

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THE CROMWELLIAN CONQUEST OF IRELAND

By Prof John Morrill

Cromwell arrived in Ireland on 15 August 1649 and departed to take up his command against the Scots on 26 May 1650. In the intervening nine months he had taken more than thirty strongholds (fortified towns and castles), most by threat and negotiation, a few by storm, and by the time he left the back of the resistance to the English reconquest had been broken. It took three more years for his sons-in-law Henry Ireton and Charles Fleetwood to complete the task, but the worst was over. In the course of those nine months, of course, there were two notorious massacres, of the garrisons certainly and civilians possibly, at Drogheda and Wexford, both as a 'righteous judgement upon these barbarous wretches who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood' and (just as importantly) 'to prevent the effusion of blood for the future' (ie *in terrorem*), which together 'are the satisfactory grounds to such actions, which otherwise cannot but work regret and remorse.' (Cromwell to Speaker Lenthall of the House of Commons, 17 September 1649). Actually in a separate letter to a close political ally, he said only that 'this bitterness will save much effusion of blood through the goodness of God' (letter of 16 September 1649, usually said to have to been addressed to John Bradshaw, an ascription which is almost certainly wrong).

This is not the place to debate the morality of Cromwell's actions at Drogheda and Wexford (space forbids it). Here I want to point out the problems with the common assumption that Cromwell was out to punish and expropriate the Catholics of Ireland – in the words of the Catholic Bishops gathered in Clonmacnoise in December 1649, that he came to Ireland 'with the resolution of extirpating the Catholic religion, which is not to be effected without the massacring or banishment of the Catholic people.' The first problem with this is that Cromwell fiercely denied the charge. In the *Declaration of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland for the Undeceiving of Deluded and Seduced People*, he was contemptuous of their claims. No-one's conscience would be forced, he said, no Catholic required to attend any Protestant worship. Although the blasphemous and idolatrous Mass would be banned, he did not ban all Catholic worship (Catholics would not see this latter as much as a concession, of course, but his point was that no-one would be put under pressure to convert).

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Who did Cromwell see as his opponents in Ireland? Let us look first at what he told the House of Commons on 23 March 1649 as he pondered taking up the proffered command of the army of conquest. His enemies were ‘the papists and the King’s party’ and he is careful to stress that ‘I cannot say all the papists but the greatest part of them’. In listing the army commanders of the union of forces against him he mentions three Catholics and two Protestants (significantly passing over the O’Neills) and although he says he would rather be overrun by a Cavalier interest than a Scottish one (and it is worth speculating why – is this a comment on Scottish theocracy?) and he would rather be overrun by a Scottish interest than an Irish one, he says Irish not Irish-Catholic interest – indeed ‘I speak not of any one religion, almost any of them but in a manner as bad as Papists’ but he concludes that the key is that the ‘now [the King] must come from Ireland or Scotland.’ In the months that followed, before his departure for Ireland, he worked very hard to divide and rule the coalition of royalist and Catholic forces lined up against him. He secretly bought off powerful protestant-settler interests in Munster (the earl of Cork and his party amongst the Ormondists) and more dramatically he bought off the most Catholic and therefore least royalist of the Catholic commanders in the North, above all Owen Roe O’Neill (who fancied the title for himself or fancied handing the title to the King of Spain). By the time he arrived in August, Cromwell had achieved these goals.

More than forty of Cromwell’s letters from Ireland survive from his time in Ireland, about half of them addressed to friends or opponents in Ireland, the other half to allies and friends back home in England, including the letters to Parliament or the Council of State (and intended for publication) in which he announced his victorious progress. What is striking about all these letters is their lack of anti-Catholic content. In his letter to Lenthall, from Drogheda, most dramatically, he does not use the words ‘Catholic’, ‘popish’, ‘popery’, or ‘papist’ once. He uses the word ‘enemy’ twenty one times in this letter, but always with the actual or implied adjective ‘royalist’ or ‘Irish’. The letter is saturated in providentialist language (‘God’ too appears 21 times) but *not* in biblical language. In his campaign letters in 1648 and again in Scotland in 1650-1, he constantly cites the bible. In his Irish letters he does not. Or at least in his *campaign* letters he does not. In some private letters, such as the one he writes to his son Richard from Carrick on 2 April 1650, in which he pleads with Richard to ‘know God in Christ which

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the scripture makes the sum of all', citing the second letter of Peter, St Paul's letter to the Philippians to encourage him to a deeper faith. Even more dramatic is his letter to his estranged comrade Thomas Lord Wharton (1 January 1650) in which he pleads with him to come on board and abandon his scruples about the Regicide: 'be not offended at the manner of God's working; perhaps no other way was left. What if God accepted the zeal, as he did that of Phineas, whose reason might have called for a jury'. The reference is to the Book of Numbers where Phineas a priest drove a javelin into an Israelite and the Midianite slave with whom he was copulating, thus ending a plague with which God was afflicting Israel because of its apostasy. Cromwell's failure to draw on Scripture in his military letters from Ireland is thus a very deafening silence.

In fact in the forty letters written in Ireland, he uses the words 'Catholic', 'popish', 'popery', or 'papist' on only three occasions. The first and fullest was in a letter of 19 December (by which time his truce with Owen Roe O'Neill had collapsed and Owen Roe was actually dead), when he referred to O'Neill's 7,000 troops as 'the eldest sons of the Church of Rome' and he goes on to speak of the 'Roman clergy' working to bring in 'supplies from foreign parts'. But he adds that 'the rest of the army consist of Old English-Irish, some Protestants, some Papists.' He is summing up a royalist party not a Catholic one. A month later, on 16 January 1650 he sent a copy of the deliberations of the Catholic clergy at Clonmacnoise to Lenthall, with the gloss that 'the affaires of the enemy are much endeavoured to be brought under the inspection and Government of the Romane Clergy'. Finally, on 2 April 1650, he reported taking a town on mercy: the defenders were from Ormond's own regiment, including an English colonel from Kent and 'the next day the Colonel, the Major, and the rest of the Commission Officers were shot to death, all but one, who being a very earnest instrument to have the Castle delivered, was pardoned. In the same Castle also we took a Popish Priest, who was Chaplain to the Catholiques in this Regiment, who was caused to be hanged.'

And that is it. Compared with these occasional references, with their strong anti-clerical emphasis, he does not use religious descriptors of his 'enemies'. More representative is his summing up of his leading opponents at New Ross as 'English, Scots and Irish, fifteen hundred more, *Ormond, Castlehaven,* and the Lord of *Ardes*' – ie an Irish Protestant, an English Catholic and a

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Scottish Presbyterian; or in the earlier of his accounts of the storm of Drogheda, on 16 September, probably written to an ally in Parliament, where he spoke of ‘the enemy ... under command of their best Officer Sir *Arthur Ashton*, being made governour, they were some seven or eight Regiments, *Ormonds* being out under the command of Sir *Edmund Verney*’ as being those who he killed *in terrorem*: an English Catholic, an Anglo-Irish Protestant, an English Protestant’. It was the heads of English officers he displayed at the gates of Dublin after the fall of Drogheda. It seems that Cromwell came to Ireland not to crush Catholicism but Royalism.

How does this square with Cromwell’s justification of the killing of 3552 combatants and civilians at Drogheda (the figure given by his chaplain, Hugh Peter, who will have buried them). His main emphasis, as we have seen, was that it would be a deterrent that would save lives in the long run; but he also claimed that it was ‘as a ‘righteous judgement upon these barbarous wretches who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood’. This has been assumed for too long to be a claim that he was avenging the massacres of 1641-2 and that the ‘barbarous wretches’ were Irish Catholic rebels. Actually Cromwell fully understood that the garrison at Drogheda consisted of English exiles and that the whole of the garrison was made up of *royalist* regiments of the Marquis of Ormond – those raised *against* the Catholic confederacy. The comment about barbarous rebels comes straight after his account of the summary execution of the *English* commander and of Ormondist soldiers who had taken refuge in medieval towers. It is at least as likely that Cromwell was using the word ‘barbarous’ (a word he has used in England about the defenders of Basing House) about the English who had come to renew the war in Ireland, as that he was misusing it against the Irish. Again, royalism, not Catholicism, was the foe. And yet... would that it was that simple! For, however much Cromwell was preventing Ireland from becoming the Launchpad for a Stuart restoration, he had also as a principal task in coming to Ireland the satisfaction of the Adventurers, that large body of venture capitalists and committed puritans, including more than 100 MPs, Cromwell himself included, who had lent money to Parliament in 1642 to deploy an English army in Ireland that would avenge the massacres of Protestant settlers by Irish rebels the previous winter and to protect the survivors. The Adventurers Act had committed Parliament to compensating the Adventurers with 25% of the land of Ireland. Cromwell was charged with making that happen. This

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meant delving into the events of the winter of 1641-2, into the rebellion of Irish Catholics and the massacres of Protestant settlers (there were retaliatory massacres of Catholics, of course, but Cromwell was charged with avenging the massacres of planters). This was not a 'royalist' rebellion, of course, although it had given rise to the wars of the 1640s. In these wars 'rebels' looking to create a Catholic Ireland owing allegiance to the House of Stuart but no longer a dependency of England had first fought and then made common cause with the 'royalist' forces under the King's Protestant Lord Lieutenant, the Marquis of Ormond against the planter-dominated parliamentary movement. So if Cromwell came to Ireland to fight an immediate royalist threat, he also came to avenge an insurgency eight years earlier and to identify all those who had participated in it or condoned it.

To understand how Cromwell understood his task, we need to look at his major statement of policy, of his diagnosis and prognosis of the Irish problem of the 1640s. Sometime in January 1649 he published first in Cork and then in Dublin his *Declaration of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, for the undeceiving of deluded and seduced people: which may be satisfactory to all that do not shut their eyes against the light; in answer to certain late Declarations and Acts framed by the Irish Popish Prelates and Clergy in a conventicle at Clonmacnoise*. This is a 6,000 word point-by-point refutation of the 1,500 word clerical Declaration and an outline of Cromwell's plans for the post-war settlement. It is possible that Cromwell was lying through his teeth, but in fact it is consistent with his subsequent opposition to the settlement proposed by the Rump and by his more radical (and desperate) successors of Ireland who were finding that they could win the war but not the peace and who had seen off the royalist armies only to face an unwinnable guerrilla war against 'Tories' and 'woodkerne', in the dense woods and bogs of Ireland. The ethnic cleansing politics of Ireton and Fleetwood were the product of the dirty war after Cromwell's departure: they were not intrinsic to his mission.

The first point to make about Cromwell's *Declaration* is its withering anti-clericalism. 'Yours' he told the clergy '*is a covenant with Death and Hell*'. Let's hang on to that phrase. He draws attention to the distinction between 'clergy and laity' in the bishops' document and he denounces the distinction – it is, he says, a term unknown to all true churches, which speak instead of 'brethren and saints of the same household of faith', in which there are some who exercise particular ministries under the 'administration of

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ordinances' but in which there are no distinction of merit. It is pride and 'for filthy lucre's sake' that they make the distinction. He accuses the Catholic clergy of preaching rebellion and massacre and he says that they 'poison [your flocks] with false, abominable, and Antichristian doctrine and practices. You keep the Word of God from them; and instead thereof give them your senseless Orders and Traditions', This all-out assault on clerisy takes up most of the pamphlet. He really does not like the Catholic clergy. But then, neither does he like the Presbyterian clergy of Scotland (or for that matter those with clericist ideas in England). Thus in addressing the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland a month before the battle of Dunbar, he accused them of clerical arrogance and pride ('there may a spiritual fullness which the world calls drunkenness as in the second book of Acts') and then, tellingly, he adapts his most severe charge against the Irish clergy: 'there may be *a covenant with death and hell*. I will not say yours was so. But judge if such things have a politic aim: to avoid the overflowing scourge, or to accomplish worldly interests'. It is diluted; but it is the same charge. And he rams it home by urging them to 'read the twenty eighth of Isaiah from the fifth to the fifteenth verse'. He is likening them to the priests of Baal who vomited (through strong drink) over the altars. The Scots ministers vomited out of pride. Cromwell, the old lay preacher from St Ives, would not have clergy of any denomination interposing themselves between God and Man, mediating either sacramental grace or the Word.

So, in his Irish Declaration, his anticlerical fury against sated, Cromwell turned to ponder the reckoning. He was not really in Ireland for the benefit of the Adventurers, he said. Why would the English state be at 'five or six millions pounds charge merely to procure Purchasers to be investing in that for which they did disburse little above a quarter of a Million?' No, he had come to exact justice on the rebels and very specifically the rebels whose mayhem had taken place before the formation of the Confederation of Kilkenny. They had come 'to ask an account of the innocent blood' and to 'hold forth and maintain the lustre and glory of English liberty' (including the liberty of conscience of all Catholics not to be forced to attend Protestant services). The rebels would be escheated. But as for those who served under the Confederacy or under Ormond, they would be treated by royalists in England, subject to similar rules of sequestration and composition (and so a loss of some, in the case of papists-in-arms much, of their land), merciful consideration being withheld only from 'the leading

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persons and contrivers of this rebellion whom I am confident the [Parliament] will reserve to make examples of justice'. He also promised to continue something to which he could point, that exemplary punishment would be inflicted on any in his own army who were 'insolent' and that all the Irish would be protected at law, in taxes and in all things 'equally with the English'.

This was a blueprint for the kind of settlement that he would encourage his son Henry to pursue as Lord Deputy in the later 1650s. but it was at odds with the Acts of 1652 and 1653 and the policy of the radical party, headed by Charles Fleetwood, Lord Deputy from 1652-6, which he strenuously opposed: the policy which has come down through history as 'to Hell or Connaught' – the execution of thousands of Catholic (and some Protestant) landowners, the deportation to Europe or the Caribbean of tens of thousands of demobbed soldiers, and the removal of all remaining Catholic landowners and tenants to the four counties of the west – Clare, Galway, Mayo, Roscommon. The policy was only partially realised and John Cunningham has recently written by far the best of what actually happened (J.Cunningham, *Conquest and Land in Ireland: The Transplantation to Connacht, 1649-1680* [2011]). It is not the case that Oliver Cromwell favoured the policy and as I have shown elsewhere (John Morrill, 'Cromwell, Parliament, Ireland and a Commonwealth in Crisis: 1652 Revisited', *Parliamentary History*, 30:2 (2011), 193-211) he was sacked in May 1652 as Lord Lieutenant by a Rump Parliament in which he was deeply unpopular precisely for opposing the proposed Act for the Settling of Ireland, which was finally passed after bitter debates, three months later.

As a final reflection on this unexpected story, I will just say this: that the list of 'the leading persons and contrivers of this rebellion whom I am confident the [Parliament] will reserve to make examples of justice of' mentioned at the end of Cromwell's *Declaration* of January 1650s does survive, little changed, into 1652. The first 34 names on the list consist of twenty Irish Catholics – but also nine Anglo-Irish Protestants, four Scots Presbyterians and a Church of Ireland bishop. Behind Cromwell's Irish wars of religion, and the ethnic conflicts, lay a deeper obsession: with the House of Stuart.

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