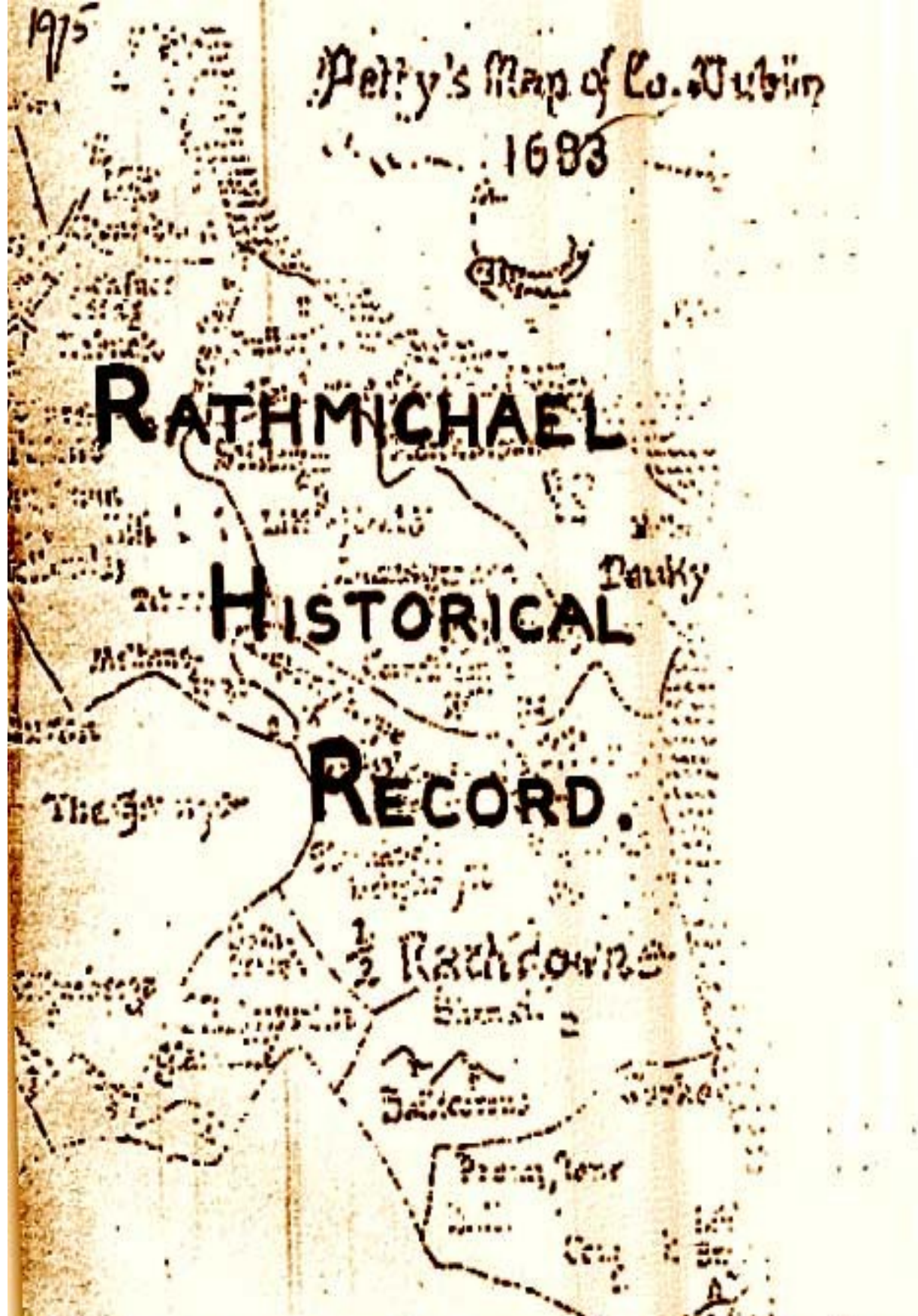


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Petty's Map of Co. Dublin
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The French Are on the Sea

Paul O'Dwyer

[This is a summarized version of an illustrated lecture delivered to the Rathmichael Historical Society January 1975 by Paul O'Dwyer. The lecture was based on an essay which won first prize in the local history competition in the 1974 Oireachtas, and fuller version with sources will be appearing in the forthcoming issue of "The Irish Sword", journal of Military History Society of Ireland.]

Since the beginning of the war between Britain and France in 1793, both political and military leaders feared a French attack on the United Kingdom – and what better place to attack than Ireland? If a westerly wind persisted for a period of four days the French fleet could sail from Brest and reach Dublin before the British could lift a finger defend the capital. The same wind which would bring the French ships to Dublin would effectively keep whatever British ships were stationed in Portsmouth or Plymouth cooped up in those ports. The Hon. George Napier, a colonel in the Brit Army felt that Killiney Bay would be the best for the French to disembark and take possession of the heights overlooking Dublin "before 800 British soldiers of the garrison could be disentangled from the Town and thrown into any position even half way between the Enemy and Dublin". He also feared that the rabble would welcome the French and plunder the City, and that "the whole Kingdom would be undone for a Century to come".

In order to cope with this threat, Napier proposed that about a third of the Army be devoted to the defence of the Capital, starting with Killiney Bay, where a camp should be set up for 5,000 men. This Camp would have to be sufficiently back from the shore to be put of range of the guns on any invading ships - a full two Irish miles. He also suggested that the army assemble a small corps of enlisted artificers to construct earthworks and suchlike. Thus, the Loughlinstown camp was opened on June 1st 1795 on the townland of Lehaunestown owned by the Established Church and situated about a mile inland. During the year that followed the troops were given intensive training to cope with whatever emergency might arise - night operations, meeting daybreak alarms and surprise attacks and repelling landings.

In December 1796 the French attempted a landing in Bantry Bay and this increased the authorities' fear of a seaborne invasion. Lord Carhampton, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in Ireland, decided to draw up a plan to defend Killiney Bay against the French Fleet. He asked Major La Chaussee to reconnoitre the Bay and draw up a plan of defence. La Chaussee was a Frenchman and he appears to have joined the British Army following the French Revolution. He submitted his report to Carhampton on February 11th, 1797. La Chaussee identified three places which would suit an enemy trying to land. These were the points where there were breaks in the cliffs. He considered the Bay had one great advantage, however, it was almost a straight line and so the attackers could not push the defenders out to the perimeter, and the defenders would not have to spread their forces any wider than those of the attackers.

I think it is worth summarising La Chaussee's report as it adds a new dimension to this scenic Bay and it also illustrates the concise mind of a professional soldier. La Chaussee included a map with his report, but unfortunately, this cannot be found today.

Although Carhampton requested information on particular points, La Chaussee drew up a comprehensive report on the geography of the Bay and its military significance. He examined the Bay under five headings:-

1. The Coast

The coastline is bordered by cliffs, varying in height from 30 to 70 feet, except in three places:

- i. between the bottom of the Obelisk Mountain (Killiney Hill) and the Lime Kiln – a distance of 300 yards.
- ii. at the mouth of the stream which runs across the brow of the Camp (Shanganagh River) - a distance of 400 yards.
- iii. at the mouth of the Dargle - a distance of 500 yards - and from there to the Mountain of Bray Head.

As well as these three places there are other small breaks in the cliffs caused by little streams or made by local residents for the convenience of access to the beach.

2. Inland

The inland of the Bay is shaped like an amphitheatre, stretching back to the hills, but three major divisions can be identified:

- i. from the Obelisk Mountain to the wood at Fair View, a distance of 2½ miles. There are no natural barriers in this section to impede the progress of the enemy should he succeed in penetrating the coastal defences.
- ii. from Fair View Wood to Bray village (a distance of 1½ miles). This section is made up entirely of two fairly regular slopes, the summit of which is about 500 - 700 yards from the sea. The coastal slope is fairly open, but the inland one is broken by a considerable number of ditches, land rises, streams, etc. all of which make communication and access very difficult.
- iii. from Bray village to the foot of the mountain called Bray Head (a distance of ¾ mile). This section is fairly regular; the coast is low on the seaward side and it rises in the form of a crater, the centre of which is occupied by a fairly large castle, surrounded by trees and walls.

3. Deployment of Forces

This will depend on:

- i. the number and type of the troops.
- ii. the degree to which they are experienced in battle.
- iii. the geography of the area.
- iv. the general's choice between engaging the enemy on a broad front or at

selected points.

Having taken those points into account the actual deployment of forces will depend on the judgement of the general on the spot. Military theory does not provide a once-and-for-all answer to this question.

4. Modifications to the Coastline

i. position batteries to cover the sea and defend the approaches from the shore; even if these are not sufficient to prevent disembarkation, the loss they will occasion to the enemy will mean that much less to be contended with when he lands.

ii. set up 12 pounders or howitzers, hidden behind the shoulders of the cliffs, not to be fired until the very moment when the enemy start getting out of their launches. I think that these flanking batteries would cause chaos among the enemy as they could not be fired upon from the ships due to the presence of the enemy's own troops in the line of fire.

iii. escarp all the slopes and ravines which leave openings in the cliff in order to reduce to a minimum those points where the enemy can get through, and in this way keep him longer exposed to the raking fire, should he disembark in front of the cliffs.

5. Inland Modifications

i. cut and destroy all the hedges, ditches and ravines which are parallel to the shore and so not give the enemy cover and allow him to advance unnoticed.

ii. entrench the country houses and fortify them with big guns.

iii. set up turnpikes at the top of the pathways to deny the enemy entry for as long as possible should he try to penetrate the defences at any one of these points.

The troops for all this defence would, of course, be drawn from the Loughlinstown Camp. Despite all these preparations the French never came in 1797, and the Loughlinstown troops were not called on to defend the Bay. But towards the end of 1797 and the beginning of 1798 the Camp was the focal point for another quite different plan. The Camp contained a large number of Catholic militia and the United Irishmen planned to subvert these, take over the Camp and use the troops to march on Dublin.

This was a very clever and ambitious plan which would provide the revolutionaries with trained forces and deprive the city of its main defence all at one blow. Needless to say, it did not come off. The wonderful plan came a cropper when the United Irishmen accepted Captain Armstrong as a member of their organisation. Armstrong was in charge of the King's County Regiment in the Camp and he met the Shears brothers regularly in the city centre to work out details of the plan against the Camp. After each of these meetings, however, he dropped in to Dublin Castle and brought the authorities up to date on the latest developments. He was, of course, only one spy among thousands, but I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that he was responsible for considerably changing the course of the rebellion. He testified against the Shears brothers on July 12th 1798 when they were in the dock for treason; part of the charge was that they "did make...a plan...to surprise and take the camp at Loughlinstown...". By April 1799 the Camp was at an end. The authorities were satisfied that there was no further danger in the United Irishmen movement now that the rebellion had been quelled, and the French who landed in the west with Humbert the previous year had failed to achieve their

objective. And in the last analysis, was the Act of Union not going to solve those problems once and for all?

From 1800 on there was a sort of informal truce with the French and the Treaty of Amiens was signed in 1802. However, war broke out again in 1803 and once more the authorities began to fear a French seaborne invasion.

A plan was drawn up to construct a series of Martello Towers around the coast of Ireland and the south of England. Since Ireland was uppermost in the minds of the authorities, the first towers were built in this country, starting with the southern half of Dublin Bay. Seven were built in Killiney Bay itself and concentrated around the points identified by La Chaussee as coastal weaknesses. Each tower cost somewhere in the region of £1,800 and was garrisoned by six to eight men at first. By 1815 each tower appears to have had a garrison of about 30 men, and the batteries about 45 men. The towers were generally mounted with one gun while the batteries had on average three to four guns. These numbers were subsequently reduced when the French threat subsided after Waterloo, though some gunners, pensioners perhaps, are recorded as living in the towers as late as 1867.

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