

The lordship of Tír Eoghain has been designated as a documents-based case-study for those Leaving Cert students and teachers who have opted for the early modern field of study.
Hiram Morgan outlines the background.

Gaelic lordship and Tudor conquest:
TÍR EOGHAIN, 1541–1603

The O'Neill lordship of Tír Eoghain was the most powerful Gaelic lordship in Ireland. It was bigger than the modern county of Tyrone, taking in most of County Armagh and what is now the barony of Loughinsholin in south Derry. The central location of this large polity in the north gave Tír Eoghain a natural claim to hegemony in the province of Ulster, and this was exercised by its ruling lord claiming rights over the neighbouring lordships characterised as the *Uirríthe* (literally sub-kings). Gaelic lords were inaugurated by proclaiming the most powerful individual in the ruling branch of the family

by surname at a prominent place within the lordship—and hence the making of ‘the O'Neill’ at Tullaghoge was the most celebrated investiture of sovereign rights amongst the Irish.

Tanistry

This Gaelic political system was known to the English as ‘tanistry’—the term being derived from the *tánaiste* or designated successor of the lordship. It contrasted with the acceptance under English feudal law of primogeniture, the automatic succession of the eldest son. Tanistry—since it favoured the survival of the fittest—brought to the fore leaders who were politically adept as well as militarily capable, but it was

also the cause of many destructive wars of succession in Gaelic lordships, and also of significant long-term opposition to the ruling lord from collateral branches of the family who had lost out in these power struggles. This ‘segmentary’ opposition was regularly exploited by neighbouring lords and by the Dublin government. However, these divisions were always outweighed by the centrifugal forces within the lordship. The existence of household lands, administrative families—in Tyrone the O'Hagans, O'Quinns, O'Devlins and O'Donnellys living in the vicinity of Dungannon—and a long list of rights and services meant that there were strong vested interests in the continuance of Gaelic





Right: The assassination of Shane O'Neill at the hands of the MacDonnells in 1567, from John Speed's 1599 historical map, 'The invasions of England and Ireland with all their civil wars since the conquest'.

lordship. The ruling lord utilised the concentration of power in his hands to expand the landholding capacity of his lineage, thereby pushing collateral branches and minor families out of landholding into the tenantry. It would have been foolhardy for any prominent O'Neill who wished to secure his future and that of his children to ignore an opportunity of pursuing the family title. Besides, in this case being 'the O'Neill' meant claiming provincial overlordship as well as asserting local dominance. It was not for nothing that Sir George Carew, surveying the political landscape at the onset of the Nine Years' War, spoke of Hugh O'Neill, already honoured by the crown as earl of Tyrone, as having a 'thirsty desire to be called O'Neill, a name more in prize to him than to be entitled Caesar'.

Tír Eoghain, as the strongest Gaelic lordship and principal example of the tanistry system, presented the centralising Tudor state with its greatest challenge in its attempt to 'reform' Ireland in the sixteenth century. Unfortunately for Ireland, this reform policy was being developed in a very fraught international situation. England in adopting the Protestant Reformation had made itself into a pariah state. It had isolated itself dynastically and strategically whilst simultaneously accentuating Ireland's military importance as a possible back-door through which to attack England. The Protestant Reformation was introducing new religious modes and mentalities in England, but in Ireland it had been pre-empted by the activism of the Franciscans. A further factor was the gentry and mercantile classes most identified with the new religion in England. Increasingly these groups came to see in the 'reform' of Ireland opportuni-

ties to develop careers in army, state and church, and to gain wealth and status at the expense of its recalcitrant Papists and incorrigible natives. In these circumstances the peaceful integration of Gaelic Ireland—and most notably the lordship of Tír Eoghain—proved impossible.

Surrender and regrant

Coinciding with Henry VIII's break with Rome, the so-called reform of Ireland began in the mid-1530s after the suppression of the Kildare rebellion. This witnessed the appointment of English lord deputies, the establishment of an English standing army in Ireland and an overhaul of the government of the Pale. Gaelic Ireland was more directly affected by the second phase of this process, when Ireland was designated a kingdom by act of parliament in 1541 and the centralising government embarked on the incorporation of the Gaelic and Gaelicised lordships that controlled about two-thirds of the country by a policy of 'surrender and regrant'. This involved the great Gaelic lords—the so-called Macs and Oes—surrendering their lands, Gaelic titles and local sovereignty in return for English feudal titles, succession by primogeniture and a regularised constitutional relationship with the crown. By this process the Mac William Burke became the earl of Clanrickard, the O'Brien became the earl of Thomond and the MacGillpatrick became the baron of Upper Ossory. But the biggest catch of all was Conn O'Neill of Tír Eoghain. After an application of military force, he agreed to the new departure being pursued by Lord Deputy St Leger and travelled to London in 1542 to obtain his earldom directly from

Henry VIII. At first sight the agreement had tangible benefits for both parties. The crown got Conn to renounce his provincial claims and sovereign rights and to agree to the establishment of English laws and customs. Conn, on the other hand, obtained external recognition of his control of Tír Eoghain and a constitutional connection with Dublin to replace the dependent client relationship he had previously enjoyed with the earls of Kildare.

The rise of Shane O'Neill

Time was not on the side of the innovative, integrative policy of surrender and regrant, which would have required a generation of peaceable working out. In 1548 St Leger's patient diplomacy gave way to a more forceful policy in the midlands under Bellingham and Croft that climaxed in the plantation of Laois and Offaly. In Ulster old practices died hard. Conn O'Neill himself continued to exert claims outside Tír Eoghain and foolishly met French agents who came on a fact-finding mission from Scotland. Most critically, however, the O'Neill surrender and regrant agreement contained the seeds of its own destruction. Extraordinarily, Conn had been allowed to designate as baron of Dungannon Matthew Feardoragh O'Neill. By blood Matthew was not an O'Neill at all but an affiliated son—born Matthew Kelly in Dundalk—who had been adopted by Conn at the age of fifteen. This flagrant abuse of the rights of the eldest surviving legitimate son, Shane O'Neill, caused a vicious and devastating civil war in Tyrone. The baron of Dungannon was actively supported by Lord Deputy Sussex, but he lacked the fosterage and marriage connections of a real O'Neill. In 1558 Shane had Matthew assassinated, and the following year he was able to succeed on the death of his father in traditional Gaelic fashion.

Shane O'Neill has been portrayed as tyrannical, licentious and arrogant—the epitome of the wild Irish dynast. This image is attributable to his personality, to English propaganda and to



force of circumstance. In fact Shane now sought recognition from the crown as earl of Tyrone. This would have required the state to set aside the inheritance rights of Matthew's sons, the MacBarons. Instead Sussex made destroying Shane the centrepiece of his aggressive policies. Sussex's military expeditions into Ulster against Shane proved abortive, and it became all or nothing, as he exclaimed in 1561—'If Shane be overthrown, all is settled; if Shane settle, all is overthrown'.

Shane's power continued to grow. According to the Four Masters, 'O'Neill then assumed the sovereign command of all Ulster from Dundalk to the Erne, so that at this time he might have been

called the provincial king of Ulster, were not for the opposition of the English to him'. By 1562 Shane was so strong that his power had to be recognised. And the dramatic visit he made to court the same year gave the Pale opponents of Sussex the opportunity they had been looking for to pull off a coup against the lord deputy. In London Shane received confirmation of the title of O'Neill, control of the *uiriúthe* and a promise of the earldom of Tyrone in the event of a successful investigation into Matthew's parentage. Meanwhile, in his absence, his *tánaiste*, Turlough Luineach O'Neill, had killed off the young baron of Dungannon, Brian O'Neill. In 1565

Above: The submission of Turlough Luineach O'Neill to Lord Deputy Sidney. This depiction is largely spin. Turlough did become more amenable over time but meetings with him were never this decorous. Sidney records in his memoir of a meeting with Turlough at Newry, at which very little negotiating was done, that 'he brought above £400 sterling to the town and spent it all in three days; he celebrated Bacchus' feast most notably and as he thought much to his glory'. (John Derricke's *Image of Ireland* [London, 1581])

Shane became even stronger in Ulster when he scored a crushing victory over the MacDonnells at the battle of Glenshesk, but his nemesis now made his appearance in the person of Sir Henry Sidney.

Military government did not end with Sussex's failure. Sidney had similar aims and methods—only he promised to achieve his goals on time and within budget. Where Sussex had planned to poison Shane, Sidney favoured the assassin's knife. The subsequent Irish parliamentary act that abolished the title of O'Neill and gave the crown legal title to the province of Ulster left the impression in its preamble that Shane O'Neill had been killed in a drunken brawl: that when visiting the MacDonnells, he and his hosts fell to drinking and arguing and that they killed him in revenge for his earlier maltreatment of their kinsmen. In fact this was government propaganda that



Left: Nineteenth-century portrait (left) of Hugh O'Neill (Lord Dunsany), developed from a 'true likeness' of the earl (above) in Primo Damaschino's *La Spada d'Orione* (Rome, 1680)

‘The honest, valiant and politic Captain Piers being made by me Seneschal of Clandeboyne, according to my direction, did deal so as the traitor’s practice by some providence was prevented, and whereas he looked for service at their hands [i.e. the MacDonnells] against me, for service of me they killed him the 22nd day of June.’

The removal of Shane O'Neill solved nothing, with the Gaelic system immediately throwing up Turlough Luineach O'Neill as his successor. This astute politician, who came from a junior Strabane-based branch of the ruling family, had taken advantage of the premature death of Shane and the youthfulness of his competitors, the MacShanes and MacBarons, and he increased his power further in 1569 by marrying Agnes Campbell, the Lady of Kintyre, through whom he was about to recruit a continuous supply of Scots mercenaries, the famous 'Redshanks'. On the government side, the much-heralded 'enterprise of Ulster' did not begin immediately and it failed when it did. This colonial venture was privatised to save money but proved beyond the resources of the projectors, Sir Thomas Smith and the earl of Essex. Sidney was absent, the cost-cutting Lord Deputy Fitzwilliam was loath to assist, and Turlough took advantage of the threat of expropriation to unite the province in opposition. The colonists, frustrated at their lack of success, committed two awful atrocities against the natives. At Belfast the Clandeboye O'Neills were massacred at a party given by the earl of Essex; on Rathlin Island the MacDonnells were hunted down and killed by an English naval squadron led by John Norris and Francis Drake. When Sidney visited Ulster during his third term as lord deputy he was forced to

recognise the failure of private colonisation and the continuance of the *status quo*. This meant shelving plans for a provincial presidency based at Armagh along the lines of the institutions he had established in Munster and Connacht in 1569. The best he could do was to appoint Sir Nicholas Bagenal, who was established on former monastic lands at Newry, to the nominal post of chief commissioner of Ulster.

The real beneficiary of this situation was the wily and ambitious Hugh O'Neill, baron of Dungannon. After his father's death, he had become a ward of the crown and had been brought up by the Hovenden family, who farmed a property at Balgriffen, near Dublin, given to Conn O'Neill at the time of the creation of the earldom. In 1568 Hugh had been placed by Sidney in the barony of Oneilland in County Armagh. This achieved part of Sidney's aspirations in breaking up the O'Neill lordship in that henceforth, subsidised by the crown, Hugh's presence helped keep Turlough confined north of the River Blackwater.

O'Neill, his half-brother Art MacBaron had held the fort, and once back in the north Hugh was able to engage the support of the latter and to reactivate his original fosterage connections with the O'Hagans and O'Quinns. These were doubtless the 'particular and peculiar followers of his own who', Sidney says, 'much repined that the great and regal estate of the O'Neill (as they deemed it) should be so broken and dismembered'. These fosterage and marriage connections were as much a part of O'Neill's success as government backing. When the state later insisted that he had been 'raised from the dust' to be a creature of Her Majesty's, he countered that he had achieved greatness by 'scratching in the earth'.

However, Turlough remained the most powerful lord in Ulster and a brake on Hugh's ambitions. In the late 1570s Sidney offered Turlough the



earldom of Clanoneill, but the process was never completed. When in 1579 Hugh briefly became Turlough's *tánaiste* and considered abandoning his O'Donnell wife in favour of a daughter of Turlough's, he was bought off by a government commission. When Turlough waxed strong whilst the Desmond war was raging in the South, Hugh faithfully defended the borders of the Pale for the state. Yet when Turlough's death was reported in 1583, Hugh marched on the inaugural stone at Tullyhogue in expectation of assuming the now banned title of 'O'Neill', only to be confounded to hear soon afterwards that Tullaghoge had recovered from a 24-hour drink-induced coma. The following year Hugh's religious allegiance was on show, when he was at Strabane with Turlough and other Ulster lords 'solemnising their new Easter of the Pope his appointing'. The lords justices in Dublin reported themselves as being 'mere strangers' to these goings-on in the north.

Outbreak of the Nine Years' War

Sir John Perrot, lord deputy 1584–8, attempted to demilitarise Ulster by establishing 'a composition' in the province. This differed from other composition arrangements, which raised taxes to support provincial governments in Connacht and Munster. In Ulster Perrot forced the lords to take English soldiers under so-called 'butter captains' into pay instead of their wonted Scots mercenaries, with the idea that the chiefs would eventually be forced to pay taxes to get rid of them. Most of this much-vaunted 'Composition of Ulster' collapsed within a year. Nor was Perrot able to stop the consolidation of Hugh O'Neill's power. The latter was recognised as earl of Tyrone at the 1585 parliament, and in 1587, on a charm offensive at court, he received letters patent to the lands of Tyrone from the queen.

Instead Perrot had to act to contain the new earl. He had Hugh Roe

O'Donnell arrested and imprisoned by the famous stratagem of sending a ship full of wine to Rathmullen. Hugh O'Neill protested at this action against the young Tirconnell lord, to whom his daughter was betrothed, as 'the most prejudice that might happen unto me'. He was similarly annoyed when Perrot began a new round of surrender and regrant agreements with minor Ulster lords, which threatened to detach the *uirrithe* from his clutches. Furthermore, Perrot acted to shore up Turlough's declining power by converting the subsidies formerly paid to the earl for the defence of the Pale into wages for the composition troops placed in his charge.

At the time of the shipwreck of the Armada, Hugh O'Neill allayed any suspicions against him by having his butter captains massacre the hapless Spaniards who came ashore in Inishowen. However, he could not prevent the encroachment of crown government in spite of the large bribes he gave to its officials. In 1590 the execution of MacMahon and the breakup of his lordship (County Monaghan) demonstrated to the Gaelic lords of Ulster what they could now expect for failing to keep to their surrender and regrant agreements. The earl tried to destabilise the Monaghan settlement and attempted to neutralise the main beneficiary, Sir Henry Bagenal, in the same way as he had neutralised the O'Donnells, the traditional rivals of the O'Neills, with a marriage alliance. Whilst Bagenal was still protesting against the earl's elopement with his sister, Mabel, Red Hugh's escape from Dublin Castle was successfully managed, and this in turn facilitated the final defeat and pensioning-off of Turlough Luineach.

When the entry of an English sheriff into Fermanagh in the spring of 1593 threatened a replication of the Monaghan scenario, O'Neill began a proxy war, using his brothers and followers to oppose the crown whilst himself fighting and getting wounded at the battle of Beleek. As Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh tells us: 'Aodh Ó Néill was



Left: This proclamation of Mountjoy's against Hugh O'Neill in December 1600 offered 4,000 marks as well as a pardon for life and lands to whomever brought O'Neill in alive, or 2,000 on the same conditions to whomever delivered his head or procured his death.



Left: Richard Bartlett's map shows the main successes of Mountjoy's final campaign in Tyrone in summer 1602 (though not the systematic destruction and massacre): an attack on an unidentified crannog, probably Lough Roughan, described elsewhere as 'O'Neill's strongest island fort'; Dungannon Castle (O'Neill's headquarters), which Mountjoy captured on 13 June; and the rath at Tullaghoge with the nearby stone inaugural chair of the O'Neills, which Mountjoy had broken up at the beginning of September. (National Library of Ireland)

wounded there and he was pleased thereat, so that the English should not have any suspicion'. In a letter to Philip II, Cormac MacBaron later explained how his brother had devised a plan and used him as its agent whilst remaining on the sidelines himself because he could not be seen to be stirring up war against the English, having formerly been advanced to such heights by the queen.

Faith and fatherland

The crown eventually became fed up with O'Neill's duplicity. His power was now the greatest obstacle to reform. In 1595, following the capture of the Blackwater fort by Art McBaron, they proclaimed him a traitor. By this stage the earl was already at the head of an expanding confederacy and a capable army. He won great victories over government forces in large-scale ambushes at Clontibret (1595) and the Yellow Ford (1598). The latter, over his old enemy Sir Henry Bagenal, was the largest defeat ever inflicted on the English on Irish soil and enabled the extension of the war into Munster, with a native revolt against the plantation there. In response England sent its greatest soldier and biggest-ever army under the earl of Essex in 1599, but that proved an expensive disaster.

In the hope of winning over the

Old English Catholics of the Pale and towns, O'Neill appealed to them on behalf of faith and fatherland. His rhetoric turned the jargon of Tudor reform ideology on its head:

'I will employ myself to the utmost of my power in their defence and for the extirpation of heresy, the planting of the Catholic religion, the delivery of our country of infinite murders, wicked and detestable policies by which this kingdom was hitherto governed, nourished in obscurity and ignorance, maintained in barbarity and incivility and consequently of infinite evils which are too lamentable to be rehearsed.'

Instead of convincing the Palesmen and achieving a historic shift in their allegiance, this approach merely convinced the queen of the urgency of rooting out 'the archtraitor'. As a result she sent Mountjoy over to complete the job, ably seconded by Sir George Carew in Munster.

O'Neill's last hope was support from Spain, with whom England had been at war since 1585. However, their expedition to Kinsale was too little, too late, and the Ulster army, having marched the length of the country, was comprehensively defeated in the

sort of pitched battle long hoped for by English commanders. By the time Mountjoy symbolically broke up the O'Neill inaugural stone at Tullaghoge, the war was no longer about Gaelic lordship, religion or nationality but merely a question of survival. Ulster became scorched earth as the English garrisons terrorised and starved the population into submission.

Completing the conquest of Ireland had cost England a staggering £2,000,000 and the loss of thousands of its soldiers. Later, in exile, O'Neill claimed that Mountjoy's campaign was the cause of 'so much misery that our people were eating human flesh and up to forty thousand of them died of sheer hunger'. In these circumstances it is remarkable that the earl was able to remain in hiding in the forest of Glenconkyne until he was able to surrender with some dignity at Mellifont in March 1603. Fynes Moryson's *History of the Rebellion of the Earl of Tirone* records that 'the name of O'Neill is so revered in the North as none could be induced to betray him upon the large reward set upon his head'. ■

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Further reading:

- C. Brady, *Shane O'Neill* (Dundalk, 1996).
- N. Canny, 'Hugh O'Neill', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).
- H. Morgan, *Tyrone's rebellion: the outbreak of the Nine Years' War in Tudor Ireland* (Woodbridge, 1993).
- H. Morgan (ed.), *The Battle of Kinsale* (Bray, 2004).

Documents for case-study of Tír Eoghain @: <http://www.scoilnet.ie/hist/docs/lordship%20of%20tir%20eoghain.pdf>
<http://www.scoilnet.ie/hist/docs/tir%20eoghain%20images.pdf>

This article is relevant to the documents-based **case-study** 'the lordship of Tír Eoghain' of **topic 2** ('Rebellion and conquest in Elizabethan Ireland, 1558–1603') of the early modern Ireland **field of study** (1494–1815) of the Southern Leaving Cert syllabus, and to **module 5, option 1** ('Spanish and English colonisation 1500–1600'), and **module 6, option 1** ('Elizabethan England 1570–1603'), of the Northern A-level syllabus.