



English adventurer Francis Cosby personified the application of the increasingly aggressive policy of Tudor conquest to the Gaelic lordship of the O'Mores. Michael Quinn examines the impact this had on the ground in the general area of modern County Laois, and Stradbally in particular.

FRANCIS COSBY (1510–80), Stradbally, Queen's County and the Tudor conquest of Leinster

Following Henry VIII's break with Rome—leaving England diplomatically weakened and strategically vulnerable to her largest European rivals, France and Spain—an increasing number of royal officials regarded the need to consolidate and expand the English lordship of Ireland beyond the confines of the Pale as an urgent matter of self-defence. Henry VIII was

the first English king to proclaim himself 'king of Ireland' (as distinct from 'lord of Ireland'), thereby triggering a more proactive, centralising, expanding Crown policy towards Ireland.

In the early sixteenth century the Pale consisted of Dublin and its surrounding counties, from Drogheda to Dalkey, and west through Kildare as far as the Barrow. Immediately to the

west lay the Gaelic midlands, which became the target of an initial campaign of Tudor reform—a reform that soon degenerated into conquest and resettlement, a process that began in 1534 and was considered complete by 1603.

Mid-sixteenth-century O'More and O'Connor country

This Tudor conquest was preceded by

the collapse of 'Silken' Thomas Fitzgerald's revolt (1534-6) in Kildare against Henry VIII, which exposed the midland Gaelic lordships of the O'Mores of Laois and the O'Connors of Offaly to direct contact with English government at Dublin. Heretofore the Geraldines at Maynooth had acted as a buffer, straddling the Pale with a foot in both camps. By January 1538 the O'Mores had submitted to the new order under the 'surrender and regrant' arrangement, which obliged them to accept the rule of English law in return for their recognition by Dublin Castle as lords of Laois. It also provided for a government presence at the fort at Stradbally. This agreement was facilitated by the policy of Tudor reform (as opposed to Tudor conquest) associated with Lord Deputy Anthony St Leger, who held office at various times between 1540 and 1556. The aim was to assimilate the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish lordships into the Tudor state, and its legal basis was the 1541 'act for the kingly title', which provided for equality for all Irish subjects before the law and under the king of England. This reform was most favoured by the 'doves' among the Pale officials, principally the Old English, and their hope was that it would lead to a peaceful assimilation and the gradual adoption by the Irish of English laws, habits and customs. Especially important was the acceptance of primogeniture, whereby lands must be passed on to the eldest son rather than by the Gaelic method of selection from a wider kin-group.

In 1547 St Leger was replaced by a succession of lord deputies—William Brabazon, Edward Bellyngham and James Croft—whose policies and actions diluted or abandoned surrender and regrant. In its stead they prosecuted campaigns of conquest and colonisation, marking a dramatic and aggressive volte-face in government behaviour towards the midland Gaelic powers. Government forces captured and garrisoned the O'Connors' stronghold at Daingean and the O'More castle at Ballyadams (an adjoining townland to Stradbally). Daingean was fortified and renamed Fort Governor, and a new fort in the middle of Laois was established and named Fort Protector (after the duke of Somerset, protector of the boy king



Opposite page: Laois and Offaly c. 1562, viewed facing west, the physical view afforded to Cosby and his fellow English adventurers from the Pale side of the Barrow. The atmosphere created is one of a topography as untamed and inaccessible as its inhabitants. (Trinity College, Dublin)

Above: The Cosby coat of arms.

Edward VI, and called 'Campa' by the Irish). This sustained military action had the desired effect: the O'Mores and O'Connors were cowed into submission and their leaders, Giolla-Pádraig O'More and Brian O'Connor, were taken to and confined in London, where Giolla-Pádraig was to die in 1548 and from where O'Connor was eventually released in 1553.

In 1556 the earl of Sussex was appointed; his goals included the overhaul of government finances, the suppression of the midland Gaelic Irish and the resettlement of the area. His plan for the O'Mores and O'Connors was specific: if they cooperated they were to be allocated inferior lands in the west of modern Laois and Offaly, a mere third of the region, and their former lands and strongholds were to be systematically allotted to English planter captains. Accordingly, in June 1557, Sussex's parliament at Dublin confiscated Laois and Offaly and shired the counties, to

be called Queen's and King's in honour of Queen Mary of England and her Spanish husband, Philip II, with Fort Protector to be renamed Maryborough. From these acts can be traced the foundations of modern Laois and the undermining of the Gaelic lordship of the O'Mores.

Francis Cosby, newly arrived adventurer

One of the foremost 'good subjects' to be settled was Francis Cosby(e). Born in 1510, he was the second son of John Cosby of Great Leak, Nottingham, and was married to Lady Mary Seymour, daughter of the duke of Somerset. Having first soldiered in the armies of Henry VIII in the Low Countries, he arrived in Ireland in 1546. One of the earliest official records of Cosby comes from a July 1548 letter sent by him and others residing along the Pale border with Laois to Lord Deputy Bellyngham in Dublin, at a time when government incursions into Laois/Offaly were under way.

In 1549 Francis Cosby petitioned for permission to plant in Queen's County, and was a member of the commission that shired it in 1556. At the time he was living at Monastereven in a residence controlled by the lord deputy. Now aged 46 and with a growing family, it seems certain that he intended to settle permanently, a decision perhaps based upon his success as a military man and the lucrative rewards of lands in Laois, now within reach. That he was well placed in the forefront of a battle-hardened clique of enforcers of the Tudor conquest of the midlands, willing and able to be true conquistadors and frontiersmen in pursuit of lands and power, seems clear. What is also clear is support from the very top, and this is highlighted when he was rewarded with the post of general of the kern in 1558 by Queen Mary in a communication from St James's Court to Dublin castle: 'Thanks for his services. Francis Cosby to be general of the kerne'.

Many of Cosby's kerns were local men of the bogs of the midlands who threw in their lot with him rather than with their Gaelic lords. Perhaps the terms and conditions offered by the new master proved attractive, and



Above: Woodcut depicting triumphant English soldiers in the aftermath of an engagement with the O'Mores. The severed head held by the hair is reputedly that of Margaret Maol O'Byrne, Rory Óg O'More's wife, sister of Feagh MacHugh O'Byrne of Glenmalure, with whom Francis Cosby was to have a fateful encounter. (John Derrick's *Image of Ireland*, 1581)

some details of these are included in another letter from the queen to Lord Deputy Sussex concerning Cosby's appointment as general of the kern in 1558: 'Appointment of Francis Cosby to the office of General of all the kern retained, or to be retained, in "the solde" of Ireland, with a fee of 3s. 8d. a day; the leading of 32 kern, and a 3d. a day each for their entertainment'.

Seneschal of Leix and constable of the fort of Maryborough

One of the first official records of Cosby's presence at the fort of Maryborough also appears in 1558, when the O'Mores and O'Connors 'came to the fort of Leix, with such a power as they never had before, intending to take the castle'. They sacked the fort but failed to take the castle. A combination of 60 English soldiers of the garrison and Cosby's 30 kerns thwarted the attack. Later Cosby

gave chase, and a letter from Lord Deputy Sussex to Secretary Boxoll records:

'Francis Cosby seeking some of the rebels where they were making merry, met with Donough O'Connor himself, accompanied Cormack O'Connor's son that is yn Scotland, and Richard Oge the basse Garentyne, and after long fight killed Richard Oge, Cormack's sonne, and XXX or XL of the beste of them. Cosby himself kylled Rychard Oge ("a bastard Geraldine and a man of enormous stature and strength") with his awne hands, whyche wold not have bene don by no man els.'

It appears that Cosby was now resident in Maryborough and was actively engaged in further pursuit of the O'More and O'Connor rebels. A mark of his success and the negative response from Dublin Castle may be gauged from an official entry from Sir T. Wrothe: 'the Mores have desired peace by Francis Cosbie. The Lord Justice and Council have rejected their request'. But the next record from the earl of Sussex to the queen brought positive news for Cosby—his appointment as seneschal (state officer

with powers of martial law) of Leix and constable of the fort of Maryborough. At this time he also built a large house out of materials from the friary at Stradbally.

Massacre at Mullaghmast

In 1577 Cosby was issued with a commission of martial law in a government response to a rising led by Rory Óg O'More (whose father had once resided at Stradbally). Rory Óg, as a chief of the O'Mores, had earlier submitted to and was an ally of Cosby's in the hope of being granted inferior lands to the west of Stradbally at Galin. When Rory became convinced that that was not going to happen, he made a daring raid into the heart of the Pale; he burned a large part of Naas on 3 March 1577 and later Carlow town in a misguided attempt to be treated more favourably. Furthermore, his kidnapping and mutilation of Captain Harrington, the nephew of Lord Deputy Sidney, personalised the increasingly vicious campaign.

From this point on it was war to the death. Cosby's discretion was sweeping, and under pretext of safe passage to a parley at Mullaghmast (a townland in the parish of Narraghmore, Co. Kildare) in March 1578 an O'More band of 74 men, led

by Muircheartach Mac Laoighseach O'Mordha, a member of the O'More élite, were surrounded and slain by forces commanded by Cosby and Robert Hartpole (whose daughter, Helen, was to marry Cosby's grandson) and supported by the O'Dempseys.

This massacre in the midlands was not unique in Ireland during the Tudor conquest. Similar massacres occurred at Rathlin, Belfast and Smerwick. Not surprisingly, Rory Óg's own days were numbered, but it was his wife and extended family who were first killed. This was graphically captured by John Derrick, Lord Deputy Sydney's propagandist, in a contemporary woodcut. The practice of displaying the decapitated heads of slain adversaries seems to have been quite commonplace and, indeed, Francis Cosby himself is recorded in government papers as being involved: 'Cosbie has sent the head of Piers O'More'.

To the victors go the spoils— reaping a harvest of lands

Francis Cosby was granted his first lands in 1550 at Moyanna, Ballynavicare (Vicarstown) and Garrymaddock when he was still living in Kildare, and in addition he appears to have received, thirteen years later, when he was operating as seneschal of Leix and constable of the fort of Maryborough, even more extensive lands in the barony of Stradbally. This is supported by Robert Dunlop's 1563 map of the plantation of Leix and Offaly, with 'F. Cosby' marked on lands at Stradbally eight miles to the east of Fort Protector. The superior quality of the land of Stradbally barony in 1563, in country previously regarded as dominated by woods and bogs, is described as 'cultivated, apart from not very steep grassy hills'. We get a better picture when the grant is confirmed to Francis's son, Alexander, in the Calendars of Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery records of 1594:

'to Alexander Cosbye, of the ambient, site, and precinct of the late religious house of Stradbally, in the Queen's county; a water mill and all messages, cottages, gardens, with one thousand three hundred and eighty-five acres of land arable and pasture, in Stradbally'.



Above: Memorial in Glenmalur, Co. Wicklow, commemorating the battle of 1580, where Feagh MacHugh O'Byrne defeated an English army and Francis Cosby was killed. (Michael Quinn)

With all this land and privilege came responsibilities, however, and these are laid down in the same record, including that

'he shall attend with the greater part of his domestics and tenants, armed in a warlike manner, with victuals for three days to serve against the neighbouring Irish . . . and keep upon the site of the monastery nine horsemen of the English nation'.

Decline and demise of Francis Cosby

As the 1570s progressed, for Francis Cosby, now in his sixties, the going seemed to be getting tougher. The O'Mores were in revolt again and a July 1573 record seemed ominous: 'Great stirs imminent . . . English governors of countries, for evil respects winkers at rebellion. Francis Cosbie to be called to a severe account for the loss of Leix'. The writing was on the wall, and in 1577 Elizabeth confirmed his successor at Maryborough: 'George Harvie, who had been appointed Constable of Maryborough fort, should hold that

office with the commodities thereto belonging, and not be removed without her Majesty's commands'.

Cosby finally met his death at the battle of Glenmalur, Co. Wicklow, on 25 August 1580. This battle followed the attempt of the newly arrived and inexperienced Lord Deputy Grey to quash a revolt led by Viscount Baltinglass and Feagh MacHugh O'Byrne, whose army retreated into the heart of the Wicklow Mountains. There Grey's soldiers, under the leadership of George Moore, in bright coats and with officers in armour made easy targets for O'Byrne's men equipped with 'shot', and at least 30 Englishmen were killed. Presumably the veteran Francis Cosby, now aged 70, was present for his extensive knowledge in the art of pursuing rebels. It seems remarkable that such a wily and successful campaigner, with 34 years' experience in outwitting the native Irish in their own territories, could have been snared in such a trap. Perhaps he allowed his better judgement to be over-ruled by the brash new English arrivals? Or perhaps, more likely, he was unaware that the O'Byrnes had acquired the then latest in military hardware—hand-held muskets—which afforded additional deadly effect to traditional Irish guerrilla tactics? Whatever the reason, the following extract from the contemporary government state papers gives an insight into the difficulty of the terrain and the incompetence of leadership:



'When we entered the foresaid glen we were forced to slide some tymes 3 or 4 fedoms or we colde staide our feete: it was in depth, where we entered, at the least a myle, full of stones, rocks, bogs, and wood, in the bottome thereof a river full of lose stones, which we were driven to crosse diverse tymes. So long as our leaders kept the bottome, the oddes of the sermych (skirmish) was on our side. But our coroneld (Colonel George Moore) being a corpulent man not hable to endure travaile, before we were hallf through the glen, which was foure myles in length, ledd us up the hill. The slain were Sir Peter Carewe, Captain Audley and his lieutenant; old Captain Francis Cosbie, Mr George More, George Staffarde and others, about 30.'

Furthermore, a fateful connection existed between the old adversaries Rory Óg O'More and Francis Cosby: Rory Óg had been in fosterage with the O'Byrnes of Wicklow, had married Feagh's sister and indeed had made a name for himself here as a swordsman before his return to Laois. So, it seems, fate conspired to cast Rory O'More's fosterers and in-laws as the slayers of one of his greatest adversaries, Francis Cosby.

The Cosby heirs and legacy at Stradbally

The Cosby family crest includes the motto *Sub libertate quietem* ('Peace under liberty'), while *Burke's Irish Family Records* gives the alternative *Audaces fortuna juvat* ('Fortune favours the brave'). And, indeed, Francis's heirs did inherit a fortune in extensive lands at Stradbally. By the early eighteenth century the family had developed an impressive demesne. With the assistance of an energetic middleman and Dublin clothier, Israel Mitchell, a model estate village was developed alongside. Superior-quality two-storey houses flanked Main Street, and an arcaded market house, market square and waterways were established; these features survive to this day. Stradbally's distinctive eighteenth-century inheritance has been admired in recent years by many visitors to the demesne lawns and village streetscape at the annual Stradbally Steam Rally and Electric Picnic.

For over four centuries the Cosby family has had a continuous tradition of military and civil service in the British imperial and colonial establishment. The notables in the family include:

Dudley Alexander Sydney Cosby, first and last Baron Sydney, ambassador to the Court of Denmark, died 1774;

Above: Painting of Stradbally c. 1740. By the early eighteenth century the Cosbys had developed an impressive demesne and a model estate village, with superior-quality two-storey houses, an arcaded market house, a market square and waterways. (Private collection)

General William Cosby, governor of New York and Jersey, died 1743; Admiral Phillips Cosby, admiralty of the White, died 1792; brothers Major Errold, Eric and Ivan Cosby all served in World War II. Major Errold also served in the First World War, and went straight from Eton to the trenches; he died in 1984.

So continued a tradition begun by Francis Cosby, whose skills and ambitions matched the promises of land and power in the Tudor conquest of Leinster. ☛

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Further reading:

Burke's Irish Family Records.
Calendar of Patent Rolls and State Papers.
P.G. Lane and W. Nolan (eds), *Laois: history and society* (Dublin, 1999).
H. Morgan in S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history* (Oxford, 1998).