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The Impact and Importance of The Elizabethan Re-conquest of  
Ireland

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The course of Irish history has not run smoothly for a number of centuries. Since the time of Viking incursions in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland has been invaded numerous times. Of these invaders, the English have had the most effect over the longest period of time. Numerous groups from England invaded Ireland, and the kingdom of Ireland itself was considered by many to be an essential strategic location. English control over Ireland became a necessary part of politics, and for that matter, the survival of England. The total domination of Ireland, which can be seen throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, did not however occur in a short period of time.

In the time of Queen Elizabeth I, English rule had not yet been solidified. While the invasion of Ireland under Elizabeth, and in particular, advances made in the latter half of the sixteenth century, were not as brutal as that of Oliver Cromwell, it was still a time of great change for the Irish. By examining the way that the English related to the Irish, the time period of 1594 to 1603, and the consequences of the English victory over the Irish, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the historical importance of the Elizabethan Re-Conquest. The events and attitudes of this time provided Ireland as the first

location of colonial experimentation of what would come to be called the British Empire.

The English rule of Ireland had, in the fifteenth century, only been to a certain extent consolidated in the area known as the Pale.<sup>1</sup> Under the reign of King Henry VIII, the Irish were brought a bit more under English control, but the subsequent terms of King Edward VI and Queen Mary I were short and did not have a consistent policy of religion or methods to deal with the Irish.<sup>2</sup> When Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, it was the true beginning of the end of Irish freedom. Numerous small revolts across the country throughout the century prompted the queen to send a number of troops, and to attempt to bribe the leaders of these uprisings with titles and the deaths of many of the revolt participants.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of Elizabeth's reign, many had spent years fighting the English presence and attempted expansion.

As a result of the revolts and continued expansion of the English, popular opinion came to view the Irish as less civilized and not as advanced as the English. A woodcut by John Derricke, whose collection *The Image of Irelande* was

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<sup>1</sup>This area is located on the east coast of Ireland, and included Dublin and the surrounding fertile farmland.

<sup>2</sup>R. Dudley Edwards, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1977), 63-64, 77-78.

<sup>3</sup>David Beers Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 131-132.

published in 1581, shows a great deal about the English attitude towards the Irish. This image, "Plate 7- Lord Deputy Sir Henry Sidney Defeats the Irish" (See Appendix A), depicts a battle between English and Irish forces.<sup>4</sup> In the forefront of the woodcut, the charging English horses trample a few Irish foot soldiers while in pursuit of fleeing members of the Irish cavalry. In the far background, the majority of the Irish foot soldiers can be seen fleeing into the woods in the face of English riflemen, and other foot soldiers. The English soldiers take up two thirds of the picture, and are shown as an army should be- victorious.

The Irish third shows some cavalry still in line and form as they should be, but most of the Irish soldiers are fleeing in defeat. The loss of the Irish in this picture seems incredibly easy, and is an indication of the English belief of their superiority. In the verse caption to this piece, the sentiments, which are understated in the picture, are brought into focus:

For if his valor once be moved, revenge  
on them to take,/ Which do our sovereign  
Prince's laws like beastly beasts

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<sup>4</sup>John Derricke, *The Image of Irelande*, (1581) published in *Elizabethan Ireland: A Selection of Writings by Elizabethan Writers on Ireland*, edited by James P. Myers, Jr. (Hamden Connecticut: Archon Books, 1983), 44.

forsake,/ 'Tis not the cruel, stormy  
rage, nor gathered force of those,/   
Nor yet the crooked crabtree looks of  
greasy, glibbed foes/ Can make him to  
revoke this thing his honor hath  
pretended,/ But that Dame Justice must  
proceed 'gainst those who have offended.  
For Mars will see the final end of  
trait'rous-waged wars,/ To pluck the  
hearts of rebels down, that lately  
pierced the stars;/ To yield them guerdon  
for deserts by rigor of his blade,/   
And with the same gall in their hearts,  
which such uproars have made./ Lo, where  
it is in open sight, most perfect to be  
seen,/ Which showeth the fatal end aright  
of rebels to our Queen. (Derricke ed.  
Myers 1983, 44)

In this caption, the Irish are described in an unflattering way.<sup>5</sup> One of the most obvious facts that can be drawn from both the woodcut and caption is that the English felt that their presence in Ireland was justified. The use of terms like "rebels to our Queen" and "those who have offended" indicates that the Irish were not a foreign enemy, but one much closer to home. While the English would not claim that the Irish were of the same background as they were, and in fact would often claim they were of

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<sup>5</sup>The editor James P. Myers, Jr. placed this inscription in slightly more modern English. When compared to the original, it is the same meaning.

Scythian origin,<sup>6</sup> the proximity of Ireland dictated the necessity of keeping it under English control. The English did not view the Irish as their equals, and in fact saw them as barbarians.

In the above material from Derricke, the Irish are compared to "bestly beasts", who have rebelled against the rule of Queen Elizabeth. Such a characterization, combined with the idea that the Irish are nothing but the descendents of barbarians, makes it possible to accept much harsher actions and reactions by the English.<sup>7</sup> The English felt superior to the Irish, and by viewing any action to free Ireland from English control as a rebellion against the proper form of government, placed themselves as the educators of the Irish. This superiority became a part of the English colonization of Ireland in the following centuries, and also their expansion across the world.<sup>8</sup>

Edmund Campion, who wrote *A Historie of Ireland, Written in the Yeare 1571*, also supports the idea that the English need to civilize the Irish. Campion was born in

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<sup>6</sup>Andrew Hadfield, "Briton and Scythian: Tudor representations of Irish origins," *Irish Historical Studies* 28, no. 112 (November 1993): 390-408.

<sup>7</sup>Vincent P. Carey, "John Derricke's *Image of Ireland*, Sir Henry Sidney and the massacre at Mullaghmast, 1578," *Irish Historical Studies* 31, no. 123 (May 1999): 305-327.

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas P. Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (October 1973): 575-598.

London, and later moved to Dublin in order to reestablish a university there. Around the time of publication of *A Historie of Ireland, Written in the Yeare 1571*, he was associated with Catholicism and later executed as a Catholic martyr.<sup>9</sup> He states "Againe, the very English of Birth, conversant with the brutish sort of that people, become degenerate in short space, and are quite altered into the worst ranke of Irish Rogues, such a force hath education to make or marre."<sup>10</sup> Campion defines the Irish as a "brutish sort", and mentions how allowing such a pattern to continue is dangerous to the English.

Since, according to Campion, the uncivilized ways of the Irish are corrupting the English in Ireland, it is necessary that something be done to make the Irish more like the English. He goes on to state "...our unquiet neighbors would find sweetness in the taste (of good learning) thereof, as it should bee a ready way to reclaim them."<sup>11</sup> Campion pleads for education to be a bigger part of Irish society, and his use of the phrases "our unquiet neighbors" and "reclaim them" indicate that such a measure would be a way to gain control over the Irish. Campion too

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<sup>9</sup>David Beers Quinn, 87-88.

<sup>10</sup>Edmund Campion, *A Historie of Ireland, Written in the Yeare 1571*, *Ancient Irish Histories*, vol. 1. (Port Washington NY: Kennikat Press, 1970), 20.

<sup>11</sup>Edmund Campion, 195.



realizes the importance of Ireland as a strategic position, and advocates more involvement in Ireland through his suggestion of improving education.

In later centuries, and to a certain extent in the sixteenth century, the view the Irish as uncivilized and backward was not just held by the English, but also by some foreign visitors. In a visit to Ireland in February-March 1590, a German visitor named Ludolf von Munchhausen, describes those that he encountered:

The people are unclean, coarse, and lazy. They have brains enough for roguery, but they know nothing of arts and subtle craftsmanship. Their greatest pleasure is idleness, they are no good for greater jobs; they prefer to rest nakedly in their houses by the fireplace to working and digging in the fields. (Conyngham 1998, 4)

Munchhausen goes on to say in a later entry:

"The people of this place (Dublin) are not as uncivilized and boorish , for this area was given to the English by the Queen of England, so they speak little Irish around here, yes even many natives do not speak Irish at all. The houses in Dublin are a lot more dainty than in other places. (Conyngham 1998, 8)

While not an Englishman, the characterization of the Irish as a lower people in need of civilizing can clearly be seen in Munchhausen's observations. Such a view by an outsider indicates that the idea that a more civilized country or people had the right to change any uncivilized group was becoming accepted outside England. Munchhausen, who had come to Ireland to visit two pilgrimage sites, did not visit the second because of his reaction to uncivilized nature of the Irish.<sup>12</sup>

Edmund Spenser, the English poet famous for his poem *The Fairie Queene*, agreed with many of the concepts that Munchhausen, Campion, and Derricke put forth about the Irish. Spenser was a part of an attempt by the Elizabethan English to colonize Ireland by sending out individuals to all parts of Ireland.<sup>13</sup> Many of these colonists were driven out of Ireland, and Spenser himself was included in this group. His *A View of the State of Ireland* was written and published in 1598, while he was still in Ireland.<sup>14</sup> *A View of the State of Ireland* takes the form of a dialogue, and the speaker Irenaeus states "The like regard and moderation

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<sup>12</sup> Ludolf von Munchhausen, edited by Melosina Lenox-Conyngham, *Diaries of Ireland: An Anthology 1590-1987* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1998), 3-8.

<sup>13</sup> John McGurk, *The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland: The 1590's Crisis*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 5-7.

<sup>14</sup> Spenser published *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, and was later driven out of Munster, where he had settled that same year.

ought to be had in tempering, and managing, this stubborne nation of the Irish to bring them from their delight of licentious barbarisme unto the love of goodnes and civilite."<sup>15</sup> For Spenser, the Irish are strictly barbarians, and as a result this fact must be changed. His opinion of the Irish echoes that of his predecessors Derricke and Campion, and the continued predominance of the idea that the Irish needed the English to civilize them. It is only through the intervention of the English that the Irish can stop being driven by "licentious barbarisme". In order to overcome "this stubborne nation of the Irish", force would be required. What Spenser couldn't possibly have known was that the stubbornness he describes would continue for centuries until the majority of Ireland was freed from English control.

Munchhausen sees a civilized place only in the areas where English influence has been strong for a number of years, and there is an implied statement in Spenser's dialogue that someone must tame the Irish. As a result of its close location and possible side effects if such a change does not happen, that responsibility fell to the English. It is this attitude of superiority that would

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<sup>15</sup> Edmund Spenser, editors Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 20-21.

eventually lead the English to attempt to destroy Irish Gaelic culture and rebuild Ireland in their image of it as a colony,<sup>16</sup> and provider of raw materials.

While the social attitudes of the English towards the Irish were a part of the process, the events of the period 1594 to 1603 also led to the establishment of Ireland as a colony of England. It was during this time period that Hugh O'Neill led a number of raids against the English in Ireland.<sup>17</sup> After the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the importance of Ireland was once again on the minds of the Elizabethan government.

O'Neill, who had proved loyal to England even with the prospect of the return of Catholicism to the British Isles, quickly came to the conclusion in the early 1590s that his position was in jeopardy.<sup>18</sup> Sir James Perrot says in retrospect of O'Neill that "This harkeninge to Tyrones guylfeful offers of submission and subjection did much stre{g}then hym; animate others to joyne with hym; geive hym time of breathage by sessassion of armes, and

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<sup>16</sup>Hiram Morgan, "The end of Gaelic Ulster: a thematic interpretation of events between 1534 and 1610," *Irish Historical Studies* 26, no. 101 (May 1988): 8-32.

<sup>17</sup>Hugh O'Neill is also known as 'The O'Neill', and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Tyrone, an English title.

<sup>18</sup>James Stevens Curl, *The Londonderry Plantation 1609-1914: The History, Architecture, and Planning of the Estates of the City of London and its Livery Companies in Ulster*, (Southampton England: Phillimore & Co. LTD., 1986), 11-16.

attendinge of treaties..."<sup>19</sup> What Perrot is referring to is the fact that before his rebellion in the 1590s, O'Neill helped the various English officials who were trying to gain better control of Ireland. As a result of his willingness to help, and his apparent acceptance of English rule of Ireland, he was rewarded by Queen Elizabeth I. He gained more and more power in the Ulster province, and became the leader of the Irish in that area. Once he had the support of the people, and his own position was in danger, he rebelled. He led a number of raids across the countryside throughout the late 1590s, and in particular, his home area of Ulster in the North of Ireland.<sup>20</sup> The eventual defeat of this rebellion led in later years to O'Neill's flight from Ireland, and the confiscations of all his holdings there.

The Spanish, still embarrassed by the defeat of the Armada in 1588, offered their help to the Irish rebels. The new king of Spain, Phillip III, felt that by sending Spanish troops to Ireland, he would be able to apply more

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<sup>19</sup>Sir James Perrot, *The Chronicle of Ireland 1584-1608*, Edited Herbert Wood, (Dublin: The Stationary Office, 1933), 8.

<sup>20</sup>T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, and F.J. Byrne, eds., *A New History of Ireland*. Vol. 3, *Early Modern Ireland:1534-1691*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), 122-123.

pressure on the government of Queen Elizabeth I.<sup>21</sup> By draining English money and soldiers out of England, King Phillip hoped that he could force Queen Elizabeth to stop the 'sea-dogs' who were still raiding Spanish ships, and also make Elizabeth choose Philip's choice for her successor.<sup>22</sup> As much as the Spanish aid could have helped the cause of O'Neill and the other rebels, it in actuality was the means by which the Irish were defeated.

The Battle of Kinsale, fought on Christmas Day 1601, according to the English calendar was the turning point of O'Neill's rebellion against the rule of the Elizabethans. At this battle, the participation of Spanish forces negated the advantages of the methods O'Neill had used in the past. Before, when fighting the English, O'Neill had utilized a guerilla style of warfare.<sup>23</sup> O'Neill had spent a portion of his youth in England, and as a result knew English tactics, and how best to use his Irish forces to inflict damage on the English.<sup>24</sup> With the arrival of the Spanish, everything changed. Kinsale, located in the south of Ireland, was a good distance from O'Neill's home base of Ulster. Since the

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<sup>21</sup>John J. Silke, *Kinsale: The Spanish Intervention in Ireland at the End of the Elizabethan Wars*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), 45-50.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 48-50.

<sup>23</sup>A.L. Rowse, *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 420-421.

<sup>24</sup>David Beers Quinn, 134-138.

Spanish had landed at Kinsale and were besieged there, and the English troops under the command of Lord Mountjoy were not far behind, O'Neill had no choice but to engage the English directly.

This proved to be a fatal mistake on O'Neill's part. The Irish and their allies were defeated by Mountjoy's forces, and had to retreat farther and farther north in order to stay one step ahead.<sup>25</sup> With the defeat of the Irish forces, the tide in Ireland had turned to the extent that nothing could prevent the loss of O'Neill's forces. He surrendered to Lord Mountjoy in 1603, a few days after the death of Elizabeth I, a fact unknown to O'Neill at the time.

After the defeat of O'Neill, it was only a few years before another blow to the idea of Irish freedom from English control fell. In 1607, the Flight of the Earls changed the north of Ireland forever.<sup>26</sup> O'Neill, who had been pardoned for his participation in a rebellion against Elizabeth, was one of the powerful Ulster noblemen to flee.<sup>27</sup> The flight of the Earl of Tyrone (O'Neill), and the Earl of Tyrconnell left a large portion of the northern

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<sup>25</sup> John J. Silke, 146-149.

<sup>26</sup> John McCavitt, "The Flight of the Earls, 1607," *Irish Historical Studies* 29, no. 114 (November 1994): 159-173.

<sup>27</sup> A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609-1969*, (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1997), 22.

province of Ulster open to confiscation. The counties of Tyrone, Derry, Donegal, and Armagh were either completely or partially confiscated.<sup>28</sup> The confiscation of these lands was quickly passed, and the lands redistributed to those loyal to the English crown.<sup>29</sup>

With the confiscations of much of Ulster, and the loss of O'Neill, Ireland was very different than it had been only twenty years before. The English, who previously only had a strong hold over Ireland in the Pale, now had two strongly held areas, and much better control over Ireland as a whole. Irish rebels would not find another strong leader for a number of years, and the loss of O'Neill was felt for both this reason, and for the confiscation of his lands. The fall of O'Neill and his fellow rebels also helped to reinforce the idea that the Irish were inferior to the English. By losing in battle, the Irish were seen as weaker, and so ripe for domination by a power outside their society.

The English attitude towards the Irish made the colonization of Ireland even more important. This attitude coupled with the events of 1594-1603, and the Flight of the Earls made Ireland England's first experiment in

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<sup>28</sup>William F.T. Butler, *Confiscation in Irish History*, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970), 39-42.

<sup>29</sup>James Stevens Curl, 16-20.



colonialism. In later years, the English would carry the belief that they were superior and needed to civilize the rest of the world with them to North America, India, and Africa. The appearance of this idea in the treatment of the Irish by the English is an early example of one of the driving forces of colonization: the need to prove a country's worth by making that civilization the model for all others. Such an idea drove the English to subjugate a number of different nations over time, and it is only in recent years that this idea has fallen into question.

Appendix A



John Derricke, *The Image of Ireland*, Published in  
David Beers Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish*.  
Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1966, Plate 17.

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