Tudor Ireland

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To at least some of the crown’s officers who observed it, the Tudor conquest of Ireland could evoke disturbing memories. In 1558, railing against the ravages recently inflicted by both government and rebel forces on the native civilian population, the archbishop of Armagh, a leading royal councillor, described how he had ridden 30 miles through parts of the Ulster/Leinster borderlands without seeing or hearing a sign of life. Houses were burned out, villages uninhabited, all the cornfields destroyed. Nowhere were there any people or cattle, just an eerie silence; famine reigned.¹ A generation later the poet, planter, and former Vice-regal Secretary Edmund Spenser recalled the dire effects of military campaigning in large parts of Munster during the Desmond war (1579–83). ‘In short space’, he wrote, ‘there were none [people or animals] almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void’.² The climax of the Tudor conquest produced similar testimonies of famine and desolation. Having accompanied his master Viceroy Mountjoy on expeditions through all four provinces after 1600, Fynes Moryson later recorded: ‘No spectacle was more frequent in the ditches of towns, and in the wasted countries, than to see multitudes of these poor people dead, their mouths all coloured green by eating nettles [and] docks.’³

The demographic impact of the conquest was certainly terrible. Though historians lack the sources necessary for a precise calculation of the Irish population before or after the Tudor wars, it is generally agreed that it was significantly reduced by all the fighting. The conflict lasted nearly 60 years, beginning in the final months of the reign of Henry VIII, and continued until the death of his daughter, Elizabeth I. Though most of the campaigns were small and localised, they were many and persistent, so much so that between 1546 and 1603 there was not a year when government forces were not engaged in operations in some part of the country. Moreover, the major wars, against Shane O’Neill (1557–62, 1563–7), the fitzMaurice/Burke/Butler confederacy (1569–73), the earl of Desmond (1579–83), and the earl of Tyrone (1594–1603) were each bigger than the last, affecting wider and wider areas of the country.⁴ Extrapolating from available figures for the Desmond war it has been estimated that the Tudor conquest may have caused as many as 100,000 casualties.⁵ Given that the population of Ireland circa 1540 lay somewhere between 0.75 and 1.0 million, the conquest must rank as one of the most destructive conflicts anywhere in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe.⁶

But it was not simply the scale of Irish mortality that sometimes troubled the memories of Tudor-era crown servitors and commentators. It was also the knowledge that royal forces inflicted most of the deaths. Government documents of the period are
quite explicit in recording how the crown’s officers and troops were expected to advance royal power and crush native opposition by waging war on the general population as well as on the rebel forces of outlying districts. While the majority of servitors passed little or no comment on the methods they had used to achieve victory, others were not quite so reticent. Despite believing unquestioningly in the legitimacy of government expansion and the quashing of native rebellion, some field officers could be genuinely disturbed by the awful effect of the methods they had been compelled to deploy. As Viceroy Mountjoy put it while waging a particularly grim campaign in central and eastern Ulster in 1602, ‘we kill so many churls [unarmed peasants] as it grieveth me to think that it is necessary to do this.’

This is all very unsettling, to be sure, testimony to the bloody efficacy of campaigns waged by Tudor crown forces in Ireland, but was it consistent with genocide? Until very recently historians would instantly have said not. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines genocide as the deliberate extermination of a nation, race or ethnic group. The crown forces in Ireland killed a multitude but they did not do that; indeed, they were not constituted to do so. Genocide presupposes one nation or race setting about the annihilation of another, but in sixteenth-century Ireland none of the campaigns waged by the crown were simple English versus Irish affairs. As far back as the mid-1530s, when Henry VIII despatched a major army to confront the rebel Kildare FitzGeralds his English forces were augmented by large contingents of native loyalists from the ‘English Pale’ around Dublin and from the ‘second Pale’ in Kilkenny and the south-east. They were also assisted by allies drawn from Gaelic regions, albeit to a smaller extent. Likewise the series of wars and conquests that raged during the late 1540s and 1550s: the Tudor advance into the south Leinster uplands, the colonisation of the Midlands, the crossing of the River Shannon into Connacht, and the northern push into central and east Ulster, were all in turn undertaken with ethnically mixed forces comprising ‘New English’ and Welsh, and native ‘Old English’/Hiberno-English and Gaelic Irish troops. The east Ulster army even contained a small contingent of Gaelic-speaking Hiberno-Scots. This continued throughout Elizabeth I’s reign. Some of her government’s bloodiest exploits were partly the work of native supporters. The massacre of Mullaghmast of 1577, in which between 50 and 75 Midlands leaders, including several O’Mores, were invited to a parley only to be butchered on their arrival, was actively assisted by the chieftain of the O’Dempseys; on other occasions, the war against the remainder of the O’Mores was spearheaded by the soldiers of ‘Barnaby Fitzpatrick’, or MacGiollapadraig, the Gaelic baron of Upper Ossory. The final destruction and death of the rebel earl of Desmond in Co. Kerry in 1583 was orchestrated by his ancestral enemy the Hiberno-English magnate and principal native loyalist ‘Black Tom’ Butler, tenth earl of Ormond, and by Ormond’s kinsmen and clients among the Munster Gaelic Irish. Lastly, even the Battle of Kinsale of 1601–2 – the climactic event of the Tudor conquest of Ireland – was a multi-ethnic feat of arms, with the Gaelic Irish earl of Thomond, Donough O’Brien, and the Hiberno-English earl of Clanricarde, Richard Burke, to the fore as senior commanders of the victorious crown forces.

Genocide also presupposes a deliberate element, a plan. Tudor plans for Ireland and its better government have attracted an extensive historiography. This, tellingly, has
often focused on political and administrative matters, from the formulation of crown policy to the relative importance of the viceroy, the Irish Council, and individual advisers and writers in its conception and implementation. In terms of all the fighting and campaigning, a lively debate has been conducted over the extent to which the monarchy intended to assert greater control over Ireland and its affairs by military or political means. While most scholars accept that, ultimately, the advocates of a military solution secured a strong and abiding influence, and that as a result the island was conquered piecemeal, it is nevertheless widely recognised that the Tudor monarchs usually preferred to avoid military-centred programmes of expansion, if only to escape the ensuing expense. In fact, it has been shown that non-military initiatives were often enthusiastically embraced at Whitehall. On various occasions the Tudors’ advisers contended that Ireland might be brought under tighter royal control by being made a sister kingdom of England; by the development of stronger crown institutions and the extension of English common law; by the erection of provincial councils and presidencies; by greater use of the Dublin parliament. Successive generations of Tudor officials were convinced that Ireland could be reformed by these means, thus greatly reducing the need for force. Far, then, from presenting a genocidal attitude towards Ireland and the Irish, it seems that the royal government looked to incorporate the island and its inhabitants into the Tudor state.

And if cultural as much as physical extermination is vital to genocide as it is usually defined and understood, records of the Tudor court at Whitehall indicate that the monarchs themselves were eager to project the message that Ireland was an important part of the crown’s dominions and that the Irish were full subjects of the Tudor state. From 1541, medals and insignia struck for Henry VIII celebrated the creation of the kingdom of Ireland; later, the second great seal of Elizabeth I had the Irish harp prominently displayed on the reverse. Mary I had a Gaelic Irishman, Conor MacDermott, as one of her personal attendants and a Gaelic harper from Kildare, ‘Melanfyn Ourewerk’ (O’Rourke), may have played music at her court. Elizabeth was probably the most mindful of Ireland. Early in her reign she decided that the Bible should be translated into Gaelic, the better to spread Protestantism. She even expressed a desire to learn the rudiments of the Irish language: a special Gaelic primer was prepared for her use by a Hiberno-English nobleman from Co. Westmeath. Nor did she neglect Irish music. Through Elizabeth’s direct patronage Irish tunes became popular at her court, so that for a number of years ‘Blind Cruise’, a musician from north Co. Dublin, was in great demand in London and its vicinity. The genocide of a people and culture is not usually accompanied by promotion of their music.

And yet, despite all this, it has become necessary to reconsider Tudor military behaviour in Ireland within an interpretative spectrum that encompasses partial extermination. In recent years Irish historians have begun investigating the regional and local impact of Tudor state expansion, charting the methods used to achieve it, and identifying those groups most affected, for better or worse, by the imposition of more direct English rule. This concentration on ground-level realities has exposed the limitations of relying too readily on official high-level reports and representations of developments in the country. What occurred was frequently messier, more compromised, than senior officials were prepared to admit. The high death rate associated
with crown campaigns was as much to do with forces running amok, murdering and pillaging at will, as it was to do with government direction. Yet it was also to do with government direction. For one thing, the government was increasingly militarised as the period advanced; for another, close scrutiny of the activities of crown captains and other officers in the localities reveals that many of them behaved with impunity because they had been authorised to do so by government commission. Hundreds of officers were granted power of martial law to execute people without charge, on suspicion of, among other things, ‘wrongdoing’, and to receive a share of the wealth of everyone they killed. Such commissions represented a tolerance of arbitrary severity at the uppermost levels of the state often at odds with the nobler sentiments of policy discussions, and disregarded the rights of Irish people as subjects of the crown.

Moreover, growing study of government advice papers, ‘plats’, and treatises, has tended to show that noble sentiment was far from universal. Disregard of Irish rights and Irish life was not a new phenomenon, confined to the final years of the sixteenth century (as was once thought), but was a dark thread running through government discourse about Ireland since Henry VIII’s time. Repeatedly these advice papers gave expression to an ideology of English power that was not merely supremacist but exclusivist. Even those authors – and there were many – who urged a cautious step-by-step absorption of Ireland into the wider Tudor realm, and who emphasised the importance of judges and law-books over soldiers and firearms, hoped sooner or later to bring about the country’s subjugation to English forms of social and political organisation and the imposition of English standards of ‘civility’. The Gaelic order that prevailed over much of Ireland beyond the ‘four English shires’ of the Pale around Dublin or the ‘Second Pale’ in the south-east was to be systematically neutered and reduced, either by negotiation and treaty-making or by war and the hangman’s rope – whichever seemed most applicable. Similarly, large sections of the population that were of medieval English descent but had adopted Gaelic language and customs in the intervening centuries – the Hiberno-English – were to be re-Anglicised. It is now apparent that this drive to Anglicisation provided an intellectual basis for treating Ireland and its inhabitants very differently from other ‘outlying regions’ of the Tudor state. In the right circumstances any measure could be contemplated.

Ultimately, the fate of many Irish people was determined by how ‘circumstances’ were perceived in Dublin Castle, the seat of English power in Ireland, and in Whitehall. If the pursuit of Anglicisation was a key foundation of the crown’s Irish policy, security considerations were the other, following Henry VIII’s breach with Rome and the commencement of the English Reformation. The price for the royal supremacy over the English Church was English diplomatic isolation in Europe, and with that came a growing fear of invasion – of Ireland as much as of England. When King Henry first intervened in Ireland, in 1534, it was in response to reports that a Spanish and Imperial army of 10,000 soldiers was on its way to support the Geraldine rebels and defend the Catholic Church.\footnote{If the foreign forces landed and Ireland fell, England itself would be next.} Invasion scares punctuated Tudor Irish policy thereafter. In 1539–40 it was rumoured not only that James V of Scotland was readying a fleet, but that he was considering accepting an offer of the Irish crown that had been made to him by ‘all the great men in Ireland’.\footnote{Henry VIII’s war with Scotland and France of 1544–5, unresolved at his death in 1547, bequeathed a bundle of troubles to his children, the Protestant Edward VI and the Catholic Mary I, not the least of which was containing}
the threat of French and Scottish influence in Ireland. These worries continued, and intensified, after Elizabeth I’s accession in 1558, and her restoration of Protestantism. Fears of French and Scottish intervention preoccupied her early years on the throne, with the arrival of hostile fleets on the Irish coast expected in 1559, 1560–62 and 1566. Subsequently, deteriorating relations with Habsburg Spain led to rumours of impending Spanish and papal invasion plans in 1569–70, 1572, 1574 and 1575–8. An invasion eventually materialised, in 1580, in Co. Kerry. Fears of other attempted landings were hardly eased by the slaughter of the Italian and Spanish forces trapped in Smerwick harbour (November 1580). Open war with Spain and Portugal was by then fast becoming inevitable, and from 1585, when it finally erupted, until 1603, when the war wound down, barely a year passed without reports reaching Dublin and Whitehall of Spanish fleets and their likely Irish destinations.

It was this constant dread of Ireland’s island exposure to foreign naval encroachment, and its strong religious, cultural and commercial ties to mainland Europe, that chewed away at English confidence about bringing Ireland under control. It allowed the advocates of military methods a stronger hold over Irish policy than those preferring a more gradual approach. It predisposed the government to over-reaction in times of rebellion and/or rumours of invasion. It made emergency measures like martial law widespread and commonplace. It made the mass killing of rebels, their followers, and suspected ‘maintainers’, seem logical. Occasionally it even recommended the inducement of famine in troublesome regions, as a short-term military expedient.

III

Invariably the Tudor policy of Anglicisation was presented as though it were a gift to Ireland and the Irish, something from which the country and its inhabitants would derive enormous benefit. By making Ireland more like England Tudor ministers and servitors claimed that the country would become a land of peace and plenty, where everything would be stable and settled, law and justice prevail, and industry and enterprise be rewarded; all under the protective gaze of the royal government in Dublin. But stripped of all this spin and Tudor Rose-tinting, the pursuit of Anglicisation was not just a constructive endeavour. It was also deliberately destructive, for it meant de-Gaelicisation. The Gaelic way of life provoked real venom among leading English ministers and officers of the crown. Regardless of Queen Mary’s desire for a little Irish colour at her court, or Queen Elizabeth’s fondness for Irish tunes, those given responsibility for ruling Ireland on their behalf usually became less inclined to appreciate such manifestations of Irish cultural refinement. For them the Gaelic order was an alien and barely comprehensible entity that defied English management and supervision. The Gaelic aristocracy had once ruled the entire island, as kings and princes, and their sixteenth-century descendants lost no opportunity to remind the officers and agents of the English Tudor monarchy of this fact – something which greatly irked the crown’s officers, as doubtless was the intention. Circa 1540 the Gaelic lords and chieftains controlled approximately 60% of the land of the country: all of Ulster, the greater part of Connacht, half or more of Munster, and sizeable parts of Leinster. The lords’ political strength and vitality was greatly enhanced by their enduring territorial and cultural ties with Gaelic Scotland, with whose leading families they formed a self-contained world, or Gaedhealtacht, stretching fully 700 miles in length from the Skelligs off the coast of Kerry to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.
It was a world for which many English felt mostly repulsion. In their own territories, or tuatha, the Gaelic lords and their followers appeared to conform to no recognisable standard of proper ‘civilised’ behaviour. Often living remotely behind mountains and forests they were generally cattle lords, pastoral, semi-nomadic, who moved with their herds between summer and winter pasturelands accompanied by hundreds of their followers arranged into creaghts, or mobile communities. To English eyes this seemed an idle and feckless existence, following livestock instead of settling permanently in villages, farming the land, and growing things; it also looked latently or actually criminal, the mobility of the Gaels seeming to nurture a sub-culture of trespass and theft, cattle-raiding and banditry. And there were other faults. Living in such close proximity to cattle, pigs, goats and sheep the Gaelic Irish were considered slovenly and dirty. The lords and leading men wore long, heavy weather-resistant mantles or cloaks suitable to the outdoor life, but these made them appear rustic and backward. They and their horsemen rode without stirrups: that was deemed unrefined, not ‘gentleman like’. Collectively it all served to confirm the view that Gaeldom was primitive and beastly, its inhabitants savage. In countless reports and treatises of the period the late medieval English literary trope of the ‘wild Irish’ received a Renaissance humanist makeover. Indeed it was from the quills of some of the most experienced (and best educated) English officers despatched to Tudor Ireland that the trope would receive its clearest expression.

To quote Sir William Fitzwilliam, the longest-serving Tudor governor of Ireland: in 1572, in a letter to Whitehall, he growled in frustration that ‘this people [the Irish]’ had been too long ‘misled in beastly liberty and sensual immunity so as they cannot abide to hear of correction, no, not for the horriblest sins that they can commit . . . In vain is law brought amongst them’.21 Likewise his eventual successor as viceroy, the son of the earl of Bedford and an advanced Calvinist, Sir William Russell: serving as a captain in 1581 he denounced as ‘devilish and abominable before God’ all ‘Irish habits and Irish laws’. Their continued prevalence tended only ‘to the utter destruction of the common weal and impoverishing of her Majesty’s subjects’.22 Writing about the same time the English governor of Connacht, Sir Nicholas Malby, adopted a similar moralising tone: reporting from Co. Galway he denounced as wicked the local rulers and their numerous followers, ‘forsaken of God and their prince’.23

IV

Of course, cultural disdain for the Gaelic world was one thing; encompassing its reduction quite another. The main factor behind this transition was concern over English security. From Rosscarbery in the south-west all the way to Larne in the north-east the Gaelic lords controlled most of the Irish Atlantic coastline. French, Spanish, Portuguese and Scottish vessels routinely visited these shores, far from the reach of English power. Weather permitting, an invasion attempt would stand a good chance of success. Moreover, it was the sea that best sustained the capacity of the Gaelic lords to resist English governmental encroachment. Since the fourteenth century the steady supply of mercenary galloglasses from western Scotland and the Isles had transformed Irish fighting capabilities against English cavalry forces, and helped the local lineages overthrow large parts of the medieval English colony in Ireland – the ‘Gaelic resurgence’.24 At the beginning of the sixteenth century reports of growing numbers of Scottish mercenaries active in Ireland greatly agitated English observers, coinciding as it did with Scottish royal overtures in Ulster. No less concerning were reports that
the Gaelic lords had begun acquiring firearms from continental and Scottish arms-traders. The ‘resurgence’ was still surging.

The sheer vim of the Gaelic order was demonstrated most vividly in historically English areas. To their horror, ‘New English’ servitors arriving in Dublin, the English colonial capital, or venturing out into the surrounding counties of the ‘English Pale’ encountered a community that was rather less English than they had expected. Gaelic influence was all around. Gentlemen and merchants with English surnames and centuries of English ancestry broke into Irish when meeting each other. They had Gaelic tenants, Gaelic household servants; they traded with Gaelic areas in Wicklow, the Midlands, the south Ulster borderlands. Many of them even had Gaelic wives or in-laws, and fostered their children with Gaelic host families to learn the language and customs of the Gaedhealtacht and to form (or preserve) lasting ties of affinity with Gaelic territories and the lineages ruling them. They had integrated, gone partly native, been Gaelicised. They were Hiberno-English.

The newcomers’ condemnation of the Hiberno-English was immediate and shrill. It was also persistent. The word most frequently used to describe them was one loaded with meaning for anyone interested in the long history of pre-modern racism: ‘degenerate’. As Sir William Russell put it, in wide areas of the Pale and all across Munster and Connacht ‘all the lords and captains, knights, esquires and gentlemen’ of medieval English descent were ‘degenerate from their kind’. On two whole pages of his ‘Discourse of the present state of Ireland’ he listed the offending families that had so ‘degressed’ and ‘become Irish men in effect’. Russell’s text found its way into the hands of the Elizabethan Secretary of State Sir Francis Walsingham, who annotated it extensively, and wrote summaries in the margins. Walsingham wholeheartedly agreed that urgent measures needed to be taken to reverse Hiberno-English degeneracy and curb the continuing spread of Gaelic influence. The question was, which measures? Walsingham’s colleague Lord Burghley had already given the subject serious deliberation. In his main statement on Irish matters, the 1575 ‘Degrees for the Government of Ireland’, Burghley had proposed that a sort of apartheid was needed. It would be a medical measure, quarantine to cure a sickness. The Gaelic lords and lineages infected everything around them; they must, then, be contained, challenged, reduced; above all, they must be separated from the Hiberno-English to end the spread of their contagion. Then, with the Hiberno-English restored to full Englishness again, the Gaelic Irish might be cured with a suitable medicine, forcibly applied by soldiers on campaign as well as judges on circuit. In 1581 Russell made almost exactly the same recommendation in the discourse read by Walsingham.

The obvious racialism that underpinned the Anglicising proposals of Burghley and Russell was nothing new. As far back as 1537 Henry VIII’s government had overseen the passage of an act in the Irish parliament ‘for the English order, habit and language’, which stipulated that ‘all men that [ac]knowledge themselves to be his highness’s true and faithful subjects’ must use the English language and English customs ‘continually’, ‘without ceasing’, and ‘must not suffer any within his family or rule to use the Irish habit’, or dress. Another act was also passed in the same parliament banning intermarriage and fosterage ‘with any Irish person or persons of Irish blood’, ‘within the fourth degree’. The fact that the acts had not been adequately enforced had exasperated crown officers and servitors long before Burghley and Russell picked up their pens. Among New English observers this failure was seen as yet further proof of the unreliability of the Hiberno-English who continued to serve in the central
government in significant numbers, and who dominated local government in the counties and towns; only true Englishmen, born in England, could be entrusted with the task of imposing Anglicising measures and all that that entailed.

Edmund Tremayne, the clerk of the Elizabethan Privy Council and a leading English ideologue on ‘Ireland matters’ whose views were held in high regard at Whitehall, saw forceful de-Gaelicisation as the only effective way to save the Hiberno-English from themselves, so low had they fallen. Queen Elizabeth, he urged, must be moved ‘to take ye enterprise in hand’ and ‘apply the medicine requisite for the purpose’ – to first reduce the ‘inhumanity and beastliness’ of the Gaelic ruling lineages, if necessary by extreme force, ‘to make all the Irishry in Ireland [live] in terror’. Then and only then might she compel the Hiberno-English to ‘show themselves English in deed’.

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Henry Ackworth, a captain in Munster and a close client of Burghley, broadly agreed. The reduction of Gaelic power had been only intermittently pursued in a few regions of the country, through treaties of surrender and re-grant, seneschal schemes, colonisation, and the establishment of garrisons; it was time, he said, for more concerted and persistent action. Ackworth, it should be noted, was a committed Protestant. What most prompted his advice was concern that the exposure of the southern and western Gaelic lordships to militant Counter-Reformation Catholicism imported from Europe would soon affect the island at large. But his prescription for de-Gaelicisation is striking for its racialist clarity. Militant Catholicism was only the most recent symptom of the real underlying problem – the uninterrupted flow of what he called the ‘spes veniae’, or infected bloodline, of the country’s Gaelic rulers. Their descent through long generations of ruthless scheming warlords, one vicious thug after another, was corrupting and harmful to the whole population and was a constant obstacle to good government and the development of a commonwealth. The blood-flow needed to be stopped, the lineages terminated.

Such views are often identified with Edmund Spenser, who wrote at the close of the Tudor period, in the mid-1590s. Ackworth wrote a generation earlier, in the mid-1570s. Careful examination of other texts and authors is beginning to reveal much earlier examples of very similar opinions. Indeed, a single word provides an important clue to the persistence of a fundamentally hostile approach to the ‘Gaelic problem’ that dates all the way back to the reign of Henry VIII – ‘extirpation’. This was the sixteenth-century English word for annihilation. Usually it is found in domestic English writings about agriculture and gardening, particularly in regard to weed-killing. It means to destroy completely, by pulling out from the root. It is frequently used in Tudor discourse about Ireland, as a metaphor for the military extermination of troublesome Gaelic and Gaelicised lineages and other ‘enemy’ groups. Not just rebel lords and their immediate followers were to be weeded and killed, but the entire bloodline of their stock, and, if need be, the populations living under their rule. Possibly the earliest use of ‘extirpation’ in this sense was in a letter to Henry VIII by Sir William Skeffington, written while leading a campaign against Geraldine rebels. The word recurs regularly thereafter in English state papers and official correspondence, down to Spenser’s day; a close study of its usage might be a worthwhile topic for a research student.

Both Henry Ackworth and Edmund Spenser urged a cull, or ‘extirping’, of the rebellious Gaelic and Gaelicised lineages at times of heightened security fears (1574 and 1590s). Careful examination of other texts and authors is beginning to reveal much earlier examples of very similar opinions. Indeed, a single word provides an important clue to the persistence of a fundamentally hostile approach to the ‘Gaelic problem’ that dates all the way back to the reign of Henry VIII – ‘extirpation’. This was the sixteenth-century English word for annihilation. Usually it is found in domestic English writings about agriculture and gardening, particularly in regard to weed-killing. It means to destroy completely, by pulling out from the root. It is frequently used in Tudor discourse about Ireland, as a metaphor for the military extermination of troublesome Gaelic and Gaelicised lineages and other ‘enemy’ groups. Not just rebel lords and their immediate followers were to be weeded and killed, but the entire bloodline of their stock, and, if need be, the populations living under their rule. Possibly the earliest use of ‘extirpation’ in this sense was in a letter to Henry VIII by Sir William Skeffington, written while leading a campaign against Geraldine rebels. The word recurs regularly thereafter in English state papers and official correspondence, down to Spenser’s day; a close study of its usage might be a worthwhile topic for a research student.
1596 respectively). It was much the same with Burghley and Russell’s proposals for quarantining the Hiberno-English from Gaelic infection (1575 and 1581). Partial extermination and apartheid required special circumstances to be recommended as suitable measures. For large parts of the Tudor period an in-between approach was more usual, mixing negotiation and accommodation with coercion and severity. In part this was due to economic considerations, with the government under pressure to trim and make savings while pushing ahead with the imposition of greater territorial control. It was also, though, a reflection of the Tudors’ conviction that the Irish were ‘reformable’ and ultimately would accept the extension of superior English forms of government and standards of behaviour. Despite difficulties of implementation, ongoing evasion, and countless rebellions, this idea lingered. It remained at the heart of crown policy at the beginning of the next century, under the Stuart monarchy.

The willingness of many Irish lords and people to serve the crown and participate in its undertakings seemed, to some, to confirm the view that eventually most, if not all, might follow their example. The fact that those Hiberno-English and Gaelic Irish leaders who cooperated did so often out of narrow self-interest, expecting to gain power and land through crown reward, or out of more desperate considerations of self-preservation, for fear of impending destruction, was perfectly understood. It was accepted pragmatically as a necessary precondition for the successful realisation of policy. Besides which, Irish forces were a valuable addition to what constituted the royal army. They were cheap, they were readily available, and they knew the terrain best. No major campaign could realistically be undertaken without their participation. They could help make English dominion safe.

And so we have the paradox that English military operations designed to Anglicise parts of sixteenth-century Ireland by force, and exterminate opposition, received vital assistance from the Irish themselves. The most prominent of the crown’s Irish allies were the Butlers. By a distance the main Hiberno-English dynasty in the country after the defeat of the Kildare Fitzgeralds in 1534–5, the Butler earls of Ormond embraced Tudor expansion enthusiastically as an opportunity to enhance their standing in England as well as in Ireland, as one of the great aristocratic houses of the Tudor dominions. In this they partly succeeded (though not nearly as much as they would have wished) and they did so by providing extensive military reinforcements to the crown, sometimes gratis, across the southern half of the country, and occasionally in Ulster and the frontiers of Connacht. The Butlers aside, among the Hiberno-English the Fitzgerald earls of Desmond provided extensive military assistance between 1543 and 1566; the restored earls of Kildare assumed a leading role from 1554–75 and again during 1594–7; and lesser lords such as Nugent of Delvin, Eustace of Baltinglass, Fleming of Slane and Plunkett of Dunsany participated in numerous ‘hostings’ and ‘journeys’. Regarding the Gaelic Irish, their role was less pronounced, but major Gaelic lords did play their part, not least Shane O’Neill prior to his rebellion in 1557, Barnaby Fitzpatrick between 1554 and his death in 1581, Donough, Lord Thomond during the years 1588–1603, and Hugh O’Neill, earl of Tyrone before his fateful decision to rebel in 1595. Below this elite level it is also significant that a large proportion of the ordinary rank and file troops in the crown forces were of Hiberno-English and Gaelic extraction, hired by English officers as cheap substitutes for dead or missing English and Welsh men.

But of course the campaigns in which these Irish lords and soldiers participated and risked their lives were English campaigns, in pursuit of English crown objectives,
and under English direction. The imputation sometimes advanced that it was Irish influence that made the Tudor crown forces wage war so savagely, and kill so many, does not bear inspection. The worst excesses of the operations against the Geraldine rebels in the 1530s were carried out by English forces acting on the immediate orders of successive English viceroys Sir William Skeffington and Leonard Grey. This is why the main journal of Skeffington’s war in the borders of the Pale was called ‘The feats of the English army’. The attempted clearing of Laois and Offaly during 1546–8, though requiring an ethnically very mixed force, was overseen to chilling effect by Sir William Brabazon, the English Lord Justice.

And so it continued: the initial Tudor incursions into Ulster in the late 1540s were the work of Andrew Brereton and Nicholas Bagenal, both of whom hailed from the north-west of England; the further penetration of the province between 1556 and 1563 was that of Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex, and his right-hand man and marshal Sir George Stanley (brother of the earl of Derby). The second plantation of Laois and Offaly was the bloody creation of Sussex’s brother and eventual successor as earl, Sir Henry Radcliffe, supported by a chosen team of New English captains, including Francis Cosby and Robert Harpole. Cosby and Harpole would later be the prime movers of the massacre of Mullaghmast in 1577. The slaughter of old men, women and children in Munster by the Devon knight Sir Humphrey Gilbert is notable not just for the brutality he deployed, but also because Gilbert had only English troops under his charge, not trusting native forces. The massacre of Rathlin Island in 1575 was done by Sir John Norris and Francis Drake; that at Smerwick in 1580 by Captains Walter Raleigh and Humphrey Mackworth. The Connacht massacre of 1581 at Carrick Mulgreeny, was carried out by George Acres and Nicholas Mordaunt, English officers of the provincial governor Sir Nicholas Malby. On first becoming Connacht governor a few years earlier Malby had proposed the ‘extirpation’ of ‘the entire race of the Burkes’. By his estimate 200 Burkes and their kin were killed during his 1580–1 operations – including a five-year-old boy – besides a great many others of less consequence.36

English government instructions demanded this level of severity. Consider the orders issued for the renewal of war against the O’Mores and O’Connors in the Midlands in October 1557: Sir Henry Radcliffe, the commander of the crown forces, was required ‘to plague, punish and prosecute with sword and fire and other war-like manners all Irishmen [my italics] and their countries’ in the vicinity of Laois and Offaly where he thought the O’Mores and O’Connors might be hiding out. He was also allowed to issue sub-commissions of martial law ‘under his hand’ to whoever was serviceable, to execute ‘all manner of persons’ whatsoever.37 One of the starkest statements of Tudor military tactics in Ireland was in August 1579. Responding to news of the arrival from Europe of the Munster Catholic rebel James FitzMaurice, a proclamation was issued specifying that in addition to FitzMaurice himself and his supporters, it would be lawful for the crown’s officers to put to death all wandering and masterless people in the province, including Gaelic harpers, bards and rhymers, as well as, curiously, able-bodied persons found acting as guides to ‘blind folk’.38 In the ensuing Munster campaign led by Sir William Pelham, the government army fought pitilessly. As Pelham described it in a letter to the queen, he had undertaken a journey into part of Co. Limerick ‘consuming with fire all habitation and executing of the people wheresoever we found them’. The rebels, he said, had departed before his arrival, but that did not matter. ‘Albeit it were to be wished that the common people should not
with their blood bear the burden of the [rebels’] offence . . . the example with terror must light upon some.' 39 Non-combatants were killed as an example to combatants.

Not all crown commanders followed this practice. As far as we can tell, the operations waged by Pelham’s second-in-command the Hiberno-English lord the ‘Black earl’ of Ormond tended to discriminate between rebels and non-rebels, combatants and civilians, a little more effectively. This may have been because Ormond, as a native magnate, could avail of much better intelligence about the rebels’ whereabouts and how best to isolate them. But it was also because the earl needed to avoid unnecessary carnage the better to protect his reputation among the Irish, with whom he tried to mediate for the crown and advance his dynasty’s interests. Although according to an account written on his behalf he killed thousands, his style of soldiering drew heavy criticism for his use of protections to persuade rebels to surrender in return for sparing their lives. Among the New English it is recorded that Sir George Bourchier was reluctant to kill women and children: in April 1580 he was ordered to stop offering them his protection, and to put them to the sword when required. 40

In the final analysis, however, it is clear that Bourchier was a rare exception. Once they commenced, most of the larger-scale crown campaigns in Ireland were conducted with scant regard for civilians. ‘Extermination’ may have suggested a careful weeding of troubled ground, but in practice it was not very careful at all. Sir Nicholas Malby’s killing of 200 Burkes, referred to above, was accompanied by the slaughter of no less than 500 others who by his own admission were in no way related to his target group. Similarly, following his dismissal as viceroy in 1582, Lord Grey de Wilton penned a lengthy vindication of his brief government of Ireland, addressed to the queen. In this he presented a detailed account of what he most wanted to be remembered for – the killing of rebel Gaelic and Hiberno-English lords and their supporters in all four provinces of the country. He attempted to demonstrate his discrimination as commander-in-chief. His officers, he boasted, had slain various O’Byrnes and O’Tooles in Wicklow, O’Mores and O’Connors in the Midlands, Kavanaghs and Eustaces in Carlow, O’Rourkes in Leitrim, and Geraldines in Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Kerry. He listed all the killings, giving numbers and locations, in an abstract of service appended at the end. The most telling line is the last one: ‘So the number of slain in these services of note comes to 1,485, not accounting those of meaner sort, nor killing of churls, the account of which is beside number.’ 41

This is one of the main reasons why the Tudor wars were so devastating to the Irish population at large. Civilian casualties were not only well out of proportion to the numbers of combatants killed, they were of small consequence, not worth the counting. Worse, they weren’t worth counting yet were often deliberately targeted in order to deny subjects and workers to the Gaelic and Hiberno-English rebel lords and leaders. The other reason for the devastating mortality was the general recourse to scorched earth and the inducement of famine. Both rebel and crown forces share the responsibility for this. As well as burning the lands of local enemies and crown loyalists Irish rebels often burned their own lands to deny succour to the crown forces chasing them. But here too the English army acquitted itself with particular vigour, in almost every campaign in which it was involved burning more widely and over much longer periods of time than its opponents. There were at least three sizeable famines caused by all this burning and destruction, in 1557–9 in the east and north-east, in 1580–84 in the south-west, and, probably most deadly of all, in 1601–4, at the very end of the Tudor wars. This last famine was strongest in Ulster and Connacht, but Munster too
was badly affected. When it was all over the population of many parts of Ireland, but especially the Gaedhealtacht, had been greatly decreased. The final emasculation of Gaelic noble power soon followed, under the Stuarts, along with the resumption of Anglicisation.

Notes

1 TNA, SP 62/2/44; Annals of the Four Masters of the Kingdom of Ireland, (ed.) John O’Donovan (7 vols, Dublin 1851) [hereafter AFM], v, sub annum 1557.


3 Fynes Moryson, An Itinerary (4 vols, Glasgow: MacLehose, 1907–8), iii, p. 283.


11 AFM, v, sub annum 1577.


18 See the pioneering statement of Ben Kiernan, Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur (Yale: New Haven, CT, 2007), ch. 5.


21 Fitzwilliam to Burghley, 25 Sept. 1572 (TNA SP 63/37/60).
Further reading


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Maginn, Christopher, William Cecil, Ireland, and the Tudor State (Oxford 2012)


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