

Irish submission to Henry II: national humiliation or commonsense?

Worried at the growing power of Strongbow in Ireland, Henry II mounted a large-scale expedition to Ireland in 1171-72. Not only did Strongbow acknowledge Henry as overlord of Leinster but also a number of Irish lords voluntarily submitted to him and the Irish bishops endorsed Henry's intervention. (Three years later, by the treaty of Windsor (1175) Rory O'Connor acknowledged Henry's overlordship of Leinster, Meath, Dublin, Waterford and Wexford.)

The submission of the lords and bishops has been presented very differently by historians - depending on the time and purpose of the writing.

Nationalist perspective

Romantic nationalists - and historians - of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries caught up in the struggle for independence from Britain, 'have writhed with shame at the instantaneous submission of the Irish kings and bishops to Henry II'. After all, for nationalists, this was the beginnings of seven hundred years of oppression.

The most vivid expression of this point of view was the painting below: Daniel MacLise's *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, 1854. MacLise was sympathetic to the Young Irelanders who sought freedom from Britain in the mid-19th century and re-wrote the history of Ireland in heroic terms. Not surprisingly, the recurrent theme of MacLise's painting is that the Anglo-Irish relationship is a forced marriage. Can you spot 'symbols of oppression'?

Perspective of modern scholarship

Relieved of responsibility of freeing Ireland and trained as professional historians, modern writers adopt a more robustly pragmatic approach to the submission of the lords and bishops to Henry II.

According to Katharine Simms, now Senior Lecturer in Medieval History at Trinity College, Dublin,

'In the circumstances the Irish had nothing to lose and something for which to hope: protection. They had repeatedly offered military resistance to the territorial aggression of the barons without much success, and they were shrewd enough to realize the English king was unhappy about the unbridled extension of Strongbow's power. For these chiefs submission entailed no loss of sovereignty; they merely exchanged the rule of the high-king of Ireland for that of the more prestigious 'son of the Empress'.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland, edited by R. F. Foster, OUP, 1989, 0-19285-245-0, p. 58

