

1641 Legacy - Primary Documents

Document 1

Provost, Lord Bannside, Ladies and gentlemen,

For all our economic preoccupations, I think this is a better Friday, 22 October to be alive than that other Friday, 22 October 1641 which we are recalling in this exhibition.

Ireland was then a powder keg of highly combustible political, ethnic and sectarian passions in the wake of the Elizabethan conquest, subsequent plantation and effective dispossession of large parts of Gaelic Ireland. With war in Scotland and the authority of Charles 1st under threat in England and fearful for their increasingly fragile future, the Irish and Old English made a fateful bid to wrest back political control of their country. What was intended by the instigators as a conservative coup, spun out of control and Ireland descended into a bitter politico-sectarian conflict that in the following years visited appalling human suffering, culminating in the violent reconquest effected by Oliver Cromwell and casting long, brooding shadows from which we, 350 years later, are only beginning to emerge.

The events of 1641 have been the subject of considerable dispute and controversy, with wildly divergent accounts in both the Catholic and Protestant historical narratives. Facts and truth have been casualties along the way and the distillation of skewed perceptions over generations have contributed to a situation where both sides were confounding mysteries to one another. That is why in these more chastened and reflective times, as we try to understand more deeply and generously the perspectives which have estranged us and as we try to reconcile, to be good neighbours, friends and partners across those sectarian divides, it is such a valuable thing to have access to this unique collection of witness testimonies from some of those who experienced the terror and horror of those tragic times.

The stories recorded in the 1641 Depositions, though they come largely from the Protestant communities, include some from Catholics, from people of all social backgrounds, from the illiterate, so often completely written out of history and poignantly from a disproportionately high number of widows. They bring us deep into that dysfunctional and insane world where neighbour killed neighbour and where a ferociously harsh winter ensured that many more were to perish from the cold as they fled from the encircling violence. Let us hope that their voices and their suffering, far from driving us deeper into our sectarian bunkers, do the opposite and inspire us to keep on working to ensure an end forever to such suffering, a profound, embedded, respect for one and all and an egalitarian, just, democratic society where peace prevails.

As we head into a period of iconic anniversaries of events about which all sides have very different views, let us hope that we will all endeavour to see these commemorative events as opportunities to practice and perfect the mutual sensitivity and respect which is needed for neighbour to live contentedly with neighbour. If approached in an open, honest and constructive spirit, these anniversaries will allow us transform topics whose taboo status weakened all of us into sources of informed mutual comprehension and strength. We are, even after the publication of the Depositions, unlikely to agree a common version of history but we can agree that to have a common future, a shared and peaceful future, there is nothing to be gained from ransacking the past for ammunition to justify the furthering of hatred and distrust. There is however everything to be gained from interrogating the past calmly and coherently, in order to understand each other's passions more comprehensively, to make us intelligible to one another, to help us transcend those baleful forces of history so that we can make a new history of good neighbourliness understanding and partnership between all the people and traditions on this island.

In that context it is a pleasure to see Lord Bannside here today in this place where the technology of the twenty-first century has opened up part of the actuality of the seventeenth century to a generation capable of handling truth, together. I am sure that the Exhibition will be a huge success with the public. And I look forward to the online project enhancing mutual respect and understanding on this island.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

The speech of President McAleese at the launch of the 1641 Depositions 'Ireland in Turmoil', The Long Room, Trinity College Dublin, 22nd October 2010

Document 2

Thank you, Sir, for your kind words.

Trouble does not discriminate.

No man or woman lives life without facing trouble either in great measure or, if fortunate, in small measure.

Our fellow countrymen and women in the 1600's knew trouble as we have never known it.

The testimonials before us in this exhibition tell in graphic detail the losses they sustained and the crimes carried out against them.

These troubles were not borne by one social class or another or by one gender or another.
They were not limited by age and they were not in fact limited by religious belief either.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this body of material is that it bears witness to the **SCALE** of the wrongdoing, while at the same time personalises it. Here are the tragic stories of individuals, and here too is the tragic story of our land.

To learn this, I believe, is to know who we are and why we have had to witness our own troubles in what became a divided island. A nation that forgets its past commits suicide.

The 1641 rebellion first began in Ulster. Today's date, 22 October, which marks its anniversary, ought to be known by every Ulsterman and woman as well as they know their own birth date. Alas, this is not so.

One Tony Blair, when on a well-documented visit to Ulster early in his days as Prime Minister, used the phrase "the hand of history".
Before us in these cases is **THE REAL HAND OF HISTORY!**

That hand is a meticulous hand.

Its duty was to record the horrors of the hands that persecuted.

I have no doubt in the process it was also a hand of comfort, reaching out to the distressed, for it is hard to imagine that the recording of these experiences could have been dispassionate.

In time it became a hand that beckoned the academics and the scholars and the students.

And tonight that hand reaches out beyond its page, beyond its century, and touches us.

Now, the question is, what will we do?

Let us grasp that hand and hold fast to it and introduce its work to our schools.

If we learn the lessons of the past we may use them to unlock a stable and promising future for everyone on this island.

Our hands should willingly carry that key to our young people. They should not be dispossessed of a peaceful land.

Thank you for your gracious and kind invitation to me and to my wife and family members to be with you tonight.

May God bless you, and in the words of Lord Carson, a great man well known to Trinity and to this City, God Save Ulster!

The speech of Lord Bannside, Dr Ian Paisley, at the launch of the 1641 Depositions 'Ireland in Turmoil', The Long Room, Trinity College Dublin, 22nd October 2010