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Sixteenth-Century Britain

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Hugh O’Neill and The Nine Years War

The Nine Years War between Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and Elizabeth I of England was as much a war between cultures as it was between countries. Elizabeth I obviously represents 16th century Tudor England, but O’Neill’s representation of Ireland is much more complex; however, it is in that complexity that we actually see 16th century Ireland. The role Tyrone plays in the nine-year fight for Irish independence is of ultimate importance to the success and failure of the effort, but the path that led Tyrone to war was filled with twists and turns that gave neither side a clear view of where his loyalties lay. The document, *‘A note of sundry causes and articles wherewith the earl of Tyrone is aggrieved’*, represents the final moment before the Earl of Tyrone stepped away from the English to take up the mantle of the O’Neill. *‘Hugh O’Neill’s war aims’* shows O’Neill at the height of his power, and ‘*The Submission of Hugh O’Neill’* reflects the moment of the O’Neill’s defeat. These three documents, along with historical context and other contemporary papers, show the transition of an Irish chieftain into an English nobleman and reflect the greater defeat of Gaelic culture by English.

Gaelic culture in the 16th century was only marginally altered from what it had been for a thousand years. Those areas closest to the English pale—an area that stretched into the countryside around Dublin—and the larger Irish cities were more heavily influenced by English culture, politics and religion. The deeper one went into Ireland, the less “civilizing” influence one found. In the heart of Gaelic Ireland—predominately to the north and west—traditional life still held sway. The lives of ‘wild Irish’ were little changed from those of preceding generations. Tribal septs were led by a popularly-elected chief, with the ‘tanist’ heir (also elected) ready to follow in his place. Laws were influenced by English culture, but were still based on the ancient Brehon laws and Brehon judges still ruled, as did superstitions that the English found ‘devilish’. Roman Catholicism had almost totally replaced the pagan beliefs of the previous millennia, but Irish Catholicism was very different from that of the rest of Europe: Irish clergy married, had children, and inherited positions from their fathers. The tribal clans and the religious leadership were intertwined by blood relationships, and clergy even went to war with their clans in regional disputes. (The viciousness of those clan wars became legendary, especially in regard to the barbarity of the Gaels; when Gaelic soldiers fought for other nations, their traditional battle behavior shocked even their allies.) Divorce, never practiced in England, was a common occurrence in Ireland, and children could be ‘re-named’ as the offspring of another man, usually giving them a higher social status. The Gaels still dressed differently, wore their hair differently, rode a horse differently and spoke a different tongue.

To the English, ‘different’ meant ‘wrong’, and the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) are an example of English attempts to separate their own from the polluting habits of the Irish. The New English were convinced that exposure to ‘proper’ English ways would influence the Irish to turn toward civilized practices, as well as redeem the Old Irish who had fallen away. Henry VIII began his reign with a tolerant, humanist-influenced approach, willing to give the natives time to evolve. The Irish, having watched a veritable ebb-and-flow of English ‘conquerors’ waited for this latest one to direct his attention elsewhere, but Henry Tudor had no intention of forgetting the Irish. When ruling through the Earl of Kildare ceased to work, a succession of Lords Deputy followed, and the practice of planting good English farmers in the Irish land began. The policy of ‘Surrender and Regrant’ was established, wherein the local chieftains would relinquish their lands and traditional Irish titles for a re-granting of lands with a new English title from the king. This policy-- with hereditary new titles and lands—assumed a cultural superiority and its proponents were convinced that the offer was so reasonable and attractive that all opposition would be overcome. The English did not understand that ‘Surrender and Regrant’ was actually destabilizing because the Gaelic chiefs held their title only through the free will of their people; ‘Surrender and Regrant’ took away that freedom of choice. Excluding the other clan members gave reason for them to oppose all reforms and often risked out-right war. Resistance to these policies appeared, and the Irish *were* being socially and politically disenfranchised, but headway was being made when ‘the king’s problem’ reared its head.

Henry VIII’s decision to oust the pope from his lands and rule the Church himself served in Ireland as yet another English change to resist, and this issue was a unifying factor for many Irish Catholics, Gael or Old English. Where most of the newly-arriving Englishmen were Protestant, those English already established in Ireland (the ‘Old English’) were decidedly Roman Catholic. By the mid-1540’s there were already those in Ireland who would use the charge of heresy to justify resistance to crown government. By the end of his reign, Henry VIII was using force to convince the Irish to follow his lead. The radical Protestantism of Edward VI led to laws increasingly hostile to Catholics, implemented by increasing numbers of radical Protestants within Ireland’s governing bodies. Catholics received a temporary reprieve during the reign of Mary I, but the pendulum swung back at her death. The accession of Elizabeth as queen (1558) and as Governor of the Church of England (1560), along with official confirmation of England as a protestant state was greeted with outright hostility by the catholic majority in Ireland. The papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* (1570) added fuel to the fire and internationalized the conflict—the Irish could now look for support from catholic Europe.

The 1530’s vision of a humanist-inspired reform of Ireland had, by the 1570’s, devolved into a completion of the 1169 conquest by force. Authorities in England and Ireland agreed that there would have to be a militant conversion of Irish to Protestantism, but “Soldiers, it has to be admitted, almost never make good missionaries.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The growing influx of New English was a concern to the existing Gaels and Old English in Ireland; to the Gaels, the simple truth that they were English provoked a natural aversion, but both found it problematic that the newcomers were more radically protestant. The Protestant cause was not helped by the fact that the newly arriving Protestants, whether gentry or commoner, clergy, soldier or administrator-- all seemed to be the dredges of society.

English opinion of the Irish, however, was even worse. From the writings of Geraldus of Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) had come descriptions of the Gaels as dirty, shiftless, lazy heathens who would bathe in blood and eat human flesh. Those attitudes were not far changed four centuries later. The Gaels were despised and viewed as the lowest rung of humanity—if they were even human at all. The English in Ireland were viewed by their countrymen as second-class citizens and, to some, the Old English were thought lower than the Gaels for having adopted Gaelic practices; choosing to “go native” was worse than being so. The Old English were English to the Gaels, but to their countrymen they were merely Irish.

Even the monarch of England seemed tainted by prejudice against the Irish. A royal proclamation from February, 1562 concerns the abundance of homeless persons in England, especially those nearest her royal residence(s). The title of the proclamation, *‘Ordering Arrest of Vagabonds, Deportment of Irishmen’* hints at her opinion*.* In this document, Elizabeth I refers to men of Ireland who have “unnaturally served as rebels”[[2]](#footnote-2), who “cannot have any good meaning towards her majesty”[[3]](#footnote-3) and who have secretly come “by procurement of the devil and his ministers”[[4]](#footnote-4) to endanger her person. Irish vagrants that “haunt about the court”[[5]](#footnote-5) cannot possibly have a good reason for being there, merely a “pretense”[[6]](#footnote-6) of suits where they have “no just cause”[[7]](#footnote-7). It is possible, however, that the wording of this Proclamation has less to do with racial prejudice and more with political paranoia.

Elizabeth Tudor had seen multiple uprisings and rebellions in Ireland. Shane O’Neill, legitimate son of the first Earl of Tyrone, was in a semi-permanent state of rebellion from before Elizabeth ascended the throne until his murder in 1567. The Ormond and Desmond families had their own small war in 1565, with Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, being pardoned (read ‘queen’s cousin’) while Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Desmond, was imprisoned in the Tower. Upon release, Fitzgerald led the First Desmond Rebellion (1569-1573), but was pardoned and restored to his lands and title. Desmond rebelled, again, in 1579, and when he was finally murdered in 1583, his lands were declared forfeit. Not only was the 400 year-old inheritance of the Geraldines taken, but all of Muenster was confiscated due to the enormity of the second uprising.

As the great earls of southern Ireland fell, they left a power vacuum that began to be filled by the new Earl of Tyrone, Hugh O’Neill; where his allegiance lay was of increasing importance and increasingly in doubt. O’Neill’s grandfather was the first Earl of Tir-oen, Conn Bacach O’Neill, who adopted (by the Irish naming tradition) a son of his favorite mistress. When he declared this interloper, Matthew, as his heir, he set his legitimate son on the warpath, creating a thorn in the Tudor side. The disinherited son, Shane O’Neill, retaliated by initiating a violent family feud, imprisoning his father and murdering his half-brother. He then hunted down Matthew’s oldest son and cut his throat. The younger son, Hugh, narrowly escaped his uncle and was found hiding in the Dungannon wilderness by Sir Henry Sidney, an officer in charge of crown troops sent to restore peace in Ulster.

Sidney took Hugh into his own home, all but adopting him, and raised him alongside his own son, Philip. Penhurst Castle, in England, provided Hugh a quality country life; for seven years he lived with the protestant Sidneys, whose grand dame was the Countess of Pembroke-- patroness of Donne and Jonson. Given a humanist education, Hugh learned manners as a page to Mary Sidney (whose son, Sir Philip, became the epitome of the chivalric knight). The young Irishman was exposed to visitors from all walks of life—social, political and religious—who included Leicester and Walsingham, Sir John Perot and the Earl of Ormond. Hugh O’Neill, who would become not only the most powerful Gael, but the *only* powerful Gael, experienced the English world and was educated and taught its values by an English government that sought to use him for their own purposes.

Sir Sidney’s motives had been true, but as the legitimate heir to the Tyrone title, the English had recognized an opportunity to turn Hugh and use him to their advantage by raising him among the English… unfortunately, their plan backfired. Grateful to Sir Sidney on several levels, Hugh had been given the opportunity to study and understand his enemies; he also was able to recognize the inadequate traditions of Celtic life. His humanist education gave O’Neill a reasoning mind and the impersonal view of a strategist, and he recognized and appreciated English might. Comfortable in both cultures throughout his life, O’Neill counted among his friends the Earl of Essex, and peers such as viscounts, Lord Chancellors and other Lords of the Realm. His return to Ireland did not ensure his election as the O’Neill, so while he bided his time working for the chieftaincy, he quietly continued another Gaelic tradition. Intent upon avenging the murders of his father and brother, O’Neill systematically erased from existence every son, cousin and nephew of Shane O’Neill.

When Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone became *the* O’Neill, he seemed to lead his clan in support of the English. The English thought him perfect to handle the unruly Scots and Irish—O’Neill was a ‘presentable’ man who, being of Gaelic birth, was believed capable of leading his people onto the right path. When facing Spanish invaders, O’Neill gave them with no quarter; when local clans rose against the crown, O’Neill helped to put them down. .. His loyalty seemed obvious. O’Neill did abolish the practice of coyne & livery, and undercut the Brehons, but he then ruled his lands with his own laws and began to raise his own private army. By training one small group at a time, O’Neill was able to secretly muster a small army by the end of the 1580s. English looking back saw this as a prelude to O’Neill’s rebellion, but “there is no evidence that his military build-up in the 1580’s was preparatory to an onslaught on crown rule.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In fact, if O’Neill intended to play the role of an intermediary between the Gaels and the English government, to have political credibility he did need some military capacity. In the meantime, Tyrone lands were caught between the O’Donnells to the west and the Scots to the east, so a military capability served a more immediate, practical purpose.

O’Neill, as the Earl of Tyrone, used his men and his influence for the Crown’s benefit, but he was also the O’Neill, with cares and responsibilities in that sphere as well. Knowing, and being a part of, both worlds, Tyrone walked a very thin line. Politics on both sides were complicated. The Gaels followed age-old traditions and were suspicious of any change or interference. The election of clan chiefs and tanists left disgruntled candidates who were often working to undermine clan authority, if not warring outright. The English government was rife with corruption; money and influence ruled, leaving many Irishmen isolated and frustrated.

It is in this tumultuous world of ‘Gael versus Gael versus English versus English’ that we find Hugh O’Neill writing ‘*A note of sundry causes and articles by which the earl of Tyrone is grieved’.* Written in Dundalk, Ireland, March 1594, the document was presented to a group of English commissioners who had arrived to meet with O’Neill. O’Neill was embroiled in conflict with the top government authorities and the commissioners were there to mediate the situation. By the 1590s, the conflict in southern Ireland had increased Tyrone’s power to the point where he was too important to offend.

The document begins by stating that the Marshal of Ireland had bought the Lord Deputy, Sir William Fitzwilliam. (Bribes, O’Neill contends, made with monies stolen from the Irish.) O’Neill continues with the accusation that the Marshal, Sir Henry Bagenal, was using false accusations of treason with the goal of having him hung. As noted previously, O’Neill was walking a line between the Gaels and the English. A perceptive man and adept politician, O’Neill was blessed with a winning personality and a gift for words that allowed him to wriggle out of many tight circumstances. Questions were starting to be raised regarding Tyrone’s loyalty; even his friends were beginning to wonder where his loyalties lay, but there was never any proof of unfaithfulness.

O’Neill was often called in for questioning, but he was never found guilty. O’Neill likely did organize the escape of Red Hugh O’Donnell from the Dublin Castle—which would illustrate how deeply Tyrone reached into the heart of English power, but it could never be proven. In every case where he was suspect, alleged witnesses coincidentally vanished or were found murdered. When accused of treason in 1595, Tyrone boldly went to England, with the intent of defending himself in person. Elizabeth I refused to see him, directing him to her Privy Council, from whose chambers he walked out a free man.

Article Two addresses the government’s (i.e. the Lord Deputy’s and the Marshal’s) actions after the earl had done them ‘a great service’. Tyrone had brought the clans around the Upper Clandeboye under English control; all persons associated with the earl in that large area were then removed from positions of authority and replaced by lower-class persons subservient to the Marshal. This move not only insulted Tyrone and the other clan leaders, it attacked Tyrone’s influence among the clans.

The third issue that Tyrone brings forward is a similar grievance: all gentlemen who are on friendly terms with the earl are finding their influence and earned authority undermined, with their subordinates being raised to higher positions of power. Further, O’Neill continues, there are many examples of those replacements being merely tools for the Marshal, with no other purpose than to “cut the Earl’s throat”[[9]](#footnote-9). The personal, vindictive nature of Sir Henry Bagenal towards Tyrone has at its root a very personal history.

Whether for sincere attraction, or perhaps a desire to bring an ‘English touch’ to his home at Dungannon, O’Neil began courting the daughter of Sir Nicholas Bagenal, an official representative of the Crown. Not only was O’Neill twice Mabel’s age, but the Statutes of Kilkenny and other more recent laws had made marriage between a Gael and an Englishman (or woman) illegal. The Bagenals were appalled, but, hesitant to offend the earl, they asked London for direction. While they were waiting for a reply, O’Neill seduced the girl, wed her and had her firmly established at Dungannon before Elizabeth’s reluctant approval arrived. Sir Nicholas, broken-hearted by his daughter’s shame, died within a short time and was succeeded by his son, Henry. As for the couple, shunned by the English, despised by the Gaels and horrified by the harshness of Gaelic society, Mabel found her situation unbearable; O’Neill was forced to confine her to Dungannon for the last two years of her life. Sir Henry nursed a grudge for the dishonor given to his family by Tyrone, and for the rest of his life did all he could to prove the earl treacherous.

(During the early years of his marriage to Mabel Bagenal Tyrone visited England on a shopping expedition. His purpose was to ‘Anglicize’ his home, and he bought furnishings of all types to do so. He also approached William Cecil, Lord Burghley, for advice on renovating Dungannon, and struck up a sincere friendship with the old man. At some point, Tyrone bemoaned the unavailability of lead for re-roofing his home, and Cecil authorized an entire shipload through customs for O’Neill’s use. The roofing was postponed due to pressing political matters and the lead was eventually melted into munitions for O’Neill’s army.)

The fourth claim in *‘A note of sundry causes…’* relives an action in Tirconnell where Tyrone’s foster brothers had lead 200 men against a Spanish force of 500-600. Defeating them, the brothers sent the survivors on to the earl, and he sent them on to the Lord Deputy, but none of the O’Neills were compensated in any way, monetarily or otherwise

Article five relives another incident that placed O’Neill at odds with Fitzwilliam and Bagenal. The Maguires were a sept that lived on lands adjoining those of the O’Neills; traditionally, the larger O’Neill clan offered support and protection to the Maguires against their English and Gaelic foes. When the Maguires, a traditional O’Neill ally, rose against the English in 1592-93, Tyrone was placed in an uncomfortable position. He eventually agreed to be commissioned by the Lord Chancellor, Adam Loftus, and to serve with the Marshal in putting down the uprising; afterward, O’Neill was left with a L3,000 sterling tab and a badly wounded leg. Evidently the Lord Deputy later came to dinner at Dungannon and (possibly pressed for recompense), instead of thanking O’Neill for his service, called him a traitor, offending not only Tyron’s pocketbook but his honor.

Issue six details another occurrence during the Maguire campaign in Fermanagh, Muenster. The Marshal, ever watchful of opportunities to slur Tyron’s reputation—and not above creating them, himself—evidently caused a false alarm to be raised in the camp at night. The purpose of the alarm, O’Neill contends, was to find him and his men unprepared for battle and thus, subject to charges.

Sir Henry Bagenal’s continued efforts to hamper the earl are shown, again, in article seven. Tyrone had requested 200 soldiers—a low number—to aid him in pursing rebels along the border of Tirconnell. The Marshal, however, sent only 60-80 men, and the quality of those was so low that Tyrone refers to them as “the refuse of several companies”.

Lastly, the Earl of Tyrone recalls how after the battle at Balleek, County Fermanagh, where he was injured, the earl wrote an account of the battle to the Lord Deputy. When shown the letter, the Marshal asked Tyrone to include an account of how they had slain their enemies with their own hands (though no one had actually seen the Marshal kill anyone), adding that his own letter would say the same. Tyrone included the note, but Bagenal apparently did not, implying a lack of honor in the Marshal.

Taken together, all of these complaints reflect a growing anger and frustration at the lack of appreciation (and reward) by the English, as well as annoyance at Bagenal, personally. Tyrone has evidently put forth great effort against Hugh Maguire, lord of Fermanagh, a traditional clan ally, in support of English reform in Ulster. In return, he has received little acknowledgement, reimbursement or honor for his actions and is left with two scheming officials who actively seek his downfall.

Tyrone “stood between Irish and Queen’s forces”[[10]](#footnote-10)—but for whose benefit? Standing in the middle, O’Neill urged restraint to both English and Gael, watching as the English troops deteriorated. English settlers from Muenster and Connacht were greedily spilling over onto Ulster lands, and he could not continue to refrain from acting, but perhaps “that he did not act precipitously was only an indication of his deep preparations.” [[11]](#footnote-11)His protégé, Red Hugh O’Connell, after six years in Dublin Castle, had turned rebel upon his escape. O’Neill tried to shield him, but now that both Maguires and O’Donnells were on the warpath, O’Neill knew he had to choose between being Earl of Tyrone or the O’Neill.

Evidently the English response to his ‘*A note of sundry causes and articles by which the earl of Tyrone is grieved’* was insufficient, for the Battle of Clontibret saw O’Neill on the field with the Gaels for the first time. Hugh O’Neill knew that to be a Great Irish Lord he would have to be a Great Irish Rebel, and he proved to be an inspiring leader and brilliant campaigner. Elizabeth I had been right to be intimidated at the thought of having the Earl of Tyrone rise against her—his talent for planning and executing ambushes decimated the English forces, and his political acumen drew out the conflict to Irish advantage. His political savvy enabled Tyrone to surrender, plea and treat for consideration at least seven times between 1595 and 1598. Each time he was allowed to return to Dungannon unmolested, buying time for his cause.

The English recognized the threat he posed, but refused to act. Queen Elizabeth I was reluctant to spend the monies needed to send troops to Ireland in the numbers that were required; instead, she continued to believe that the English already there were sufficient to end the rebellion. O’Neill knew the queen well enough to be able to use her strengths against her—her natural caution and fiscal frugality gave the rebels time to organize and extend their area of control. Elizabeth admitted Tyrone was her most formidable adversary and referred to him as her arch traitor, her monster of the north.

Over time, Tyrone’s goals for the rebellion changed. In the 1596 Treaty of Dundalk, O’Neill and O’Donnell demanded the removal of military garrisons and the formation of county administrations in the north; they also wanted “freedom of conscience” for Catholics. These demands amounted to ‘Home Rule’ with 9 clauses calculated to win support from Spain. The queen was furious and refused to grant even one. William Cecil, Lord Burghly, scrawled the word “Ewtopia” across the page, commenting that Tyrone meant to be Ireland’s king.

To the four southern Lords who remained committed to England, Tyrone said, “Your impiety to God, cruelty to your soul and body, tyranny and ingratitude both to your followers and country, are inexcusable and intolerable. You separated yourself from the unity of Christ, his mystical body, the Catholic Church. You know the sword of extirpation hangeth over your head as well as ours, if things fall out otherwise than well. You are the cause why all the nobility of the south from the east part to the west are not linked together to shake off the cruel yoke of heresy and tyranny, with which our souls and bodies are oppressed…”[[12]](#footnote-12) A similar letter of 1599 was directed to the cities who remained under English control, urging them to show their allegiance to the country of their birth, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Religious sentiment is also reflected in *‘Hugh O’Neill’s War aims’.* Through this document, O’Neill proclaimed his goals for the rebellion—which now included restoration of the Catholic Church in Ireland and repeal of the discriminatory laws placed on the Irish by the English Protestants. The Catholic religion was to be openly taught and the Church of Ireland was to be back under papal authority. All religious houses were to be reclaimed from the English and restored to Catholicism; imprisoned Irish Catholics were to be released and all Catholics were to be free to travel internationally. No *Englishman* would be allowed to be a churchman in *Ireland*, and crown rents were to be used to establish a university for Roman Catholic education of the people.

‘*Hugh O’Neill’s War aims’* also addressed political problems, the remedies for which would effect Home Rule. Any governor of Ireland (now, ‘viceroy’) had to be at least an earl and a member of the Privy Council. Upper-level officials in the government had to be Irishmen, all of the countries in Ireland were to be governed by Irishmen and the head of the army and half of his soldiers and officers had to be Irish, as well.

Issues affecting children were also highlighted. That “no Irishman’s heirs shall lose their lands for the faults of their ancestors”[[13]](#footnote-13)reflected the practice associated with attainder that had been liberally used in the past century. If an under-age heir were to become a ward of the crown, the living from his lands was to be used to meet the needs of his family and not sucked away by the crown. The last of the ‘minority issues’ was that children were never to be used as pawns to control the behavior of the parents. The previous year, 1598, Tyrone had met with the Earl of Ormond to discuss terms for peace. One of the demands brought up by Ormond was that O’Neill’s sons be given as pledge for his good behavior; O’Neill’s response was loud and clear (to those that spoke Gaelic): the sons of Hugh O’Neill would *never* be given up. I suppose that this ‘request’ had stayed on his mind. The heirs of the Earl of Desmond were evidently also on his mind: The lands and privileges that had been taken away in the last 200 years were to be restored to O’Neill, O’Donnell *and the Earl of Desmond* and all their people; justice was to be served in the south, as well.

The rest of the demands pertained to the Irish layman as much as anyone and they are especially interesting in that they give insight into just how restricted the lives of ordinary Irishmen were. Laws against the preferment of Irishmen for employment were to be revoked. No Irishman was to be ‘pressed’ into royal service against his will. All Irishmen were to be allowed to travel freely in foreign nations without requiring special permission from crown officials, and Irish merchants were to have free trade, paying the same duties as their English counterparts. Irish traders, too, were to be under the same laws as the English merchantmen, and they were no longer to have their ships searched for clergy. All Irishmen were to be free to learn any vocation they chose and to work at that occupation (or art) as they saw fit. Lastly, the Irish were to be free to build ships, again—ships of any purpose-- and to fit them with artillery and munitions if they so chose.

In March 1599, Queen Elizabeth I issued a proclamation, *Declaring Reason for Sending Army into Ireland’*, but the English commitment came too late; O’Neill was virtually Prince of Ireland. Irish in Muenster, Connacht, Offaly and Leinster had risen in astonishing numbers to join the well-trained, fully-armed men of Ulster. The English settlers throughout the Irish countryside saw Tyrone as their ultimate nemesis, but to the Irish, O’Neill was the father of an Irish nation. The South of Ireland, already a great investment for the English, was held hostage as O’Neill’s forces won battle after battle. 1598 saw the largest battle ever to take place on Irish soil; Yellow Ford was the first time the Irish ever met the English on their own terms. The result was a national triumph for the Irish and a catastrophic loss for the English. For Elizabeth’s reign, Yellow Ford was its greatest military defeat and it precipitated a crisis second only to that of the Spanish armada. By 1599, Tyrone controlled far more Irish land than the queen… Elizabeth I had lost Ireland.

The queen, like most English in the 16th century, assumed a natural superiority over the Irish and could not understand the ingratitude of the island’s inhabitants. The proclamation for *‘Declaring Reason for Sending Army into Ireland’*, Elizabeth I states that her reign should have reaped in Ireland the fruits her grace deserved “if there had been in them any sense of religion, duty or *common humanity*”[[14]](#footnote-14). She then looks to the future and comments that “by using extraordinary power and force against them, *assuring* ourselves so much in the justice of our cause as we shall find…success.. against unnatural rebellions.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Sir Edmund Spenser, a recipient of lands from the Desmond forfeiture in Muenster, commented in 1596 that “O’Neill is like a frozen snake picked up by a farmer which, growing warm, hisses at his benefactor,”[[16]](#footnote-16) a serpent “raised out of the dust by the Queen, yet encompassing the most serious of all perils to Elizabeth’s rule in Ireland.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Sir Edmund Spenser, an observer of life in Muenster following the plantation stated, “The deviser of the settlement of Munster perhaps thought that the civil example of the English being set before the Irish, and their daily conversing with them, would have brought them by dislike of their own savage life to the liking and embracing of better civility. But it is far otherwise, for instead of following them, they fly at the English and most hatefully shun them, for two causes: first, because they have ever been brought up licentiously and to live as one listeth; secondly, because they naturally hate the English, so that their fashions they also hate.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The counter-view of the Irish echoed in Tyrone’s words to Ormond in 1598: “her majesty never gave me anything but what belonged to me. And as for what I have gotten, I got it by my own scratching of the world and not from her goodness. Have I not spent my blood for her? Have I not kept quiet for thirty years?”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Following Yellow Ford, Elizabeth was fully prepared to commit the troops and the monies required to take back Ireland, but not understanding the Irish or their motives meant underestimating what reclaiming their island would take. Elizabeth sent troops into Ireland with little success. From 1599 through 1601, Tyrone continued to hold all of Ireland except for the Pale and the larger coastal cities. O’Neil was willing to negotiate, but the queen was not; O’Neill’s rebellion had injured her pride and embarrassed her. Elizabeth declared total war without realizing that retaking the north would exhaust her troops. A letter to James VI of Scotland in 1601 shows the English queen was still expecting Ireland’s imminent defeat: “wee doe howerly expect some favorable wynde that will blowe to our ears some such tydings of their ruyne”[[20]](#footnote-20).

The war continued for another two years, however, with Elizabeth pouring reinforcements into southern Ireland, trying to overcome the attrition rate, while O’Neill endeavored to out-last her. England’s resolve had been set when Tyrone appealed to Spain after the victory at Yellow Ford: just as the prior threats of a French landing and Spanish armada had done, O’Neill’s call for foreign aid ignited English rage. The English were firmly behind their queen to spare no cost—financial or otherwise—to uphold the integrity of the Tudor state. In Spain, Phillip II had resolved to help the Irish, sending munitions, advisers and finally shiploads of supplies and Spanish troops. Tyrone, the first Irishman of his age to have international acclaim, fought with Catholic Europe cheering him on.

An English blockade kept the Spaniards from landing and it was when Tyrone changed his tactics to help them that he ensured his eventual defeat. To free the Spanish from their ships, Tyrone led the Irish south in November 1601 to attack the English siege lines. The resulting Irish loss of the battle at Kinsale lost their nation. It took another year-and-a-half, but, with the aid of disease and famine, the Nine Years War was brought to a close.

O’Neill’s submission in March 1603 was greeted with relief by the English and he was given generous terms—along with a pardon he was allowed to keep his lands and his English title, but at a price. O’Neill vows absolute loyalty to the English monarch and her representatives and renounces all claims to the Gaelic chieftaincy. Tyrone also puts away any claims to foreign powers—specifically Spain and the Pope—and offers to even serve against them or their forces or allies. O’Neill even promises no further contact with the “Uriaghts”— Anglo-Irish descendants of the 12th century English who had become so Irish that they were now sub-chiefs to the Gaelic clans of Ulster. Finally, O’Neill promises not only subjection to, but aid for the English authorities in transforming Gaelic Ulster into a proper English province. Whether or not Tyrone would have upheld all these promises, ‘*the submission of Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone’* put aside his Gaelic claims and placed O’Neill firmly in the English camp. The last defender of the Gael, the last of the great Irish lords, O’Neill’s defeat rang the death knell for a way of life that stretched back into the mists of time.

In a touch of irony, both the English queen and the Irish earl won without knowing it. The English command in Ireland had been told of the queen’s death three days before O’Neill arrived to make submission, but had kept it a secret. Elizabeth I died without seeing victory and O’Neill had outlasted her after all, but hadn’t known it until too late.

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