

The Flight of the Wild Geese

The Flight of the Wild Geese refers to the departure of an Irish Jacobite army under the command of Patrick Sarsfield from Ireland to France, as agreed in the Treaty of Limerick on 3 October 1691, following the end of the Williamite War in Ireland. More broadly, the term "Wild Geese" is used in Irish history to refer to Irish soldiers who left to serve as mercenaries in continental European armies in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.



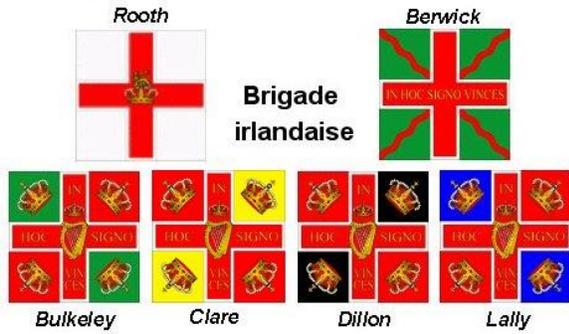
The first Irish troops to serve as a unit for a continental power formed an Irish regiment in the Spanish Army of Flanders in the Eighty Years' War in the 1580s. The regiment had been raised by an English Catholic, William Stanley, in Ireland from native Irish soldiers and mercenaries, whom the English authorities wanted out of the country. The unit fought in the Netherlands until 1600 when it was disbanded due to heavy wastage through combat and sickness.

A fresh source of recruits came in the early 17th century, when Roman Catholics were banned from military and political office in Ireland. As a result, the Irish units in the Spanish service began attracting Catholic Old English officers such as Thomas Preston and Garret Barry. These men had more pro-English views than their Gaelic counterparts and considerable animosity was created over plans to use the Irish regiment to invade Ireland in 1627. The regiment was garrisoned in Brussels during the truce in the Eighty Years' War from 1609 to 1621 and developed close links with Irish Catholic clergy based in the seminary there, creating the famous Irish Colleges – most notably, Florence Conroy.

Many of the Irish troops in Spanish service returned to Ireland after the Irish Rebellion of 1641 and fought in the armies of Confederate Ireland – a movement of Irish Catholics. When the Confederates were defeated and Ireland occupied after the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland, around 34,000 Irish Confederate troops fled the country to seek service in Spain. Some of them later deserted or defected to French service, where the conditions were deemed better.

During the 18th century, Spain's Irish regiments saw service not only in Europe but also in the Americas. As examples, the Irlanda Regiment (raised 1698) was stationed in Havana from 1770 to 1771, the Ultonia Regiment (raised 1709) in Mexico from 1768 to 1771, and the Hibernia Regiment (raised 1709) in Honduras from 1782 to 1783.

At the time of the Napoleonic Wars all three of these Irish infantry regiments still formed part of the Spanish army. Heavy losses and recruiting difficulties diluted the Irish element in these units, although the officers remained of Irish ancestry. The Hibernia Regiment had to be reconstituted with Galacian recruits in 1811 and ended the war as an entirely Spanish corps. All three regiments were finally disbanded in 1818 on the grounds that insufficient recruits, whether Irish or other foreigners, were forthcoming.



The Wild Geese also served in France, Austria, Britain, Sweden, Poland, and Italy. Irish recruitment for continental armies dried up after it was made illegal in 1745. In the 1790s the laws prohibiting Catholics bearing arms were abolished. Thereafter, the British began recruiting Irish regiments for the Crown Force – including such famous units as the Connaught Rangers. Several more Irish units were created in the 19th century. By 1914 specifically Irish infantry regiments in the British Army comprised the Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, the Irish Guards, the Royal Irish Regiment, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Royal Irish Rifles, the Royal Irish Fusiliers, the Connaught Rangers and the Royal Munster Fusiliers. With the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 five of the above regiments were disbanded, with most of the remainder undergoing a series of amalgamations between 1968 and 2006. The United Kingdom still retains three Irish regiments: the Irish Guards, the Royal Irish Regiment, and the London Irish Rifles.



Portumna Castle is the heritage museum of the Flight of the Wild Geese. It was built at Portumna in the reign of James I, close to the shore of Lough Derg near where the River Shannon enters the lake.