



A Brief History of Donegal including the Flight of the Earls, the Treaty of Mellifont and Plantation

The small fishing town of Rathmullan witnessed a key event in Irish history - the end of the old Gaelic order. From this spot in 1607 a small ship left for Spain. On board were the chieftains of some of the leading Gaelic families of Ulster, including the O'Donnell's and the O'Neill's. Those chieftains who could not live with the new English order sought refuge with England's main enemy, with the hope either of making a new life for themselves, or of living to fight another day.

How did they come to be here, and why did they leave? In one final attempt by the old order to reverse the tide of English power a decade or so earlier, an army was organised by Hugh O'Neill, chief of Tir Eoghain, and Red Hugh O'Donnell, began a series of battles with the English which came to be known as the Nine Years War. After strenuous efforts on their part, the Gaelic chieftains secured a promise of support from the leading continental power of the day, Spain. To meet up with the Spanish expeditionary force, however, O'Neill's and O'Donnell's force had to march the length of the country to Kinsale on the south coast. There they fought and lost the landmark Battle of Kinsale, which brought down the curtain on a political and cultural system that could not compete with the neighbouring island. Red Hugh made his way to Spain to try to inject new life into the alliance but died in the Castle of Simanacas a little over a year after Kinsale. He was succeeded as chieftain by his brother Rory.

The division between Gaelic lords and English government was not as clear-cut as one might imagine. Dublin Castle and its local representatives, such as Sir Henry Docwra in Derry, engaged in political as well as military means to further their objectives. Thus they offered Gaelic lords titles in return for undertakings to recognize English rule - Rory O'Donnell accepted the title of Earl of Tyrconnell in 1603 - and also tried to gain the support of middle ranking lords, to lessen the sway of chieftains like the O'Donnell's. Docwra succeeded, for example, in having Cahir O'Doherty replace his father as lord of the Doherty's against Red Hugh's candidate; the price was a reduced Inishowen and Cahir's dependence on Docwra.

Six years after Kinsale the remaining Gaelic chieftains, recognizing that English rule over the country was a fact but unable to bring themselves to accept it, or knowing what would happen to them if they gave themselves up, decided to leave Ireland for the continent. O'Donnell and O'Neill, and members of other leading families from Ulster and the northern half of the country, including Maguire's and Plunkett's, in all over one hundred people, took ship in Rathmullan, ironically the spot where Red Hugh had been captured in a foretaste of what was to come. Interestingly only one Sweeney left with them, and he was a Sweeney Banagh, with no members of either the Sweeney Fand and Sweeney Doe, whose base was much closer to Rathmullan. This was the so called 'Flight of the Earls'. In truth the power of these chieftains had been broken, even before Kinsale, and their ability to provide leadership and a measure

of prosperity for their people had gone before then. They quickly disappeared from history - Rory dying in Rome in 1608 and Hugh O'Neill in 1616.

The Treaty of Mellifont signified the end of Gaelic Ireland. During the Spring and summer of 1603 Queen Elizabeth I Lord Deputy of Ireland, Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, concentrated his campaign in the Northern counties and Leinster. He ordered all land be scorched. Harvests and stock were destroyed and famine soon prevailed. Mountjoy insisted on not being drawn into battle in Kinsale. His ruthless methods were successful and the leaders fighting in Cork were soon turning their attention to protecting their homelands. The Nine Years War was over. O'Neill and O'Donnell had returned to the north. O'Neill went into the wilderness with his warriors 'as a wood kern'. Lord Mountjoy had succeeded where his predecessors failed.

However, Mountjoy knew as long as O'Neill was still in hiding he was still a threat. He convinced Queen Elizabeth I to use his tactic to attract O'Neill out of the deep forests of Tyrone and into talks. He without the favourable terms O'Neill would certainly not 'come in'. Reluctantly the Queen authorised Mountjoy to open negotiations with the 'Arch-Traitor' O'Neill.

A meeting was arranged in County Louth in a place known as Mellifont. Mountjoy received O'Neill's submission here on the 29th March 1603. O'Neill knelt before the Deputy and pleaded pardon for his actions and swore to be loyal to the crown and not seek further assistance from foreign powers. He was granted pardon and was restored as the Earl of Tyrone. During the negotiations many points were discussed including the contentious issue of religious tolerance.

Brehon law was to be replaced with English law. The Earls were no longer permitted to support the Gaelic Bards. English would be the official language. Catholic Colleges were banned and most of the great Gaelic Scholars were left with no option but to continue their studies in Europe.

The Treaty of Mellifont was signed on the 31st March 1603. In short it was the end of Gaelic Ireland and the start of English rule in the north that would continue to the present day.

The nine years war began in 1592. The counties of the north were ablaze with rebellion. For nine years the confederacy of the North resisted England's plan of expansion. Battle after battle the English suffered defeat against a limited Irish army.

Under the strategic mind of O'Neill and the drive and determination of O'Donnell it became one of Ireland's most successful rebellions. With Maguire of Fermanagh by their side they would take charge of their territories and beyond. O'Neill was brought up in an English court and was taught the tactics of warfare and the art of diplomacy. Both these skills he used in abundance.

Ultimately it failed. The power of England was too great and the assistance from the King of Spain was too little, too late. The war ended in 1601 after the defeat of the Irish at the battle of Kinsale, County Cork.

The Flight of the Earls in 1607 gave the English government the perfect opportunity to put their most ambitious plans into action. The Earls 'Flight' meant they were now traitors in the eyes of the King James

of England. He ordered their land be taken and it became property of the Crown. Their plan was simple. The land belonging to the Earls would be given to English Protestants and Scottish Presbyterians. The exception to this was the land between Derry and Coleraine. This area was bought by twelve London companies. It was they who renamed the county to Londonderry.

Six Counties, Derry, Donegal, Tyrone, Armagh, Fermanagh and Cavan - more than 3 million acres of land, were taken over by the English. The Irish who had submitted to the Crown in the past and were not seen as traitors were allowed to stay, but lost much of their land to the planters. Those who could not prove they had submitted to the Crown were driven out.

It was hoped by doing this the English Government would build a loyal English speaking population. But the plantation failed to attract as many British settlers as the English Government would have wished. The landlords were left with no options but to rent their land to the native Irish. The plantation would not achieve a strong Protestant English speaking province until a few decades later under the iron fist of Cromwell.