

# Plantations in Early Modern Ireland

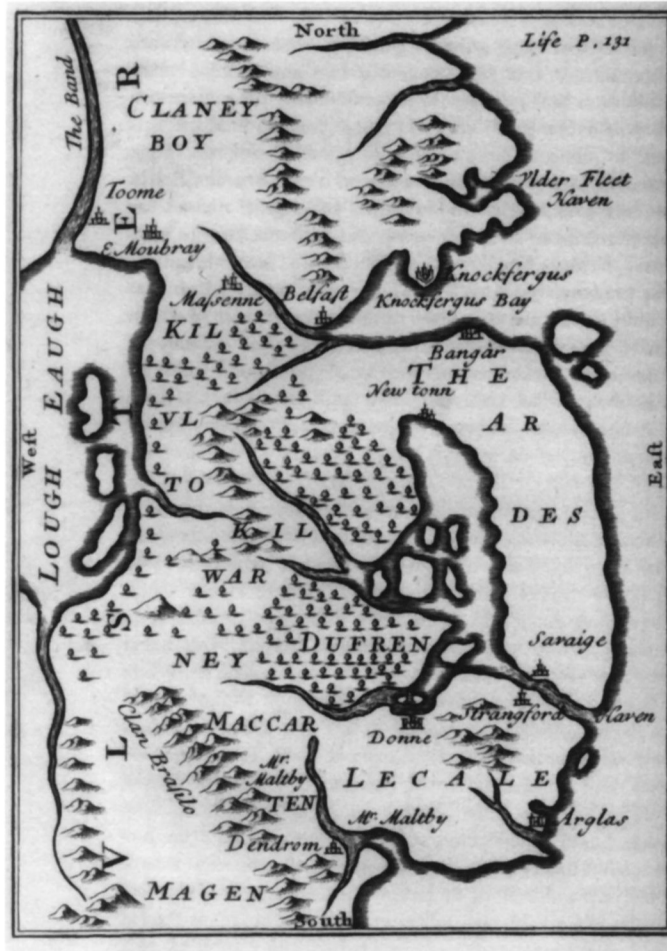
by Raymond Gillespie

Between 1580 and 1640 about 370,000 Englishmen and 100,000 Scots left home and family to make their fortune outside their native land. Rising population and demand for increasingly expensive land along with diminishing opportunities in the church or the law for younger sons made self-imposed exile an inescapable fate for many. Some, such as those from the east coast of Scotland, went to continental Europe as mercenaries in the armies of the antagonists in the Thirty Years War. From east and south-west England, others fired by religious zeal travelled west to create a new England on the north-east coast of newly-discovered America. Others from the same areas were lured to this new and exotic land by stories of fabulous fortunes to be made in the more commercially-minded colony of Virginia. If one did not have the stomach or the funds for a long sea journey or the nerve required of a mercenary soldier, a third option for fortune seekers opened up in the course of the sixteenth century: Ireland. Ireland did not have the lure of the exotic. Its inhabitants had been trading with and emigrating to England and Scotland throughout the middle ages. From western England or Scotland, it was only a short sea journey to the east coast of Ireland.

## The eclipse of Kildare

The opening up of Ireland for colonisation came about almost by accident. Throughout the sixteenth century the Dublin administration, increasingly after 1534 in the hands of New English officials rather than the Old English (descendants of the Anglo-Norman settlers), was faced with a twin problem. First, they wanted to eliminate the fragmented political authority which bedevilled sixteenth-century Ireland. To achieve this, the near autonomous indigenous Irish lordships had to be bound together into what both Old and New English administrators called a 'commonwealth', held together by common bonds and assumptions about language, authority and the law based on English models. Such a drastic change could not be implemented overnight. These were long term aims. The

*Sir Thomas Smith (right) attempted unsuccessfully to colonise the Ards peninsula. His son was killed at Comber in 1573 'by the revolting of certain Irishmen of his household to whom he overmuch trusted'. Investment in the scheme was promoted by the circulation of the map (above).*



second problem was more immediate. How could the borders of the Pale, the area of English authority, be protected while these more ambitious changes were effected? Before 1534 the Earls of Kildare, as chief governors of Ireland, could rely on treaties, marriage connections and their own powers as overlords to ensure stability. With the eclipse of the Earls of Kildare from government after 1534, new techniques had to be evolved.

## Garrisons

The first solution to this immediate problem was a simple one: strategically placed garrisons. Garrisons, however, required to be paid and the Irish exchequer was in no position to provide such funding. In 1548 a solution presented itself. The marshal of the army, Nicholas Bagenal, was granted the lands of the dissolved monastic house at Newry with the injunction that he establish a fort there to protect the northern part of the Pale against incursions from Ulster. Bagenal complied, developed Newry and its vicinity and brought in some settlers from his estates in Wales. Such grants were not formal plantations but were haphazard solutions to the defence problem since they relied on the crown's ability to prove title to land before grants were made. The best opportunity presented itself in 1547 when a local rising of the O'Connors, O'Mores and O'Dempseys led to their land being confiscated. Initial attempts to redistribute this to the 'King's loyal subjects' met with little success despite offers from individuals, such as Edward Walshe, to organise private settlements. It was 1557 before a more systematic approach was applied to the area. Under Mary, Leix and Offaly were transformed into Queen's and King's counties (after Mary and Philip) and set aside for a settlement of soldiers and others from within the Pale and England. The intention was to provide security for the western edge of the Pale and also generate royal income through rents and other payments to the Irish exchequer.

The idea of cheap defence by contracting the work to private enterprise immediately proved a success in the eyes of the government. It was used frequently in the sixteenth century. In 1571 and 1572, for instance, Sir Thomas Smith and the Earl of Essex were granted large parts of east Ulster. Crown title had been established by the attainder of Shane O'Neill. The aim was to establish pri-

ivate settlements which would provide bulwarks against highland Scots, whose recent arrival in large numbers was feared as a destabilising factor in Ulster politics. Such private settlements sometimes caused serious problems. There was no guarantee that a private venture could supply the necessary security. Bagenal succeeded at Newry but the ventures of Smith and Essex were miserable failures, Smith's son being killed. To confer military roles on these settlements could institutionalise violence as hap-



## CONDITIONS TO BE OBSERVED

by the *Brittish Vndertakers*

of the Escheated Lands

in V L S T E R,

Consisting in three principall  
points, *Viz.*

1. What the Brittish Vndertakers shall haue of his Maiesties gift.
2. What the said Vndertakers shall for their parts performe.
3. In what manner the same performance shall be.



*Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, Printer to the Kings  
most Excellent Maiestie.*

ANNO DOM. 1610.

pened in the midlands. There soldiers found it profitable to harass the native Irish and to maintain a large military presence for which captains could draw allowances. Such settlements simply replaced overmighty and violent Irish lords with overmighty and violent English ones.

## The Munster plantation

Military settlements might well be a cheap way of providing security in the short term but they did little to promote the longer term aim of creating an English-style commonwealth in Ireland. That needed more concerted action especially since the Catholic Old English, who had previously shared the ideal, were increasingly alienated by growing religious differences with the Protestant New English government in Dublin. The

opportunity for such action presented itself in November 1583 when the Earl of Desmond, in rebellion since 1579, was taken by surprise and decapitated in a glen near Tralee. A rebel under the common law, his lands had been declared forfeit almost four years earlier. The end of the war provided an opportunity for government to decide what was to be done with this large portion of Munster. It took them two years and a large-scale survey of the province to decide. The moving force behind the scheme which emerged in 1585 was almost certainly Elizabeth's principal secretary of state, Lord Burghley. It was 1586 before the details of the scheme were finalised and it was soon apparent that this was unlike anything else that had been tried in Ireland. It was nothing less than social engineering aimed primarily not at defence but to re-create the world of south-east England in southern Ireland. An estate system was to be formed by making grants ranging from 4,000 to 12,000 acres to thirty-five English landlords. They were to be the agents who would introduce English lifestyles by building villages and settling on their lands within seven years freeholders, holders of fee farm grants, copyholders and cottagers. Each estate was intended to have ninety households by 1593. The scheme introduced the English law of landlord and tenant to regulate the settlement. The allocations of the different tenures to the settlers was not random. It was designed to produce a social hierarchy with powerful freeholders at the top and cottagers, with no security of tenure, at the bottom. This hierarchy also ensured that landlords would not become over-powerful as the English government felt indigenous Irish lords had done. The landlords were also to practice English-style agriculture based on grain growing. This was labour-intensive and would promote stable settlement, replacing the more mobile cattle-raising favoured by the indigenous Irish.

## Ranchers and profiteers

The scheme was a triumph for central government planning but a disaster for actual administration. By 1592 the targets for settlers were still not achieved and landlords were less effective than it was hoped in building villages and introducing agricultural change. London may have had good social reasons to think that wheat would grow in Munster but the settlers soon had the evidence of climate

and soils that it did not. Instead they took to raising indigenous breeds of cattle. Most settlers had enough problems in getting themselves and their tenants to Munster without worrying about inappropriate English breeds of livestock as well. Perhaps the most serious problem lay in the selection of landlords. Many did not have the cash resources necessary to undertake the sort of plans the government had in mind. While London considered expenditure of £2,500 on each estate necessary, few claimed to have spent more than £1,000 and most spent less.

If government was dissatisfied at the short-term results of plantation, the settlers were delighted. Landlords acquired estates at a nominal cost while tenants who moved from England went from a land of high rents and scarce resources to a world of low rents and abundant land. For those wishing to sell land, there was a ready market. Hovering on the edge of that market was a young Richard Boyle, ready to acquire land in Munster by fair means and foul. By the 1630s his estate in Munster would make him one of the richest men in the British Isles. Government may well have been too hasty in expecting returns from Munster in less than ten years. The experience of the early seventeenth century was that the plantation scheme would go a long way to meeting its aims but that would take longer than most contemporaries expected.

## The Ulster plantation

In 1593 most officials were disappointed with the results of the Munster scheme but further consideration of the problem was cut short by the redirection of government energies necessitated by the outbreak of the Nine Years War in 1594. However, the government had learnt a salutary lesson about plantation problems and they were reluctant to become involved in another scheme. At the end of the Nine Years War in 1603, they were prepared to offer Hugh O'Neill an advantageous peace rather than confiscate his lands as a traitor and risk repeating the Munster debacle. Their hands, however, were forced when in September 1607 O'Neill and his main followers unexpectedly left Ulster for continental Europe never to return. The government confiscated (or escheated) their lands comprising the modern counties of Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Cavan and Donegal.

Antrim and Down were not part of the official scheme, where native Irish lords, undermined by debt, sold large portions of their lands to English and Scottish settlers. In north Antrim the sixteenth-century settlement by the MacDonnells was legitimated by crown grants of land. The government considered that a dangerous power vacuum existed in Ulster and had to be filled. This time London, in the person of the King and the Irish committee of the Privy Council, pre-



*Hugh O'Neill – his flight in 1607 paved the way for the Ulster plantation.*

pared a scheme in 1609. It was influenced by the Munster experience and by an earlier attempt by James I to plant the island of Lewis in Scotland. Land was to be allocated to landlords (Scottish and English, reflecting the union of the crowns in 1603) but in much smaller proportions: 2,000, 1,500 and 1,000 acres (between a sixth and a quarter of a Munster land grant), considered manageable for men of modest means. The problem of shortage of capital was also tackled in a new way. The entire county of Coleraine was set aside not for individuals but for that new invention of sixteenth-century entrepreneurs — the joint stock company. The shareholders (and providers of capital) were to be the twelve London livery companies who set up the Irish Society to manage their asset, newly renamed county Londonderry. Each company received one estate which it was to develop.

## Reshaping the social world

The Ulster plantation scheme also contained provisions for the reshaping of the social world. The number

and types of tenants were stipulated for each landlord and land was also to be assigned to the established church. Landlords were to build houses and improve their lands, remove indigenous Irish tenants within a specified time and replace them with English or Scottish tenants. Towns were to be built and artisans encouraged to settle in them.

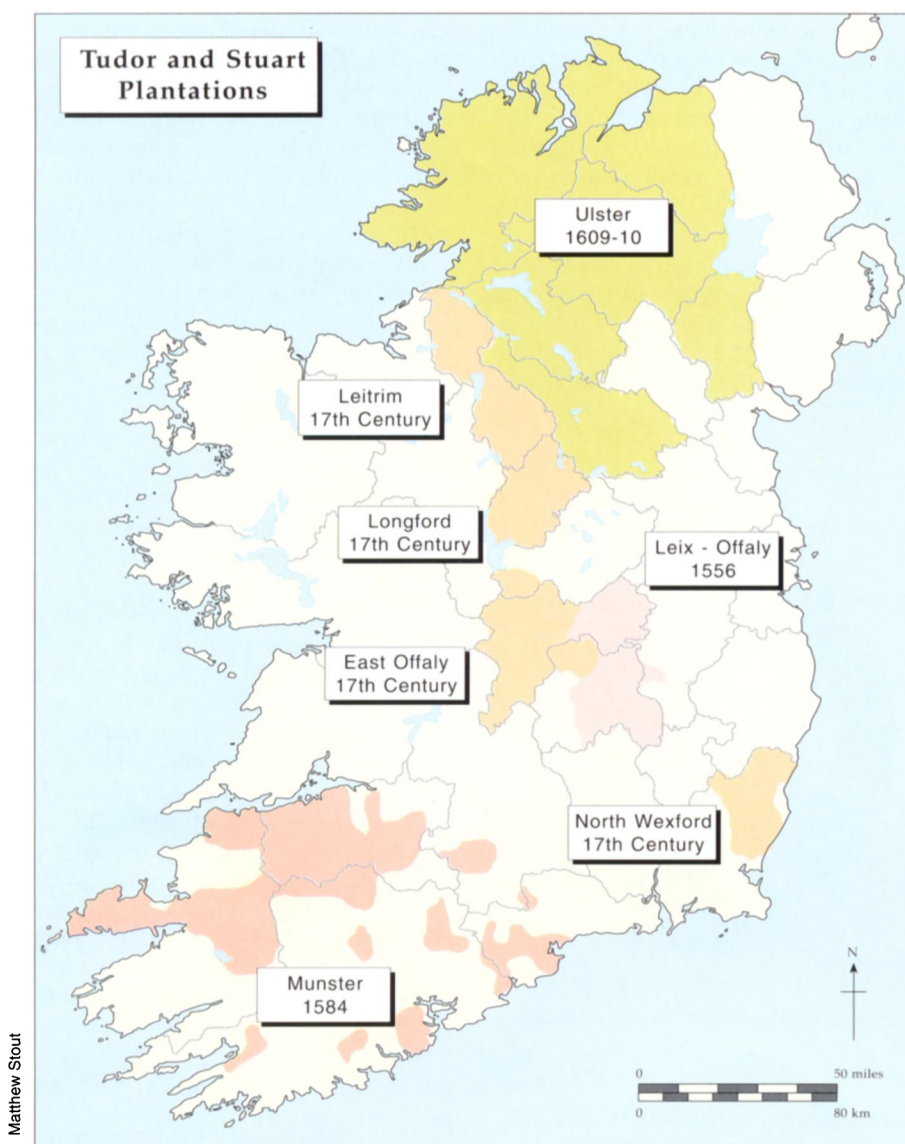
There were two innovations since the Munster scheme which point to slightly changed thinking. First indigenous Irishmen were to be among the grantees in the scheme (officially about a fifth of the land was eventually granted to them) whereas in Munster all Irish had been excluded. Second, provision was made for schools in the Ulster scheme. Land in each county was set aside for 'Royal schools' an indication that education was considered an important agent of social change.

Like Munster, the Ulster plantation was below expectations in the short term. Surveys of the plantation in 1611, 1615 and 1619 all revealed that the targets set were not being met. Settler landlords had not completed the required buildings and had not removed the indigenous Irish from their estates. Towns were poorly developed and many existed only on paper. Most importantly, from the perspective of the London government, the new settlement had not generated much revenue for the exchequer. A major enquiry on the state of the plantations, and the government of Ireland generally was undertaken in 1622. This resulted in threats of confiscation of land from those who had not fulfilled the plantation stipulations. Indeed it was this threat which made some of the Ulster planters uneasy bedfellows with the Old English in demanding security of tenure during the episode of the Graces in the late 1620s. The London companies suffered most severely, being fined heavily in Star Chamber in the late 1630s for failing to carry out their obligations.

## Successes

Judged by the aims of the settlers, the Ulster plantation was more successful. Most were younger sons, government officials or those who hoped the Ulster adventure would reverse their declining fortunes at home. They had acquired at almost no cost substantial estates although many did not have the resources to develop them. Thus they relied on the rents from their new estates to accumulate capital which took time. This explains





## From plantation to redistribution

By 1615, the great age of plantation was over. There were other schemes in the early part of the seventeenth century which were described as plantations, as in Wexford, Leitrim, Longford and other areas of the Irish midlands, yet these were different from the Munster and Ulster schemes. They were essentially redistributions of land following the establishment of crown title. The newly created landlords in these counties, with a few exceptions such as Lord Granard in Longford, did not come from England or Scotland. They were drawn from the ranks of the Dublin administration and the land grants were often a reward for loyal service. Grantees in Longford, for instance, included Francis Edgeworth, a clerk in Chancery, who founded a dynasty which included the authoress Maria. The allocations to indigenous Irish varied from scheme to scheme with about half of Longford, the most generous scheme, allocated to them. In the main these new settlers were not tied down with the detailed conditions which had been stipulated in Munster and Ulster: in particular they were not bound to introduce settlers as tenants on their estates. Scots and English tenants did feature in these areas but they came from Ulster where, by the 1620s and 1630s, opportunities were becoming less attractive while the new settlements offered good deals in land. It was a process of colonial spread rather than formal plantation which brought these settlers to their new homes.

There was one further abortive attempt by Lord Deputy Wentworth to institute a plantation of Connacht in the 1630s. Stiff opposition to the scheme by a politically articulate group in the west meant that progress was so slow that the plan was still on the drawing board when Wentworth fell from power and was beheaded on 12 May 1641. Just as the execution of the Earl of Desmond marked the beginnings of formal plantation schemes, so the decapitation of Wentworth marked the end. No one again produced formal plantation schemes for Ireland. Unlike in the early seventeenth century, with rising population and fears of poverty, the English population in the late seventeenth century was stagnant or falling. Government became concerned to ensure that people stayed at home to promote the growth of the economy rather than go abroad.

their reluctance to remove the indigenous Irish, who were prepared to pay premium rents. Some landowners may well have found the terms of the formal plantation scheme inhibiting. Their counterparts in Antrim and Down, on the other hand, proved more willing to encourage settlers to their lands and the settlement outside the formal scheme was much more successful than in other parts of Ulster.

In economic terms the plantation was a major triumph. The introduction of many new settlers, probably 15,000 adult males by 1630, swelled the labour force in Ulster, which had been sparsely populated in the late sixteenth century. Output of cattle and oats rose enormously, so much so that Scotland had to impose limits on the import of Ulster grain fearing that it would drive down prices in Scotland. The effectiveness of the various plantation schemes in promoting economic change has been the subject of some debate among historians. Nicholas Canny has argued that tech-

nological change in Munster made it superior to Ulster whereas I have pointed to the greater output of the Ulster economy in the early seventeenth century as evidence of much faster change.

The Ulster plantation was successful in one other way: it neutralised resistance from the indigenous Irish. For almost thirty years after the plantation there was no serious trouble in Ulster, with the exception of an abortive conspiracy in 1615 which was related to factors other than the plantation. Many of those who were disaffected went to Europe as mercenary soldiers or to the Irish colleges, especially to Louvain, as clergy. A generation was to pass before the rebellion of 1641 caused massive disruption. By then the reasons for discontent were to be found more in the circumstances of the late 1630s than in the plantation itself. Indeed the instigators of the rising had been beneficiaries of the scheme rather than its victims.



English migration to late seventeenth-century Ireland all but ceased. Only the Scots, disturbed by the Covenanter troubles of the 1670s and the harvest crises of the 1690s, continued to arrive in Ulster in large numbers to rebuild the settlements shattered by the 1641 rising and its aftermath. There was, it is true, massive land redistribution in the late seventeenth-century: during the Cromwellian period (1650s), at the Restoration (1660s) and again after the Williamite revolution (1690s). It was these later events which made such a dramatic impact on Catholic ownership of land, shrinking from 61 per cent in 1641 to 22 per cent in 1688 and to 15 per cent in 1703. Yet these were not plantations in the early seventeenth-century sense. They were the ruthless division of the spoils of war by the victors at the expense of the vanquished. Armies had to be paid and Irish land was the cheapest way of rewarding loyalty and meeting soldiers' arrears. None of the new landowners was bound to introduce settlers, make any improvements or even give any thought to defence.

### Conclusion

The plantations of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were powerful forces in introducing change into Irish society. They created a coherent network of estates which essentially survived into the nineteenth century. The new landlords were among the main agents of economic change and social development into this century. The requirements to build and introduce settlers affected almost every aspect of life from dialect through agricultural practices to social customs. In short they gave Ulster its enduring Scottish character and Munster its ephemeral English tone and in so doing both reinforced and changed the nature of Irish regional identities.

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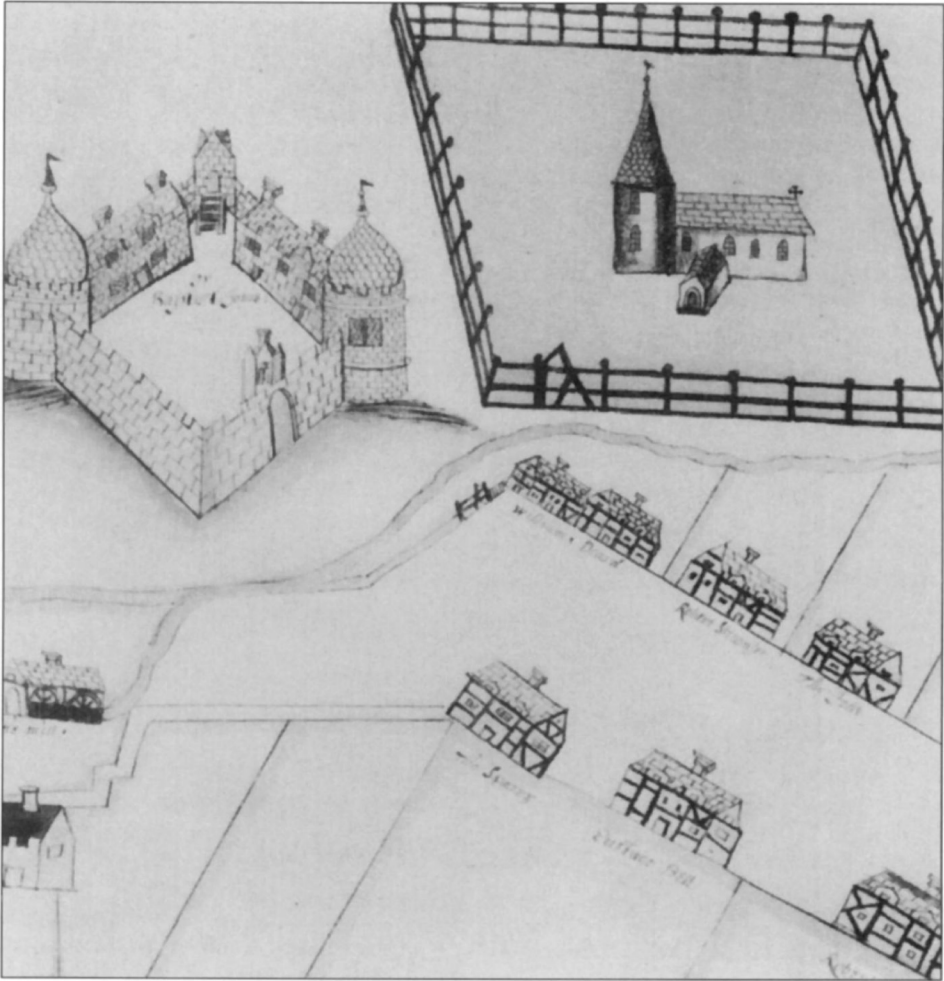
#### Further reading:

R. Gillespie, 'Explorers, exploiters and entrepreneurs: early modern Ireland in its context' in B.J. Graham & L.J. Proudfoot (eds.), *An historical geography of Ireland* (London 1993).

R. Gillespie, *The transformation of the Irish economy* (Dundalk 1991)

M. MacCarthy Morrogh, *The Munster plantation* (Oxford 1986).

P. Robinson, *The plantation of Ulster* (Dublin 1984).



(Above) *The Ulster plantation involved the foundation of new planned towns. This neat row of dwellings was part of an estate at Bellaghy, County Londonderry.*

(Below) *Theoretical lay-out of a typical Munster grant.* (COURTESY OF J.H. ANDREWS)

