

Reviews

This Lost Land: Ireland in Elizabethan Times

The Twilight Lords: An Irish Chronicle
by Richard Berleth. 1994.

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That the intertwined histories of England and Ireland have been complex through the ages should be no surprise. The unhappy coupling began long before the Elizabethan age and it has not ended yet. But the relationship that one Elizabethan Vice Treasurer called “the sink of the treasure of England” took on increased importance during Elizabeth’s reign, when the stage was set for reverberations and repercussions on both islands that are with us even today.

Ireland was England’s first colony off the island of Great Britain and, in the vestige known as Northern Ireland, arguably remains its last. Long before Elizabeth’s birth, England had tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to conquer and tame the native Irish Celts. Since their conquest of the island between the 6th and 1st centuries BCE, these people had developed a society based strongly on independence and autonomy. The Celtic Gaels had formed over a hundred *tuatha*, or petty kingdoms, independent of one another but sharing a common language and Brehon Law. Even in religion, a distinctive Celtic Christianity had evolved early to rival the Roman Church, with the Irish sending missionaries of their own throughout Europe. But unlike strongly centralized Roman Christianity, the Celtic “Church” was built upon numerous autonomous monasteries. In Ireland, historically untouched and unconquered by the Roman Empire and not yet under the Roman Church, there was no longing for or toleration of either foreign or centralized power.

Elizabeth’s father had been the latest to try to reconquer Ireland. Since Henry II, the Roman Church had backed England’s claim over Ireland, primarily to bring Celtic Christianity more in line with Roman standards, but Henry VIII’s severance of ties with Rome had complicated things. For one thing, there was virtually no sympathy for the Protestant cause among the native Gaels or the remaining Anglo-Irish colonists, who reportedly had become “more Irish than the Irish.” Nevertheless, Henry VIII had been

somewhat successful at undermining Celtic society by compelling hitherto elected Irish chieftains to accept English lordships and privileges, thereby imposing the laws of feudal monarchy, including the law of succession (primogeniture), on those who had elected them. Having made that “advance,” Henry followed the tradition of his royal predecessors and quickly turned to other issues, leaving most Irish largely “outside the Pale,” literally, of English influence. And so it remained until the third decade of his daughter Elizabeth’s reign.

It is at this point that Richard Berleth picks up with his excellent book, *The Twilight Lords: An Irish Chronicle*. As he sets the scene for what he calls “the tragedy of Elizabeth’s Ireland,” Berleth writes:

The glories of Elizabethan England are well fixed in the popular mind... all are at the heart of that age which was also the flowering time of English-speaking culture and national sentiment. Now to insert the Irish debacle seems rude, except for the fact that popular accounts have passed silently over that subject, relegating it to the backwater of specialized history or dismissing its brutal nature.... *The Twilight Lords* opens this matter not to revel in old horrors or to deflate the triumphs of a legendary reign. The book only means to suggest the underside of Elizabethan virtues, the negative force of certain Renaissance values, for those values have certainly descended to us. (xiii-xiv)

In chronicling the events and characters of Elizabethan Ireland, Berleth is neither pro-Irish nor anti-Elizabethan—neither side in the conflict is painted as without fault or self-interest. While the English may be arrogant in their presumption that Ireland and the Irish people are “theirs,” the Irish hold their own against their enemy for cunning, betrayal and brutality. That is, the Irish earls do. For as the story unfolds, it is the historical, endless disregard on both sides for non-combatants that horrifies. To a smaller but lethal degree, the English settlers, and to a staggering and exterminating extent the native Irish, are the innocent victims of this struggle. Even contemporaries were often disgusted:

Never since I was a man of war, was I so weary with killing of men, for I protest to God, for as fast as I could I did hew them and paunch them, because they did run as we break them [these victims were prisoners who had surrendered], and so in less space than an hour this whole and good field was done. (173)

Berleth begins his book not with Ireland, but with three situations that form a backdrop. First, there is Elizabeth’s courtship of the French Duke of Alencon and the subsequent “marriage crisis,” which becomes the Virgin Queen’s greatest preoccupation. Berleth outlines and discusses the impending marriage in great depth. At the same time, England is preparing to join in battle with

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other Protestant powers against the Counter-Reformation forces in the Netherlands. Finally, there is intelligence that Philip II's Spanish armies are making extensive preparations at Antwerp and other sites, possibly for a Channel crossing against England.

The only English concern in early 1579 for Ireland (and this becomes a refrain even into our own century) is that the enemies of England might invade Ireland or persuade the Irish to aid them against England: "England could not afford a hostile and undefended Ireland at its back." (217) For much of its history, Ireland's worth as a colony was considered more as a strategic military buffer to England's west than as a colonial exporter or source of farmland and grazing meadows. Berleth emphasizes that, if Elizabeth had had her way, affairs in Ireland would not even have made her list of concerns; it was "a land always to be reformed tomorrow, never today... she preferred to ignore it." (3)

In the autumn of 1579, however, Ireland thrust itself into Elizabeth's concerns, where it would remain until her death, twenty-five years later. Before her successor took the throne, the list of Elizabethan characters directly involved with Ireland would grow to include Peter Carew, Warham St. Leger, Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh, Francis Walsingham, Henry Sidney, John Perrot, William Pelham, Nicholas Matby, Arthur Grey, Charles Blount, John Cheke, and William Stanley. Thomas Norris and five of his brothers would die in Ireland; the fall of the great Earl of Essex would begin there. Unnamed are the two waves of English settlers who were exterminated and the innocents who made up half of the Irish population that would die through war, famine, and plague. These Berleth calls "the common people, the pawns at risk, [who] were sacrificed by both sides without compunction." (xiii) No wonder, as the author points out, specific events of that time are still recounted in parts of Ireland today.

The first of the three Elizabethan Irish rebellions began in 1565 when James Fitzmaurice, the self-proclaimed Captain of Desmond, led forces to oust English settlers from confiscated Desmond land in south Munster. Fitzmaurice's cousin and rival, the Earl of Desmond, had been imprisoned in England after a particularly bloody internecine battle, creating a vacuum among the balancing forces of Irish baron-chieftains. Without the help of the English, however, Fitzmaurice probably could not have united the midland clans as successfully as he did. Sir Peter Carew, stationed in Munster to protect English colonists, caused an uproar when, during a foray to punish a band of cattle thieves, his soldiers invaded the territory of a loyal chieftain and sacked and burned the town of Kilkenny, one of the few prosperous county towns in Ireland. Carew's actions, for which he was dismissed by Whitehall, prompted Fitzmaurice's fellow lords to thron to his rebellion. Before the First Desmond War was over, four years later, "the Munster colony, the settlers, and a large part of Elizabeth's army and resources had vanished." (25)

The bulk of *The Twilight Lords* describes the rebellions known as the Second Desmond War and the rebellion of Hugh O'Neill in Ulster. Although Berleth aptly chronicles the political and military details surrounding these abstractions, what stands out again and again is the barbarity of the treatment of the Irish people, word of which even reached Elizabeth: "Troubling her most were charges that she was methodically exterminating her Irish subjects..." (154) Berleth gives a too-telling example in the 1580 siege, under Arthur Grey, the Queen's Lord Deputy of Ireland, of Smerwick. Walter Raleigh was present and leading troops:

There followed that ghastly scene so often repeated in Ireland during the wars. Women pleaded their bellies [claiming pregnancy], and Grey's troops strung them up, nevertheless, with requisite speed and efficiency... The women hanged at Del Oro fared better than the men... The prisoners had already been stripped of their armor, they were defenseless against pike thrusts, and those who dodged the long poles were slashed by the swordsmen. As could be expected, the killing was heavy work, the prisoners clung to one another in a corner of the enclosure and had to be dragged free... the pleas and cries fell on deaf ears... While Mackworth and Raleigh carried out their assignment, others tallied the spoils... and then stripped the dead of all valuables, including their clothing. The bodies were carried to the sea face, flung over the wall, and allowed to roll down onto the narrow beach below... Raleigh never mentioned Smerwick thereafter. (173-4)

Raleigh did later call Ireland, "This lost land... this commonwealth, or rather common woe." Berleth himself seems sickened by the scene he has described, for he comments:

The grim particulars of the Smerwick massacre are described in order that the close and personal nature of such things be understood... Worse atrocities occurred during the sixteenth century, worse massacres occurred in Ireland alone, yet of all the arguments summoned to dismiss or justify Smerwick, none seems more patently false than the broad historical, the view that such things were less objectionable to an earlier and more barbaric age. To say that mercy or compassion had a different value for Elizabethans, that they found the slaughter of prisoners more congenial, is to miss their shame and horror. (174)

Though *The Twilight Lords* is primarily about the Irish rebellions, students of Elizabethan times will find more: descriptions of military operations, down to Captain Barnabe Rich's coining of the word "hubbub" to capture the Irish war cry at the Battle of Monaster. Berleth also includes scattered but well-written looks at various aspects of Elizabethan life, going to contemporary sources for descriptions of the layout of Irish castles and village life in

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Elizabethan Ireland, as well as describing the jostling and sycophancy of courtiers back at Whitehall. He strays from the battles for a lengthy discussion of Edmund Spenser, both as landowner and poet, with a particularly touching view of Spenser's last days, death and funeral. He chronicles Essex's downfall and gives a detailed account of the trial of Teig McGilpatrick and Connor MacCormac under Lord Justice Henry Wallop, a trial Berleth describes as "among the most bizarre in English legal history" and "the last instance of trial by combat in the British Isles." (212)

He has some intriguing commentary on the implications of English colonialism for Catholicism in Ireland, describing the step-wise strengthening of the Church each time English influence waned, and suggesting a role for Irish Catholicism as largely a nationalistic reaction to the ascendancy of Protestantism and colonialism in neighboring England. Berleth suggests that the famed sensuality of Celtic women drew blame and anger from the English overlords and their armies. And he deftly reminds us how Elizabethan England's Irish policy reverberates: before the invasion of Scottish and English settlers during James I's Ulster Plantation, the O'Neill (Tyrone) rebellion created political consequences that still effect the troubles in Northern Ireland today.

Lord Burghley figures prominently in the story and, for the most part, is treated sympathetically. Berleth sees him as one who served as a source of restraint, preferring benign neglect in matters Irish. Cecil's concern with Ireland was primarily one of bringing Brehon Ireland under English Common Law and avoiding the stellar costs of war with the Gaels.

He paints Burghley as at least prescient if not prophetic in his counsel to Elizabeth to calm her growing wariness and frustration with Ireland: that the "plan to dispossess the Irish and colonize Ireland with English settlers was beyond the power and scope of the Crown." (54) His steadfast distrust of military solutions to Irish problems would change only somewhat in his old age with the impending Armada. Berleth relates a strange event that occurred when the aging Burghley received Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone (and soon after called by the Queen "my Arch Traitor" and "my Monster of the North") to give advice on the procurement and use of lead for roofing O'Neill's proposed country house. Cecil became an inadvertent traitor.

Importation was strictly controlled, for obvious [military] reasons, and Cecil might well have been the only man in England capable of circumventing the restrictions. In any event, Hugh got his lead, a whole shipful... Before the Battle of Yellow Ford [two years later], Burghley's lead was melted down and molded into shot and ball. (251)

Burghley's death had direct implications for Ireland. With his passing went the chief voice of military toleration, so that "with Cecil gone, no one remained

to restrain the hot-heads or encourage Elizabeth's native caution." (274) At Yellow Ford in Ulster, English troops under Henry Bagenal suffered a terrible defeat; the news reached Whitehall during Burghley's funeral. Essex was soon sent to Ireland to subdue the Tyrone rebellion and, with Cecil gone, Elizabeth raised the largest expeditionary force of her reign, numbering more than 25,000 over the next three years. She proclaimed, "This is therefore the cause that after so long patience we have been compelled to take resolution to reduce that kingdom to obedience by using an extraordinary power and force against them." (287) As history and Berleth show, her eventual victory was pyrrhic. By the time the last and greatest of the Irish "twilight lords" had surrendered, the Queen was three days in her grave, two waves of English settlers had been exterminated, almost half the Irish people were dead, and much of Ireland had become a barren wilderness.

The Voice of God

William Tyndale: A Biography
by David Daniell. 1994.

Reviewed by Warren Hope, Ph.D. Dr. Hope is writing a life and study of the British poet Norman Cameron.

One of the most enlightening events in English history took place on October 24, 1526. On that date, Cuthbert Tunstall, then the Bishop of London, delivered a remarkable sermon at St. Paul's. No copy of the sermon has been preserved, unfortunately, but the substance of it and some of its supporting arguments were recorded by witnesses. As a result, it is still possible to gain a sense of the effect of the talk. Tunstall raised his voice that day to denounce a book and to call for the collection and burning of copies of it. The book, he contended, was an heretical work, full of errors—errors of the kind that could mislead readers into damnation. In sum, the book constituted "strange learning" and was not to be tolerated. Within days of this talk, servants of the Church and State brought copies of the pestiferous book to St. Paul's and publicly put them to the torch. In time, people found with the book in their possession were also publicly burned.

What handiwork of the devil was it that so exercised the Bishop of London?
The New Testament.

Nothing to my mind so clearly shows the contradictions in Tudor society, the strains caused by the clash between what was once called the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, than this single event. Do not misunderstand me, though.