

Eamon Darcy, *The Irish Rebellion of 1641 and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms*

Woodbridge (Suffolk), The Boydell Press, 2013

[ISBN: 9780861933204 ; £50.00]

GORDON D. RAEBURN

The University of Melbourne

Eamon Darcy's recent work on the 1641 Irish Rebellion sets out, as one of its stated aims, to interact with the depositions taken from those claiming to be witness to the initial activities of the rebellion in late 1641 in a more detailed manner than previous works on the subject. Due to the fundamental nature of the depositions, however, in that they were taken predominantly from Protestants, by Protestants, about Catholics, this is far from a straightforward endeavour. There are potentially useful elements to the depositions highlighted by Darcy, such as their aid in gauging the fears of the settlers in Ireland following the initial waves of violence, but even this aspect needs to be treated with caution; fears could be and were manipulated for personal and political ends. Additionally, the fact that the people in the depositions could name individual rebels shows that there had been a certain degree of contact and familiarity between the two communities in Ireland prior to 1641. It is clear throughout this text, however, that Darcy has treated these sources with due care and diligence. The depositions, of course, are not the only source to be engaged with in this work, and Darcy has also employed a wealth of archival and contemporary printed material, and it is this material that aids in another of the aims of this work; the placement of the rebellion in the wider context of the Three Kingdoms of Ireland, Scotland, and England, as well as the wider European and even Atlantic contexts.

The book begins by giving a good background to the events of 1641, as well as looking at Irish life and society in the preceding years. In working towards the stated aim of the placement of the rebellion in the wider context the book highlights an incredibly violent time at home and abroad, as well as a time of religious disagreement throughout Europe, and both of these notions are engaged with throughout the text as elements to consider when discussing the 1641 rebellion. Interestingly, however, Darcy suggests that in terms of the wider context mentioned above it is the English context that is more important to understanding the rebellion than the Scottish. The Scottish influence on the events of 1641, in particular the signing of the National Covenant in 1638, is clear, but as Darcy states, it was England that the Colonial administration in Ireland looked to for help following the beginning of the rebellion (p. 8). This is not to say, however, that the Irish rebels also ignored Scotland, and as such a brief section on the Scottish aspect of this conflict would not have gone amiss.

Due to this work's engagement with the 1641 depositions, as well as other sources reporting on the rebellion, a large aspect of the text deals with the reported violence of the rebels, such as their displays of power and authority through symbolic violence. Reported incidences of the exhumation of Protestant corpses, and the denial of burial to the Protestant dead are not uncommon, and if true were clear signs of the re-establishment of a Catholic community identity through the ownership of death (pp. 65-66). The Catholic community was very clearly strengthening its identity through the expulsion of the Protestants from the very land itself, leaving the Protestant dead to rot above ground. There were reports of the mutilation of cattle belonging to Protestants. The animals were said to have been not just killed, but tortured and dismembered, a further display of power over the Protestants. Men, women, and children were drowned in rivers (p. 64). Men were emasculated, and the corpses of the dead were desecrated and burned. These incidents, as well as claims of the execution of members of the Protestant clergy, were also taken by the settler community, and those who reported these incidents to the wider audience, as signs of the apocalypse, along the lines of Revelation 19:17-18 (p. 105). There were also reports of ghostly apparitions frightening Catholics (p. 70), but also inspiring some to join the rebellion (p. 58). Again, in the minds of the Protestants at least, the religious aspect was of central importance to the rebellion.

Returning to the attempts to place the Irish rebellion in a wider context, in this work comparisons are made in the various methods of reporting the violence in Ireland with similar attempts elsewhere in Europe, particularly the Thirty Years War in Germany and the fairly unrepresentative reporting that occurred, focussing on gory violence and bloody atrocities. Looking further afield to the Atlantic world, comparisons are drawn not only in terms of episodic violence in the Virginian colonies and the Spanish New World colonies, but again also in terms of the reporting of events to a wider audience, as was the case with the Thirty Years War. This is a particularly interesting aspect of this work. Comparisons are drawn between the English portrayal of the Jamestown massacre in Virginia in 1622 and the events in Ireland in 1641. In both cases the violence of the natives was used to remind the audience of the need to spread Christianity throughout the colonies. Fascinating parallels are shown between English attitudes to Native Americans and the native Irish, in that in both cases their violence was seen as symptomatic of not being Protestant. The Native Americans were violent because they were non-Christians, the native Irish were violent because they were Catholic. Elsewhere the text highlights the parallels that were drawn between the 1641 rebellion and the Spanish conquest of Central and South America, and there is a resulting paradox in that the Native Americans who elsewhere were vilified for their violence were, in this instance, portrayed as suffering atrocities at the hands of the Catholic Spanish, much as the Irish protestants were portrayed as suffering at the hands of the Catholic Irish. The Catholic Irish, however, were the native Irish, and the Protestants were the settler community. In a sense it could be suggested, from the Colonial Protestant perspective, that the native Irish were seen as violent both due to being a native population in a colonised land, and as due to their Catholicism. In all of these instances, the Thirty Years War, the incidents in North and South America, and the 1641 rebellion, Catholic aggressors were portrayed as targeting the weak and the helpless, such as women and children, and perpetrating atrocities including rape

(although not as commonly in the Americas), the dashing of children's heads against walls, and the slitting of the stomachs of pregnant woman, all of which, in the eyes of the Protestants, clearly contravened the conduct of civilised soldiers in times of war, as well as being reminiscent of other categorisations of the violence as apocalyptic, as seen above.

Of course, due to the nature of the majority of the primary materials with which this text engages it is perhaps unsurprising that there is such a focus on Protestant interpretations and reports of the rebellion, and initially the final chapter of the book continues this theme. It is important to note that Darcy uses the term 'Protestant' in this instance to denote 'official', as he does highlight the fact that there was no uniform Protestant identity in early modern Ireland (p. 133). This section is very interesting in that it reinforces points made earlier in the book regarding the initial reports on the violence of 1641, and in particular the wildly varying estimates of the casualties (varying from 150,000 to 600,000), but also the influence that the earliest reports had on later official interpretations of the rebellion. Additionally, the initial intelligence and the earliest reports not only coloured later interpretations and reports, but also the audience's interpretation of these reports. They are also shown to maintain a belief that there was a religious element to the rebellion, to which the true extent is a very important debate concerning the events of 1641, as will be seen below. There is also a very interesting discussion of the ways in which the events of 1641 themselves were used by the English in particular. Oliver Cromwell is shown to have used the rebellion to further his own agenda in Ireland and England, reporting his victories over the Irish in a rather gory fashion, but he is also seen to have justified his actions, and the level of violence employed, through recounting the horrors reportedly perpetrated against Protestants in Ireland. Others, such as John Phillips, used the events of 1641 to manipulate Cromwell in turn, encouraging him towards further acts of conquest and violence (p. 140). It is very clear from this discussion that the various works produced on the Protestant side regarding the 1641 rebellion served to reinforce English cultural notions of the Irish as barbaric, as seen above. Although it is stated at the outset of this work that Darcy has taken the English context of the rebellion to be more important than the Scottish context in understanding the root causes there is still an interesting lack of material dealing with the Scottish casualties of the rebellion. It is unclear why that should be the case in this instance. Perhaps it is merely the case that the English suffered far greater casualties, and this was reflected in the reports of the violence. Again, however, considering the title of the book a slightly more thorough investigation of the Scottish aspect of the events of 1641 may have enriched this text, although the book certainly does not suffer unduly without it.

The final section of the book does also address the Catholic versions of the rebellion, which appear to have been more varied than those of the Protestants. On the whole these responses were unsurprising. The rebels stressed the validity of their actions, they challenged the validity of the depositions, and they denied the initial massacre of Protestants. Other responses, however, glorified the rebellion as an attempt to rid Ireland of heretics and foreigners. There was an unsurprising denial of the atrocities described by the English, as seen above, but accusations of atrocities were also made against the English. There is also a particularly interesting mention of

very emotional elements in works produced by bardic poets, such as Uilliam Óg, in war poems in favour of the rebellion (p. 158). Of course, the responses on the Catholic side were far fewer than those produced by Protestants, as the Irish Confederates did not have the same ability to produce and distribute such works. There is a suggestion, however, that the works that they did produce managed to cause considerable consternation in England, although works in Gaelic, such as the bardic poems, understandably failed to reach a wide audience outside of Ireland. It would be interesting to see the extent to which these works found an audience in Gaelic speaking parts of Scotland, particularly in light of comparisons of Scottish Highlanders to the native Irish.

Throughout this work the question of the importance of religion in the rebellion of 1641 is raised, and this question is returned to in the conclusion. Indeed, Darcy states outright that religion was of crucial importance to the events of 1641 (p. 7). Darcy also states at the beginning of the text that the established Church in Ulster was not hugely concerned with the conversion of the native Irish during this period, adopting instead a more Anglican form of Church governance, a situation which certainly would have led to the exclusion of the native population from Church life, and a further separation of the two populations. In the conclusion, however, there is the suggestion that the situation in Ireland was far more complex than that in England, and as such attempts to portray the conflict as simply Catholic versus Protestant may have oversimplified the rebellion. There was, of course, a range of socio-economic factors, as well as political and possibly even ethnic factors to be taken into account, but this too should not be taken as in any way minimising the religious aspect of the rebellion. In truth, in the early modern period, when religious identity, cultural identity, and personal identity were so closely intertwined it is very difficult to separate the various influences, and it may well be the case that even within the rebellion there were factors more important to certain groups than others, and this is possibly reinforced by the variety of Catholic responses to Protestant reports of the rebellion. Although not an expressly stated aim of this book these notions of identity, and in particular the imposition of an identity on native communities and Catholic communities, are an important strand throughout this work. Catholics and native populations are seen as being portrayed by Protestants as barbaric; their identities are imposed through their affinity for violence. Protestants, on the other hand, saw themselves as more civilised, and as such it was their Christian duty to tame the 'savages'. The 1641 rebellion, therefore, could be said to be important for the identity of Protestants in the Three Kingdoms, as the violence unleashed by the rebels justified further attempts on the part of the settlers to control the native population in Ireland.

As stated above, in this work Darcy has set out to engage with the 1641 depositions in a more detailed manner than previous works, but he has also engaged with a wealth of contemporary books and pamphlets on both sides of the rebellion. These sources have been carefully considered and well utilised, and an admirable degree of balance has been brought from very partisan sources. In doing so he has not merely produced a narrative of the events and results of 1641, but has woven together issues of identity, religion, and the reporting of violence as a political and personal tool, not only employed against Ireland, but also in other colonial situations.

The 1641 rebellion has also been placed successfully in the wider context of European and Atlantic unrest, as well as within the context of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. There is an undeniable lack of Scottish material, but the extent to which the Irish rebellion directly affected Scotland is comparatively minor, and as a result this is not a problematic issue. Although it should not be forgotten that an Irish Royalist force did invade Scotland in 1644, relatively unsuccessfully, any attempt to shoehorn much more Scottish material into such a work would serve only to complicate the text, and may be better served by a separate study. A good survey of secondary material on the subject has been undertaken, and in places aspects of work into violence and fear in other cultures and periods of time has been applied rather successfully to early modern Ireland, although it is again possible that a bit more engagement with material on the English and Scottish views of the Scottish Highlanders may have helped in places.

Why is this an important work? Firstly, Darcy's laudable attempts at tackling the 1641 depositions, combined with solid engagement with other contemporary material, provides an excellent view of the ways in which reports of violence, real or imaginary, could be taken, moulded, and used to manipulate groups or individuals, politically or emotionally, in order to produce thoughts, feelings, or actions on a specific subject, in this case the conversion and suppression of native peoples. Secondly, in the text Darcy suggests that in some cases English soldiers in the Americas had used their experiences in Ireland as a learning experience when dealing with native populations (p. 8). Whilst this in itself is still up for debate, this work does show that cultural notions of native people, including the native Irish, were formed in very similar ways, and the various reports of violence again support this. Similarly, these works also serve to show that notions of cultural identity were very much linked to religious identity, almost to the point that one's culture was believed to go hand in hand with one's religion. This, of course, begs the question of how recent converts from Catholicism or from the Native Americans would have been viewed by those born into Protestantism. Were they still viewed as inherently barbaric? Finally, this is an important work in that, whilst the importance of religion to the rebellion of 1641 is not definitively answered there is still a good discussion and examination of the issue, and the other factors that went hand in hand with it. As has just been stated religious identity and cultural identity can be said to be almost inextricably linked, and as such it seems fair to say that religion was of central importance to the rebellion. Of course there were many other very important factors, no rebellion truly has only one root cause, but in this instance the various attempts to downplay the religious aspect in favour of socio-economic factors could well have stemmed from attempts to reduce anti-Catholic sentiment in England and Scotland, as stated in the text (p. 171). In this endeavour Darcy has produced a work that manages to balance many of these factors, aiding the overall picture of the events surrounding the Irish rebellion of 1641.