

O'Neill's Rebellion The Nine Years' War 1593-1603

By Lee Offen

Up until 1594 Hugh O'Neill, "The O'Neill", or, Earl of Tyrone, as he was known to the English, was pledged to the support of Elizabeth I Queen of England. The degree to which he took that commitment seriously can be measured by the fact that he took to the field with his brother in law, the English Marshall Bagenal, against Hugh Maguire, who was in rebellion against the English. This joint force defeated Maguire in 1593 at the battle known as "The Passage of the Erne at Belleek". After this engagement, O'Neill withdrew his support for the English, expressing several grievances to commissioners sent by Elizabeth I. One of his complaints was the absence of proper recognition for his support for the English Crown. The replacement of the Viceroy and a limit upon actions that could be taken against him, by his estranged English brother in law Bagenal among others, indicate that Elizabeth had considered his grievances favorably. The English were left with the impression that O'Neill was still loyal to the English Crown.

In June of 1594, a soon to be ally of O'Neill, Hugh O'Donnell, ambushed and defeated an English relief column on the road to Enniskillen at in a battle known as "The Ford of the Biscuits". O'Neill was not present, but his brother Cormac was, along with 300 musketeers and 100 horse. In February of 1595 his other brother, Art MacBaron, participated in the successful attack on an English fort at the ford of the Black River. It remains to be determined if O'Neill was supporting his brothers, as he remained aloof from the actions taken against the English.

With the introduction of a new Viceroy, the English stepped up their efforts to end the on again off again resistance they were experience in their efforts to establish and supply English outposts on the edge of the Pale. The English increased the number of forces in Ireland. True to form, each of the three separate English armies were commanded by independent commanders unable or unwilling to support each other.

O'Neill allied himself with Hugh O'Donnell, whose power base lay in Connaught and who was already out in rebellion. Tyrone's active role started with the investment of Monaghan Castle. O'Neill's brother in law, Bagenal, was able to supply the garrison of the castle, but was forced to contend with ambushes along his route of march. As Bagenal was leaving, en route to Newry, he was met by O'Neill at Clontibret who fought the column to a standstill with ambushes and harassing fire until sunset.

The Irish demonstrated no attachment to castle or town and were perfectly willing to raze either in order to retain operational mobility and not tie down forces to defend them from the English. An English raid that destroyed Dungannon in August 1595, O'Neill's own castle had no effect on the Irish.

In September of 1595 O'Neill sued for peace and pardon. The English at the time were at their most vulnerable but O'Neill may have had some appreciation for the inability of the Irish to defeat the English militarily and the fragile nature of his alliance. He used

1596 and 1597 to stall the English, increase his efforts to get Spanish military support and to convince Irish leaders to join him or replace those who would not.

O'Neill was executing a foreign policy of sorts in that he was appealing to Catholic Spain for aid against the Protestant English, using the restoration of the Catholic Church in Ireland as a basis for the request for troops and equipment. Despite his best efforts, Scots mercenaries were not forthcoming, but weapons were, purchased in England and Scotland.

O'Neill had also begun a considerable modernization effort that continued throughout his rebellion, converting Kern to musket and caliver formations and converting some Gallowglas to pike formations as well as providing the requisite training and fielding the equipment necessary for the transition. Throughout this modernization initiative, O'Neill retained the flexibility to fight his army in the more traditional manner of fighting the English in Ireland, using hit and run tactics and ambushes against English formations moving across the Irish countryside. His modernization effort made it possible for him to at least retain the option of meeting the English on the field as equals, given enough time and training.

The interlude of peace ended in July 1597. The new Viceroy, one Lord Brough, was on the offensive again and was met by O'Neill at the ford over the Blackwater River. He overcame the 40 Irish defenders in a small sconce, or fort, there with 1,000 men and proceeded to occupy the fort to cover the approaches to the ford. Brough lacked the forces or the will to carry the fight into Ulster and so remained in place. Bagenal conducted a raid into Ulster burning Dungannon but accomplishing little else.

At Christmas of 1597 O'Neill met with Elizabeth's commissioners and in return for peace demanded a pardon, return of property of for his followers Liberty of Conscience, withdrawal of all English garrisons and Palatinate status for his holdings. Had the English agreed to that, it would have established a separate and independent Irish Kingdom with O'Neill as its ruler. The English did not agree to his terms and so both sides waited for summer to renew hostilities.

By the summer of 1598, O'Neill was prepared to move again, invested the Blackwater Fort and waited for the English to come to the garrison's rescue. O'Neill met his former brother in law and old nemesis at the Yellow Ford. Bagenal's route of march went from Armagh on a narrow road through the Yellow Ford and from there to the fort on the Blackwater River. The engagement began when Bagenal's lead element reached a trench dug by the Irish across his route of march. Simultaneous attacks occurred on the lead element and trail elements with the center element raked by fire along its flanks. The English army disintegrated and fled the field after approximately an hour and a half with $\frac{3}{4}$ of the army dead or missing and Bagenal dead. The town of Parma was returned to O'Neill and the English abandoned the fort at Black Water.

O'Neill's victory caused the Irish in all four provinces to rise up against the English. Even Munster, which had been put to fire and sword after the earlier Desmond uprising,

was no longer safe for Englishmen. English refugees began gathering in walled cities and fleeing Ireland for England. Congratulations, as well as the possibility of support, came from Spain and the Pope in Rome. O'Neill began a "scorched earth" effort in preparation for an English attempt to retake previously held areas of Ireland.

Elizabeth I accurately assessed the challenge England was facing and sent the largest force to date under the command of the Earl of Essex to put down O'Neill's uprising and to pacify Ireland. Essex moved south into Munster depleting his force by garrisoning towns along his route of march and failing to adequately feed his sick and starving army made up of inexperienced English conscripts. Essex did fight a brief engagement at the Pass of the Plumes in which he remained on the field of battle as the Irish fled and took Cahir Castle. Elizabeth grew impatient at the cost and lack of results of his campaign. When Essex finally turned north to fight O'Neill, he met him face to face, established a truce and departed for England never to return. O'Neill attempted to negotiate a peace from the truce asking England to recognize, in effect, a Catholic Kingdom of Ireland, with him as its ruler. Once again, the English refused to agree to such terms.

In the spring of 1600 O'Neill faced Lord Montjoy who, by establishing a base of operations in the north west corner of Ireland under the control of Sir Henry Dowcra as well as sending Lord Carew south into Munster, began to threaten the alliance upon which the rebellion was based. Some of O'Neills more faint of heart followers began defecting to the English which led to an encirclement and an ever shrinking perimeter of land and towns he controlled in Tyrone. Montjoy, unlike his predecessors kept his forces in the field year round putting O'Neill under considerably more pressure than he was accustomed to. He also insured the harvest of 1600 did not take place, nor the planting of 1601.

In the summer of 1600 a Spanish force landed on the southwest corner of Ireland at Kinsale. It is only possible to speculate as to why they landed so far away from Tyrone. Among the possible reasons were efforts by rebel leaders in Munster to have their position bolstered by the Spanish presence or that Kinsale was seen as a staging area for an invasion of England. In either case, O'Neill had to choose whether or when to leave his base of operations in Tyrone to move south to support the Spanish force. This was a difficult decision due to the fragile nature of his alliance making it likely that he might lose Tyrone upon his departure.

Montjoy moved on Kinsale and invested it with little difficulty due to the Spanish failure to move out of Kinsale into the surrounding countryside. As Montjoy was surrounding Kinsale, O'Neill conducted several raids into the Pale probably in an effort to force Montjoy or Carew to focus on him and lift the siege of Kinsale. Montjoy refused to be distracted and let the Pale burn. By November, O'Neill and his long term ally O'Donnell, began to move south in two columns to relieve the Spanish. Both columns managed to outmaneuver an effort by Carew to impede their progress south. On Christmas Eve, 1601, after consolidating all his forces in front of Kinsale, O'Neill marched his forces onto the field in a three tercio formation of musket and pike. The English, under leaders far more experienced and soldiers more trained at this mode of traditional European warfare were able to outmaneuver the Irish formations and routed

them from the field. The Spanish did not support the Irish with any attempt to breakout of Kinsale permitting the English to bring the majority of their forces to bear on O'Neill's forces in the battle and the follow on pursuit of the broken Irish formations. O'Neill fled and made his way north back to Tyrone.

The battle of Kinsale in effect ended the rebellion even though O'Neill spent a year in hiding before making his submission to the English. During that year the English had taken control of all of Ireland. O'Neill's submission was accepted on the 24th of March, 1603 the day after Elizabeth I died. He remained in Ireland, stripped of his earldom and the title of "The O'Neill" until 17 September, 1607 when he fled Ireland with his fellow former Irish leaders, in an event called the "Flight of the Earls." Those not of noble blood stayed behind to feel the full wrath of the English, not to rise up again until 1636.

Throughout the rebellion, the English were limited by terrain to only three avenues of approach out of the Pale to invade Ulster and Connaught. Initially the English sought to control the terrain by establishing a series of outposts along these routes. All but one of the major battles fought during the rebellion were fought on these routes. At Clonbriet, Blackwater Ford and Yellow Ford the Irish forces positioned themselves between an English garrison and a relieving or resupplying force. This gave the Irish the ability to chose the terrain upon which battles would take place, taking maximum advantage of their knowledge of the countryside. These battles can be described best as "running battles", with the Irish engaging English columns from the flanks and from prepared positions to the column's front. As the English would respond, the Irish would, if necessary to preserve combat power, withdraw in an orderly fashion to another position. In this manner the English seeking to resupply garrisons were forced to pay a high cost in manpower, lead and powder, all of which were in short supply and only replaceable across long supply lines reaching back to England. It was not until Montjoy bypassed these routes into Ulster and Connaught by landing on the northwest coast, sending Carew into Munster and keeping forces in the Pale that the English were able to break the stalemate the Irish were able to use to their advantage so successfully. Kinsale, the last battle of the uprising, found O'Neill attempting to meet the English on an open field. It is very likely that the battle was lost as a result of this first and only attempt to meet the English forces on an open field on English terms.

A Brief Summary of Irish Military Organization in the 16th century

The highest office held by an Irishman outside those parts of Ireland occupied by the English in the 16th century was the usually hereditary Ceannfine or Chief of a Tuath (a tribal area occupying as much as 400 square miles). Below him was his Tanist or the heir to the Ceannfine. Next in the hierarchy came the Urraigha, or sub-chiefs.

The Urraigha were responsible for supporting the Ceannfine if called upon, in a Gairmsluaigh ("calling out") with all free men who were not Clergy, poets, harpers, physicians, scholars or lawyers. These were Cernagh, a term anglicized to Kern. They were expected to report with all weapons and three days worth of victuals. By mid 16th century those who were not free were also pressed into service. These were part time soldiers who augmented full time professional military men.

The full time military in 16th century Ireland were called Buannadha, a term Anglicized to Buannacht or billeted men. They were paid "coyne and livery" which were their wages, or "coyne" and care for their horses if they owned any, or "livery."

In a Ceannfine or Urraigh household it was possible to find both Cernagh and Galloglaich, a term anglicized to gallowglas, which means foreign warrior. The Galloglaich were mercenaries from families originally from the Western Isles and the western coast of Scotland that had been a military presence in Ireland since the 12th century.

The Cernagh were typically armed with knife, sword, bow or darts transitioning over time to musket and caliver. They served as scouts and skirmishers. The Cernagh also served as cavalry, riding stirrup-less saddles and using lances in an overhand manner making them well suited for reconnaissance but unable to meet English cavalry in a stand up fight. The Galloglaich were typically armed with two-handed swords and or lochaber or sparth axes with some serving in pike formations as the 16th century progressed. There can be little doubt that there were no hard and fast rules concerning armament of these two groups. Each pair of Cernagh were entitled to a servant to help carry equipment. Each Galloglaich or mounted Cernagh was entitled to a pair of servants or "horse boys" to help carry equipment. The servants were armed with javelins or bows and expected to join their masters in battle.

As the 16th century progressed, there were numerous Cernagh who became musketeers and calivermen while some of the Galloglaich migrated to the small number of pike used by the Irish. Firearms were of more value than pike in the hit and run tactics favored by the Irish against the English. O'Neill, during his rebellion against the English crown, fostered this process of modernization. Another group appeared in Ireland in the late 16th century. They were the "New Scots" who, unlike their predecessors chose not to settle, but served in Irish armies and returned to Scotland. They were employed as horse or foot.

The buannadha were organized into corrughadh, called a company or battle by the English and commanded by a consapal or captain. This was further divided into spars in the case of the Galloglaich, which consisted of one Galloglaich and two servants. A Galloglaich Corrughadh would usually consist of 60 to 80 Galloglaich with the consapal permitted to draw pay for an even 100; the difference being called "dead pays" and the source of the consapal's pay. Pay for Galloglaich was set at one bullock per quarter as pay and two for sustenance. The Cernagh received one heifer per quarter and victuals.

The importance of the cattle herd roaming Ireland called creaghts cannot be over emphasized, as they provided the requisite augmentation to the field rations of oatmeal and whiskey needed to keep the army combat ready. Irish formations on the move would coordinate in advance a link up with one of these creaghts and boil the meat in its own hide, saving the army the need to carry cook pots.

Sources

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