

**THE CHURCH OF IRELAND AND THE NATIVE  
IRISH POPULATION IN PLANTATION ULSTER**

**Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin**

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## ABSTRACT

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### **THE CHURCH OF IRELAND AND THE NATIVE IRISH POPULATION IN PLANTATION ULSTER**

This largely historiographical paper examines the initial inclusion of native Gaelic clergy in the plantation church in Ulster and their gradual disappearance over the course the next twenty-five years. This was a highly significant development for it meant that the Ulster church took on a markedly Anglo-centric profile and religion, rather than functioning as a potential bridge between the indigenous and immigrant communities, instead was to become one of the most potent markers of division and hostility between natives and newcomers.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The early modern period witnessed the establishment of deeply-entrenched rival religious confessions in Ireland, which exhibited a constant potential for sectarian conflict down to the close of the twentieth century. This process was carried to its extreme in Ulster where early modern Protestant immigration into Ireland reached its highest point, eventually resulting in the development of a Catholic identity which was essentially Irish in its ethnic composition, a substantially Scottish Presbyterian strand, and a politically-dominant Anglican population of largely English origin. By the late seventeenth century, these divisions seemed almost to reflect a natural order and had acquired a patina of historical inevitability. They were also deeply significant, because confessional differentiation was the key not merely to social alignments but to the entire political structure of eighteenth century Ireland. Yet, as Robert Armstrong has argued, the notion that Scottish immigration into Ulster almost mathematically equates to the foundation of Irish Presbyterianism is far too simplistic. The special circumstances of the 1640s were required to catalyse the formation of the first Irish presbyteries from a series of pools of Godly protestants which by no means already amounted to a Presbyterian church in waiting.<sup>1</sup>

A similar contingency can be glimpsed in the case of Gaelic Irish Catholicism. In the course of the seventeenth century, the essentialist catholic character of the native Irish was to emerge as a predominant trope in the literary production of Gaelic Irish intellectuals. This process arguably reached its apogee in the work of Seathrún Céitinn who crafted an origin mythology for the Catholic population of Ireland which presented its past in terms of the preoccupations of post-Tridentine Catholicism (Ó Buachalla, 1982-3: 59-105). But Céitinn's work integrated smoothly with the writings of a host of others, among whom Franciscans such as Flaithrí O Maolchonaire, Aodh Mac Aingil, John Colgan and the Four Masters were particularly significant (Cunningham, 2000: 39-40, 128-9). It would be foolish to argue that the powerful identification of the seventeenth century Gaelic Irish population with Catholicism was entirely without religious foundation. A tradition of looking to Rome as a source of religious authority, the extraordinary influence of and reverence for the observant Franciscans, and respect for the Mass and the Virgin Mary all represented strong bridges between the pre-Reformation religious culture of Gaelic Ireland and the post-Tridentine form of Catholicism which became increasingly embedded in the culture in the course of the first half of the seventeenth-century (Corish, 1985: 57,

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply grateful to Dr Armstrong for allowing me to see an unpublished draft of his paper entitled "Scottish and English in Irish Presbyterianism" which was presented to the 'Alternative establishments: Catholic and Presbyterian' conference 2-3 June 2009, TCD.

75; Nicholls, 2003: 114-5). On the other hand, Gaelic Scotland, which particularly in the sixteenth century formed an integral part of a Gaelic world which spanned the narrow seas, offers an important corrective to any notion that Gaelic culture was fundamentally inhospitable to Protestantism. Rather, Jane Dawson's research has demonstrated that neither the overwhelmingly rural nor the Gaelic cultural characteristics of western Scotland proved an insurmountable obstacle to the deep rooting of Calvinism (Dawson, 1994: 231-53). Indeed, certain aspects of Gaelic culture, most notably the common tradition of clerical marriage-concubinage and the resulting ecclesiastical dynasties were actually far easier to accommodate within the developing Protestant tradition, rather than within a reformed Catholicism which placed increasing emphasis on clerical celibacy. It has been argued that attachment to Protestantism offered some Scottish Gaelic clans, most notably the Campbells of Argyll, concrete advantages in terms of political expansion. In fact, a convincing case can be made that the confessional divisions between Campbells and MacDonalds in western Scotland can at least partially be explained by the degree to which religious choice offered opportunities for local brokers of power to position themselves along a political spectrum determined by the evolving intrusiveness of the Scottish monarchy.<sup>2</sup>

If political and social advantage could predispose many Gaelic Scots to embrace rather than reject the reformation, why are similar processes less visible in Ireland, particularly in Ulster where the flight of the earls and the subsequent plantation offered possibilities for a comprehensive refashioning of all dimensions of the province's social structures, including those of religion? This question is made more pertinent when the character of the king and his avowed commitment to advancing the cause of the state church in the newly planted territories is taken into consideration, a commitment moreover which was to be backed in economic terms by a conscious decision to provide generously for the church from the great land windfall of the plantation. In addition to the 9,240 acres of bishops' demesne land which was discovered in the six escheated counties of the plantation, it was decided that the far larger amount of territory classified as termon and erenagh land, which legal inquisition found to be escheated to the crown, should also be granted to the bishops of the established church (Robinson, 1994: 69-70). Traditionally in Gaelic Ireland such land was in the hands of clerical families with duties to maintain parish churches, offer hospitality to the Episcopal household, and pay rent to the bishops (Ellis, 1998: 31-50). The decision to accede to the bishops' claims to these territories vastly increased the church's stake in the new dispensation as in total this land amounted to almost fifty thousand acres (Robinson, 1994: 69).

The perception of state officials in the early seventeenth century also was not that Rome had already forestalled the established church in Gaelic Ulster, but that the majority of the population could still take the stamp of any religion. Sir John Davies,

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<sup>2</sup> This is the argument of Dr Scott Spurlock. I am deeply indebted to Dr Spurlock for allowing me to see an unpublished draft of his paper entitled "Catholic Continuance and the Role of the Laity in Scotland, 1603-94" which was presented to the 'Alternative establishments: Catholic and Presbyterian' conference 2-3 June 2009, TCD.

for instance, one of the principal architects of what became the Ulster settlement, as well as a key figure in precipitating the Flight of the Earls, remarked in 1606 that in Ulster “all the people of that province, at least the multitude,, are apt to receive any faith” (quoted in Ford, 1997:132). Moreover, significant groups within the population which could be expected to spearhead resistance to religious innovation were significantly disrupted in the early part of the seventeenth century. The Franciscan order in Ulster, one of the strongest bulwarks of the old religion, had suffered particularly heavily in the course of the Nine years war and the completion of the Tudor conquest had resulted in the destruction of numerous convents which had previously enjoyed the protection and support of local lords (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 18-36). By the end of the sixteenth century evidence of hostility towards Protestantism, it is true, had been becoming increasingly evident among the lay elite of Gaelic Ulster but the flight of the earls and the institution of plantation operated to reduce the influence and power of the recalcitrant native aristocracy to a very considerable extent. Catholic sources certainly were to bewail this development down to the watershed of 1641 with figures such as John O’Cullenan, the catholic bishop of Raphoe, emphasising to Rome the manner in which the impoverishment of the Catholic laity impinged on his own ability to discharge his functions (Ó hAnnracháin, 2002: 48-9).

The textual difficulties which had eroded the evangelical capacity of the Tudor church in Gaelic Ireland were also slowly being addressed. The heroic work of William Daniel resulted in at least a New Testament, first published in 1602, and a book of Common prayer, published in 1608, (Ford, 1997: 108) becoming available in the Irish language, thus finally rendering obsolete the fairly derisory situation which had previously obtained where a Latin version of Protestant texts had been in use for congregations unable to understand English (Lennon, 2005: 307, 310). And the Lord Deputy, Sir Arthur Chichester in 1605-6 had also shown an awareness of the potential importance of the Irish language by organising the funding and attendance at Trinity of a series of students from Ulster on the grounds that “being of the country birth and having the language, [they] may prove profitable members hereafter, either in the church or commonwealth” (quoted in Ford, 1998: 63). In the middle of the first decade of the seventeenth century, it has been estimated that sixteen of the seventy-five students at Trinity were of Gaelic Irish origin, significantly more than their Old English counterparts who numbered only ten. In 1619 roughly similar proportions were still visible with nineteen of eighty-two students of Gaelic origin, over twice as many as the nine Old English (Ford, 1998: 62-5).

The accession of a Stewart monarch also brought potentially into play the possibility of importing Protestants with experience of conditions in Gaelic Scotland to staff the church in Ulster. The king soon showed himself alive to this possibility and in 1610 appointed Andrew Knox, formerly bishop of the isles in western Scotland to the see of Raphoe so that “by his pains and travails the ignorant multitude within that diocese may be reclaimed from their superstition and popish opinions” (Laing, 1851: 1: 427-8). Knox’s record of administrative success with a Gaelic population culturally linked closely to Ulster in his Scottish career was evidently one of the primary reasons for his drafting into the Irish church.



Knox can, to a considerable extent, be viewed as an exponent of the classical strategies of Sword and Word evangelism which were common all over Reformation and counter-reformation Europe. In the isles he had shown a commitment to the “civilisation” of the Gaelic population which involved the curbing of clan military power and advancing the cause of the reformed church in tandem with that of respect for law and the ordinances of the Scottish parliament. But rather than the dispossession of defiant chiefs, he favoured a policy of conciliation which would offer them an avenue of accommodation with the new realities of royal power (Goodare, 1998: 31-57). In Raphoe he quickly demonstrated a similar commitment to a combination of hardline coercion and persuasive evangelism. Knox, as befitted a former Scottish commissioner charged with seeking out Jesuits and seminar priests, was insistent on the need to take firm measures for the repression of papistry. He demonstrated his combative streak early in his first visit to Ireland when he went to a small church, probably at Agivie near Coleraine and ordered the destruction of a nationally renowned statue of the Virgin Mary. When his own servants demonstrated their reluctance to participate in the iconoclasm, Knox personally pulled the statue down and had it carted to Coleraine where he organised its public destruction by fire (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 39). In 1611 and 1612 he produced two influential drafts of proposals which firmly emphasised the need to expel Catholic priests and to punish recusancy. To this end, he advocated the passing of a new penal statute in the forthcoming Irish parliament of 1613 (Ford, 1997: 140-1). But Knox was also prepared to engage positively with those elements of the native population who were prepared to offer conformity, in particular native Irish clerics. As Brian MacCuarta has noted, it is suggestive that in contrast even to the most conciliatory of the English bishops appointed to Ulster, Brute Babington, Knox referred by name to the conforming clergy of his diocese, describing for instance Owen Congall (or McCongall) “as a very good minister reading in the English and Irish language and of a very good report” and he used similar terminology in his description of Richard Mullen and Brian MacNelus (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 48). By 1622 these three men, together with two converted priests, Brian O Doweny or Deveny and Owen O Mulmock, and two other Gaelic Irish clerics, Owen O Doweny and Turlough O Kelly were serving as ministers in his diocese, and, according to the bishop, were labouring for the conversion of the population of the see (Ford, 1997: 142-3).

The brief career of Brute Babington as bishop of Derry, together with the later example of William Bedell as bishop of Kilmore, however, indicated that even among English prelates an awareness of the importance of evangelical work in the Irish language was not completely unknown. Babington’s active episcopate in Derry lasted for less than a year before his death in September 1611 but in that short time he evidently made considerable and not unsuccessful efforts to win over the native Irish clergy of his diocese. Under his predecessor, Bishop Montgomery, the lineaments of a potentially persuadable group of clerics had been identified as a collateral development from a process of interviews of clergy principally aimed at establishing the exact extent of ecclesiastical lands (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 45). Central to this group was Owen MacCawell, erenagh of Dunboe who had a formidable command of Latin and evidently some degree of theological understanding of the issues between the Established church and its Roman Catholic competitor. In 1612 his

pragmatism in the face of the new dispensation was rewarded by appointment as archdeacon of Derry. MacCowell was supported by the dean of the diocese William McEntagart and another unnamed individual. Babington evidently was loathe to resort either to open coercion or to extreme demands in his quest for conformity which he believed would lead to the alienation of all the local clergy. McCowell was initially enticed to accompany the new bishop to a church service where he was accorded a place of honour. As a result of this temperate wooing, McCowell's influence was evidently important in the later acceptance at a diocesan chapter by the majority of the Derry clergy of an agreed if limited programme of church reform. This did not involve for instance, any mention of royal supremacy over the church. In contrast to later Catholic efforts at reform which involved strenuous attempts to force clergy to put away their concubines, Babington offered the presumably more attractive additional choice of marriage (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 46). He was concerned also to make use of the recently available translation of the new testament and the book of common prayer as the basis of a liturgy which would be comprehensible both to the newly conformed clergy and their congregations (Ford, 1997: 139). Like Knox, Babington by no means turned his back on the use of coercive authority but he stressed his own interest in exercising such authority with moderation. In a fashion not dissimilar to the later Bedell, he was at pains to sit in court himself in a conscious attempt to make the exercise of his disciplinary functions ameliorative rather than merely punitive (Shuckburgh, 1902: 35-6; Ford, 1997: 139).

Babington's example demonstrated that many, perhaps even the majority of the native Irish clergy in the province were prepared to consider conformity to the established church, at the outset of the Ulster plantation. Certainly, it seems probable that such conformity owed little to conviction. Native clerics were evidently most concerned to provide for themselves and their families in the new dispensation. Many of the wives and children of conforming ministers apparently remained catholic and Brian Mac Cuarta has noted what were probably not merely isolated examples of conforming ministers returning to the Church of Rome prior to their deaths (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 51). Yet, from the point of view of the established church, such conformity offered far more hopeful possibilities than outright and principled recusancy. It suggests for instance a situation still removed from bishop William Lyon's account from Cork in 1596 where he detailed the collapse of conformity as five hundred communicants dwindled to three in the space of two years, something which Lyon ascribed to the influence of the seminary priests, who were also evidently active in causing previously conforming clergy to abandon their positions within the established church.<sup>3</sup>

Yet ultimately the inclination towards native clerical conformity in the plantation church proved of no long-term significance. Rather than acting as a bridgehead to the establishment of the reformed religion among the native population, the conformist Gaelic clergy gradually dwindled into insignificance and exerted little or no influence over the religious orientation of the general population which increasingly turned to Rome. Evidently a complex tissue of reasons were at work to explain this

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<sup>3</sup> Public Record Office, London, SP 63/183/47 (1592-6, 394-6).

phenomenon. Alan Ford has highlighted the difficult balancing act which the plantation church was forced to walk between missionary endeavour and the claims of ecclesiastical discipline (Ford, 1997: 140). While this was clearly a significant issue, it was a problem common to many other areas of Europe where successful religious change was inculcated despite the absence of any strong initial inclination on the part of the native population to embrace it (Bottigheimer and Lotz-Heumann, 1998: 313-53).

In Ireland, however, the plantation itself was evidently a major complicating factor. As it began to deliver a protestant population into the escheated territories the opportunity was created to import English and Scottish clergy to supply the religious needs of the immigrants. From the perspective of the bishops of the established church, these new ministers were of vastly higher quality than the conformist Irish clergy. Not surprisingly they were keen to appoint them to the best benefices available and if necessary to supplement their income by granting a plurality of parishes, even if that entailed the practical deprivation of Irish-speaking groups of any practical ministry. All over Ulster, a process of displacement of native clergy quickly set in. Within a decade a pattern had developed which saw native Irish clerics either entirely replaced or else reduced to holding subordinate posts, either as curates for an English rector or in charge of poor Irish parishes devoid of any significant British settlement. The traditional ecclesiastical families of coarbs and erenaghs also witnessed a sharp diminution in status as the bishops to whom their hereditary lands had been granted assigned leaseholds to British settlers (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 51, 53).

Critically, except in a handful of cases, a new educated Gaelic clergy was not formed to replace the first conformist generation. In this regard, the free schools which were to be established in each escheated county simply failed to produce an educated generation of Gaelic Irish students eager to further their education and join the ministry of the protestant church. By 1640 only five students of a native Irish background were attending Trinity college, barely a quarter of the number twenty years previously (Ford, 1998: 66). A lack of sources makes it impossible to decide why the free schools failed but it can be surmised that the pattern reflected a pervasive disinterest in forming an educated Gaelic clergy. Part of the purpose of the plantation was to further the anglicisation of the country: in this context the acculturation of Protestantism to Gaelic society was a low priority. In simple terms, the state church failed to establish attractive career paths for young clergymen of Gaelic origin. In this way, the economic interests which had helped to secure initial conformity of the first generation of native clergy largely ceased to operate in the decades that followed.

The testimony of William Bedell in Kilmore in the early 1630s is of particular interest in this regard. According to his biographer, Bedell was uniquely prepared to patronise even less educated men of Gaelic origin for benefices with Irish-speaking populations on the basis of their evangelical capacity. This evidently created a good deal of hostility in the planter community which questioned the legality of his actions as running against the avowed state policy of Anglicisation and there was evidently considerable resentment at his failure to discriminate in favour of educated English

ministers even for benefices in which the Irish language was the primary evangelical requirement. For his part, Bedell objected to the common assumption on the part of British clergy that parishes without immigrant protestant populations simply did not entail pastoral responsibilities. (Shuckburgh, 1902: 40-42) Yet it is clear that Bedell's position was very much a minority one.

What made this tissue of attitudes even more deadly was the fact that a failure to recognise pastoral responsibilities did not merely translate into benign neglect. The British clergy of the plantation may have done little or nothing to evangelise the native population but they vigorously attempted to gain their financial entitlements, often farming out their rights to tithes in parishes to proctors who created enormous resentment in their collection of dues (Mac Cuarta, 2007: 58). The end result therefore was that the established church quickly came to represent a financially rapacious face to the native population. Just how deep these resentments ran was to be vividly demonstrated in the rebellion of 1641 when protestant clergymen became particular targets of native violence.

A major contributory factor to that explosion of sectarian violence, and 1641 was arguably the single event of most importance in determining inter-confessional relationships on the island, was also the strengthening mission of the Catholic church in Ireland. Reasons fully as complex as the failure of the state church lay behind the evangelical success of Catholicism in Ulster in the first half of the seventeenth century (Ó hAnnracháin, 2002: 65; Mac Cuarta, 2007: 71-131), but central to the process was the relatively clear field which was given to the catholic clergy by the established rival. In real terms, Catholicism secured the religious allegiance of a population to which the established church was unable to minister in their native language. In terms of the roots of conflict, the results of this were particularly disastrous for it added an enduring sectarian overlay to the already very potent ethnic differences and antagonisms which the plantation had introduced.

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