LATE MEDIEVAL IRELAND

Late Medieval Ireland was made up of three distinct cultures: Gaelic Ireland, the Anglo-Normans or old English and those who were more recently arrived and lived primarily within the Pale. The Anglo-Normans recognized the king of England as their ruler but they lived far from London and often adopted many of the Gaelic customs.

English rule in Ireland was concentrated on an area around Dublin known as the Pale and in small areas centered in larger towns and cities. The people of the Pale kept much closer ties to England and followed English customs and "common law".

Medieval Gaelic society was a clan or lineage based society. The economy was based on farming. Barter, especially in cattle, was the common method of business transaction. Settlements were mostly scattered either in isolated farmsteads or in house clusters.

Gaelic society had its own system of law, known as Brehon Law. Brehons (or brithem) preserved and interpreted the law that had developed from customs passed on orally from one generation to the next. Brehon Law was often in direct contrast to English "common law". Brehon Law permitted divorce. Wives could keep their own names and property when they married. Children born outside marriage were entitled to a share in the inheritance of their mother. This often led to disputes and, in the political instability common in Medieval Ireland, hostage and ransom taking were used to strengthen alliances and enforce agreements.

Before the Flight

ULSTER BEFORE THE FLIGHT

In the 16th century Ulster was ruled primarily by Old Gaelic and Anglo-Norman families.

The O'Neill dynasty dominated Ulster from their base in Tír Eóghain, which consisted of Counties Tyrone, Fermanagh, Donegal, and Monaghan. By the 15th century, the political influence of the O’Donnell family, lords of Tír Chonaill, had spread from Donegal across the territories of Fermanagh, Sligo and Leitrim. They were opposed by sub-chieftains such as the O’Sullivans, the Mac Carthys, and the O’Tooles. The O’Donnell family kept a tight hold on their territories by stimulating rival claimants and by keeping a large army made up mainly of professional soldiers. England’s success in the O'Donnell’s defeat by Lord Deputy Arthur Gorges in 1593, led to the O'Donnells being known as "the king of the fish" because he controlled the greatest share of the Irish fish trade.

In 1576 Henry VIII introduced a scheme of "surrender and re-grant" in an effort to control the Irish lords. If the Gaelic Chieftains surrendered their lands to the King and promised to recognize English laws and customs, they were allowed to hold their lands in perpetuity from the monarch and were granted titles. Under this scheme Henry VIII granted the O'Neills the title of Earls of Tyrone.

At the start of Elizabeth I's reign in 1558 Ulster still lay beyond the reach of the English crown. Throughout the late 16th century various attempts were made to subdue the Gaelic chieftains and English power slowly advanced in Ulster.
THE NINE YEARS WAR

In the last decade of the 16th century the Gaelic lords felt increasingly threatened by the growing power of the English crown in Ulster. In 1593 the appointment of an English sheriff to Fermanagh led to a revolt by Hugh Maguire. Maguire soon found support from the other chieftains and thus began the Nine Years War. O'Neill secretly supported the rebels but kept up the appearance of loyalty to the Crown until 1595. He had the most to lose but knew that his authority in Tyrone was also under threat.

Maguire defeated the English at the Ford of the Biscuits in Fermanagh and Red Hugh O'Donnell led successful raids into Sligo, Mayo and North Galway. O'Neill defeated the English at Clontibret in Monaghan, Yellow Ford in Armagh and the Moyry Pass on the Armagh/Louth border. These successes were due in no small part to O'Neill's military skills as well as to the fact that the battles were fought mainly on territory familiar to the chieftains.

To build on these military successes foreign aid was essential. The Spanish were interested in helping England's enemy and several meetings took place in Donegal. In the meantime however battles raged within the clans over succession. This, worsened by the delay in the arrival of foreign aid, weakened the ability of the Irish to defeat the English.

BATTLE OF KINSALE 1601

The Spanish finally arrived in Kinsale, County Cork, in September 1601. Following an arduous journey from the north, O'Donnell persuaded O'Neill to attack the English forces in December. The battle was a disaster. O'Neill's forces did not surprise the English and they were forced to retreat while the advancing English cavalry attacked them. O'Donnell's force in the rear guard fled. The battle was soon over. The Spanish Captain, Don Juan del Águila surrendered nine days later to Lord Deputy Mountjoy. With no army and much of his loyalty lost to his cousin Niall Garbh, O'Donnell decided to go to Spain to get further help from King Philip III. He died in Simancas in 1602. He named his younger brother Ruairí as his successor.

TREATY OF MELLIFONT 1603

During 1603 Mountjoy concentrated his campaign in the northern counties and Leinster. Harrisons and sweets were harvested and harvest was soon set in. O'Neill returned home. Mountjoy however knew that O'Neill was still silent. Reluctantly the Queen authorised him to open negotiations with O'Neill. On the 26th March 1603 O'Neill took below Lord Mountjoy at Mellifont, County Louth. He swore to be loyal to the crown and not seek further assistance from foreign powers. The Treaty of Mellifont was signed on the 31st March 1603. O'Neill was granted pardon and was restored as the Earl of Tyrone. Ruairí O'Donnell was created the Earl of Tyrone.

AFTER THE TREATY

Although Ruairí O'Donnell had received a pardon from the crown of all the territories in Tyrone the patron declared that the O'Donnells must renounce their claims to the overlordships in areas west and south of Lough Swilly. Niall Garbh O'Donnell who was allowed to hold his own land around Crolly declared his own succession to the leadership of the O'Donnell clan. There was ongoing tension over land between O'Donnell and the other Donegal families, in particular the McSomers and O'Flahertys. Furthermore O'Donnell was constantly antagonised by the actions of the English officials in his territories.

Between 1601 and 1605 O'Neill slowly began to strengthen control over his territories. However, in 1605 O'Neill's old enemy Chichester was appointed as Lord Deputy. Chichester wanted to remove all the Catholic influence from the country and for all. He was determined to prove that the northern chieftains, in particular O'Neill, were planning treason.

Throughout 1606 royal officials provoked the chieftains who found it increasingly difficult to get support from the Lord Deputy. Rumours persisted that an Ulster presidency was to be set up with Chichester appointed as the head president of the north. Furthermore an attempt to set up a new line of O'Donnell leadership supported the O'Cahan chieftain's claim to an area of O'Neill's estate. Finally in 1607 O'Neill and O'Cahan were summoned to London by King James I to settle their dispute. It was believed that O'Neill and O'Donnell were to be arrested for treason. O'Neill considered that he had no option but to leave Ireland for the continent.
AFTER THE FLIGHT - EUROPE

A whole generation of Irish exiles now found themselves in Europe dependent for survival on their wits and the generosity of their hosts.

Ruairí’s son, Hugh Albert O’Donnell, an infant at the time of the flight, became an army officer in the Austrian service, and was killed in battle in 1642. His sister Mary was raised in the English court and met with her brother for the first time in Brussels in 1626. Nuala O’Donnell survived her four brothers; Red Hugh, Manus, Cathbharr and Ruairí but never returned to Ireland.

John O’Neill, Hugh’s son, made a career for himself as the Spanish Army. He died in 1641 in battle at Catalunya.

The descendants of the families who left Rathmullan in 1607 made lives for themselves in Europe and their names survive to this day in their adopted countries.

THE FLIGHT OF THE EARLS

Hugh O’Neill was in Slane, County Meath when word reached him on the 6th of September 1607 that Cúchonnacht Maguire had arrived with a French ship, hired to bring the Irish Earls to Spain. The ship was harboured in Lough Swilly near Rathmullan.

O’Neill travelled from Slane to Mellifont on the 8th of September and from there on to Dundalk. His route then took him over Slieve Foy to Armagh and then to his home in Dungannon, County Tyrone. From there he travelled over the Sperrin Mountains and was met in Ballindrait in County Donegal by Cathbharr O’Donnell. Together they travelled to Rathmullan where Ruairí O’Donnell and others were loading the ship.

Ninety-nine people in total departed for the continent on the 14th of September from Portnamurry near Rathmullan. The passengers assembled in such a hurry that O’Neill’s infant son could not be retrieved from his foster family and they were forced to leave without him. Ruairí O’Donnell also left behind his young and heavily pregnant wife, Bridget.

Thirteen days into the journey, heavy storms diverted the ship from its intended destination of Corunna in Spain and they headed for the north of France. On the 4th of October the ship landed at Quilleboeuf on the Seine River near Rouen.

EXILE AND DEATH

The Earls were eager to travel to the safety of Spanish controlled Flanders. They travelled east and reached Louvain, in Belgium in November 1607. They spent the winter at the Irish Franciscan College, meeting news from the Spanish King. Having received no word from Spain by February the Earls set out for Rome, leaving the children and some of the women in Louvain. After a difficult journey over the Alps they reached Rome on the 25th of April 1608. The party were made welcome and Pope Paul V granted them the hospitality of the Papal Court.

In the summer of 1608 Cahir O’Doherty’s rebellion in Inishowen made O’Neill impatient to return to Ireland. He wrote to Philip II on the 9th of July to say that they should ‘not allow that such a good opportunity be lost’. International relations in Europe at this time were complex and the King was reluctant to commit Spain to open support for the Irish rebels. O’Donnell’s death in July and the subsequent suppression of the rebellion put paid to O’Neill’s efforts to return to Ireland at this time.

By the end of the summer of 1608 Ruari and Cathbharr O’Donnell and Cúchonnacht Maguire had all died from fever. The O’Donnell brothers were buried in the Church of San Pietro Montorio in Rome.

AFTER THE FLIGHT - AT HOME

Following the departure of the Earls, Lord Deputy Chichester continued to suspect them of plotting rebellion in Ireland through foreign intervention. Sir Donal O'Cahan who had assisted the crown in undermining O'Neill's territorial claims was imprisoned in the Tower of London following accusations of treason. Brian MacArt O'Neill, O'Neill's nephew was executed. O'Neill's son Conn and O’Neill’s brother Sir Cormac O’Neill were imprisoned for life.

In April 1608 Cahir O'Doherty of Inishowen who had fought on the side of the crown during the Nine Years War led an attack on Derry following repeated attempts by Lochinvar to undermine his authority. Following O’Doherty’s death in July and the subsequent suppression of the rebellion, a scheme was formulated for the plantation of Ulster.

King Philip I

Hugh O’Neill

Flight, Exile and Death

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With the Flight of the Earls in 1607, an opportunity arose for King James to stamp his authority once and for all on the “most rebellious corner.” The proposed plantation of Ulster was to be the biggest ever undertaken. 

The decision to carry out a plantation in Ulster was based on two considerations: fear and opportunism. It was feared that if the earls returned they would land in Ulster and lead another rebellion. Furthermore the monies that could be earned from this plantation would be equal to that from the previous plantations in Munster or Connaught.

In December 1607 the earls' lands were confiscated and preparations for a plantation began. It was not until 1610 however that the new ownership arrangements were brought into operation. The scheme included six counties – Donegal, Armagh, Tyrone, Cavan, Fermanagh and the subsequent county of Londonderry. The basic principle of the plantation was that of segregated communities. English and Scottish Protestants were to be settled on land confiscated from native Irish. New landowners were banned from taking native Irish tenants. There were two types of new owner – undertakers and servitors. Undertakers were English and lowland Scottish in equal numbers. Servitors were mainly military officers who received estates ranging in size from 1,000 to 2,000 profitable acres. The other major group of owners comprised the Ulster Irish themselves.

By 1640 about 40,000 English and Scottish settlers had come to Ulster. They brought with them new ways of farming with an emphasis on arable farming. They set up over 20 new towns and organised fairs and markets.

PLANTATION IN DONEGAL

Estates in Donegal, as elsewhere, were granted out on a barony or precinct basis. Groups of Scottish undertakers were planted in counties Portlough and Hortagh, signed with Baragh and English undertakers were planted in Lifford. Servitors and native Irish together got the barony of Kilmacrennan or Doe and Fanad.

There were two exceptions, one in Donegal: Dough and landsheagh. In Tullahogue, Henry Folliot was already the leaseholder. In Loughswill, captain Hardinge received a crown lease of twenty-one years for Donegal town. Captain Thomas Hakewill purchased the property of the two friaries. Captain Charles presented his to the bishop of Down and Connor.

The barony of Inishowen was granted to one man, Sir Arthur Chichester, the Lord Deputy.

DERRY CITY AND THE HONOURABLE THE IRISH SOCIETY

In 1609 the Earl of Oxford was invited to take part in the plantation. It was thought that this would ensure stability and prosperity and be soothing to other communities. Agreement was reached with the London Livery Companies in January 1610. From this the Honourable the Irish Society was born. This new body was established by parliament to supervise the plantation. It was known today as “The Honourable the Irish Society.” On 17th December 1610 a draw was held for 25 proportions of the County of Londonderry and the City of Derry. In the 1640s the Society re-emerged to supervise the plantations.