

'Civilizing' Tudor Ireland: a review article

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Sir William Herbert, Croftus sive de Hibernia Liber, Eds. Arthur Keaveney and John A. Madden, Irish Manuscripts Commission, Dublin 1992, pp. lxi + 207; ISBN 1-874280-02-9. Price: £25.00.

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These days it cannot automatically be assumed that historians of early-modern Ireland will have an extensive knowledge of Latin. Most historians read chancery writs and exchequer rolls in dog Latin, but few relish the prospect of reading a long tract in revived Ciceronian Latin. Thus the publication of a modern edition, with English translation, of Sir William Herbert's important pamphlet on the Tudor conquest of Ireland, completed early in 1591, is a great boon to historians. The edition has parallel texts in Latin and English, with extensive notes, and the translation is both clear and easy to read, without a trace of an ablative absolute. The editors are, by training, an ancient historian and a classicist; and this no doubt explains the long sections in the introduction and commentaries which are devoted to analyses of Herbert's Latinity, style, and exploitation of classical sources. These are a model, and the editors have not neglected other aspects of their task, but it is hard to imagine any early modernist capable of extracting so much about Herbert's classical training.

So why do we need a modern edition of Herbert's *Croftus*? Sir William was an Undertaker for Munster who was granted a 'seignory' of 13,276 acres at Castleisland, Co. Kerry, in the plantation which followed the crushing of the Earl of Desmond's rebellion (1579-83). A member of a Welsh county gentry family from south-east Wales, Herbert had been sheriff and J.P. there, and also twice a member of parliament. Between 1587 and 1590 he was a leading figure in the Munster Plantation, serving as sheriff and J.P. in Kerry and also as a member of the provincial council. Thus Herbert's tract on the State of Ireland and how it might be made peaceful and prosperous under English rule affords us an unique insight into the plans and prejudices of a member of this recently-arrived group of three-dozen Undertakers, who aimed to plant 'English civility' throughout the south-western corner of Ireland as far north as Limerick.

Turning to Herbert's views on Ireland, his achievement in *Croftus* is to weave together into an effective piece of propaganda for English rule three distinct and, in part, discordant strands of thought, of which two were commonplace among Elizabethan officials, the third much less so. Essentially, his is a plea for more colonization. His starting point is the classic Tudor strategy of state formation: that outlying territories can best be assimilated into the English State by introducing standard English administrative structures and law, building towns and promoting tillage, which will somehow automatically promote 'English civility', turning the wild Irish into loyal English subjects. Allegedly, this strategy is fully justified because these structures had brought England to the height of perfection and exceptional happiness (since God is an Englishman, and England his elect nation), whereas the Irish were wicked and barbarous - like all primitive peoples unacquainted with a cultured way of life.

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Unfortunately, not everyone accepted the logic of these conventional Tudor arguments. The Irish remained unconvinced of the benefits of English civility, but then no-one else considered them a civilized people. More seriously, however, no-one else thought that the Tudor strategy of State formation was viable either: princes in continental Europe seemed to think that the native laws and administrative structures of a particular region reflected in large measure the topography, settlement patterns, and social structures of that region so that the customs and privileges of a newly acquired territory should first of all be confirmed and then gradually remodelled, not proscribed and eradicated. Besides, if English government was so perfect, why should it need to be supported - uniquely in Ireland - by a standing army and draconian measures for wholesale colonization and expropriation of the natives, all of which was foreign to the Tudor tradition? To this question, the obstinacy and malice of the 'Wild Irish' provided only a partial answer, particularly since the Munster Plantation was chiefly directed against the Old English.

Thus, Herbert's extensive citation of classical authors - the second strand in his theorizing - was designed to allow him to have his cake and eat it. Recognizing the high esteem in which the philosophies of the ancients were held throughout Renaissance Europe, he rummaged around for classical material in support of his own preconceptions. By his selective citation of texts, Herbert was able to exploit the classical tradition of colonization in order to justify English plantation schemes in Ireland, and for this purpose, too, Machiavelli's *Prince* undergoes a substantial rehabilitation. Yet Roman colonization schemes to civilize primitive peoples around the Mediterranean appeared to Herbert only to offer general support for his projects. The third strand in his thought - 'the Welsh model' - was more original - at least in the detailed way in which the author employed it - but it required careful handling if it was to prove what Herbert wanted it to prove.

In a general way of course, most Tudor officials accepted that the successful imposition of Tudor rule among the primitive people of Wales provided a blueprint for the reform of Ireland. But Herbert had a much more detailed knowledge of the Welsh model, and would have been very familiar with the planting of Englishries and conquest towns there in the Anglo-Norman era. He was apparently the sole surviving heir-male of William Herbert (d. 1469), the first Welshman to be elevated to the English peerage; and he was sufficiently sympathetic to the Welsh language to be the subject of praise-poems in Welsh. Herbert would have been familiar too with the growing literature in Welsh published by supporters of the Reformation: Welsh translations of the Book of Common Prayer and the New Testament had long been available, and Bishop William Morgan's translation of the whole Bible appeared in 1588. Thus the quickening response in Wales to these initiatives no doubt explains his comparatively sympathetic attitude to Gaelic in Ireland - he wanted the Bible and common prayers read to the Irish in their own language, with singing of Gaelic hymns and psalms accompanied by the harp. But as in Wales, native law, habits and customs should be rooted out and replaced by English.

Given his knowledge of the success of Tudor reform in Wales, however, Herbert's difficulty is to explain why this same strategy had been much less effective in Ireland. The reality of course was that Tudor Ireland was not Wales, despite certain cultural parallels: it was much more like the far north of England where, too, a long military frontier with another independent people fostered precisely the same kind of marcher lordship and lineage society which Herbert denigrated as 'degenerate' among the Old English of Ireland. But the far north could hardly serve as a model for Ireland, since Tudor rule there had equally failed to bring about the kind of 'civil society' which Herbert desired. He states the problem fairly enough, noting that Henry VIII 'held the same opinion' about Ireland and Wales, 'deciding to proceed

by one and the same road in the reform of each country, so that under one king, one law, one fair, wise and moderate administration but different sceptres they would become citizens of one happy and flourishing state' (p. 39). He offers a highly selective history of medieval Ireland, however, asserting that since the Norman conquest, English law and government had been less widely planted in Ireland, that the natives had been controlled there more by castles and garrison troops than by plantations of English settlers, and that English administration there had been too feeble. Even in those instances where colonies had been planned in Ireland, they had not been adequately planned and protected, so they had gone native. Thus the remedy for the evil state of Ireland is more colonization, properly established and supported. And in this respect, the lands of the Earl of Desmond and other traitors in Munster, Viscount Baltinglass in Leinster, O'Rourke and O'Connor Sligo in Connaught, and the Essex inheritance in Ulster were all now available for plantation. Thus what was in fact a monumental failure of Elizabethan policy is presented as her 'greatest opportunities' (p. 77).

Finally, Herbert offers detailed proposals for a 'hearts and minds' policy with, as its centrepiece, the founding of two universities, with three colleges each, at Dublin and Limerick to foster 'virtue, learning and civilization' (p. 101). So Limerick still has some way to go in this regard. It is perhaps worth quoting Herbert in full (in translation) on this matter of the universities, not only to show something of his style and of his thoughts on the subject, but also to give an indication of his attention to detail (pp. 101-107):

Since universities have always been held to be the most pleasant and purest sources of virtue, learning and civilization, it would be most advisable to establish two in Ireland, one at Dublin and one at Limerick. Three colleges could be founded in each. A rent of seventeen shillings imposed yearly by parliament on every village throughout the whole of Ireland will provide for each of them in a sufficiently magnificent fashion. Part of this rent would be paid by the owners of the land, the rest by the tenants. Certainly this impost would only just yield seventeen pence from one hundred English acres, especially if that much used and well-known Irish couplet rightly gives the dimensions of a village: A townland sustains five hundred cows, With seven plough-lands, it is no lie. And, in a village ye five hundred cows are wont to graze, And ye oxen draw seven ploughs fit for bulls. Now there are 5520 villages in Ireland and if they were made liable for this rent by law they would yield annually 4692 pounds. A grant of 700 pounds then could be assigned to each college and there would be enough over to suffice for the reimbursing of those who collect this revenue. As regards all three colleges in both cities the head of one will be a Professor of Theology and the Sacred Language who will give two lectures a week, one in Theology, the other in Hebrew. The head of the second college will be a Professor of Jurisprudence who will also give two public lectures on Civil Law and Moral Philosophy. Over the third will be placed a Professor of Medicine and Greek. He should be able to deliver two lectures on medicine and Greek - but each Professor must discharge his tasks on alternate days. Each of these should be given an annual salary of one hundred pounds. Further, in each college there should be ten Fellows, to each of whom should be given an exhibition of twenty pounds. There should be eight Candidates for eventual election to a Fellowship. Each of these should receive twenty marks. Two Chaplains should be added who would be given exhibitions of fifteen pounds. There should also be thirty Scholars who would each receive yearly six pounds, thirteen shillings and four pence. In the individual colleges these exhibitions amount to six hundred and thirty-six pounds. There remain sixty-three pounds, six shillings and eight pence which are sufficient to pay the wages of porters, cooks and other servants. And there is no doubt that in Ireland, where both food and clothing are neither dear nor scarce, this proportion should meet and more than meet all needs. From among the Fellows and Candidates there should be chosen those who will give public lectures on the liberal arts. For the public lectures each of them should annually receive twenty pounds. Around four hundred pounds will remain to reimburse the collectors who will be engaged in gathering this revenue and tax.

But since the colleges have to be erected and built and that can only be done from these revenues, it is reasonable that for the first five years the number of Fellows, Candidates, Scholars and others should be reduced by a half in each college. Thus about three hundred pounds will be left over annually for the building

of each college. With the care and diligence of prudent men this should be sufficient to build and construct colleges on a magnificent scale within five years. In the meantime the Scholars should acquire the most comfortable dwellings possible and enter on their public and private studies. But at this point some people will argue that the greater part of Ireland is devastated and uncultivated and that therefore there can be no point in levying such a revenue on individual estates nor any means of collecting it. It must be admitted and deplored that Ireland is not as cultivated as it should be. However, it is not so empty and depopulated that it would not be easy to raise such a small revenue, which would bestow such exceptional lustre and advantage on Ireland, from the owners and tenants of the land. And this would come about much more successfully and quickly if those cesses, and indeed excesses, were to cease. I speak of the inhuman and tyrannical exactions by leading Irishmen, Deputies and English officers and soldiers which are the plague and ruin of people and state alike. If these were destroyed and stamped out, there can be no doubt that it would be of such great benefit to the Irish that it would win their goodwill, encourage industry and bring back into cultivation the most desolate places.

Yet the impact of all this would in any case have been negated by his other main recommendation: that 'the poor and the people as a whole' should not be called to parliament, hold office, exercise judicial functions, bear arms or act in defence of the State (p. 111). Thus, having manipulated the evidence to demonstrate why the land should become English, he then offers a proposal which would transform Ireland into a classic colony by reducing the natives to the status of Gaelic Man-Fridays!

The editors are of course too discreet to spell out the wider political implications of Herbert's tract. That is not their task, although they make the evidence available. (Indeed, Herbert was almost moderate by comparison with some other New English adventurers.) Yet the publication of Herbert's *Croftus* represents a signal service to early modern British/Irish history, and its editorial conventions certainly set a standard which editors of other contemporary pamphlets will find very difficult to match.