

Battle of Scarriffholis 21 June 1650

Mapping the Battle of Scarriffholis 21 June 1650

The Battle of Scarriffholis was fought near the modern town of Letterkenny in the area of Newmills on 21 June 1650 and was one of the most decisive battles fought in Donegal and was the last major land battle of the 'War of the Three Kingdoms' / 'Cogadh na dTrí Ríocht' 1641-1652. The armies that fought at Scarriffholis were the Ulster Catholic Army (Ulster Gaels) commanded by Bishop Heber MacMahon, Bishop of Clogher. Opposing MacMahon was the Parliamentarian Commander Sir Charles Coote Jr, 1st Earl of Mountrath whose force was made up of various military formations drawn, from different garrisons in West of the River Bann. On paper, both armies were well matched, Coote's army was bolstered by local Protestant settlers and remnants of the Lagan Army who were all fresh troops.

The Ulster Army were battle-hardened veterans, but they were weary and in need of rest. The most important consideration for Scarriffholis was the fact it resulted in the total annihilation of the Ulster Catholic army. With this defeat, Ireland lost all its best and most experienced soldiers, vast quantities of war material, but most importantly the physical threat this force posed to Parliament's grip on Ulster. With this victory, Coote secured Ulster and could now combine his forces with other Parliamentarian forces outside Ulster, bringing them to bear on the Duke of Ormond's Confederacy of Kilkenny and other Royalist forces. But it would take two more years for Ireland to be beaten into submission, but never quite fell under the iron rule of Oliver Cromwell's regime.....!

Key points of the battle relating to the map

1. The Ulster Army; arrives in Letterkenny on the 20 June 1650, under the command of Bishop Heber MacMahon. This force comprised of about 4,000 battle-weary but hardened men. They crossed the ford at Scarriffholis, setting up their camp on high ground near but overlooking the then ruined O'Donnell Castle that stood guard at the ancient ford.
2. Sir Charles Coote's forces gather: they arrive in Oldtown on 21 June 1650. Coote is subsequently joined by Col Fenwick, the Lagan Army and local militia forces. This combined force makes ready to march on the Ulster Army position at Tullygay /Doon Hill.
3. Col. Miles Sweeney; leaves the main camp, with a detachment of 1200-1400 men to forage and secure Doe Castle and Port.
4. The Ulster Army makes its first move; this is in response to Coote sending out numerous small patrols to probe for weaknesses in the Ulster Army's defensive position. MacMahon had little choice but to counter Coote's numerous patrols who would eventually cut him off if he remained atop of Tullygay hill.
5. Coote makes his first move; seeing MacMahon's forces descending the steep slope of Tullygay, he advanced his forces to intercept the now vulnerable mass formations moving downhill.

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6. First blood; Coote's initial attack is carried out by Col Fenwick with a Forlorn Hope numbering 150 men, against an Ulster Army advanced party of a similar number and composition. In this initial skirmish, Fenwick's men are worsted by the Ulster Army initially and begin to tire. Coote bolsters their formation and they gain ground again.

7. Phase two of the Coote's attack; is launched from the Ulster army's left flank (from Ballymacool / Conwal village) causing the Irish troops now filtering into the battle area from the steep slope of Tullygay, to become disorganised and panic.

8. The Push of Pike: With the Irish forces being attacked from the front and left sides simultaneously and the death of the Irish Captain commanding the Ulster army's Forlorn hope, the Irish troops began to fall back in disorder to a large ditch. On arriving at the ditch those still descending the steep slope begin to collide with those now retreating from the front ranks. While in the Push of Pike, they had been worsted by shot and pike on their flank and could not turn to defend against it due to being trapped between, a river, slope and ditch. Those who could escape towards Glendowan and Cloghan did, the others took up a defensive posture at the old Castle ruin in what would become a last stand.

9. Refuge Denied: Coote's Cavalry, eventually reached the Castle ruin and Ford via Ardahee along the Rockhill Road on the South side of the river, his Infantry and Cavalry from Conwal from the North side of Swilly completed the encirclement of those now corralled within the Castle ruin.

10. Necessity hath no law: For those within the castle, they would receive no mercy, here a few hundred may have been killed. Those who escape into the hinterland and hills are hunted through the bogs, forests and valleys of Donegal for two to three days by Coote's men and the local Protestants, keen to show their loyalty to the Parliamentary regime. *Today at location 10 there is a commemorative plaque and stone seat to mark the location across the river where the castle once stood. It was demolished by the railway in the early 1900's, and in 2022 what remained was landscaped for farmland.*

Note: One of the few extant indications of the battle is to be found where a Major King Commanding a Cavalry troop, claimed to have killed 200-300 men. He gives this location as 12 miles from the main area of action in the Parish of Kiltееvoge. He is most likely referring to the engagement a Welsh town (11.2 miles away) at a location called Meenagrauv (Mhín na gCnámh) the name and local stories indicate that a mass grave exists in the vicinity. From local stories, this would seem to have been a last-stand scenario. After the fugitives endured skirmishing over Cark mountain, again at the Ford on the Finn in Brockagh and an engagement at Strath na Bratog, at Meenaclave a sword was found, more extant evidence of troops escaping along the Finn River and possible discarding or dropping them in panic. This weapon may have been the final chapter in the story of an undisclosed mass grave near Meenagrauv.

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