

“When the Plough and Breeding of Cattle Cease, Then Will the Rebellion End”: The Adoption of Total War as English Policy in Ireland, 1558-1603

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On March 30, 1603, Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone and leader of the nine-year Irish rebellion, surrendered to Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, the English Lord Deputy in Ireland, at Mellifont Abbey. Tyrone threw himself on the floor and groveled at Mountjoy's feet, begging for the Queen's mercy, unaware that Elizabeth had died merely weeks before. He remained on his knees for an hour before being sent away; later he was made to submit to the Lords of the Irish Council and to the Irish Parliament in Dublin. Despite their names, these committees included members loyal to the Queen and English interests on the island.¹ Tyrone was a broken representative of a broken country; decades of Irish rebellions and English punitive actions had reduced Ireland to a state of poverty and starvation.

Elizabeth's expeditions in Ireland were unlike those of her predecessors, who had largely left Ireland the way it had been passed to them: relatively stable and effectively independent in all but name. Ireland was never completely quiet, but no one before Elizabeth had managed the level of settlement and control that her administration accomplished. In the course of Elizabeth's reign English dominance had been extended from the limited area of the Pale to the entirety of the island. This conquest had not been easy; the Irish were unwilling to submit to English customs and rule without a fight. Elizabeth's predecessors had little interest in spending the men and money necessary to subdue the Irish, and so left Ireland largely to rule itself. In Elizabeth's reign the escalated hostility with Catholic Spain, a

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston

Volume 3, 2004: pp. 1-25

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potential Irish ally, and the success of Tyrone in raising the country in a large-scale revolt forced Elizabeth to turn the English reign over Ireland into actual English rule, and it would be a violent and cruel affair for both sides. The circumstances of the English conquest were very bloody, but these cannot be attributed simply to English cruelty. The reasons for English violence were many. The English believed they were the possessors of a superior culture and thought it their responsibility to transmit this culture to Ireland. The English also feared the Irish religion, and the support Catholicism could bring the Irish from continental enemies of England, especially Spain. Little wars had sprouted and fizzled for decades with little progress on either side, escalating into the disastrous Nine Years War, Tyrone's expansive rebellion, from 1594-1603. As money and men were sucked into an Irish black hole, the English felt it more necessary to quickly subdue the island, and with all other attempts having failed, the English were, if they were to have any chance of success, forced to make war on the Irish population, and therefore perpetrated the violence and brutality inherent in Total War.

Total War has been thought to be a concept applicable only to the twentieth century, with special reference to World War II. During that conflict the scope of who were understood to be combatants gradually increased. What began as soldiers killing soldiers soon involved the taking of cities for supplies, or the bombing of factories, refineries and other strategic locations when they couldn't be taken. Once factories and industrial centers were being bombed it was not a huge step to start destroying cities simply to cause terror and hopefully to demoralize the enemy enough that they would stop fighting.² But long before aerial bombardment, it is possible to see something very close to Total War in the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. The same progression of victims from soldiers, to producers of material, to finally all of the civilian population is evident, as is the motivation for this strategy: a quick end to a war that wasn't being won in the traditional fashion. If desperate times call for desperate measures, then Elizabeth became the unwelcome Queen of Ireland during most desperate times.

The Ireland of 1558 posed a daunting problem for the new Elizabethan government. Decades of minimal progress and ineffective policy during the reigns of the other Tudor monarchs before Elizabeth

had made the Irish resistant to English domination. Although Henry VIII declared himself King of Ireland in 1541 (instead of Lord of Ireland, the title of English monarchs had held before him), actual English control was limited to a patch of land on the east coast and



around Dublin called the Pale. As Edmund Spenser says in his 1595 tract, Henry had “onlie the bare name of a King.”²³ The Gaelic areas of Ireland for the most part remained relatively quiet, ruling themselves

through traditional Gaelic forms of clannism under a Gaelic or Old English chief, feuding and herding cattle much as the Irish had done for hundreds of years. Ulster, Ireland's northern province, was, however, a continuous problem. Attempts to impose the English practice of primogeniture on the very powerful Earldom of Tyrone within Ulster had resulted in resistance to the English government and its tool, the Dublin parliament. This, combined with the unnerving frequency of Scottish immigration at a time when relations with Scotland were strained with periodic bouts of violence (in 1513 and later in 1542 Scotland had marched armies into England and been repulsed), made Ulster a canker on English policy. None of the monarchs were, however, particularly interested in the backwater island, and they certainly did not feel like emptying their coffers to impose English rule while the term King or Queen of Ireland could easily be, and was, added to the royal title without all the military fuss. Henry VIII made a few minor attempts to settle areas outside of the Pale, but these were poorly planned and funded and dried up almost before they had begun. Henry tried predominantly to conquer Ireland through titles, promising land and estates to lords who professed allegiance. Without the men or money to enforce this allegiance, though, this policy was only effective at securing power in Ireland on paper. Outside of the Pale, where English elements, in the form of Old English lords, had been living for over three centuries, the country felt very few effects from the government in Dublin and because of this resisted English "rule" very little. Only when the English tried to extend their control or settle plantations did the Irish fight back.⁴

During the reign of Mary Tudor, Elizabeth's predecessor, the ambitious but short-sighted Lord Deputy Thomas Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex, had managed to reverse the minimal progress made by his predecessors in extending English influence. Sussex, before his commission, had outlined plans for the resettlement of the previously failed Laois-Offaly plantation in Munster, as well as settlements in Ulster to prevent the influx of more Scottish. He also tried to implement a system of mixed government wherein the English style of law would control the high courts and legislation, but the common people could still see their civil affairs handled by traditional Gaelic law. Sussex in fact implemented neither of these. He did, however,

field a comparatively large number of troops maintained by “cess,” or billeting within the Pale. Sussex’s soldiers drained the Pale’s economy, and their presence became a nuisance: “The soldiers have done more harm than ever the Irish did.”⁵ These practices and the ineffectiveness of the army in defending the Pale against attacks by Gaelic Irish on its borders drastically affected the opinions of the “loyal” Palesmen against English government in Ireland. The attempted and failed plantation had also bred resentment in previously quiet Munster.⁶

By Elizabeth’s reign a significant debasing of the coinage to fight inflation, an issue the Marian government had all but ignored, had reduced the Irish economy, never terribly strong, even further. Poverty affected the entire population but hit especially hard in the Pale, where most English troops were billeted, and where an English economy, but not English coin, was in use.⁷ Ireland was also in a constant state of feudal warfare with clan leaders and Gaelic lords battling over personal quarrels, a state of life in Ireland that the Elizabethan government, although unable to control, unlike the other Tudor administrations refused to ignore. War was the monarch’s prerogative, and no one could muster an army without her approval. Elizabeth did not like armed warlords patrolling her island, ignoring her laws, and occasionally attacking her loyal Pale Protestants. From the outset, Irish culture, based on this idea of feudalism under the Gaelic chiefdoms, was a nuisance and a danger.⁸

Independent Gaelic chieftains loyal to no one but themselves — or worse, possibly to the Pope — made potential French and Spanish allies. Religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants had bled over into violence on the continent. At the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign France was the enemy, supported by the Catholic and French-raised Mary Queen of Scots. England feared another invasion from the north. As Elizabeth’s reign progressed France became embroiled in religious civil war, Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned and executed after fleeing to England, and Scotland was under the rule of her Protestant son James the VI. This left Spain the Catholic power in Europe. The Spanish Enterprise of England to return the wandering country to the Catholic fold and dethrone the heretic queen became more and more visible as Elizabeth’s reign progressed, and relations between England Spain soured further through Dutch intervention

and near constant raids by English privateers on Spanish treasure shipments from the New World. The Pope supported Spain's efforts, excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570, announcing that her murder would be a blessing in God's eyes, and offering Spain legions of soldiers as soon as Catholic soldiers put foot on English soil. And it appeared to the English that the easiest launching ground for an invasion would be from Ireland.

On top of these factors, the English view of Ireland had always been colored by much ethnocentrism, especially at this time when the English began more and more to see themselves as the center of cultural greatness. The biggest problem the English had with Ireland was the Irish themselves and the fact that they were not English: "My soul doth detest their wild shamrock manners."⁹ Thomas Spenser, English author of the sixteenth century treatise on Ireland, writes that Ireland's evils are, "almost as countable with those which were hidden in the basket of Pandora."¹⁰

During the sixteenth century Ireland was mostly a pastoral society with cattle as the most prominent commodity. The English attributed the Irish pastoral lifestyle to their inherent laziness, claiming that they hated the work associated with farming: "The Irish, thus given to idleness, naturally abhor from manual arts...For whereas all, yea the most strong and able bodies, gladly employed themselves in the feeding of cows."¹¹ This laziness was, in English eyes, reinforced by an unwillingness of the Irish to hunt, although there was much game present. C.L. Falkiner noted, "they seldom eat wildfowl or fish, though they have a great plenty of both," and that "the fishermen must be beaten out before they will go to their boats."¹² This reliance on cattle meant that cattle raiding, and its associated spoiling and plundering, was a common practice, often with the support or active participation of the local Gaelic or Old English lord. In Ireland this was considered a part of life, almost a right of passage: "and when it is daylight they will go to the poor villages...They will drive all the kine and plow horses, with all other cattle, and drive them away...and when he is in a safe place they will fall to the division of the spoil, according to the discretion of the captains." The English had no patience or appreciation of this pastime, equating it with the disturbances on the Scottish border, where similar circumstances had produced a similar lifestyle and an

equivalent amount of lawlessness and destruction.¹³ These facts, combined with a lack of agriculture on an English scale, and what was seen as an easy life as cattle herders, meant the Irish lifestyle took on an appearance of leisure; the English saw it as a life spent watching one's own cows when not stealing your neighbor's.¹⁴

The English found the Irish diet particularly repulsive. Aside from eating mostly beef instead of lamb or mutton, the Irish often consumed their meat raw and, "often let their cows' blood, eating the congealed blood with butter,"¹⁵ a description to make any Englishman wretch. The Irish also consumed predominately field greens they gathered rather than cultured vegetables. Although this diet is much more nutritious than that of the high-starch diet of the average English peasant, it appeared to English eyes to be quite primitive and uncivilized.¹⁶

Instead of wheat, the English staple, the Irish ate mostly oats whole or coarsely ground; in England oats were horse food. These cakes were made by Irish women who often performed their work naked to avoid losing oats in their clothing. Women were not the only ones going naked in Ireland; the men often did as well, as evidenced by Fynes Moryson's description of a Bohemian nobleman who, visiting an Irish lord, was confronted by "sixteen women, all naked," and Lord Ocané, who "came in all naked except a loose mantle and shoes, which he put off as soon as he came in." The Bohemian was too shocked and ashamed to "sit naked by the fire with this naked company."¹⁷ And when they were dressed, it was not to English standards and therefore, obviously, inferior. At a time when the English were wearing more clothes than ever before Irish nakedness appeared to be especially uncivilized.

As a result of all these factors the term "Irish" became synonymous with "primitive" and "barbarian." They were seen as lesser people, a culture that needed to be civilized.¹⁸ Spencer vented English frustration at Irish rejection of English culture, writing, "that no purposes whatsoever which are meant for her good, will prosper or take good effect."¹⁹ The English saw the imposition of their own culture and the destruction of Irish culture as an act of mercy and sympathy, since Irish culture was obviously inferior. The English belief in the goodness of what they were doing combined with their attitudes about the barbarity of Irish culture resulted in a view of the Irish as

less than human, and this made the application of a Total War policy, a policy that required inflicting death and starvation on the Irish population, easier to justify. A view of the Irish as subhuman allowed the English to view their war not only as the punishment of rebels (admittedly few compared with the entire population) but also as a civilizing mission. The Irish population would accept English culture and be civilized; if portions of the population did not want to accept God and culture, then they would be killed, and the world would be no worse off for the loss of a few papist barbarians.²⁰ Once an enemy has been reduced to subhuman levels it becomes much easier to exterminate them: yes, by 1603 the Irish were starving, but it was for their own good.

Irish barbarity was an annoyance and embarrassment to Englishmen; it was talked about with disgust and disdain. Irish religion was of even more concern; it is referenced with fear, because in this respect the Irish had allies. Ireland's allegiance to the Catholic Church and its proximity to England made it appear a dangerous security risk, especially in the reign of Elizabeth. Tensions between Protestants and Catholics were stronger than ever before, and Ireland was seen as a Popish back door on England that needed to be barred from France and Spain. The ability of Ireland to gain Catholic allies in an increasingly divided Europe was the principal reason that Ireland needed to be reduced to submission in Elizabeth's reign.²¹

Even before Elizabeth the threat of France through Scotland had been an issue. During Henry VIII's attempted securing of Ireland through titles, Ulster especially was open to French influence through the presence of numerous Scottish soldiers. By the end of Henry's reign it was entirely unclear that any of the re-titled Irish lords would be avid supporters of English Protestant dominance in Ireland, and many showed severe signs of backsliding.²²

Ireland continued to be a problem in Mary's reign. There was still a near constant migration of Scots into Ulster exerting pro-French influence, so much so that the Irish Parliament, composed of pro-English Palemen, passed an act forbidding the immigration and intermarrying with any Scots. Mary's marriage to Phillip did nothing to help England's relations, and the declaration of war against France in 1557 made Ireland even more of a threat since the French were

now provoked. The loss of Calais, the last English holding in France, shortly thereafter and apparent English weakness associated with the continental loss seemed just the opportunity that France was likely to take. In truth, France was economically unable to cause much more than annoying diversions in Ireland; the threat of Spanish intervention on behalf of England at this time was too great. This did not, however, prevent the fear of French invasion from being very real to the English government, both in Dublin and in London.²³

Early in Elizabeth's reign the Catholic threat continued to come from France; Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary's actions, minimal as they were, failed to settle the Irish problem. English control in Ireland was still restricted to the Pale, and the increasingly nervous state of religion on the continent made an island of Catholics mere miles off the coast an even greater threat. The threat was a very real one to English Protestants since there was so heavy a French presence in Scotland that it would take very little effort on the part of Mary of Guise, the Scottish regent, to send a substantial army to Ireland where they would, undoubtedly, pick up many loyal soldiers and make the short jump across the sea to England itself. The treaty of Cateau Cambresis only made matters worse for England. The treaty, signed in 1559, officially ended hostility between France and Spain. The English were very nervous that the end of Hapsburg-Valois hostilities left France "bestriding the realm having one foot in Calais, and the other foot in Scotland."²⁴ And without Spanish war to distract them the French could very easily invade England from Scotland, or Ireland, or both. In truth France was in no economic condition for a full-scale invasion; Henry II was perched on the edge of a financial chasm with Catholic-Protestant hostilities threatening to erupt in his own country. This condition did not prevent English fears from turning toward France, Scotland and Ireland.²⁵

But French control in Scotland was a political conundrum with no real benefits for England. If France maintained a significant presence in Scotland, it created a dangerous back door for either direct invasion from the north or a Catholic uprising in Ireland spurred on by Pro-French Scottish immigrants. If Protestant lords rose up against the Guise faction in Scotland, then there was the threat of French intervention. As the leading Protestant figure in Europe, Elizabeth

and her England would certainly come under attack if holy war erupted in Scotland.²⁶

Spain was a much more dangerous threat than France. By the middle of Elizabeth's reign Spain had conquered Portugal, and taken along with it the substantial Portuguese navy. Spain was also having great success in the Dutch wars, where English intervention on the side of Protestant rebels was perceived as an act of war. It is not surprising that Spain was tentatively testing Ireland for much of the period, sending small bodies of troops to aid in Irish uprisings. In 1581 William of Orange, leader of the Dutch Protestant forces, wrote to Elizabeth, saying, "A league is to be or has been concluded between the pope, King of Spain, and certain Italian potentates against the realms of England, Scotland, Ireland...They have begun with Ireland, which has the advantage that certain persons there had taken arms against you..."²⁷ It certainly appeared that Ireland was a tempting target for Spain. During the Desmond rebellion of 1579 a small number of Spanish troops had landed and tried to rally Irish lords to their side. Although few in number, the English were very afraid that they would be reinforced and made a concentrated effort to put the rebellion down quickly.²⁸

Spanish intervention reached its peak during Tyrone's rebellion. In 1596 Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, actually broke off negotiations with Elizabeth and offered Phillip II the kingdom of Ireland. He was prepared to back up his claim using history, citing the 12th-century *Book of Invasions*, claiming that the original ancestor of the Gaels, King Millesius, had come from Spain, and therefore the Irish were Spanish by blood.²⁹ Phillip never claimed the kingdom, but he did send 3,400 soldiers and a papal bull commanding Irish Catholics to "take up arms in defence of your faith"³⁰ to aid O'Neill in 1601. Through a navigational error the Spanish landed much farther south than intended, and were besieged by Lord Deputy Mountjoy's forces at Kinsale. O'Neill's attempt to relieve the soldiers ended up in his decisive defeat, and the effective end of the Nine Years War.³¹ The threat of more substantial Spanish intervention hung over the Elizabethan administration, made palpable by the persistency of Irish Catholicism.³²

Irish Catholicism became more dangerous with the

excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570. The Elizabethan government responded by cracking down against Rome. The New Treasons Act of 1571 made it high treason if anyone, “shall by writing printing preaching speech express words or sayings, maliciously advisedly and directly publish set forth and affirm that the queen...is an heretic schismatic tyrant infidel or an usurper of the crown...” That same year the “Act Against Bulls and Other Instruments from Rome” extended the definition of high treason to include, “if any person or persons shall...bring into this realm of England or any of the dominions of the same, any token or tokens...by the name of Agnes Dei, or any crosses pictures beads or such like vain and superstitious things from the bishop or see of Rome...” The Act made Jesuits or Catholic missionaries traitors. It also made any family who aided or hid them guilty of praemunire, as well as any judge or legal official who was thought to deal with the offenders too lightly.³³

These factors almost assured that decisive action would be taken by either Spain or England over Ireland, and with Phillip II of Spain becoming more and more devout and set in his ways and continuously provoked by English piracy, it seemed likely to the English that the Spanish would take action sooner rather than later. A need for quick submission combined with a view of the local inhabitants as subhuman added up to conditions pointing toward the adoption of Total War toward Ireland. Throw in English frustration at the Irish way of war, and the country’s refusal to be broken, and the fighting was likely to escalate to an even higher level of brutality.

The preferred tactic of Irish soldiers was perfectly suited for the environment: they “lurk and ambush amongst the standing wood.”³⁴ The Irish military was composed almost entirely of light infantry, changing very little from its medieval composition until the Tyrone rebellion. The Irish soldiery specialized in hit-and-run tactics, the majority of Irish battle success being ambushes: “they are only trained to skirmish upon bogs and difficult passes or passages of woods, and not to stand or fight in a firm body upon the plains, they think it no shame to fly or run off from fighting, as they advantage.”³⁵ The Irish were at a decided disadvantage when up against an English or English-trained force practicing the newest European formations and using new equipment such as matchlock firearms, and so, much to the

disgrace of their English enemies, the Irish had no qualms about running when it was impossible to emerge from a battle victorious. The Irish practiced a policy of avoidance, always staying one step ahead of the English commanders, who were often forced to chase them through bogs and swamps and all nature of unpleasant country: “[the lands] are very barren and mountainous, full of bogs, wood, and other remote places, whose fastness hath [incited] the people to overgreat presumption.”³⁶ If they managed to cover the terrain, the English often ended up caught in an Irish ambush.³⁷

This type of guerilla fighting was completely at odds with the preferred English style of warfare, which employed continental tactics of squares of pike and shot. Battle were fought on open fields in good weather, the musketeers exchanging volleys and then the pikemen moving slowly to collision, the two blocks trying to force each other off the field. Even the miserable conditions of the Flanders trenches left some degree of honor between the warring sides. English soldiers were completely unprepared for ambush tactics. The lack of English veterans of the Irish wars due to disease, desertion or battlefield death meant there were few experienced soldiers to teach the new recruits or conscripts. English commanders were constantly hoping to draw the Irish out into a single, decisive pitched battle that would subdue all resistance. As time progressed and it became obvious that the Irish were not going take the bait, other tactics had to be adopted.³⁸

The maintaining of garrisons in Ireland was draining England of its money as well as its men; by 1599 England had spent £678,544 on Irish expenditures: “it was the Irish warres [which] had impoverished England, & not the warres of Spain or Low Countreys.”³⁹ The drain was so great that in that same year Elizabeth was actually forced to sell some of her old jewelry.⁴⁰ But money was still disappearing faster than it could be sent to her commanders. The armies, in search of plunder and supplies, tended to lay waste to whatever area they occupied, and these areas were rarely abundant in supplies to begin with. Ireland also had little to offer in terms of plunder, and what little there was did not go very far in what was left of the Irish economy, so soldiers were especially volatile over lack of pay. The money pouring into Ireland rarely ended up where it was supposed to go. Corrupt officials often pocketed pay instead of passing it on, a common

Elizabethan practice not restricted to Ireland. Every investigation of the officers in Ireland since the 1563 showed an incredible amount of corruption and fraud, and periodic purges failed to rectify the situation. As England planted garrisons farther away from Dublin where the officers could be monitored, the probability of fraud grew. In some cases the money was diverted to other essentials not necessarily budgeted for. Head money, the bounty paid by the administration to local Irish for the heads of outlaws, is a good example. As the Irish economy worsened and famine and epidemic set in across the island, head money become less of a supplemental income and more of a necessary living. As more and more Irish brought in heads, the English were obliged to pay for them — they certainly did not want to discourage Irish vigilantism — but it became a significant drain on their purses, as well as Irish heads.⁴¹

The monetary problems of the Irish campaigns stemmed from many sources, but the most prominent of these was the assumption that once plantations were settled and Ireland was pacified, all these colonies would be immediately self-sustaining and could actually help the English economy. Because of this assumption, long-term plans for the government funding of garrisons were not made until 1599, and Elizabeth became more and more reluctant to increase the budget of officers in Ireland who seemed to be accomplishing very little. The problem was a cyclical one. The less progress that was made in pacifying the island, the more soldiers had to be stationed and the more time they had to spend there. The more time the soldiers had to spend in Ireland, the more they drained the local economy of supplies. The more they drained the local economy, the more English soldiers had to rely on victuals and pay from across the sea. The more this occurred, the more must be the budget for operations and Ireland. And if the budget was not increased, the army could not eat and would therefore be less effective.⁴²

English commanders, unable to find the Irish armies, began to wage war on the Irish populace out of necessity, rather than a prescribed strategy of Total War, most importantly to feed their starving troops. Crop burning and, more significantly, the killing of cattle became common practice if the English army was unable to locate the Irish forces; the English took what they needed and destroyed the rest.

The only hope for English victory was going to be a war of attrition.⁴³ Unfortunately, for the majority of Elizabeth's reign no one wished to fight this kind of war because nobody had the money, desire or time. The continued attempt at traditional English wars resulted in both sides bloodying each other to stalemate. The attitude of the English is best summed up in a section of the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters* from the year 1600:

For it was of great annoyance of mind to the Queen and the councils there and here that...Ulstermen in general, and those who were in alliance with them, had made so long a defense and stand against them; and it preyed like a latent disease on their heads, all of their people that had been slain and destroyed, and all of their wealth that had been expended, in carrying on the Irish war until then...⁴⁴

There can be seen in the Irish wars a trend toward more violence and the eventual adoption of Total War tactics under Lord Mountjoy. Some figures in Ireland recognized the need for this earlier. Spenser believed that reform and negotiations were useless, writing in 1595:

Then so it is with Ireland continually, for the sword was never yet out of their hand, but when they are weary with warrs, and brought doune to extreame wretchednesse, then they creepe a little perhaps, and seue for grace, till they have gotten new breath and recovered strength againe: so it is in vaine to speak of planting of laws and plotting of policies till they be altogether subdued.⁴⁵

A prime example of individual violence outside of policy is Sir Humphrey Gilbert, military governor of Munster beginning in 1569, who made it his goal to make the sight of one Englishman, "more terrible now to them than the sight of a hundred was before."⁴⁶ He used his power to place the entirety of Munster under perpetual martial law and conducted hundreds of summary executions.⁴⁷ He also used psychological warfare, lining the long path to his tent with the heads of executed Irish soldiers and civilians, claiming that, "through the

terror which the people conceived thereby it made short wars.”⁴⁸ Other episodes of violence, such as John Norris’ execution of two hundred unarmed followers of the Irish lord Sir Brian O’Neill, and the First Earl of Essex’s 1575 massacre that wiped clean the entire population of Rathlin Island after it had surrendered, were perpetrated by English officers frustrated at the futility of the Irish war.⁴⁹ These actions were made independently of policy, and the men who committed them were often accused of inciting future rebellions with such violent practice. In 1589 it was complained that, “In the late action against the rebels, none but women, children, and churls were destroyed, which will breed desolation to country and decay of her majesty’s revenue.”⁵⁰ These men, however, got results in their own areas, and it was only a matter of time before English policy makers noticed their successes.

By the time the Second Earl of Essex boasted his way to Ireland in 1599 it was apparent to all that what Ireland needed was an even heavier hand; the Queen needed to “bridle these unruly Irish colts with a sharp English bit.”⁵¹ The largest army mustered since Henry VIII’s reign, more than 17,000 men, was commissioned and shipped over to Ireland. In 1599 the annals record, “So great an army had never till that time come to Ireland. . . .”⁵² Up until this point the violence of individual governors like Gilbert had been of their own acting; London just turned a blind eye and gave quiet support if they showed signs of success. By 1599 and the sending of this army to Ireland the Queen and her administration saw no other option, and extreme violence was becoming official policy:

...they give us cause to use against them the last [remedy], the sworde, which for repairing of our honour, the saftie of the rest of our people, and the assurance of our Justice, wee are both forced, and so resolved to doe to all that shall not with all expedition, penitencie, and humilite, prostrate themselves to our mercie, as there onley way to redeeme themselves from the calamities and confusions, whereof their owne hearts cannot but feel (beforehand) the horrour. . . and the force of our goods Subjects, with which he is now and shall be furnished, as it may be just terrour to the wicked, in making them see before their eyes, the short and desperate ende of these their barbarous

and unnatural courses...⁵³

The Queen's proclamation touched on two other factors that promoted violence in Ireland; they were the issues of honor and of treachery. Elizabeth was Queen of Ireland, and that meant that the Irish people were her subjects whether they wanted to be or not, and therefore owed loyalty to English laws and customs, and most importantly to her. Elizabeth had been willing to overlook Irish religion as long as the island remained relatively quiet and, more importantly, loyal, but for her Irish subjects and this upstart Tyrone to rise up against their divinely appointed monarch was the ultimate crime. As Elizabeth and the English saw it, it was best when "our Subjects' heartes are assured to us by the bond of love, rather than by forced obedience."⁵⁴ She is clear to mention, though, that forced obedience is an option. The love spoken of by the Queen is the attempted Anglicization of the Irish; the attempt, as the English saw it, to turn a wild and backwards land into something resembling a civilization. The Irish, however, did not seem to appreciate the English effort, since, "it hath not wrought in all men's minds...that fruit of obedience which we expected," resulting in, "unnaturall rebellions."⁵⁵

A rebellion is always a smirch on the honor of a monarch. Under Elizabeth the idea of honor was associated with loyalty to the state, and there was nothing more honorable than being a good subject of the crown. The worst possible crime a subject could commit would be high treason, or, in other words, be disloyal to the monarch. In England traitors were given the least respectful treatment and the most violent death of all prisoners. It was thought that a person who behaved without honor should be treated without honor.⁵⁶ The Irish were a people who ran from battle, broke their promises of loyalty, opposed civilizing efforts and rose up against their Queen. The Irish were traitors and were to be treated as traitors. This view of Irish treachery colored English actions, since the military actions by the Irish were not a war, but a rebellion, and rebellions were to be quashed using any and all means.⁵⁷ In this rebellion the rules of war did not apply, and the use of Total War, the starving and burning of Irish forces into surrender, was perfectly acceptable.

Unfortunately, Ireland also seemed to be making traitors out of

the English. To the English one of the most disturbing factors of time served in Ireland was its apparent tendency for making good Englishmen go native. Men who spent years or decades amongst the population picked up many Irish tendencies. William Cecil described it as *Hibernia Hibernescit*; “Ireland makes everything Irish.” One of the most striking examples of this was Captain Thomas Lee, a commander under both Sidney and the Second Earl of Essex (referred to from here as Essex). Starting in about 1575 Lee’s letters to London showed more and more Irish qualities in the writing and style, until eventually Lee sent Elizabeth the head of an outlaw, preserved and packaged from her loyal “bog soldier.” Doubtless Lee was pleased with his gift; sending heads as proof of the death of a criminal was common practice in Ireland. But Elizabeth was less impressed: “Her Majesty is surely not well contented that the head of such a base Robin Hood is brought so solemnly to England.” The Queen was not on the level of a mere Irish chieftain to be placated by body parts. Lee considered himself snubbed and folded into the local population, where he survived by raiding English garrisons until he was brought back to England and hung. But Lee’s example was hardly unique. There was not a force sent to Ireland in recorded history that had not been reduced by at least half due to defection and desertion. English soldiers were rarely paid and poorly fed, and many ended up selling their weapons and armor to the local Irish and then disappearing into Irish culture, sometimes to turn up again in Irish raiding parties, sometimes to never be heard from again.⁵⁸

By 1594 Elizabeth believed that she had been lenient with the Irish up to this point; she had attempted reform government through the Dublin Parliament, offering the Irish a dual system similar to Sidney’s proposal under Mary. It would have kept Dublin and the Protestant Palemen in control, but chieftains would still be allowed some independence, and clans would continue to rule on the local level, as long as they swore fealty. She had also been reasonably tolerant of Irish Catholics, as long as they were quiet and loyal, although she would have preferred the whole island going Protestant. But Tyrone’s rebellion and refusal of Elizabeth’s terms and the Irish relations with the hated enemy of Spain during the war was more than any reasonable monarch could be expected to put up with. It was a serious blow to

not only her crown but also to her personal honor that her Irish subjects were arrayed in rebellion, and it was time, “to reduce that Kingdom to obedience...by using an extraordinary power and force against them...”⁵⁹

The expeditionary capabilities of Elizabeth’s army in 1599 had changed significantly since the beginning of her reign, and she was now in a much better position to achieve success in Ireland. First of all, the London administration had made long-term plans for supplying commanders with soldiers. Aside from the 16,000 infantry and 1,300 cavalry sent to Ireland initially, it was planned to send another 2,000 men every three months until the rebellion was quelled. The increased development within the English Navy meant that it was easier to use ships to supply the armies, and shipments of weapons and provisions became substantially more regular. This meant that the tables had turned against the Irish, who were now forced to survive off the meager pickings from a desolated land while the English were well victualled. The English by this time also had their own weapon and armor industry, built through private industry and subcontracting, which provided the army with its munitions. This made supply acquisition less expensive since such goods no longer had to be imported from the continent, were readily available and were of a higher quality. Finally, England was willing to expend the necessary amounts of money, knowing, at this point, that it could not be any worse than the expenses accrued by decades of mismanagement.⁶⁰ England was mobilized for war with Ireland.

With all the supplies, men and money at his disposal Essex had the potential for success. Unfortunately, he squandered his time and money in a search for plunder, probably the last thing one could hope to find in significant amounts in Ireland anymore. The *Annals of the Four Masters* for the year 1599 describe Essex wandering across the width and breadth of the island with his army, but not engaging in any significant military activity.⁶¹ Elizabeth was unimpressed with Essex’s adventures in Ireland, stating very vehemently, “nothing has been done, then surely we must conclude that none of the four quarters of the year will be in season for you.”⁶²

Like previous commanders Essex had hoped for a great pitched battle to end the rebellion so that he could return quickly to England

and continue exerting influence over affairs there as a national hero. When it became obvious to him that he was falling out of favor with the Queen —by the time of his recall he had spent £87,000 of her money and accomplished nothing of any significance⁶³ — he quickly drew up an uneasy ceasefire with Tyrone (an action he had no authority to pursue: only the crown could negotiate treaties and did not do so with rebels) and “left Ireland in without peace or tranquility, without Lord Justice, Governor, or President.”⁶⁴

By 1596, when Spenser published his *View of the Present State of Ireland*, he had seen the sporadic and persistent nature of Irish rebellions, and it is no surprise to read: “till Ireland be famished it cannot be subdued.”⁶⁵ In 1602 Fynes Moryson, secretary to Lord Deputy Mountjoy, “saw a most horrible spectacle of three children (whereof the eldest was not above ten years old) all eating and gnawing with their teeth the entrails of their dead mother, upon whose flesh they had fed twenty days past...”⁶⁶ What happened between Spenser’s writing and the observations of Moryson was the Deputyship of Lord Mountjoy, and the English application of a Total War policy. Before 1600 Commanders in Ireland had waged war against the Irish military, they had plundered for personal gain, and had stolen crops and livestock to feed their soldiers. Mountjoy, along with many of his contemporaries, recognized that this had been and would continue to be an ineffective policy toward the Irish rebels, and pushed for the adoption of a strategy of destruction aimed at the agricultural and pastoral base of Irish society: “When the plough and breeding of cattle shall cease, then will the rebellion end.”⁶⁷ Mountjoy began a full-scale campaign of destruction through Munster in a successful attempt to drive Tyrone back into Ulster and cut him off from any aid.⁶⁸ The annals for 1600 describe the kind of wake Mountjoy’s forces left behind him: “they left no habitation or mansion worthy of note which they did not burn and totally destroy. All the country behind them, as far as they could see around on every side, was *enveloped in* one dark cloud of vapour and smoke (*italics theirs*).”⁶⁹ Moryson, eyewitness to many such desolations, notes, “I have often made mention...of our destroying the rebels’ corn, and using all means to famish them...”⁷⁰ Burning crops and cattle was not a new practice in Ireland, but the significance of 1600-1603, what makes Mountjoy’s policy Total War, is the

recognized removal of non-combatants. Mountjoy was aware that “the strength of this war consisteth in men,” and men needed food to march and fight.⁷¹ But women, children, the elderly and the militarily incapable also fed on the same corn and cattle the Irish soldiers did. These non-combatants would be hit worse than the soldiers if the English burned fields and destroyed livestock since the Irish soldiers were significantly more mobile. Before 1600 when the Lord Deputies, or more correctly the Presidents of regions or their underlings, had committed atrocities against non-combatants the Lord Deputy, the Irish parliament or the Crown rebuffed them for their cruelty. Mountjoy was committing the same atrocities, albeit on a larger scale, but by 1600 these atrocities had become official policy. Moryson was appalled by the sight of starving Irish soldiers stabbing “long needles into the horses of our English troops...for a share of them,” or the allegations of “old women” luring “divers little children” into a field with a warm fire, where the children, “were by them surprised, killed and eaten.” He was even more appalled when, upon the arrest of the afore mentioned women, “they found the children’s skulls and bones.” He is horrified that the most common sight in Ireland is, “of carcasses scattered in many places, all dead of famine,” and that “the common sort of rebels were driven to unspeakable extremities...the ample relating thereof were an infinite task,” but he knows that the starvation was inflicted as part of official royal military policy, and agrees that such famine was necessary for the subduing of the Irish.⁷²

The effect of Elizabethan Total War can be seen in the Ireland of 1601-3. Mountjoy’s policy of total destruction regardless of civilian or non-combatant status had accomplished in three years what had not been managed in three centuries. Although Tyrone would still continue fighting weakly until 1603, he could only to hope to hold out long enough for Elizabeth to die so that he could surrender under more favorable conditions to James, Elizabeth’s unstated but obvious successor. After Kinsale the Irish War was effectively over. The annals from 1602 sum up the state of the Irish afterwards:

Pitiable, indeed, was the state of the Gaels of Ireland...for their characteristics and dispositions were changed; for they exchanged their bravery for cowardice, their magnanimity for

weakness, their pride for servility; their success, valour, prowess, heroism, exultation, and military glory, vanished...They despaired of relief, so that the most of them were obliged to seek aid and refuge from enemies and strangers, while others were scattered and dispersed, not only throughout Ireland, but throughout foreign countries, as poor, indigent, helpless paupers; and others were offering themselves for hire as soldiers to foreigners; so that countless numbers of the freeborn nobles of Ireland were slain in distant foreign countries...In a word, it would be tedious and impossible to enumerate or describe the great evils which sprang and took permanent root at that time...⁷³

In Mellifont Abbey in 1603 Hugh O'Neill was the ultimate symbol of Ireland under Elizabeth: a once-powerful figure who attempted to survive on his own terms, reduced through attrition to groveling at the boot of the English power.⁷⁴ This is the contrast between the Ireland of 1601-3 and the Ireland of 1558. The agriculture of the country was ruined. Significant military or financial aid from France or Spain was obviously not arriving. England had planted settlers in areas extending beyond the borders of the Pale, most significantly in previously unsuccessful locations such as Ulster, the very heart of Tyrone's rebellion. The track record of English monarchs would not have predicted anything resembling success in the Irish venture, only the perpetuation of hopeless struggle in the Hibernian quagmire. But, as Thomas Gainsford asked, concerning Ireland, "what cannot men and money do?"⁷⁵ It took the desiccation of the land and the death of its people, as well as millions of pounds and thousands of its own men, for the Elizabethan administration to accomplish its goal of a pacified, or at least crippled, Ireland.

This Total War strategy would serve England well in its coming colonial ventures. The policy was adopted for use in Africa against the Zulus and throughout most of the Empire against "barbarian" peoples who needed, in British eyes, to be civilized. The lesson learned from Ireland was that negotiations and reform were futile gestures in the face of a people who refused the civilizing mission of England. The quickest and, in the long run, cheapest method of assuring control

over a people was to destroy their agricultural base and demoralize the population. At a time when men and horses were the primary war machines, an assault on the local farms was the equivalent of destroying a fuel refinery. Without food and homes it was only a matter of time before the men fighting would be forced surrender. This was the same thinking that was used to justify the firebombing campaign against Japan and the strategic bombing of Germany during World War II. The allies hoped to destroy the industrial centers of Germany and prevent supplies from reaching the troops on the front lines, believing that a knock-down, drag-out fight with the Nazis couldn't be won, and that the bombs would cause terror in the same way that Hitler hoped the V-1 and V-2 rocket attacks on London would. The allies were also willing to wreak destruction on Japan, thinking that an invasion of the home islands could be prevented by demoralizing the civilian population, and succeeded in proving this with the dropping of the two atomic bombs.⁷⁶

Elizabeth's war on the Irish population was spurred largely through frustration: frustration at Irish culture and its resistance to what the English thought was positive, civilizing influence; frustration at Ireland's becoming a powerful focal point for all of England's Catholic enemies; frustration at the Irish soldiers who ran and ambushed in a manner most unfamiliar and dishonorable to English sensibilities; frustration at the inability of England's own men, supposedly the best and most capable, to subdue the island quickly; and frustration at the expenditure of money and lives beyond the scale of any venture in recollected history. Total War was justified by these frustrations: the only way to tame Ireland was to starve and burn it into submission.

Notes

¹ Richard Berleth, *The Twilight Lords* (Barnes and Noble, 1978), pp. 292-3.

² James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (Quill, 1980), pp. 27-77

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⁴ *A New History of Ireland, Vol. III, Early Modern Ireland 1534-1691*, ed. T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 79, 83-5.

⁵ Walsh to Cecil, 23 Aug. 1559, SP 53/1/71, cited in Cirian Brady, *Chief Governors: The Rise and Fall of Reform Government in Tudor Ireland 1536-1588* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 89.

⁶ Brady, *The Chief Governors*, pp. 72-100.

⁷ Brady, *The Chief Governors*, p. 87.

⁸ "I Eliz Cap. V.," *Select Statutes and Other Constitutional Documents Illustrative of the Reigns of Elizabeth and James I*, ed. G.W. Prothero, (Oxford University Press, 1894), p. 23.

⁹ *The Image of Ireland, with a discoverie of Woodkarne*, cited in Quinn, *Elizabethans and the Irish*, p. 62.

¹⁰ Spenser, *A Veue of Ireland*.

¹¹ C. Litton. Falkiner, *Illustrations of Irish History and Topography, Mainly of the Seventeenth Century* (Longmans Green, 1904), pp. 248-50.

¹² Falkiner, *Illustrations*, pp. 249, 320.

¹³ David Beers Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 46-7.

¹⁴ Quinn, *Elizabethans and the Irish*, p. 65.

¹⁵ Falkiner, *Illustrations*, p. 321.

¹⁶ Quinn, *Elizabethans and the Irish*, pp. 63-4.

¹⁷ Fynes Moryson, cited in Quinn, *Elizabethans and the Irish*, pp. 71-2.

¹⁸ Quinn, *Elizabethans and the Irish*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Spenser, *A Veue of Ireland*.

²⁰ Quinn, *Elizabethans and the Irish*, pp. 33, 126.

²¹ Moody *et al.*, *A New History*, p. 139.

²² Moody *et al.*, *A New History*, p. 78.

²³ William Palmer, *The Problem of Ireland in Tudor Foreign Policy 1485-1603* (Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 72-6.

²⁴ PRO SP 12/1/66, cited in Palmer, *Problem of Ireland*, p. 77.

²⁵ Moody *et al.*, *A New History*, pp. 79-81.

²⁶ Palmer, *Problem of Ireland*, pp. 78-81.

²⁷ *Calendar of State Papers Foreign* 15, pp. 55, 58-9.

²⁸ Palmer, *Problem of Ireland*, pp. 109-11, 115.

²⁹ Hiram Morgan, "Hugh O'Neill and the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland," *The Historical Journal* 36:1 (March 1993), p. 34.

³⁰ Quoted in Morgan, "O'Neill and the Nine Years War," p. 32.

³¹ Heath, *Armies of the 16th Century*, pp. 26-7.

³² Morgan, *The Problem of Ireland*, p. 119.

³³ "Treasons Act, 1571," "Act Against Bulls and Other Instruments from Rome, 1571," in Stephen B. Baxter (ed.), *Basic Documents of English History* (Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 88-9.

³⁴ Thomas Gainsford, "The Description of Ireland," in *The Elizabethans and the Irish*, p. 163.

³⁵ Falkiner, *Illustrations*, p. 287.

³⁶ Gainsford, "Description," p. 163.

³⁷ Ian Heath, *Armies of the 16th Century: The Armies of England, Scotland, Ireland, the United Provinces, and the Spanish Netherlands 1487-1609* (Foundry Books, 1997), pp. 90-1.

³⁸ Heath, *Armies of the 16th Century*, pp. 93-4.

³⁹ Cited in Paul E. J. Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 233.

⁴⁰ Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars*, p. 216.

⁴¹ Nicholas Canny, *Making Ireland British 1580-1650* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 75.

⁴² Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars*, pp. 71-3.

⁴³ Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars*, p. 214.

⁴⁴ "Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters vol. 6," *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts*, ed. Marianne MacDonald (1997), 2190. Retrieved 15 September 2003, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100005F/index.html>.

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⁴⁶ Cited in William Palmer, "That 'Insolent Liberty': Honor, Rites of Power, and Persuasion in Sixteenth-Century Ireland," *Renaissance Quarterly* 46:2 (Summer 1993), p. 314.

⁴⁷ Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Palmer, "Insolent Liberty," p. 314.

⁴⁹ Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland*, 4, p. 368.

⁵¹ *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1574-1584*, p. 24.

⁵² *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2111.

⁵³ “Proclamation on Sending an Army to Ireland” (1599), in Arthur F. Kinney (ed.), *Elizabethan Backgrounds*, (Archon Books, 1975), p. 316.

⁵⁴ “Proclamation on Sending an Army to Ireland,” *Elizabethan Backgrounds*, p. 314.

⁵⁵ “Proclamation on Sending an Army to Ireland,” *Elizabethan Backgrounds*, pp. 314-5.

⁵⁶ Palmer, “That Insolent Liberty,” pp. 311-3.

⁵⁷ Hiram Morgan, “Hugh O’Neill and the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland,” *The Historical Journal* 36 (March 1993), pp. 22-5.

⁵⁸ Berleth, *Twilight Lords*, pp. 20-23.

⁵⁹ “Proclamation on Sending an Army to Ireland,” *Elizabethan Backgrounds*, p. 315.

⁶⁰ Hammer, *Elizabeth’s Wars*, p. 215.

⁶¹ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2098-2121.

⁶² Cited in Palmer, “Insolent Liberty,” p. 313.

⁶³ Hammer, *Elizabeth’s Wars*, p. 77.

⁶⁴ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2121.

⁶⁵ Spenser, *Veue of Ireland*.

⁶⁶ Fynes Moryson, “The Effects of Elizabethan Policy in Ireland, 1602,” in John Carey (ed.), *Eyewitness to History* (Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 164.

⁶⁷ *Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, 4, p. 178.

⁶⁸ Moody *et al.*, *A New History*, pp. 131-2.

⁶⁹ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2199.

⁷⁰ Moryson, “Effects of Elizabethan Policy,” p. 164.

⁷¹ *Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, 4, p. 194.

⁷² Moryson, *Effects of Elizabethan Policy*, pp. 164-5.

⁷³ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2299.

⁷⁴ Berleth, *Twilight Lords*, p. 292.

⁷⁵ Gainsford, *Description of Ireland*, p.163.

⁷⁶ Stokesbury, *Short History of World War II*, pp. 364-8.