

## **The Battle of Benburb 5 June 1646**

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Monro's nephew, George Monro, led a second and smaller column southward from Coleraine to meet his uncle at Glaslough. A third column of two thousand settlers from the Laggan in County Donegal had reached Augher by the 4th of June. The plan was that the Laggan men would invade Connacht while Monro invaded Leinster, and maybe march as far south as Kilkenny the Confederate Catholic capital.

On 1st of June Eoghan Rua O'Neill began a march from near Lough Sheelin in County Longford to his summer base at Charlemont Fort. He had about five thousand footmen and a similar number horsemen. On Thursday the 4th of June Monro captured an Irish scout near Poyntz Pass. The prisoner passed on electrifying news: Eoghan Rua was marching that very day from Glaslough to Benburb!

Monro was desperate to catch O'Neill. He broke camp, marched ten more miles before pitching camp, then roused the camp at 4am on Friday morning and marched to Armagh. At a crossing on the Blackwater River near Benburb Monro could see the Irish on the high ground by the ruins of an old O'Neill castle on the northern bank, blocking his passage over the Blackwater.

Historian G.A. Hayes-McCoy imagines 'on the one side the buff-coated Scotsmen and ejected planters, standing at the beginning of their centuries of distrust; on the other, the dispossessed gentleman of Ulster...'

Monro could not risk crossing the river at Benburb nor could he cross downstream at Portmore. Upstream, the closest crossing was at a ford near Kinard, more than five miles away as the crow flies. Monro had men, not birds. He marched his soldiers 19 miles along the river, their second day of long marching and little sleep. O'Neill was kept well-informed about Monro's long detour. O'Neill's men had it easy by comparison. All they had to do was march one mile west of Benburb to a hill named Drumflugh, the 'wet ridge', face south, and wait. O'Neill sent most of his cavalry and some of foot soldiers towards Dungannon to intercept George Monro's column. They planned to delay Robert Monro's main army to provide buy time for the detachment to intercept Monro's second army at Dungannon and get back.

O'Neill sent some musketeers forward to shoot at the enemy and slow him down. The basket of eggs topography in which the drumlins are separated by small loughs or boggy wet ground favoured such delaying actions. For half an hour O'Neill's musketeers shot at Monro's vanguard. They had to pull back when Monro's son-in-law George Montgomery arrived with cavalry. O'Neill succeeded in delaying Monro's advance they didn't reach Derrycreedy until around 7:00 o'clock at night.

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Between Derrycreevy and O'Neill's position lay a shallow valley and stream that emptied into the Blackwater. On Monro's left lay boggy ground, on his right the Blackwater. Monro sent Henry Blaney forward with six field guns. As the guns fired, Monro grouped his regiments into brigades and forming two battle lines. But his front was too narrow and his brigades so close together they would not be able to make a single unbroken line, if they had to. Monro's musketeers went forward to secure a ford between the hills. Next Montgomery, 'a young warrior very desirous of honour', plunged in with a hundred cavalrymen.

O'Neill saw the threat and sent 600 musketeers under lieutenant colonel, Phelim Mac Tuathail O'Neill who drove back the attackers and may have taken Montgomery prisoner. If Montgomery was captured this early in the battle his loss would have reverberated through the ranks as he was nominally second-in-command of the whole army.

Everyone waited.

Monro was waiting for his nephew; O'Neill was waiting for his cavalry. At last on the horizon, they saw horsemen. Both armies set up a cheer. Monro thought it was his nephew and they had trapped O'Neill. But the riders who galloped up were Irish who had raced back from Dungannon where they had stopped the Coleraine detachment.

Monro must have begun to feel very alone. O'Neill's chaplain bade the soldiers kneel and he gave them general absolution.

Afterwards, O'Neill harangued them:

'Gentlemen and Fellow Soldiers! Know that those who stand before you ready to fight are those that banished you, your Wives and Children from your lands and Houses, and made you seek Bread and Livelihood in strange places'. A chaplain wrote down O'Neill's actual opening words:

'Agsúd cugaibh escairde Dé, agus naimhde bhur n-anma; agus dénaidh calmacht 'na n-aghaidh aníú; ór isiad do bhen díbh bhur dtighernaibh, bhur gclann and bhur mbeatha spiradálta agus temporálta, agus do bhen bhur ndúthaigh díbh, 'sdo chuir ar deoruighacht sibh'

O'Neill concluded:

So as now is the time to consider your distressed and slavish condition; you have arms in your hands, you are as numerous as they are; and now try your Valour and your Strength on those that have banished you and now resolve to destroy you Bud and Branch. So let your Manhood be seen by your push of Pike; and I will engage, if you do so, by God's assistance and the Intervention of His Blessed Mother and all the Holy Saints in Heaven, that the day will be your own. Your word is Sancta Maria; and so, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, advance, and give not fire till you are within pike-length.

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O'Neill fully intended his men to march forward, his musketeers to fire a volley at close range, and his blocks of pikemen to push forward while Monro's men were still reeling from the shock.

Monro's horsemen charged forward through the gaps in the front line to try to break up the Irish battalions. But the Irish battled on, the wind blowing gun smoke in their faces and eyes. Monro's officers 'stood to it manfully' and 'left not the ground till they were beaten down by push of pike' but their men 'did not back them'.

Monro's men were exhausted. Some say his pikemen shortened their pikes to make them lighter to carry during their long march. This was a major disadvantage when they met the Irish with their longer pikes when they stood 'breast to breast pointing at each other'.

Monro tried to pull his first line back into the second line but the intervals between the brigades were too narrow and his troops piled up. Meanwhile the Irish had neatly slotted their first and second line units to make a complete unbroken line of battle. Again, Monro sent forward the horsemen but to no avail. Eoghan Rua ordered Colonel Richard O'Farrell, on the extreme right to bend the line inwards and attack Monro's flank. This caused Monro's army to 'stagger'. Seeing this, Monro's cavalry rode off so did Monro, without his wig and cassock. Only Sir James Montgomery's regiment which stood nearest the riverbank on Monro's right escaped.

O'Neill lost 300 men, Monro 3,000.

Such asymmetrical losses were common when most of the killing happened in the pursuit, rather than the battle. The river provided a major for soldiers fleeing in panic, now trampled between the river and O'Neill's pursuing men.

The massacre was not confined to Battle ford. An area just south-east of the ford on the route to Armagh is known as Cabhán na Fola or 'Bloody Hollow'. Here the Irish soldiers robbed the dead and dying, taking with them tokens of battle: colours, cannon, drums, muskets, and pikes. The Irish soldiers robbed the dead and dying.

Monro interpreted the disaster as God's punishment for overly confident: 'the Lord of Hosts had a controversy with us to rub shame on our faces'. We often speak of a battle being decisive, but in practice battles are increments in a process of attrition whereby wars are won or lost. The criticism has often been made that O'Neill should have pursued Monro's army vigorously and overrun the Scots settlements there.

But many of O'Neill's men had gone home to stash their booty and Monro still had up to 9000 Scots and British men.'

The Papal nuncio Rinuccini, O'Neill's paymaster, warned O'Neill and his army in Kilkenny to forestall what he saw as a shameful treaty with Ormond, the King's man in Dublin. O'Neill answered Rinuccini's call, added military muscle to the nuncio's moral suasion, and wrecked the Ormond Peace.

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Good or bad, that was Benburb's legacy.

### **Location**

Benburb Castle

Main Street

Benburb

County Tyrone BT71 7JZ

Benburb Film:

Script and historical expert Dr Pádraig Lenihan, NUIG; Tomás Ó Brógáin, Oireas living history actors and film producer Cathal Hegarty, Benburb Productions.

[Battle of Benburb Credits](#)