



CONQUEST & COLONISATION

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VIRTVTIS·COMES·INVIDIA

Tom Murphy outlines the process by which a Gaelic lordship became the heartland of British settlement in Ulster.

CREATING FACTS ON THE GROUND: THE DESTRUCTION OF CLANDEBOYE

Walter Devereux, first earl of Essex—in spite of investing a large fortune, his disastrous and bloody colonisation scheme in the 1570s destroyed much of north Clanclooney (south Antrim).
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

History Ireland, November 2012

One of Ireland's most important parliaments was held in Dublin in 1541. This declared Henry VIII to be 'king of Ireland' and made all Irishmen, whatever their origin, Gaelic or Norman, his subjects with equal rights under common law. It enacted the 'surrender and regrant' legislation and, while English was the official language, much of the proceedings was translated into Irish for the benefit of the many attendees who knew no English. Among them was the lord of Clandeboyne, whose name we do not know. It is not unreasonable, however, to assume that this was Brian Faghartach, eldest son of Niall Óg (d. 1537), and he may also have participated in 'surrender and regrant' agreements in the early 1540s. Whether he did or not, in 1548 he was assassinated by Shane O'Neill, then a twenty-year-old about to make a name for himself in Ulster.

Shane O'Neill

Over the next nineteen years Shane established himself as a supremo in Ulster and controlled Clandeboyne as one of his *urriaght* (subsidiary) territories. This was not simple, as he had to cope with the Scots, incursions into his territory by forces from Dublin and the English garrison at Carrickfergus, which appears to have been completely re-Anglicised by the mid-1560s when controlled by William Piers. Piers established relationships with Owen McHugh in south Clandeboyne and Brian McPhelim in north Clandeboyne, both getting large sums for cooperation. It is likely that both became *inter alia* 'intelligence agents' on Piers's behalf and perhaps had a role in the ultimate destruction of Shane O'Neill, both at Farsetmore (see *HI* 19.3, May/June 2011, pp 16–21), where Shane's defeat cost him some 2,000 men, and ultimately at the hands of the McDonnells, who hacked him to death in 1567. Shane had become a major liability to the governments in both London and Dublin and Sir Henry Sidney, the lord deputy, took all necessary measures to get rid of him. During the fifteen-month period up to September 1567 Piers was paid £3,589 and Owen McHugh and Brian McPhelim £626, huge sums disbursed by the Dublin treasury. Brian McPhelim O'Neill was knighted, presumably for his role in helping to get rid of Shane, but a further consequence of the campaign was the destruction of the agricultural economy around Carrickfergus. According to Rowland White of Lecale, Co. Down, an Old English correspondent with the government, writing in 1569, before the English garrisoning of Carrickfergus (in the



1560s) there were 500 or 600 ploughlands under grain within ten miles of the town, but afterwards only five or six. This destruction was wrought by the soldiers of Carrickfergus.

The results of the war against Shane were confirmed by the Dublin parliament of 1570, where he was attainted, his lands confiscated to the Crown and east Ulster divided into the shires of Antrim and Down. While Sir Brian McPhelim was still regarded as chief of Clandeboyne, neither he nor any other Clandeboyne got a title to their lands. This parliament also marked the *de facto* end of the medieval earldom of Ulster.

Failed colonisation schemes

While east Ulster was now pacified, the English in London attempted to benefit from it. Queen Elizabeth therefore approved colonisation plans for both north Down and the Ards on the one hand and all south Antrim on the other. Sir Thomas Smith, her former secretary of state, was awarded north Down and the Ards, while the earl of Essex was awarded the whole of County Antrim except for the

Route and the Glynnys (Glens), i.e. the southern half of County Antrim. From the queen's point of view, the most salient feature of both of these plans was that they were to be completely financed by the promoters and were ultimately to yield her an income for no investment on her part. These grants were made over the head of the lord deputy, Sidney.

Both colonisation attempts failed through incompetence of different sorts. Sir Thomas Smith, underestimating what was involved, advertised in London for colonists to participate in his venture. When Sir Brian McPhelim O'Neill of Clandeboyne heard of this, that—despite his fulsome cooperation in the war against Shane—his land was now to be taken from him and given to Smith, he immediately set about destroying any infrastructure that might be used by Smith to garrison troops. He therefore destroyed all the monastic buildings in north Down and the Ards, including those at Newtown (Ards), Bangor, Movilla, Comber and Grey Abbey. It is not clear whether this involved displacement of tenantry. These churls (labourers) were thought by the English to

be cooperative, hard-working and productive if only they could rid themselves of their over-exploitative Gaelic landlords. The main promoter of the colony on the ground was Sir Thomas Smith's son. The venture came to an end in 1573 when he was killed by one of his Irish servants, his body boiled and fed to dogs.

In the case of Essex, the earl appears to have been inveigled into the venture by those at court who wanted rid of him. He invested a large fortune, mortgaging thirteen of his English manors and getting a loan of £10,000 at 10% interest from the queen. His was a very bloody venture. During his time in Ireland many Scots were killed, the notorious massacre at Rathlin Island was perpetrated by Norris and Drake, and he destroyed much of north Clondeboyne. According to himself, in a letter to the queen in July 1575, he 'left all the county desolate and without people'. Neil McBrian's 'people [he had succeeded Sir Brian McPhelim] were few, his cattle less [and] his husbandmen were starved, dead or run out of the country'. Perhaps Essex's worst atrocity occurred at the Christmas feast at Belfast in 1574 given by Sir Brian McPhelim, when Essex—according to himself, suspecting treachery—had all 200 participants, of whatever age or sex, killed. The Four Masters claim that this massacre was

Right: Lord Deputy Sir Henry Sidney—the grants to Essex and Sir Thomas Smith in south Clondeboyne (north Down and the Ards) were made over his head. (National Gallery of Ireland)

gratuitous murder without cause. Sir Brian himself, his wife and his brother Rory Óg were arrested, brought to Dublin and executed.

Essex achieved nothing by his exploits in Antrim. In 1576 he fell ill of dysentery in Dublin, where he died. Sidney visited Ulster later that year. He claimed that Carrickfergus was much decayed and impoverished, the inhabitants fled, not about six householders of any countenance remaining, and Clondeboyne was 'utterly disinhabited'. Such were the results of the first attempts to colonise the new counties of Antrim and Down. The main English participants incurred great loss of money and some loss of life.

War amongst the Gaelic Irish

A period of relative peace followed in Clondeboyne between the Irish and the English. This was not the case among the Irish themselves. In promoting Neill McBrian Ertagh, Essex ignored the claims of other contenders for the lordship. These included Sir Brian McPhelim's son and brother as well as Con McNeill, Niall McBrian Ertagh's uncle. A tentative



division of the lordship was made in 1584 under the auspices of Lord Deputy Perrott. Con was to have south Clondeboyne, while the north was to be divided between Shane, son of Sir Brian McPhelim, and Hugh Oge, son of his brother, also Hugh. This arrangement led to the killing of Hugh Oge in 1586. North Clondeboyne was bitterly disputed between the sons of the brothers Sir Brian and Hugh McPhelim, causing 'great dissension between them, and great slaughter often by both parties committed'. Eventually Shane was allotted the castle at Belfast and three parts of lower Clondeboyne and followers, while Neill was allotted one quarter of the territory and followers and the castle at Edenduffcarrick on the shores of Lough

NAMES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

English/Scottish

Sir Henry Sidney, lord deputy during Shane O'Neill's time and during the attempted plantations in the 1570s.

Sir Thomas Smith, English civil servant and polymath who organised the failed plantation of north Down in 1572.

Walter Devereux, first earl of Essex, who instigated the failed plantation of south Antrim in 1573.

Sir Thomas Norris and *Sir Francis Drake*—perpetrated the massacre of all the inhabitants of Rathlin Island in 1574.

Sir John Perrot, lord deputy who authorised division of Clondeboyne in 1584 among Gaelic Irish.

Sir Arthur Chichester, governor of Carrickfergus from 1599; chief planter of south Antrim in the early 1600s; lord deputy of Ireland in 1605.

Charles Blount, eighth Baron Mountjoy, lord deputy of Ireland in 1600.

Fynes Morrison, Mountjoy's secretary, who documented progress of his campaign in Ireland.

Sir Hugh Montgomery, Scottish laird, acquired a third of south Clondeboyne and planted it with Scots.

James Hamilton, Scottish spy for James VI & I, acquired a third of south Clondeboyne and planted it with Scots.

Irish

Niall Óg O'Neill (d. 1537), son of Niall O'Neill (d. 1512), last chief of all Clondeboyne, ancestor of south Clondeboyes.

Brian Faghartach, son of Niall Óg, killed by Shane O'Neill in 1548.

Shane O'Neill ('the proud'), the O'Neill, killed in 1567.

Sir Brian McPhelim (north Clondeboyne), helped in the war against Shane, executed by Essex in 1574.

Hugh McPhelim (d. 1583), brother of Sir Brian, helped in the war against Shane.

Neill McBrian Ertagh (south Clondeboyne), promoted to lordship by Essex c. 1575 to succeed Sir Brian McPhelim.

Shane McBrian, awarded three quarters of north Clondeboyne centred on Belfast by Perrot in 1584.

Hugh Óg McHugh, awarded a quarter of north Clondeboyne centred on Edenduffcarrick, Lough Neagh, by Perrot in 1584. Killed in 1586.

Neill McHugh, succeeded Hugh Óg McHugh.

Con McNeill, awarded all south Clondeboyne by Perrot in 1584.

Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, led Nine Years War and made Clondeboyne a subsidiary territory.

Brian MacAirt, organised military contingents in Clondeboyne for his uncle, Tyrone.

Con O'Neill, lord of south Clondeboyne 1601–19, lost two thirds of his land to Hamilton and Montgomery and sold off the remainder.

Neagh. Henceforth Clondeboyne would be held by the descendants of these two men. All these settlements were authorised by the English.

These arrangements might have held if the English had been able to protect and defend them against the ambitions of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone. Because they couldn't, O'Neill was able to establish his supremacy and during the Nine Years War sent his nephew, Brian MacArt, to organise and control Clondeboyne military contingents to fight on his side. These were relatively small, perhaps because the Clondeboyne population had not fully recovered from the devastation unleashed by Essex and Smith's attempted plantations. No great battles were fought in Antrim and Down during this war. The war there consisted of small local engagements, none of which was decisive. To the English Clondeboyne was more of a nuisance than a threat. This was to change once Sir Arthur Chichester was appointed governor of Carrickfergus. He determined to finish Clondeboyne. He quickly overran north Clondeboyne and got some of its Irish lords on the English side.

Famine and massacre as tactics of war

Chichester believed in famine as the main method of defeating the Gaelic Irish. Mountjoy agreed, and after the victory at Kinsale in 1601 both set about burning and killing in Ulster, destroying crops and animals as well as men, women and children without scruple. While Chichester is infamous for his trips across Lough Neagh, burning and killing, he confined most of his activities to Antrim and Down. This succeeded in destroying Clondeboyne as a safe haven and a supply base for Tyrone. Apart from winning the war, Chichester had another and more personal motivation. Managing his estate and inheritances in Devon had left him virtually bankrupt and he saw the prospect of land confiscated in Ireland after the war as a means of restoring his fortunes. He coveted the lands of Clondeboyne. To acquire these he took the Carrickfergus governorship with a hand-picked staff of English officers from backgrounds and circumstances similar to his own, second sons with limited if any prospects in England but who could make fortunes from land confiscated in Ulster.

Chichester and his cohorts set about their task with a determined, ruthless mercilessness. Letters written by Chichester himself, confirmed by the



Above: Carrickfergus Castle—constantly garrisoned by the English from the mid-sixteenth century.

Right: Sir Arthur Chichester—governor of Carrickfergus from 1599 and lord deputy of Ireland in 1605—believed in famine as the main method of defeating the Gaelic Irish.



accounts of Fynes Morrison, Mountjoy's secretary, show what unremitting devastation was inflicted without compunction for age or sex. The standard histories of the period tell of cannibalism, corpses green-mouthed from eating grass, and dead bodies piled by the roadsides. There was so much killing of churls that even Mountjoy found the excesses distasteful. Chichester left lower Clondeboyne, i.e. the southern half of modern County Antrim, utterly devastated and depopulated. North Down was not destroyed to the same extent. When its lord, Con O'Neill, saw that Tyrone's cause was lost, he immediately surrendered to the queen and was confirmed in his lands as an encouragement to others to do likewise. He returned to Castlereagh to find most of his lands, though not all, devastated like those of Antrim but was able to save what remained of his tenantry from further burning and slaughter by Chichester's flying columns.

Dividing the spoils

Once the war was over it was time to divide the spoils. Inquisitions were held in 1605 in Antrim and Down to assess exactly what was available for distribution among the victors. The Antrim inquisition found, according to Belfast antiquarian F.J. Bigger:

'... in lower Clanaboy [sic] there were twenty-one sub-territories containing vast tracts of the finest lands in Ulster, and inhabited by a very numerous population, but Chichester left it desolate'.

These lands were distributed among Chichester and his followers, although the remaining few loyal Gaelic nobles got generous estates. The story of Con O'Neill and how he lost two thirds of his estates to Hamilton and Montgomery in upper Clondeboyne (north Down) is well known. These latter expelled their remaining Gaelic tenants to the Dufferin barony.

Scottish immigrants began arriving at Donaghadee from May 1606 to take up new tenancies first in Down and later in Antrim. They found no resistance. There was nobody left to offer it. By now James VI of Scotland had become James I of England. Thus started the peopling of these parts with inhabitants who then and subsequently were to be described as 'British'. **HI**

Tom Murphy is a retired internal auditor. Article based on his MA thesis, 'Clondeboyne: its rise and decline c. 1350–1606'.

Further reading:

- W. Bouchier Devereux, *Lives and letters of the Devereux earls of Essex*, vol. I (London, 1853).
- J. McCavitt, *Sir Arthur Chichester, lord deputy of Ireland 1605–1616* (Belfast, 1998).
- R. Ó Baoill, *Carrickfergus: the story of the walled castle and town* (Belfast, 2008).