

Searching for Common Ground: Colonialism and Collaboration in Early Modern Tipperary

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Introduction

The development of Irish identity and emergence of Irish nationalism in the early modern period has become a central arena of debate and contestation in Irish historical studies in recent years.¹ A series of complexities and ambiguities inherent in Irish reactions to elements of British colonialism has been shown to underline an array of tensions within Ireland's colonial past. As part of this growing body of work, this paper aims to demonstrate the perennial presence of elements of Gaelic-Irish collaboration as well as resistance in the early modern period by examining the experience of the O'Dwyers of Kilnamanagh in the early seventeenth century. By drawing attention to their contacts with one prominent New English entrepreneur, Sir Philip Percivall, the paper reveals a significant level of Gaelic-Irish accommodation to English social norms, which subsequently brought about the negotiation and contestation of a variety of shared spaces in contemporary society.

Early Modern Kilnamanagh at the Contact Zone

The O'Dwyers managed to survive the partial Anglo-Norman colonisation in late medieval Tipperary, but by the early modern period a new contact zone had presented itself in the form of the New English. A series of Norman-style castles, as seen in William Petty's Down Survey barony map of Kilnamanagh in fig. 1, testify to the region as an interconnected contact zone that overlapped in material practices with neighbouring English lordships by the seventeenth century.² Although Petty failed to map all the tower houses of the barony, one can nonetheless gain a picture of the region as one of contemporary Ireland's multiple contact zones. Accordingly, how did the O'Dwyers negotiate the various political, social and cultural differences presented by this new zone of interaction with the New English?

What is most interesting about the O'Dwyers is arguably the level of sophistication to their attempts to negotiate survival. They successfully played as both defenders of the crown and agents of rebellion throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as examined elsewhere in the context of Gaelic participation in contemporary government administration.³ An additional important means by which cultural interaction in early modern Ireland can be explored (and one that has rarely been pursued) is by examining the manner in which the Gaelic-Irish negotiated contact with the entrepreneurial, New English adventurer class. The rise of the adventurer class to the forefront of mid-seventeenth century Irish society was an insidious one and is often understated in the historiography of the period, which serves subsequently to place too much emphasis on the effectiveness of government plantation efforts in transforming the localities. The influence of adventurers such as Richard Boyle in County Cork, Sir Valentine Browne in County Kerry and others throughout the country was considerable, especially in those areas unaffected by direct plantation and, therefore, warrants specific attention. Their distinct impact in relation to west Tipperary has been accommodated by the survival in the *Egmont Manuscripts* of the family records of one of the most prominent and powerful New English

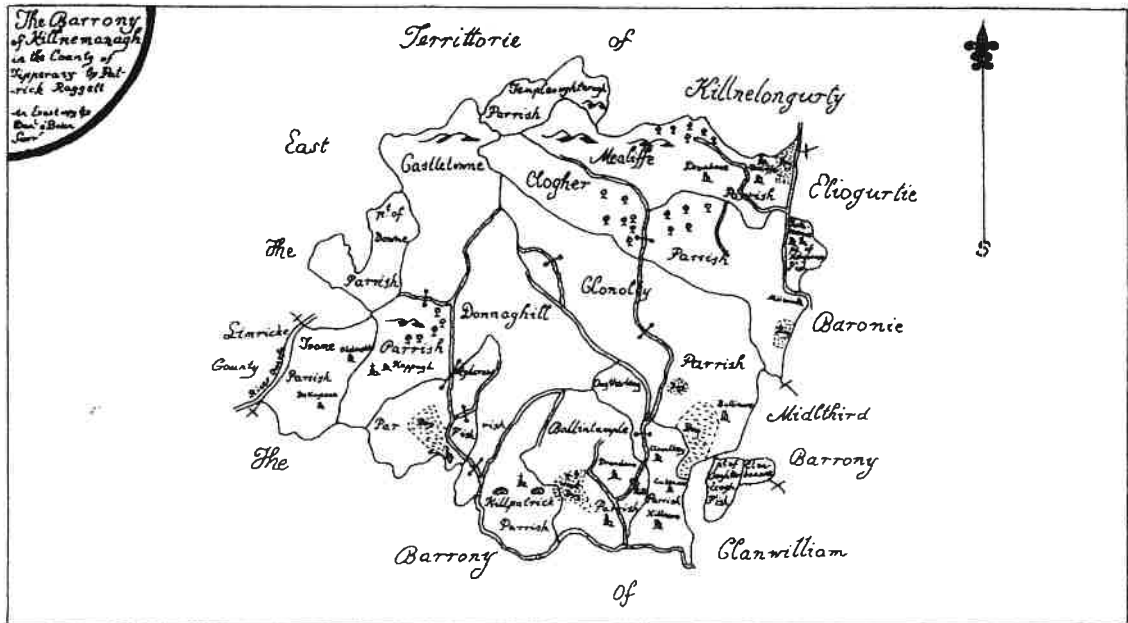


Fig. 1: The Down Survey Barony Map of Kilnamanagh, c.1654. Copied from source: National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), MFIC Pos. 7384 b.

entrepreneurs in contemporary Ireland, Sir Philip Percivall.⁴ The *Egmont Manuscripts* are a hugely under-used source in studies of early modern Ireland, which is unfortunate given the wealth of materials contained within. Percivall's recorded correspondences therein reveal the process whereby the adventurer class comprehensively infiltrated the Irish landholding scene prior to the 1641 rebellion. Crucially, too, his catalogued activities indicate the level of interaction and cooperation reached between him and the Gaelic-Irish, and more specifically in the context of this paper, the O'Dwyers.

Interaction with Percivall

From the early decades of the seventeenth century, Sir Philip Percivall – whose descendants later became established as the earls of Egmont – held the lucrative office of clerk and registrar of the court of wards in Ireland.⁵ He also held the appointments of clerk of the crown, prothonotary of the court of common pleas and keeper of the public accounts.⁶ In the 1630s, he began to build up an extensive network of properties throughout Ireland, via the remunerative and influential positions he held in government. The bulk of his holdings were seen in Munster, principally in Counties Cork, Tipperary and Waterford. He established a large estate in Burton, in north-east Cork, having been granted it by letters patent from King Charles I in 1637 and, in Tipperary, he purchased, leased, and acquired the mortgages and wardships of extensive lands throughout the county, setting up numerous Protestant tenants in Kilnamanagh and elsewhere.⁷

Percivall's accumulation of properties in west Tipperary was facilitated by the positive engagement and shared economic and social terms of reference he enjoyed with the leading Gaelic-Irish landowners, as revealed by a series of letters documented in the *Egmont Manuscripts*. Several O'Dwyers, including Philip the then chief, are seen to have maintained regular contact

with Percivall in the late 1630s and early 1640s, principally concerning land transfers and related matters.⁸ This highlights the extent to which shared economic and social spaces were being actively forged in contemporary Irish society by both the New English and the Gaelic-Irish. The association of the O'Dwyers with Percivall significantly underlines both their knowledge and appreciation of contemporary political and economic currents in society.

In early seventeenth-century Kilnamanagh, a conventional colonial reading of developments, incorporating exclusive notions of 'us' and 'them', cannot ultimately be sustained. On the contrary, the evidence demonstrates that in the pre-1641 period, the Gaelic-Irish sought to consolidate their position by actively forging stronger links with prominent New Englishmen such as Sir Philip Percivall. In 1637, for example, one of the foremost O'Dwyer landowners, Charles O'Dwyer, had written to Percivall advising the Englishman 'to buy lands in that neighbourhood [of Kilnamanagh], as the inhabitants are so affrighted by the relation of the coming of the Plantation that they will sell upon very easy rates'.⁹

The communication reveals how the O'Dwyers were actively seeking New English landowners to acquire landholdings within their neighbourhood in order to stabilise existing arrangements. The prospect of plantation in Kilnamanagh and elsewhere in north and west Tipperary had been stated in government circles from 1630.¹⁰ O'Murchadha has shown, in the context of contemporary County Clare, how the fourth earl of Thomond and others 'encouraged the immigration to [the county] of settlers of English and Dutch origin in the drive to improve and modernize their estates'.¹¹ The enterprise of the O'Brien earls of Thomond, however, must be seen in the context of their standing as powerful magnates and defenders of New English authority in Clare since the mid-sixteenth century. They had been substantially 'anglicised' and had earlier converted to Protestantism.¹² Evidence, therefore, of the innovation of the Gaelic-Irish O'Dwyers has an additional significance to the reading of the period, given that they were Catholic and not as comparatively interconnected in political circles.

Further evidence of the close, and often personal, contact that the O'Dwyers had effected with Percivall emerges from a suggestion of Philip O'Dwyer, the chief, of 'a match between Sir Philip's daughter and his own kinsman, the lord of Castleconill'.¹³ Elsewhere, O'Dwyer wrote to Percivall thanking him for 'the kind expression of [his] love and care'.¹⁴ It is important, too, to stress that the evidence does not present a case of the O'Dwyers merely yielding authority to a powerful and pre-eminent individual, in the person of Sir Philip Percivall, but rather reveals that it was a shared and negotiated level of interaction. The Englishman, for example, wrote to O'Dwyer, at one point, 'apologising for his servant's behaviour' in Kilnamanagh.¹⁵ Significantly, too, Percivall had a positive working relationship with many of the lesser O'Dwyer subordinates in the Kilnamanagh lordship, and his Protestant tenants actively engaged in trade with their Gaelic-Irish neighbours throughout the barony, as revealed by a number of correspondences from his tenants such as this one:

Richard Stokes... has sold a hundred of your smallest ewe lambs to Mr. Ryane... Mr. Edmond Magrath cuts wattles in Ballagh bog, and says he has your leave to do so, and Mr. O'Barry, who had a "reck" of hay last winter which he promised to restore this year, now refuses to do so, answering that you promised him hay for his cattle – *August 19, 1641*.¹⁶

The cumulative evidence suggests, then, that a significant level of shared confidence had been engendered between the Gaelic-Irish and New English on the ground in the pre-1641 period. As MacCarthy-Morrogh observes, this 'balance was forgotten in later years and is perhaps under-

estimated today because of the implacability of the religious divide from the rebellion onwards'.¹⁷

Collapse of Anglo-Irish Relations

Despite the common ground evidently forged between the O'Dwyers and Percivall, the elite members of the Kilnarnagh lordship were unsuccessful in their attempts to control their subordinates as the 1641 Rebellion loomed in Tipperary.¹⁸ Consider, for example, this correspondence by one of Sir Philip Percivall's tenants in Kilnarnagh in late 1641:

We have lost 3,000*l.* stock by rebels in Killemanagh... Mr. Philip O'Dwyer is keeping what he can for you, but Edmund O'Dwyer of Ballymone has taken at least four hundred sheep and put them upon Ballytemple and Ballybrowngh. He intends to keep the land, and has spoiled your servants' gardens and taken their corn... This loss is not your worship's alone, but every English gentleman in these parts has lost all – *December 17, 1641.*¹⁹

Philip O'Dwyer's efforts to engage with the new order ultimately failed to incorporate Gaelic-Irish society at large. Many Gaelic-Irish lords, by reaching an accommodation with the New English administration in an effort to survive, simultaneously created a confused and contradictory polity within their respective lordships, as O'Dowd and Canny have shown for elsewhere.²⁰ This frequently resulted in their being discredited in the eyes of their traditional followers as collaborators and rendered incapable of maintaining order and preventing rebellion. By conforming and collaborating in an attempt to survive, the Gaelic-Irish partially brought about their own demise.

As the 1641 Rebellion grew imminent in Tipperary, Philip O'Dwyer, the last chief of Kilnarnagh, attempted to maintain control by defending the properties of Sir Philip Percivall but was ultimately thwarted in his efforts by other members of the O'Dwyers, who continued to plunder and spoil.²¹ In late 1641, he was attempting to stabilise a society that had, in actuality, been insidiously fragmented from the early seventeenth century. Whilst some of the principal O'Dwyers had evidently forged close relations with Sir Philip Percivall, others had, on occasions, actively opposed his presence in the barony; as highlighted, for example, by the manner in which numerous O'Dwyers levied rents from his lands in the barony in the late 1630s.²²

Conclusion

What does the experience of the O'Dwyers tell us about colonialism and collaboration in early modern Ireland? Their interaction with Sir Philip Percivall is particularly indicative of the shared space negotiated and constructed between native and newcomer in the early seventeenth century. The evidence from Kilnarnagh reveals that the social and cultural dimensions of everyday English/Gaelic relations in early colonial Ireland were far more complex than the simplified, official political discourses that reinforce notions of 'coloniser versus colonised' and 'civility versus barbarism' separated by a so-called frontier. Using the example of the New English planter, Sir Matthew de Renzy, Mac Cuarta has highlighted a similar more complicated picture of Gaelic/English relations for contemporary County Wexford and King's County.²³ The piecemeal nature of contemporary English government in Ireland ensured a significant level of integration with the existing population, which was negotiated principally by the upper levels of society sharing economic and social terms of reference. These 'shared spaces' did not reflect a broader, pluralistic design of early modern English colonial thought but, rather, the extent to which the Gaelic-Irish had recognised, and acted on, the necessity of searching for common

ground.²⁴ Ultimately, however, in Kilnarnagh and elsewhere, Gaelic-Irish society was pervaded by contradictory forces of resistance and accommodation, which served ultimately to fragment the construction of an alternative polity and ideology in response to New English hegemony in the early modern period.

Notes

- 1 See, for example: T.J. Dunne, 'The Gaelic Response to Conquest and Colonisation: The Evidence of the Poetry', in *Studia Hibernica*, 20, (1980), pp. 7-30; B. Cunningham, 'Native Culture and Political Change in Ireland, 1580-1640', in: C. Brady and R. Gillespie (eds.), *Natives and Newcomers: Essays on the Making of Irish Colonial Society, 1534-1641*, (Dublin, 1986), pp. 148-170; and M. O'Riordan, *The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World*, (Cork, 1990). Cf: B. Bradshaw, 'Native Reaction to the Westward Enterprise: A Case-Study in Gaelic Ideology', in: K.R. Andrews, N.P. Canny and P.E.H. Hair (eds.), *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, The Atlantic and America, 1480-1650*, (Liverpool, 1978), pp. 65-80; M. Caball, 'Providence and Exile in Early Seventeenth-Century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 114, (1994), pp. 174-188; and *Idem.*, 'Faith, Culture and Sovereignty: Irish Nationality and its Development, 1558-1625', in: B. Bradshaw and P. Roberts (eds.), *British Conscientiousness and Identity: The Making of Britain 1533-1707*, (Cambridge 1998), pp. 112-139.
- 2 J. Morrissey, forthcoming, 'Cultural Geographies of the Contact Zone: Gaels, Galls and Overlapping Territories in Late Medieval Ireland', *Social and Cultural Geography*.
- 3 J. Morrissey, 'Contours of Colonialism: Gaelic Ireland and the Early Colonial Subject', *Irish Geography*, 37 (1), (2004), pp. 88-102.
- 4 *Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont* (hereafter *Egmont MSS*), HMC, London, 1905-09, vols. 1-2.
- 5 *Egmont MSS*, vol. 2, p. 11.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. vi.
- 7 *Egmont MSS*, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 92, 96-97, 108-109, 113-114, 137, 140-141, 156; NLI, D. 3786 and D. 3918; *Civil Survey, County Tipperary*, vol. 2, pp. 8, 13-14, 95, 101-102, 359, 384, 399.
- 8 *Egmont MSS*, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 85, 93, 95, 97, 115.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 10 *Cal. S.P. Ire., 1647-1660, Addenda*, p. 160.
- 11 C.D. O'Murchadha, 1984, 'Thesis Abstract. Land and Society in Seventeenth-Century Clare (Ph.D. Thesis, National University of Ireland, 1982)', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 11, p. 125.
- 12 G.A. Hayes-McCoy, 'The Royal Supremacy and Ecclesiastical Revolution, 1534-47', in: T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (eds.), *A New History of Ireland III: Early Modern Ireland 1534-1691*, (Oxford, 1976), pp. 48-49.
- 13 *Egmont MSS*, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 115.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141. See also *ibid.*, p. 137.
- 17 M. MacCarthy-Morrogh, *The Munster Plantation: English Migration to Southern Ireland 1583-1641*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 274.
- 18 For a detailed discussion of the outbreak of the rebellion in the county, see J. Morrissey, *Negotiating Colonialism: Gaelic-Irish Reaction to New English Expansion in Early Modern Tipperary, c.1541-1641*, Historical Geography Research Series 38, HGRG, Royal Geographical Society, (London, 2003), chap. 5
- 19 *Egmont MSS*, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 156.
- 20 M. O'Dowd, 'Gaelic Economy and Society', in: Brady and Gillespie (eds.), *Natives and Newcomers*, (Dublin, 1986), p. 147; N. Canny, 'The Formation of the Irish Mind: Religion, Politics and Gaelic Irish Literature, 1580-1750', in: C.H.E. Philpin (ed.), *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 76-77.

- 21 *Egmont MSS*, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 149, 156.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 23 B. Mac Cuarta, 'A Planter's Interaction with Gaelic Culture: Sir Matthew de Renzy, 1577-1634', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 20, (1993), pp. 1-17.
- 24 For further commentary on this important point, see Morrissey, (2003), esp. chap. 3-5.