

The Plantation of Ulster: - it's impact on the Catholic population

The 'loss of the land' has been a central theme in Irish nationalism and with the penal laws is part of a composite picture of Catholics as a persecuted people. The Plantation of Ulster with English and Scottish settlers was not initially intended as a religious campaign against Catholics. But it took on its own dynamic and effectively became such by the turn of the 17th century. For Protestant settlers too the century established the perception of Catholics poised to take revenge and dispossess them at the first opportunity, for the Ulster Irish* had risen in 1641 and 'massacred' large numbers of the settler population. That the Ulster Plantation was never as total, nor the 1641 uprising as brutal as tradition allows, matters little. Both have continued to be axioms of respective communal identities and along with the religious demography of Ulster, established by the Plantation, these beliefs have remained virtually unchanged for over three centuries.

The Ulster Plantation was the most extensive and comprehensive of England's Plantations in Ireland. The 'Flight of the Earls' in 1607, the subsequent rebellion of Sir Cahir O'Doherty and the vast tracts of church land (some 20% of the province, technically confiscated since the Reformation, but relatively untouched till James I's reign) placed an unprecedented amount of territory at the disposal of the crown - virtually the whole of modern Armagh, Cavan, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Donegal. The sudden availability of so much territory presented the new monarch with the opportunity to create a defensible colony and infuse Ulster Irish culture with habits of 'civility' and industry. Like all colonial ventures it was shot through with the cultural elitism of the colonising power. But it was not a blueprint for a general dispossession of the existing inhabitants. Sir John Davies, the Attorney General, credited with masterminding the Plantation, thought Earlier Plantations had failed because all the land had been given to adventurers, forcing the local people into the hills and woods where they became outlaws. He and the Lord Deputy, Chichester, considered the creation of a secure Ulster Irish population alongside the new planter element as vital to the scheme's success.

The Plantation scheme involved the division of six counties (Donegal, Londonderry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh and Cavan) into three categories: first, land to be granted to English and Scottish undertakers; second, land to be granted to servitors (usually English government officials) and 'deserving' Irish; third, land belonging to or to be granted to the established church and Trinity College. The undertakers were required within three to five years to settle English or Scots on their lands at a rate of 24 per 1,000 acres, to provide defenses and build stone houses and bawns, or risk hefty fines. No one who did not conform to Protestantism and no Irish could rent these lands. The other two categories were granted with no condition to plant or conform, and here the Irish inhabitants could remain. In fact although some displacement did occur the Irish remained even on undertaker land, for tenants were scarce, and likewise on the lands given to the London Companies: the new county of Londonderry, encompassing Derry and its immediate Inishowen hinterland, part of north Tyrone, and O'Cahan's lands around Coleraine.

The Ulster Plantation was implemented with considerable co-operation from the Ulster Irish - at least from those who had disliked the aggrandising policies of Hugh O'Neill. The Irish elite responded as it had always done: as individuals, using England when it suited them against their enemies. It was the Gaelic system of overlordship and all its trappings which England sought to destroy. Bringing the Irish into the benefits of the common law, granting rent relationships and leases in place of the customs tying man to lord in the Gaelic system was as important as planting British settlers in Early schemes. The widespread dispossession of the Ulster Irish was not envisaged. A roll-call of the main Irish beneficiaries under the Plantation settlement reads like a list of the rivals of the O'Neill, O'Donnell and Maguire lords who had fled in 1607. The O'Hanlons who had fought against O'Neill were rewarded with a total of 1,340 acres. Maolmuire MacSweeney, who had testified against Hugh O'Neill and attacked the crews of the ships taking the chieftains to the Continent, received 2,000 acres, as did Turlough O'Boyle and two other MacSweeneys. The various O'Neill branches in Tyrone and Armagh who had suffered in Hugh O'Neill's lineage expansion received grants. Notable among these were the O'Neills of the Fews in south Armagh, frequent allies of the Dublin administration in the 16th century. Turlough MacHenry O'Neill had been pardoned in 1603 and received a grant of 9,900 acres (the largest grant to any Gaelic lord), on which he was to settle considerable numbers of British tenants.

In Fermanagh the senior Maguire, Conor Rua, had expected to be rewarded for his loyalty and surrendered his three baronies in Fermanagh. But it was not government policy to replace one overlord with another. Usually the great were lowered and the middle-ranking consolidated. Conor Rua received less than a third of his territory back and lost the ancestral seat at Lisnaskea to a Scottish undertaker. Paradoxically it was the junior Enniskillen branch, which had fought on O'Neill's side in The Nine Years' War and participated in the 'Flight of the Earls', which became most reconciled to the new situation. Brian Maguire received 2,000 acres in the Plantation scheme and by pragmatically avoiding future involvement in rebellion transmitted it to his descendants. For this he was posthumously damned by later nationalist tradition, a fate awaiting all the Irish landowners who survived the Plantation. Other Maguires received smaller grants, a practice repeated in all the Plantation counties to reconcile a handful of key 'deserving Irish' to the scheme.

The descendants of Shane O'Neill, thwarted in their succession to the O'Neill title by successive Earls of Tyrone, likewise received recognition in the new scheme with land grants in Armagh and Fermanagh. But their position was a pale shadow of their former glory and resentment at continuing decline (even if started long before the Plantation) was undoubtedly a factor in Sir Phelim O'Neill's drift to rebellion in 1641. Cavan was already settled by many Englishmen and the county's position had accustomed its chiefs to Pale ways. They were accordingly the first to use the English common law to argue their rights to the land, engaging a Pale lawyer and travelling to London to push their claims. Grants of land totalling 13,950 acres raised the O'Reillys to a position second in importance to the O'Neills in the new order.

The Ulster Plantation then was not imposed on a universally reluctant population. It was nonetheless a major revolution in land ownership. In all, 280 Irish became landowners of some 94,013 acres. But seen against an estimated 365,097 acres to various English and Scottish grantees in the six Plantation counties alone, the scale of the revolution in land ownership can be appreciated. These figures also disguise cases such as that of Hugh O'Neill's half-brother Art McBaron O'Neill. He had fought against O'Neill in the recent war. But his reward of 2,000 acres was to revert to the crown after the deaths of himself, his wife and their survivor. It also included an agreement to move from his O'Neill

(north Armagh) territory centred on Loughgall - then given to English undertakers- to the less fertile area of Orior in the south of the county. His son was Owen Roe O'Neill, military leader of the Irish Catholic Confederacy after the 1641 rising.

How did those Ulster Catholics not included among the 280 grantees fare in the new order? On the whole the Irish remained in occupation of the land. Only the remaining swordsmen of the Irish lords or 'kerne' were totally expelled, some transported to continental service, others taking refuge as outlaws in the woods. But 'occupation' and 'ownership' are quite different things. The comparatively small number granted freehold and the loss of the top tier of Gaelic lordship (through the 'Flight of the Earls' and death in battle) pushed the gentry of Catholic Ulster down a tier. A new tier of lords had been substituted for the old and generally the main undertaker in each barony ended up occupying the residence and demesne land of the former Irish chief.

We simply do not know how the bulk of the Ulster Irish reacted to the Plantation. The continuation of year-to-year leases on the estates of some Irish grantees (e.g. MacSweeney) suggests that they may have enjoyed greater security in new leases from the undertakers and servitors. Generally the Irish were supposed to receive shorter leases. But the 1619 and 1622 surveys suggest that many British settlers fared little better. In fact such was the general insecurity of title under the Plantation, with British grantees constantly under threat of confiscation for non-compliance with the original terms of their grant, and frequent prying commissions to check on them, that few were in any hurry to give tenants legal title. Certainly the original concept of a strong, segregated British (and Protestant) colony had to be abandoned. The Irish remained in the majority on all estates. Many of the settlers showed a preference for Irish ways and did not always comply with the terms of the original grants. Indeed the requirements for conformity to the established religion and the abandonment of Irish dress and agricultural methods were quietly set aside.

Why then did the Plantation create such bitterness? While many Catholics may well have fared a good deal better under the new dispensation than under the Gaelic land system, the elite did not, and it is their voice we hear. Moreover, because of the nature of Gaelic society - with its extended kinship networks, multiple layers of declined and declining families, and regular division of

lands - there were many more people claiming status as gentry than had land to support such claims, and this at a time when social status was increasingly measured in land-ownership rather than lineage. It was this, the sharp decline in status, the resentment at being lorded over by upstarts and parvenus, which most determined the reaction of that elite to the Plantation, rather than actual dispossession.

The Plantation played havoc with this intensely status-conscious society. Suddenly people deemed their social inferiors (Irish and British alike) were rising in the social ladder while those who would normally have been in the elite were rapidly declining. This elitism and social snobbery of Gaelic society is frequently overlooked. But more than any loss of land it explains the sense of lost glory which later infused developing nationalist tradition. 'The people in general are great admirers of their pedigree,' commented an English traveller in 1674, 'and have got their genealogy so exactly by heart that though it be two hours work for them to repeat the names only from whence they are descended lineally, yet, will they not omit one word in half a dozen several repetitions; from whence I gather they say them instead of their Pater noster'. This older lineage definition of status was to continue in Ulster Catholic society alongside the newer landed one, quite independently of wealth and property, and was undoubtedly responsible for the long memory of customary land rights.

Even so, by the 1630s evidence suggests that the Plantation land settlement was settling down. Some 40,000 settlers had arrived. But this out of a likely population of between 200,000 and 300,000 left the Irish in the majority everywhere. But all was not well with the Irish grantees. Most Gaelic lords were heavily in debt and the amount of land in their hands was being steadily eroded. Declining branches of the Maguires or the O'Neills would have been a volatile element at any time in Gaelic society, but they would have been kept in check by their Gaelic overlord. With the overlords gone, their restlessness fed on every slight by English officials, many of whom would have been their social inferiors. There may too have been a restlessness for old ways. Moreover, in an unusually turbulent century, the Ulster Catholics were on the losing side in every conflict and each was followed by new land confiscations.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the social consequences of the 17th century land settlements for the future of Ulster Catholicism. Only a handful of Catholic landowners survived into the 18th century and very soon these too disappeared, most conforming to the established church. The net result was to place the Ulster Catholics on a lower social level than their co-religionists elsewhere in the country. The Catholics of Ulster and adjacent north Connacht were generally the poorest in the country. This, and the absence of the kind of surviving Catholic gentry which sustained an institutionalised Catholic church elsewhere, dictated its different character in Ulster. Ulster never had a significant 'Old English' class, a Catholic elite accustomed to the practice of power and politics. The absence of such a political tradition is still felt today. The Protestant gentry in Ulster never had to deal with equals, and the distance between them and the socially inferior Catholics bred unrealistic fears of subversion. The picture of an impoverished Catholic peasantry clinging to the hills is far-fetched. But they had lost their natural social leaders - a vacuum which was filled by the Catholic Church - and highly charged local resentments against those who got the land have festered to the present day.