BANTRY, THE UNKNOWN INVASION

by Tom De Voil

This is a true story of bad timing, missed communications, confusing orders and changes in plans. The Commander-in-Chief goes missing, there is inclement but predictable weather and bad intelligence.

Where did it occur? Bantry is a picturesque township of about 3000 people at the head of Bantry Bay in the south-west of Ireland. It is the site of a failed invasion of Ireland by France. This real tragi-comedy of errors took place just over 200 years ago.

Bantry Bay is a deep water inlet approximately 20 miles long and six miles wide at its widest point. On Whiddy Island, about a mile offshore from Bantry, the RN set up a 19th century establishment and the US built a military aviation base there in WW I. A scintillating posting it would have been, observing the nature of the weather most of the year. With the development of convoys to combat the U-boat menace, Bantry Bay became an assembly point for many trans-Atlantic convoys.

To the west of Bantry is a Georgian mansion, Bantry House, the 18th century home of Richard White (1769–1851, later First Earl of Bantry). Its Carriage House is a museum, the French Invasion Exhibition Centre (also called the French Armada Exhibit). Only the Irish could do this. The museum displays a wonderful range of artefacts from a French sixth rate, *La Surveillante* (26 x 12-pounders plus six 6-pounder guns and a crew of 200), together with descriptions of life afloat and ashore at the time of the invasion. The French scuttled this storm-damaged ship off Whiddy Island on 2 January 1797. Re-discovered in 1981, it has been gradually excavated over the following years (Breen MS).
SHIFTING POLITICAL ALLIANCES

Great Britain and France were at war in 1797. After the 1789 French Revolution there were a number of wars from 1793 to 1815 between France and a series of changing coalitions. Austria and Prussia were their first opponents, but in 1793 Great Britain and the United Provinces of the Netherlands joined in. Originally undertaken by France to defend the French Revolution and whip up Republican fervour, French aims shifted with Napoleon’s rise to absolute power to include aggrandisement and territorial annexation.

Meanwhile, Ireland seethed with social and political unrest. Irish Protestants developed political aspirations during the 18th century and in 1782 Westminster finally granted a Declaration of Independence to the Dublin-based Irish Parliament. In 1793 the Catholic Relief Act granted Catholics a limited right to vote, but all this did little to mollify the increasingly volatile Irish nationalists.

“VOLUNTEER” GROUPS

Overtly recruited to replace British forces diverted to fight the American revolutionary war, armed “Volunteer” groups sprang up in Ireland, but they implicitly threatened Westminster control. One of these was the Society of United Irishmen, with Dublin Protestant lawyer Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–98) as an enthusiastic founding member.

Its initial innocent-sounding aims, rapid parliamentary reform based on a united Catholic and Protestant society, achieved little. The group evolved into an even more radical secret society, willing to use violence to achieve its immediate aims (Foster p 151, Kee p 60).

Violent revolutionary concepts advocated by both French and American activists fed the Irish maelstrom of radical social and sectarian activity. Additionally, there were pervasive inputs from religious agitators and underlying political discontent with the Westminster Government.

Lord Edward Fitzgerald (left) and Theobald Wolfe Tone were active leaders of the Irish revolutionaries.

There was also considerable conflict between and within the secret societies. Sectarian pressure to relax anti-Catholic penal laws and controls generated unrest among the Protestant gentry. Some of these people, more interested in pushing their own hidden agendas, including land ownership “reform”, strongly influenced the Volunteer groups. An attempted crackdown on radical activity followed the declaration of war with France in 1793, but it did little other than to set up yet another crisis point (Foster, ed., p 152–3).

It was in this environment that Tone travelled first to the USA and then to Paris. There, he persuaded the Directory, the governing body of the French Republic, to invade Ireland. Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1763 – 98) lobbied the Directory independently and almost persuaded them that a monarchy under himself might be an acceptable compromise if it followed a triumphal French invasion supported by Irish allies. The French recognised Fitzgerald’s republican sympathies, his acceptance by many leading Irish citizens, his (illegitimate) descent from Charles II and the Fitzgerald “royal Gaelic blood” (Foster pp. 264–86, Moore pp. 280–83, Tillyard pp. 193–6).
The French Revolutionary Government always doubted that Ireland was ready for republican government but they authorised a military invasion. The choice of leader was between a fast-rising Napoleon and a brilliant, ambitious young commander, General Louis-Lazare Hoche. The latter was chosen. How history could have been different.

General Louis-Lazare Hoche and VADM Morard de Galles were in command of the expedition.

**THE WEATHER FACTOR**

The invasion force, Armee Expeditionaire d’Irlande, was formed from part of the Armee des Cotes de l’Ocean. Estimates of their strength vary (Breen says 13,000; Bridge Ch IV says 14,000; Moore p. 283 and Todd p. 194 say 15,000; Brenton p. 325 says 20,000), but it probably comprised 14,000 to 15,000 men, with limited artillery and some extra 50,000 or so small arms for the Irish militias.

They planned to depart Brest in December 1796 in 17 line-of-battle ships and 13 frigates plus sloops and transports. VADM Morard de Galles and RADM Bouvet commanded the 44 ships (Moore p. 283 says 43), with General Emmanuel Grouchy supporting Hoche.

The invasion force aimed to land in Ireland, then link up with the Volunteer and other dissident armed groups, defeat the British forces by means of a series of coordinated uprisings and establish a revolutionary Irish government. Wolfe Tone, commissioned as a Colonel in the French Army, accompanied the force.

**DECEMBER WEATHER**

December weather was notorious for the frequency and strength of easterly gales and there had been a moderate easterly wind blowing for six weeks prior to the planned departure. This was not a good time of the year to plan a campaign that had a final run to the east up Bantry Bay. Additionally, many of the best officers in the French navy had been executed or removed in the French Revolution purges and this left the French fleet in a weakened state. De Galles replaced the first French naval commander chosen, ADML Villaret de Joyeuse, possibly because of the latter’s pessimistic view of the venture.

The invasion force embarked in Brest but the French government changed its mind at the last minute. They despatched a messenger but a wheel fell off his coach and he missed the fleet’s departure by four hours.

A blockading fleet of 15 sail-of-the-line under VADM Admiral Colpoys remained off Brest, but they had drifted 50 miles to the west. Only Sir Edward Pellew (of Hornblower fame) with three inshore frigates was aware of the French movements. When the French moved on 15 December it took three days for one of his frigates to alert Colpoys, who should have been near Ushant at the seaward entrance to the Iroise Channel. VADM de Galles took his fleet from Brest to the roads before the Iroise Channel on 15 December, in a blustery easterly wind. He set sail the next day in stormy weather as Pellew despatched a second frigate to warn Colpoys. The British Channel Fleet, under VADM Bridport, was wintering off Spithead but when it was finally alerted and did sail, it stormed off towards Lisbon.

**ORDER + COUNTERORDER = DISORDER**

After winning the Battle of Cape St Vincent, Napoleon wrote to Hoche: “I am not too busy to write your name on my tablet of glory.”
After sailing, de Galles changed his departure plan. Believing Colpoys might be near Ushant he
decided to try the southern track through the narrow Passage de Raz. However, as the wind veered to
the south in the evening, he again changed his mind and signalled the fleet to take the Iroise
Channel. In the confusion and darkness most of the French vessels missed the signal and he
despatched a sloop to stop them. Pellew, in true Hornblower fashion, cheekily attached himself to
the leading ships during the night and added to the confusion by firing signal guns and displaying
fake signal lights (Padfield p. 117).

In the confusion, two French ships collided and the 74-gun frigate *Séduisant* grounded. They saved
only 70 of her 850 aboard. Eventually, all the other French ships cleared Brest without encountering
Colpoys but three other frigates, a fourth rate 44-gun warship and a transport, together with nearly
all aboard, were lost during the transit voyage. This included three ships captured or sunk on passage
as independent British warships picked off stragglers.

Seventeen ships made the Mizen Head rendezvous by 19 December. Most of the survivors were there
by 22 December, when 15 ships carrying 6,400 men entered Bantry Bay. The French found it very
difficult to proceed because of fog, snowstorms and easterly gales.

Hoche and de Galles, still embarked in the 74-gun frigate *Fraternité* never caught up. Their ship,
damaged in one of the storms, cast about for some days until they found another damaged frigate on
31 December, which they escorted back to Brest. That was the end of their campaign (Breen MS,
Padfield p. 117).

Meanwhile, a reinforcing squadron of French ships-of-the-line, commanded by RADM Villeneuve, of
Trafalgar fame, sailed from Toulon. Intercepted by Colpoys, they were too little too late to provide
any direct assistance to the invasion force.

Grouchy, the French army commander, believed that in addition to the adverse weather there was a
significant British land force ashore and this made him reluctant to land. He also feared the strong
British Channel Fleet that might find them and attack at any moment. Intermittent foul weather
made anchoring dangerous. When a fresh storm dragged anchors, parted cables and blew ships
scores of miles out to sea, Bouvet took off the crew, scuttled the badly damaged *La Surveillante*,
abandoned the invasion and sailed home for Brest on 2 January.

**IRISH MILITIA**

Unbeknown to Bouvet and Grouchy, all they had to face ashore was a number of generally ill-
prepared and poorly motivated Irish militia units, hastily assembled from Cork and other parts of
Ireland. False alarms were frequent. The French preparations to scuttle *La Surveillante* generated a
lot of boat traffic and this was interpreted ashore as preparations for an invasion. Most of the militia
immediately deserted. The way to Cork stood wide open (Kee p. 60, Moore p. 284).

By 14 January 1797, 31 of de Galles’s original 44 ships had scuttled battered but safely back to France.
In all, the weather claimed seven ships, the Royal Navy six.

And so the 1796 French Invasion of Ireland ended.

**AFTERMATH**

The French made a small number of abortive raids against Ireland and Wales in the ensuing months.
These included landings in Killala and Lough Swilly in Northern Ireland and Fishguard (Fisgard) in
Wales. A British squadron captured Tone during the abortive Lough Swilly landing attempt with 3000
men on 12 October 1798. Sentenced to death a month later, Tone cheated the hangman by cutting his
own throat (Todd p. 302, Moore p. 284).

Fitzgerald returned to Dublin, but was arrested 18 May 1798 after a struggle in which he was shot in
the shoulder. He died of his wounds ten days later in Newgate Prison (Todd p. 275–9).

The French dumped a force of 1400 men, chiefly poorly trained convicts, ashore at Fishguard, Wales,
on 22 February 1797. Newly released from prison, the convicts displayed less interest in military
gains than looting and drinking. A Portuguese ship carrying a cargo of port wine had been driven
gains than looting and drinking. A Portuguese ship carrying a cargo of port wine had been driven ashore nearby a few weeks beforehand and most of the coastal houses had pillaged barrels stacked inside. The French forces surrendered to the local militia virtually without firing a shot while “the frigates from which they had disembarked never waited to see the results of their expedition” (Brenton p 325).

REFERENCES: