. Furthermore, in his laconic report of the battle Robert Byron commented without any special emphasis: "Some say (*sic*) they played foul-play and ran over to the enemy, at least 60 of them, and fired upon us". It is also significant that Clarendon, who, writing retrospectively, could have told any tale he liked, had nothing but praise for this Irish army; cheerfully immune to the harsh winter conditions and always impatient for action they erred through over-eagerness rather than lack of nerve. Regrettably also for the apologists, both Digby and Byron had reported favourably on the behaviour of the troops before the calamity occurred. Certainly the determination with which they persevered with their attacks in spite of heavy casualties during the abortive assault of 17 January scarcely bespoke cowardice. Again, if they had been seriously deficient in courage and had displayed signs of treachery, that salutary reverse would have provided an excellent pretext for raising the siege and escaping from squalid bivouac conditions. As it was, Robert Byron informed Ormond on 31 January that the troops had not been depressed in spite of the heavy losses they had incurred.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Byron should have thought twice before investing Nantwich in the first place. As has been pointed out, Liverpool presented a valuable prize and its capture would have been relatively easy. Given that the operation was deemed essential he should have prepared for the intervention of a relief force from Manchester by keeping at least half of his horse on the west side of the river.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ In a letter to Rupert, Warburton, Vol. II, p. 371.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ Fairfax described the royalist troops as "... men of great experience who had run through all sorts of services, and were not new to the Policies of Warre. . . . They were men acquainted with the greatest hardship, habituated to cold and want, and whatever suffering a winter siege could require. . . . They were put in heart by their former successes, and that would make them the more daring and desperate, and they were valient before, being used to nothing but conquests".

In any case, he should not have allowed his free movement to become restricted by the swollen river. The sudden thaw was a contingency to be expected. Nor was it valid to complain of the reserve regiment's failure to man the stone bridge in adequate strength. He should have ascertained personally that this precaution had been properly taken. Above all, he was left with the embarrassing question: why did he allow himself to be caught with his army divided and why, having come up on the scene of battle, did his cavalry not intervene? In his evasive report, Byron pinned the blame on everyone but himself. Even Newcastle was at fault for neglecting to deal with Fairfax as he had been asked to do. Misplaced confidence, underestimation of the time it would take the parliamentary army to come to the rescue, faulty dispositions on the ground, his own inability to control the battle, these were the factors which contributed towards his defeat. In the main, the army fought in adversity as well, if not better, than Ormond, for one, had predicted.

At the national level the whole expedition was badly managed. The vital need was to cancel out the entry into the war of the Scots. For this purpose, all available Irish troops should have been assembled in one place. Instead, a third of them were sent to assist Hopton in the South-West. Even then, the troops for Chester came over in separate waves. The time-lag between the first and second was not serious but the third wave, as we have seen, arrived too late to be of service at Nantwich, where their presence might have made all the difference to the outcome. Furthermore, the royalists should have been anticipating the major campaign which would open in the Spring. For this, it was important to keep the Irish army intact, so that the king could put into the field one really large army.

There is nearly always one ironic footnote that may be appended to a royalist blunder. In this instance, it takes the form of a letter from Prince Rupert to the supreme council of the Irish Confederacy at Kilkenny, in which he stated that he was assuming general command of Wales and the North-West so as to be able to coordinate defences against the Scots. Would they supply him with 5,000 muskets and 300 barrels of powder and ship them to Chester or any North Wales port? The letter was dated 18 January.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Too late. On the next day, the Scots were on the march—down the east coast. In a dazzling campaign, Rupert was shortly to recover royalist supremacy in the North-West, but not for long. His effort fizzled out for lack of numbers and supplies. How differently he might have fared had the Irish Royalist army still been at his disposal.

⁽⁶⁸⁾ Carte, Vol. VI, pp. 14-15.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

All the material used in this account has been drawn from contemporary or near contemporary sources, most of which are readily accessible in published form. It was not always considered necessary however to cite references in the case of key sources.

For the evidence concerning Ireland and Ormond's part in the episode I have relied mainly on T. Carte, *Life of James Duke of Ormond*; volume III includes Carte's sound but incomplete narrative of the campaign; volumes V and VI contain a selection of letters and a few documents from Ormond's own papers. Carte published another collection of letters in two volumes in 1739. The Carte Papers in the Bodleian Library (transcripts in the Public Record Offices of England and Ireland) furnish a wealth of unpublished material.

Clarendon in his great history of the origins and course of the Civil War made some penetrating comments on the campaign from the national viewpoint. E. Warburton's *Prince Rupert and the Cavaliers* is full of extracts from Rupert's correspondence and very useful. The second volume of J. R. Phillips' *Memoirs of the Civil War in Wales and the Marches 1642-9* (1874) consists of skilfully selected illustrative documents. Phillips' own account is valuable as a general introduction to the subject but not always accurate.

The siege of Nantwich was minutely, if not impartially, described by a contemporary parliamentarian apologist, Thomas Malbon. Edward Burghall subsequently paraphrased Malbon's narrative in the course of a longer work without due acknowledgement. Both accounts were published by the Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society in 1889 in one volume edited by James Hall under the title *Memorials of the Civil War in Cheshire and the Adjacent Counties by Thomas Malbon and Providence Improved by Edward Burghall*. The two narratives were placed one above another in order to facilitate a comparative analysis.

The battle of Nantwich is notoriously difficult to reconstruct. Malbon was no militarist and in any case had little or no idea of what happened outside the town. One of Fairfax's officers, Captain Hodgson, left us a terse record of his sectional view of the proceedings (*Sir Henry Slingsby Original Memoirs*, etc., Edin., 1806). The only remaining source on the parliamentary side is Fairfax himself, and he was not a man to waste words. Apart from his remarkable letter of understatement to Essex he made a tantalisingly brief allusion to the battle in "A Short Memorial of the Northern Actions in which I was engaged (1642-4)" (*The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. V (1926), pp. 119-25 and 160-74. On the royalist side we have Byron's own account (contained in a letter to Ormond, 30 January 1644, Carte's *Collection of Letters* (ed. 1739), Vol. I, p. 36) which cannot be taken at its face value since its primary object was to obscure rather than reveal the truth; in any case, Byron played a passive role in the conflict and lacked an overall grasp of what took place. It is indeed fortunate that Robert Byron, who was more straightforward than his brother, also made a report to Ormond which is obviously reliable as far as it goes (31 January 1644, Carte's *Collection of Letters*, (Vol. I, p. 40). But we are still left with a great gap in our knowledge. Thus the brief description of the battle which has been given represents no more than an attempt to construct a coherent pattern out of the disconnected pieces of information that are available.

In their recently published work on the principal battles and campaigns of the Civil War (*The Great Civil War 1642-6*, London, 1959) A. H. Burne and P. Young devoted several pages to the siege and relief of Nantwich (pp. 132-8). Some of their incidental remarks concerning the episode are incorrect. For example, on p. 132 they have five regiments joining Byron in October at a time when they had not even embarked and when the king had not yet summoned Byron to Oxford. Elsewhere (p. 119) their explanation of Capell's replacement by Byron is unsatisfactory. Still more serious, their ingenious reconstruction of the battle, which carries a deceptive note of authority, is open to criticism on several major grounds, as well as a number of minor ones. It will suffice to mention a few examples. They locate the whole of Nantwich itself east of the Weaver (see their own sketch map) when in fact some part of it was on the west side and had been

there since medieval times. This means that there must have been two stone bridges along the road leading out of the town and not one as they assume—the second bridge, the one guarded by the royalists, must have spanned a stream filled in in later years. It also means that a portion of the royalist army, probably with most of the cannon (as may be deduced from Malbon's account), was always on the west side and indeed Fairfax plainly stated that Byron had "besieged the town on both sides of the river." Again they allocate the same number of foot to Byron as to Fairfax, namely 3,000. As has been seen, Byron only gave himself 1,500. Even if it be granted that he deliberately underestimated his true strength in his *ex post facto rationale* of the battle, it is hard to believe that he went so far as to halve his numbers. As for Fairfax, he gave himself 3,000 on leaving Manchester in one account, but only 2,500 in the other. Finally, they give a demonstrably false description of Fairfax's intentions. Consider, for instance, this remarkable distortion of the evidence relating to Fairfax's reaction to the news of Byron's descent on his rear. They write: "In his report he (Fairfax) merely states in matter of fact terms 'they told me the enemy was close upon our rear, so, facing about two regiments I marched . . . straight for Acton Church'". But this is quite untrue, Fairfax's column was making directly for the town. As he makes perfectly plain in his reports, he did not attack, he was attacked! The point of drawing attention to these inaccuracies—and again it must be emphasized that there are others—is to show how shaky the whole highly speculative reconstruction must be. When in the absence of clear evidence authors choose to fall back on a doctrine of "inherent military probability", it is surely not too much to ask that they should get the few ascertainable facts right.