

AN OVERVIEW OF TUDOR IRELAND

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Ireland underwent a profound transformation in the sixteenth century. In 1500 Ireland, nominally a possession of the Tudors, was largely autonomous; by 1603 that autonomy had been broken. The manner in which this change unfolded could not have been foreseen a hundred years earlier. The Irish state papers (series SP 60, 61, 62, 63), collated here¹, amount to, quite simply, the single best source historians have at their disposal when considering this transformation. Other sets of state papers (hived off by individual statesmen or collectors) such as the Fitzwilliam papers in the Bodleian Carte Manuscripts, the Carew Manuscripts at Lambeth Palace and others scattered across various holdings, although indispensable, can only serve as partial adjuncts to this collection. Although the documents included are varied, for the most part they are letters from Crown administrators in Ireland to Privy Councillors, royal officers and monarchs. They serve as a chink through which we hear, not only the creaking of Crown government in Ireland, but the groanings of those who served it, and those who were subjected to it.

In 1509 English control over Ireland was, in reality, manifestly incomplete. Attempts from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth century to advance an English conquest of Ireland had merely left an ethnic and cultural *melange* behind them. The inhabitants of the country, despite a certain resistance to neat clarification, could be sorted into two groups: the first were the descendants of the native population at the time of the English invasion (usually described by historians as the Gaelic-Irish) and the second were the descendants of the English lords and settlers who had taken part in that enterprise (nowadays generally described as the English-Irish). Each group had a different origin myth, glorified specific emblems of its own culture and cherished an epic aspiration for its eventual victory over the other. In truth, however, the country's lords, both Gaelic and English-Irish, had quite a deal in common, being addicted to what, in the English view, looked exactly like the appurtenances of bastard feudalism: the maintenance of private armies, forcible entry onto lands, cattle-rustling and arbitrary exactions against those within their individual spheres of influence. These practices used – most notably – by adherents of the two main indigenous factions, the Butlers (the house of Ormond) and the Geraldines (the houses of Kildare and Desmond), were antagonistic to the higher form of law, order and administration practiced in the home

counties of England. In this rough and ready environment, arbitrary and flagrant violence against persons and property was commonplace.

The purest expression of English cultural norms in Ireland – pious to the extent of fetishisation – was to be found among the gentry, lawyers and merchants of the area around Dublin, known as the Pale. Their disquiet with the allegedly degenerate way in which Ireland was governed under the Irish born Lord Deputy, the 9th Earl of Kildare, informed the widely distributed dossier of grievances entitled, ‘The State of Ireland and its Reformation’, which provides an excellent and comprehensive gazetteer of the country’s political landscape, composed for English eyes.² Their ambition to reform Ireland by reigniting the spirit of the original medieval *conquistadores*, chimed with Henry VIII’s burgeoning personal interests in his western dominion. Significantly, by the mid 1530s the logic of Henry’s break with Rome demanded that the provenance of English sovereignty over Ireland, hitherto based on a papal bull issued in 1155, had to be superseded.

As a result the Irish Parliament of 1541 passed the Act of Kingly Title, which was not only constitutionally convenient, but became the linchpin of a remarkable policy initiative, known to historians as ‘surrender and regrant’.³ This turned Gaelic-Irish potentates, whose occupation of lands had received no formal recognition from the Crown, and who held no status under English law, into subjects of the Crown. In return for submission and, what initially seemed like, a cursory commitment to desist from Gaelic cultural and legal norms, particularly patterns of political organisation and practices of inheritance,⁴ figures like Conn Bachach O’Neill, Murrough O’Brien and, over 20 years later – following the same pattern – Donal MacCarthy, were given English titles, such as Earl of Tyrone (1542), Earl of Thomond (1543) and Earl of Clancar (1565).⁵ In this they were accompanied by English-Irish lords, like the Earl of Desmond, and the Clanricard Burkes, whose status under the Crown had long been ambiguous because of irregularities in tenure and ancestry.⁶

The remainder of the Tudors’ attempts to govern Ireland revolved, for the most part, around individual successes and failures in maintaining this policy and building on it. The Irish state papers provide an excellent vantage point from which to survey these administrative aspirations, not least because they contain numerous viceregal instructions hammered out through negotiation between Elizabeth, her Privy Council and those individuals appointed as chief governors.⁷ From the 1550s to the 1590s further initiatives were introduced designed to

complement that basic framework, supposedly making the business of anglicizing Ireland cheaper, or more manageable. These included the establishment of provincial presidencies in Munster and Connacht,⁸ the attempt by Lord Deputy Sir Henry Sidney in the mid 1570s to institute extra-parliamentary land taxes that would support a permanent Crown force replacing decommissioned bastard feudal armies,⁹ and the embedding of English military captains, acting as Crown officers, within the Irish political landscape.¹⁰ Whatever minor successes there were (often trumpeted as major by those who sought glory at Whitehall) brought little satisfaction, and those failures that dogged the administration increasingly threatened to catapult Ireland into the grip of Continental Catholicism. Ultimately it was metropolitan paranoia about Ireland's non-adherence to English reformed religion that ensured that no Irishman, not even one as loyal as 'Black Tom' Butler, the 10th Earl of Ormond, was trusted to formally serve as viceroy to the Tudors after 1535.

The Crown's policies although implemented with flexibility under Sir Antony St Leger, were more rigidly imposed under his successor Thomas Radcliffe, the 3rd Earl of Sussex. His stiff-necked unwillingness to accommodate Shane O'Neill's bid to be recognized as the Earl of Tyrone in succession to Conn Bacach brought about a crisis that led to military and political embarrassment for the Crown, division about Irish policy and placed the northernmost province beyond metropolitan control at the very time that Anglo-Scottish relations were most nerve-racking for commanding figures at Whitehall.¹¹ Shane, although tremendously ambitious, was not the officially designated heir to the title.¹² The instability that resulted could not even be remedied by his assassination in 1567.¹³

For many in Tudor Ireland, life was nasty, brutish and short.¹⁴ This was particularly the case in areas where *ad hoc* military intervention by the Crown had so damaged the indigenous political fabric that new settlements had been essayed. The insurgency of the O'Mores and the O'Connors against the attempted plantation in Laois and Offaly (inaugurated in 1556) brought almost three decades of low-intensity dirty conflict.¹⁵ Sir Henry Sidney, who eventually used massacre to lance the boil, admitted that the Crown's attempts to resolve the problem in the midlands had been too costly.¹⁶ The 1st Earl of Essex's 'enterprise of Ulster', an attempt to capitalize on the power vacuum caused by the fall of Shane O'Neill by setting up an English colony in the east of the province, can be tracked in detail in these papers. Its naïve and unpromising beginnings, when it was effectively cast adrift by the Dublin administration, ultimately degenerated into Essex's followers flailing out violently at all and

sundry around them: the result was the massacres of the kinsmen of Sir Brian McPhelim O'Neill in October, 1573, and of the fugitive MacDonnell Scots, then on Rathlin Island in July 1575.¹⁷

The attempt to set up provincial presidencies in Munster brought its own casualties. The Earl of Desmond, found himself sandwiched between the demands of an increasingly disaffected and confessionalized group of swordsmen led by his captain general, James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald,¹⁸ and pressure from the Crown to conform himself to the strictures of reform. The first Desmond rebellion, already religious in provenance,¹⁹ took place while the Earl was under arrest in London, and simmered up until James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald's surrender and subsequent flight to the Continent. The Earl, when he returned to his lordship, oscillated from defiance to attempted accommodation with the Crown. When Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, in July 1579, came back with the papal legate Dr Nicholas Sanders and a military force, it tipped the earldom into rebellion. Desmond found himself squeezed fatally between unrelenting pressure from Crown officers to submit, no matter how great the personal cost, and his own swordsmen. He was proclaimed a traitor. The cataclysmic second Desmond rebellion which resulted prompted both a disastrous intervention by a papal force in September 1580²⁰ and a bloodthirsty campaign by fire, sword and famine, stewarded by Lord Deputy Grey de Wilton and the Earl of Ormond.²¹ This ultimately enabled the Munster plantation.²²

The late 1570s and early 1580s saw the general confessionalization of conflict in Ireland. The Pale, hitherto an area of occasional civil protest, became a locus of resistance: here James Eustace viscount Baltinglass, a young man imbued with the zeal of the Counter Reformation attempted to form an alliance between the Gaelic-Irish of Leinster and Catholic Palesmen.²³ An unprecedented crackdown against Irish Catholicism ensued, issuing in the imprisonment of the 11th Earl of Kildare, a cull of scions from some of the best families in the Pale and the doing to death in London and Dublin of the Catholic archbishops of Cashel and Armagh.²⁴ All this brought about an irrevocable and mutual alienation between the Crown's officers and the most anglicized community in Ireland. This enmity ensured that Lord Deputy Sir John Perrot's parliament in 1585, a bid to kickstart political reform in Ireland, ended in stalemate. The English-Irish MPs refused to repeal Poyning's Law, the constitutional device that bridled the Irish parliament's legislative autonomy, thereby scuppering the new viceroy's programme.²⁵

Disjointed attempts to implement reform in Ulster, coupled with a growing radicalization of the Gaelic Irish lordships there, set the stage for the convulsions of the final decade of Elizabeth's reign in Ireland. The Nine Years War (1594–1603), had a number of causes. Among these were the changes that occurred in the O'Donnell and Maguire lordships because of successful bids for chieftainship by energetic young candidates, Red Hugh O'Donnell and Hugh Maguire, both of whom embraced Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Maguire's lordship became the refuge of many members of the Catholic hierarchy of Ireland and O'Donnell's became a haven for those on the run from the brutal government of the president of Connacht, Sir Richard Bingham.²⁶ All of Gaelic Ulster looked with trepidation at Lord Deputy Fitzwilliam's forced liquidation and partition of the MacMahon lordship in Monaghan: effectively the destruction of the inner structures of a Gaelic polity. O'Donnell and Maguire, given England's war footing since 1584, looked to Spain for succour, stressing the Catholic provenance of their discontent. The possibility of the Irish people proffering the Crown to the king of Spain or another Habsburg prince was mooted, the very danger that had been anticipated by the Tudors as early as 1541.²⁷

In a development that wrongfooted the Crown, Hugh O'Neill, the 2nd Earl of Tyrone, a wanted loyalist who had desired to be rewarded for his steadfastness with the maximum degree of autonomy and pre-eminence within Ulster, emerged steadily as the leader of the rebellion. Along with O'Donnell and Maguire, O'Neill played an effective game of 'bad cop, good cop', with the Crown; occasional submissions and negotiated truces bought time while the rebel forces, armed and trained according to European norms,²⁸ visited defeat and humiliation time and time again on their opponents.²⁹ After the failure of the 2nd Earl of Essex to gain any advantage for the Crown during his viceregal term a more expeditious approach to the conflict was taken by hardened soldiers such as the new Lord Deputy Charles Blount and his fellow officers, Henry Docwra, Arthur Chichester and George Carew. Blount and his associates managed to break into the heartland of Ulster, employing scorched earth tactics.³⁰ In December 1601 the rebels, somewhat harried and weakened, ended up gambling all their gains on a single day's battle at Kinsale in county Cork, where a Spanish army of over 3,000 men had landed³¹ – at the furthest imaginable point from the rebels' Ulster strongholds. O'Neill and his confederates were subsequently brought to submit. Their defeat effectively destroyed whatever capability any Irish potentate had of maintaining a studied indifference to English designs on the country. Over the next hundred years Ireland would

become the object of many British ambitions for profit and gain, and increasingly take on the characteristics of a colony.

Citation:

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Notes

¹ The State Papers series relating to Ireland for the Tudor period are included in *State Papers Online*, Part II.

² See for example TNA, SP 60/ 1/ 9

³ See SP 60/ 10/ 16

⁴ See SP 60/ 10/ 5

⁵ See SP 60/ 10/ 77; SP 60/ 10/ 63; SP 63/ 13/ 69, 70

⁶ See SP 60/ 10/ 4; SP 60/ 10/ 10

⁷ See SP 63/ 1/ 61; SP 63/ 25/ 50

⁸ See SP 63/ 6/ 18; SP 63/ 14/ 3; SP 63/ 16/ 14; SP 63/ 22/ 48

⁹ See SP 63/ 32/ 66; SP 63/ 35/ 21

¹⁰ See SP 63/ 3/ 2; SP 63/ 123/ 2

¹¹ See SP 63/ 2/ 26; SP 63/ 3/ 49

¹² See SP 63/ 5/ 21-3

¹³ See SP 63/ 2/ 21; SP 63/ 4/ 37; and SP 63/ 5 / 45, 46, 47.

¹⁴ See SP 61/ 1/ 79; SP 63/ 41/ 2

¹⁵ See SP 62/1/21

¹⁶ See SP 63/ 54/ 17

- ¹⁷ See SP 63/ 41/ 21; SP 63/ 42/ 64; SP 63/ 52/ 79
- ¹⁸ See SP 63/ 25/ 70iv.
- ¹⁹ See SP 63/ 29/ 8
- ²⁰ See SP 63/ 69/ 51; SP 63/ 76/ 29
- ²¹ See SP 63/ 106/ 62
- ²² See SP 63/ 147/ 51i
- ²³ See SP 63/ 74/ 64i
- ²⁴ See SP 63/ 83/ 4
- ²⁵ See SP 63/ 12/ 63
- ²⁶ See SP 63/ 170/ 3; SP 63/ 170/ 26
- ²⁷ See SP 60/ 21/ 23
- ²⁸ See SP 63/ 207/ 143
- ²⁹ See SP 63/ 175? 47i, ii; SP 63/ 179/ 95
- ³⁰ See SP 63/ 208/ 2
- ³¹ See SP 63/ 209/ 256, 261