Ireland in the Age of the Tudors. 1447-1603

by Steven Ellis, Longman, 0-58201-901-X

Completion of Tudor conquest

The book explores Ireland as a frontier society divided between the English and Gaelic worlds. The understanding of both worlds, and their interaction (culminating in the Tudor conquest and the collapse of Gaelic rule) has been transformed over the past thirty years through the detailed research of Irish and Tudor specialists alike; and this wealth of new scholarship is fully synthesised in the text.

However, Steven Ellis - an acknowledged expert on Tudor frontiers and state formation - also looks beyond the local detail of these developments to consider Ireland itself as a problem within the wider Tudor state.

He explores the relationship between the English crown, the English community and its Gaelic neighbours, and the nature of the transition from medieval Ireland's two nations to the centralized Tudor kingdom. The result is thus not only a survey: it is also a critique of traditional perspectives on the making of modern Ireland.

Ellis argues that English rule in the late medieval lordship was quite successful in the years before 1534, and that its government presented similar (and far from intractable) problems to those of Wales and the English north.

Yet, unlike these other English borderlands, Ireland gradually became entangled in an extraordinary departure from traditional Tudor methods in an ultimately disastrous attempt to extend 'English civility' by force.

Thus, he concludes, Irish nationalism and Irish alienation from English rule were chiefly a consequence, rather than a cause, of the Tudor conquest.

What follows is Professor Ellis's conclusion 'Tudor Failure' (pp 352-8), which is a scathing indictment of Tudor policy in Ireland.

Militarily, Tyrone's submission at Mellifont signalled the completion of the Tudor conquest of Ireland. The completion of the conquest, despite Spanish intervention at Kinsale, was a major achievement of the Tudor regime, and one which is undiminished by the subsequent failure to establish a stable political settlement in Ireland. As Penry Williams has argued, Mountjoy's defeat of Tyrone's rebellion enabled Elizabeth 'to hand to her successor a kingdom effectively united and secure - for the time being - from internal threats'. Undoubtedly, the planning, preparation and execution of Mountjoy's campaign was an extraordinary feat of government.

Conquest at a price - new problems

However, politically, Tyrone's submission at Mellifont marked, not the solution of the crown's Irish problem, but simply the start of a new phase of anglicization.

To establish political stability in the aftermath of military conquest, the Dublin administration faced a very difficult task: it commanded wholehearted support in Ireland only among the numerically small New English group and a small minority of older settlers, while many natives were totally alienated from government and provided a receptive audience for further conspiracies.

In these circumstances James I might most easily have won support by timely political concessions to Gaelic and Old English lords, coupled with a firm enforcement of anglicizing policies in religion and government. Yet this would have involved close supervision and, initially at least, a substantial army to prevent disorders and enforce conformity, neither of which James was willing to provide.

To save money, the army was quickly reduced to 1,100 men, and this imposed severe restraints on policy options. Instead, the government generally favoured the New English interest, allowing officials and adventurers ample scope to exploit the weakness of native land titles and so to strengthen their position politically and numerically by expropriation and plantation.

The Old English community was excluded by religion from office and influence, but in practice the generous measure of religious toleration accorded it forestalled serious unrest.

In general, this uneasy but economical compromise between interest and expediency promoted the gradual anglicization of Gaelic Ireland, but it did little to inspire local confidence in royal justice or to conciliate Gaelic and Old English lords.

Thus, by 1641, when the political crisis in England gave Irish dissidents another opportunity, the basis of local support painfully built tip by the Dublin administration was still too narrow to withstand major rebellion.'

The price of the defeat of O'Neill

Mountjoy's campaign against O'Neill placed an enormous strain on the English economy and on the crown's limited financial resources.' Moreover, if, as shall be argued, a more conventional approach to government in Ireland could well have obviated the need for military conquest, it follows that the cost of victory was unacceptably high. Large parts of Ireland had been devastated, crops burned, cattle slaughtered, buildings razed: Ulster was almost a wilderness, Munster west of Cork almost uninhabited, trade disrupted, the coinage debased, towns ruined or declining, and the population decimated by famine. The contrast with England could hardly have been starker.

Weakness of Tudor policy

Even if we leave aside Elizabeth's last years as untypical, the Tudor achievement in Ireland remains distinctly unimpressive. The concerns of sixteenth-century governments were very limited, particularly in Ireland where the border's proximity imposed additional constraints on inadequate resources. Yet kings were traditionally expected to do justice, maintain order, and defend their subjects from invasion and insurrection: and an additional Tudor preoccupation was the maintenance of religious uniformity.

Tudor government clearly made little progress in these tasks, even within the traditional English regions, and still less in Gaelic and border lands. Elizabeth's Irish bench had a poor reputation for impartial justice, the council was distracted by more urgent problems, and the frequent resort to martial law brought the whole system into disrepute.

The government did perhaps succeed in curbing aristocratic feuds after 1565, but this was hardly because disputes were now pursued in the law courts: rather the polarization of political opinion under Elizabeth prompted Old English magnates to close ranks and redirect their energies against the newcomers or to engage in outright rebellion. Indeed Irish politics were punctuated by revolt throughout the Tudor period, and perhaps the main reason why Elizabethan governors (aided by wind and weather) were not more troubled by foreign invasion was that continental powers regarded the strategic possibilities of Irish unrest as strictly limited. The failure of the established church to strike firm roots in local society also contributed its share of unrest and disorder. Thus between the various revolts, petty raiding, and the disorders of the garrisons, Elizabethan Ireland enjoyed remarkably few sustained periods of peace and stability.

Was failure due to the uniqueness of Ireland?

The sharp contrast between the Tudor regime's comparative success in England and its dismal record in Ireland must surely cast doubt on its general policies there. The consensus of historical opinion has been that geographical, cultural and social differences within the island and between Ireland and England created conditions that were so extraordinary by English standards as to constitute an intractable problem of government: Tudor government failed in Ireland because it failed to appreciate the need for extraordinary remedies for exceptional problems. Of course there is some truth in this argument, but also much Whiggery.

Undoubtedly, the particular combination of exceptions to English norms was peculiar to Ireland: but individually marcher conditions and differences of law and language had all been encountered elsewhere, and Irish problems were not so different from those successfully resolved in other Tudor borderlands. Moreover, in the early Tudor lordship the traditional techniques of English government had brought about a gradual improvement in conditions, discernible in the areas of justice, order and defence.

Why, then, did Tudor policies subsequently break down?

Clearly there is no short answer to this question, but arguably the general thrust of later Tudor policy for Ireland was fundamentally misplaced. From being a distinctly peripheral consideration under Edward IV and Henry VII, Irish affairs became increasingly more important thereafter, and the Tudors spent increasingly large amounts on government there. Yet almost invariably after 1534 the demands made of successive governors grossly outstripped the resources available to them to perform their duties, and this led to the erratic operation of government and frequent reversals of policy.

To evaluate the relative merits of the various strategies attempted by the Tudors is a highly subjective exercise, but it should be said that most of them were inherently workable: usually Tudor policies failed in Ireland because they were not given the chance to succeed.

Yet the policies of successive governors did become increasingly ambitious (even taking into account that Tudor government everywhere became gradually more intensive), while Tudor monarchs remained reluctant to contemplate Irish government as a long-term drain on their resources. It is perhaps in this context that the various policy options may best be evaluated.

Taking the cheapest options

The Kildare ascendancy proved that the late medieval lordship could be administered out of its own resources, even if the resultant standard of government was comparatively low. To make any real progress in reducing Gaelic Ireland, however, required English subventions. The options were wide, but financial considerations still determined what was practicable.

Theoretically the king could, as Surrey advocated in 1520, despatch an army of 6,000 men and keep it there until Gaelic Ireland had been conquered and remodelled to his liking. This would certainly have been more effective and less expensive than the gradual build-up to the Elizabethan conquest, which gave Gaelic chiefs ample opportunity to prepare resistance: but no monarch could have accepted such substantial and ongoing commitments in Ireland. Unfortunately, however, Elizabeth did allow herself to be persuaded that Gaelic Ireland could be conquered within three years by a smaller army!

Pros and cons of 'surrender and regrant'

In practical terms, the cheapest option was probably something akin to St Leger's surrender and regrant scheme, because this strategy attempted (with some success) to win the support of Gaelic chiefs for anglicization by helping them also to consolidate their local power base: concurrently, the support of the Englishry was assured, despite the expense and inconvenience of an enlarged garrison, because the scheme promised increased stability and security, and an enhanced political standing for the local leadership within an extended Tudor state.

It also had two major disadvantages, however. First, by supporting the chiefs against their local rivals, it threatened to create overmighty subjects; although in borderlands English kings had traditionally viewed strong government by potentially overmighty subjects as preferable to disorder or the expense of intervention. Sidney's modification of the approach eliminated this threat by aiming to create directly a 'civil' gentry-dominated society, but its initial impact on

Gaelic society was consequently more disruptive and its implementation therefore more costly. Second, progress was unspectacular, but this was chiefly because Henry VIII denied St Leger's administration the means to move more quickly.

Antagonising the local community and power struggles in the mid-Tudor period

The major political mistakes were made during the mid-Tudor period of weak government (1547-60), when influential outsiders attempted by new methods to accelerate the change already taking place. A poor and remote borderland was always likely to appear backward and unruly to cultured courtiers; but by dissociating local lords and gentry from their environment, English administrators could persuade themselves that corruption and disloyalty among local politicians, rather than inadequate resources, were chiefly responsible for the slow progress. Allegedly, if the campaign were directed by trusted and impartial outsiders, Gaelic Ireland would be quickly and efficiently civilized.

In terms of overall policy these considerations were marginal: but much more serious was the precipitate manner in which the newcomers were packed into key positions. This development antagonized the local community and initiated a ruinous power struggle within the Dublin administration between New and Old English politicians.

Thus the additional money and men provided after 1547 were largely squandered in internal feuding. Disgruntled local lords withheld their cooperation, while the vast majority of the newcomers were seemingly men of modest means more intent on making their fortunes than civilizing the natives. Unfortunately for these adventurers, Gaelic Ireland was too poor to offer significant pickings in booty and ransoms, but it did offer ample opportunity for land-grabbing.

Moreover. the grossly undermanned Dublin administration was quite unable to curtail disruptive private ventures by its own officials, while the queen and privy council often lacked the information to intervene effectively.

A strategy for conquest

The result was that the later Tudors were gradually manoeuvred by their chief ministers in Ireland into pursuing a strategy for conquest which, although inherently sound, far outstripped the resources available. Henry VIII had sanctioned a gradualist strategy to assimilate Gaelic Ireland culturally and politically into the Tudor state: his daughter was eventually committed to an exceedingly ambitious strategy which entailed breaking Old English political influence in order to establish a new political elite preparatory to a costly military conquest of the country. Unfortunately, however, the region in which the Tudors attempted their most ambitious policies was that in which royal government was weakest.

Reputations

Considering the overall failure of Tudor policy in Ireland, it is hardly surprising that few rulers or ministers emerge with much credit from their interventions there.

Most notably, Elizabeth's rule by faction, parsimony, and irresolute conduct of government proved particularly disastrous in Ireland and certainly strengthens the revisionist interpretation beginning to emerge of a queen who made serious mistakes as well as enjoying spectacular successes. Of her councillors, Lord Burghley was particularly well-informed and influential in policy-making for Ireland, but his advocacy of some ill-considered plantation schemes involved Elizabeth in much fruitless expense.

Ironically, the ruler who was most successful in Ireland was probably the man who attempted least there: Henry VII required merely that his vital interests be protected and the traditional authority of English kings there preserved, and after 1495 he achieved his ambitions.

Henry VIII was, from 1519, more demanding of his governors and less realistic in his policies; but by keeping a tight rein on English subventions for the lordship, he effectively forestalled some of the sillier, programmatic initiatives sponsored by Sussex and Sidney. Of his chief advisers, Norfolk (albeit after service there) had the best grasp of Irish political realities, but his advice was too often ignored. Cromwell was also interested and informed, although his sponsorship of 'direct rule' (1534-40) was comparatively less successful than the similar experiment by Henry VII (1494-6).

Protector Somerset's garrison strategy for Gaelic Ireland - an adaptation of his Scottish policy to what superficially appeared a similar problem - was an expensive mistake.

Neither Northumberland nor Mary, apparently, were able for long to resist similar demands for ambitious but ill-conceived experiments.

Of the various Tudor governors, most performed competently in a difficult office which afforded innumerable avenues to financial ruin, military defeat or political disgrace but offered small opportunity for glory and gain. Yet in their different ways, the eighth earl of Kildare, St Leger and Mountjoy proved outstanding governors, while the conduct of Sussex, Grey de Wilton and Essex ought perhaps to warrant their consignment to a viceregal rogues' gallery.

Impact of the Tudor conquest on Ireland and then English state

Overall, the Tudor conquest of Ireland had a substantial impact, both on the making of modern Ireland and also on the development of the contemporary English state.

Ireland

Most obviously, in Ireland itself the manner of its execution and the subsequent settlement under James I caused great bitterness and long-term alienation from royal government of the Gaelic and Old English communities. Within the Englishry, particularist sentiments sharpened into a distinct Old English identity.

Concurrently, the different pressures exerted on the traditional Gaelic world by centralizing monarchy in England and Scotland assisted its break-up and the incorporation of the Gaedhil of Ireland and Scotland into different political units. In effect, the Gaedhealtacht was partitioned and the Gaelic people were marginalised in separate composite kingdoms of Gaedhil and Gaill.

Yet, while ***London*** *and Edinburgh in this way* ***defused*** *the most dangerous threat to their power and pretensions in the region, these* ***developments*** *also promoted conditions* ***conducive*** *to the gradual emergence, mainly after 1603, of a new Irish nation with a nationalist ideology based on faith and fatherland.*

In other ways too, the Tudor conquest continued to set the political agenda.

In its aftermath, English law and administrative structures were quickly extended to the former Gaelic lordships. Compared with the ruthless, autocratic rule of the old Gaelic chiefs, the application of the English model of local government ('self-government at the king's command') implied a considerable defusion of power: the leading Gaelic clansmen would be transformed into an English county gentry, representing the new shires in parliament and ruling them as sheriffs and justices of the peace as part of a county community. Likewise, the model envisaged the growth of a politically aware 'middling sort' elected to minor office, as constables or churchwardens for instance, and serving on grand and petty juries.

Plantations

Initially, hopes of just such a transformation may have been raised among previously disenfranchised sections of Gaelic society. Yet in practice, this development was stymied by the very instrument intended to advance it, plantation. On the pretext of 'civilizing the natives', small cliques of English and Scottish colonists attempted to manipulate local government so as to avoid sharing power with rival elites whose interests were diametrically opposed, in terms of politics, culture and religion. The resultant struggle for power eventually precipitated the 1641 rising - significantly, the first popular insurrection in Gaelic history.

Yet ironically, this struggle revolved around the administrative structures of this new English kingdom: by 1641, political discourse was conducted entirely within this framework, with no support for the restoration of traditional Gaelic lordship. Thus, in this respect too, the shape of the Tudor conquest set a pattern for Irish politics which, in Northern Ireland at least, has persisted down to the present.

England

Within a wider context too, the conquest had a major impact both on Tudor England and also, in the context of the 1603 Union of the Crowns, on English patterns of state formation. The conquest was influential in shaping the characteristics of English nationality as it developed in Tudor times.

Before the Reformation, the Tudor territories were united principally by a common allegiance to the English crown and by a dominant culture and system of government that were recognizably English. Despite conflict between geographical and cultural criteria of nationality, a generally wide sense of 'Englishness' prevailed which included the Englishry of Ireland. After the breach with Rome, however, and the growing consciousness of differentiation from continental Europe that accompanied the Elizabethan idea of an 'elect nation', a narrower definition of 'Englishness' evolved, from which the catholic Old English were clearly excluded.

Yet this new English 'nation-state' might have developed very differently if, as seemed very predictable c. 1534, the Reformation had succeeded in Ireland and the lordship, together with its local elite, had been peacefully absorbed, like Wales and the north, into a unitary realm of England.

As it was, Ireland developed differently, with the unfortunate results that are painfully apparent today. To the Tudor specialist, however, the fate of Irish variations on familiar constitutional themes, illustrated by the cess controversy, the decline of parliament, the growth of a standing army, and the abuse of martial law, do at least underline the very delicate nature of the balance between crown and community, on which political change in Tudor England was founded.

Similarly the Tudor failure in Ireland shows how barely adequate were the English government's resources to tackle the serious problems that it faced elsewhere.

Finally, the Tudor conquest also reinforced an emerging English pattern of state formation (evident also in the treatment of Wales and the English north) by centralization, administrative uniformity, and cultural imperialism. In Ireland, this took the form of the imposition of the highly centralized structures of English government on remote and 'uncivilized' Gaelic lordships and their integration, together with the English lordship there, into a dependant kingdom.

The new kingdom of Ireland, controlled from London but without a substantial input into the political process there, proved a serious and continuing source of instability in the developing British state. The device of a dependent kingdom set an unfortunate precedent, offering a misleading model much favoured by English politicians, for the incorporation of Scotland into a wider English state following the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

Thus, in many ways, the eventual shape of the Tudor conquest left as its legacy a series of unresolved tensions between King James's three kingdoms which later came back to haunt the Stewart monarchy, precipitating its collapse and the creation of a republic (1638-51).