The Last Cavalier: Richard Talbot (1631-91)

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IHR Review

Padraig Lenihan, *The Last Cavalier: Richard Talbot (1631-91)*, Dublin, UCD Press, 2014, 268 pages, €40, ISBN 9781906359836.

Padraig Lenihan's biography of Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnell, deals with a figure who, despite holding a position at the forefront of Irish and British political life for nearly half a century, has remained strangely under-studied. This dignitary, by turns a soldier, courtier, political lobbyist, land agent, and, ultimately, a wartime viceroy, has only been subjected to two full biographical treatments. The first, from 1913, was Philip Sergeant's *Little Jennings and Fighting Dick Talbot*; a work which was a biography of not one, but two persons, Talbot himself and his second wife. The second, by Sir Charles Petrie, is from 1973. Given this relative scholarly neglect of an undoubtedly major public figure, Lenihan's book is a timely contribution to the canon.

Before embarking on the biography proper the introduction opens by highlighting the subject's centrality to events in late 17th-century Ireland and Britain, and his fascinating (if divisive) personality. The biographer also acknowledges the multiplicity of roles that Talbot filled during his lifetime, but asserts that, while he was not someone to whom a courtly role came naturally, he was primarily a courtier before everything else. Furthermore, Lenihan recognises that Talbot's standing in the existing historical record is poor, being seen as an untrustworthy bully. This he attributes to three reasons: his enemies (who were many) have left a considerable body of primary sources behind, he and his allies have left relatively few such sources behind, and an overly-influential 19th-century Whiggish historiography, which paints Talbot as one of the great villains of his era. While acknowledging that more modern scholarship has given us a somewhat subtler understanding of the Earl of Tyrconnell, Lenihan argues that we still lack a properly rounded portrait of his subject, making his work, which draws on newly-discovered and previously under-utilised primary documents, necessary.

The first chapter proper covers the 1640s and most of the 1650s. It begins by dealing with the familial, political, military and cultural backgrounds that Richard Talbot emerged from, describing the position and standing of his family in Irish society prior to the wars of the three kingdoms of the 1640s. It subsequently

covers the events of the Ulster Rebellion and the subsequent Confederate wars, and the Talbots' role in these events, before moving on to the Cromwellian conquest and its aftermath, Richard Talbot's continental exile following the sack of Drogheda in 1649, his involvement in an assassination attempt on Oliver Cromwell in 1655 and his later integration into the exiled royal household of James, Duke of York. This development would have profound consequences later on. The chapter also identifies two other long-term and significant influences on Richard's life; his older brother, Peter, a leading Jesuit who provided vital support to his siblings during the 1650s, and the Cromwellian Land Settlement in Ireland. Dismantling this, the author justifiably claims, would afterwards become Richard's life work.

Chapter two primarily covers Richard's life between 1657 and 1662, though it sometimes strays beyond these chronological limits. Once again, continuing a theme elaborated on in the previous chapter, Peter Talbot is portrayed as a major figure in Richard's life. Indeed, because of a lack of specific sources on Richard, many events in these years are looked at using material pertinent to this cleric. The other major theme identified in the previous chapter is also strongly evident here, with Talbot's role in the early development of the Restoration Land Settlement in Ireland getting much coverage. The chapter also tackles Richard's growing involvement in life at the Royal Stuart Court, especially as part of the Duke of York's household, and seeks to describe the social, political and courtly world in which he operated.

The next chapter takes the story into the early 1670s. It continues with more details on Talbot's involvement in the Restoration Land Settlement, including his role as an agent to Whitehall for Irish Catholics during that settlement's negotiation, as well as his role as a representative of important courtiers and landowners in the complex political negotiations surrounding this issue. As part of this it describes two important developments; how he enriched himself by taking a portion of the lands he secured for certain individuals, most notably Lord Arlington, and how his meddling in Irish land questions earned him Ormond's enmity. This latter rivalry ultimately led to Talbot's imprisonment during the enactment of the crucial Act of Explanation (1665) and, as Lenihan argues, to Talbot playing a part in bringing about Ormond's political fall in 1667–8. From there it goes on to describe his subject's activities up to his capture at Solebay during the third Anglo-Dutch War. In this section, which is set in the context of the growing Anglo-French alliance of these years, as well as Charles II's increasingly pro-Catholic policies, the book contends that Talbot consistently sought to advance the interests of Irish Catholics, most especially his own friends, allies and family.

The fourth chapter brings us through the 1670s into the early years of James II's reign. The 1670s are depicted here as difficult years for the Talbots, largely due to the collapse of various pro-Catholic Stuart policies, such as the Declaration of Indulgence. The appearance of the Popish Plot did not help either. Indeed, the latter affair led to Peter Talbot's death in prison and sent Richard back into exile. The early years of the 1680s are shown to be better years for the latter Talbot, though. He married Frances Jennings in 1681 and was able to return home two years later. This latter development was followed by a successful attempt to remove his old adversary, the Duke of Ormond, from the Irish Lord Lieutenancy. Furthermore, Richard was made Earl of Tyrconnell in 1685, following James II's accession to the throne. Lenihan, in these pages, describes the major significance of the new Earl gaining oversight over the Irish army. Talbot's initial moves against Ormond's successor as Irish viceroy, Henry Hyde, second Earl of Clarendon, as well as his attacks upon Protestant domination of Irish corporations and the Restoration Land Settlement in Ireland, are also analysed.

Chapter five brings us through the early years of Tyrconnell's viceroyalty and into the early stages of the Williamite war. It describes how James II's Irish Lord Deputy overcame opposition to his policies and his greening of the Irish administration. Here Lenihan argues that Tyrconnell did this in co-operation with, and under the influence of, his Monarch. William of Orange's invasion of England is presented as a catastrophe for the Jacobite cause in Ireland as Tyrconnell, taking a three-kingdom view of events, sent 40 per cent of his Irish forces to aid James II. The subsequent failure of this king to give battle, the author claims, allowed the Glorious Revolution to occur and deprived Tyrconnell of a significant part of an army that was already hampered by the lack of a Catholic landed elite to lead it. This disaster, the chapter continues, combined with growing Protestant opposition in Ulster, caused Tyrconnell to slump into despondency and consider

surrender. Richard Hamilton's arrival in Ireland in early 1689 revived the Lord Deputy's morale, though, leading him to prosecute war against his Ulster-based opponents. The failure to take Derry, together with Tyrconnell's poor health at that crucial again proved damaging to James's adherents, robbing them of leadership. This allowed William's army under Schomberg to land in Ireland, though Lenihan credits Tyrconnell with taking effective steps to halt his advance at Dundalk.

The bulk of the Williamite War in Ireland, from winter 1689 to the eve of the second siege of Limerick in autumn 1691, is covered by chapter six. Part of it is dedicated to describing Tyrconnell's initial, and less than successful, efforts to get men and supplies from France. Aside from this, there is considerable discussion of failings in the Jacobite campaign. For one, Lenihan argues that the French commander in Ireland, Lauzan, was a liability because, though a capable officer, he was also an outsider at the Louis XIV's court. He thus could not rely on the backing of senior figures at Versailles in the war effort. Lauzan's antipathy to Tyrconnell was another problem. Indeed, Lenihan sees such personal rivals as particularly problematic. Patrick Sarsfield's antipathy towards James II's viceroy was the most notable of these, and the author contends that he (Sarsfield) should have been allowed to go to France to get him out of the way. Compounding the problems, the chapter contends that Tyrconnell and his fellow Jacobite commanders lacked a clear strategy for defeating William of Orange, who arrived in Ireland in 1690. Instead they vacillated between first deciding not to give battle to the Dutch champion, thus losing the opportunity to catch him on advantageous ground in the Moyry Pass, before changing their minds and choosing to confront him on the River Boyne. As for the latter battle, Tyrconnell's actions at the Boyne are both criticised and praised, with his biographer crediting him with organising a successful retreat. After this, however, Tyrconnell became increasingly ineffective. Sarsfield's successful defence of Limerick during the first siege of that city led to Tyrconnell losing face. While a subsequent trip to France by the Lord Deputy to gain more men and supplies proved successful, Tyrconnell's temporary abandonment of the Irish stage allowed his enemies, especially Sarsfield, to gather support there. The appointment of the French officer St. Ruth as Jacobite Commander-in-Chief in Ireland in 1691 weakened Tyrconnell further. Having described the demise of his political and military career in Ireland, the chapter concludes with Talbot's actual death, some six weeks before the war ends. A brief seventh chapter, labelled 'post-mortem', ties up the loose ends left by the preceding narrative. Describing the second siege of Limerick and its aftermath, Lenihan concludes by arguing that the war could have been dragged out by the Jacobites until 1692, though to no great purpose, and that they surrendered at the right time. The author leaves off, however, with a criticism of those Jacobite leaders who succeeded Tyrconnell, as he claims that the latter person would probably have secured better terms if he had been alive to negotiate the surrender.

The conclusion sees Lenihan present his analysis of Talbot's significance. Here he makes a good case for Talbot's worldview being more typical of British, as opposed to Irish, Jacobitism, seeing James II's cause through a three-kingdom lens and not from an exclusively hiberno-centric perspective. This argument is somewhat qualified, however, by the author conceding that Tyrconnell did consider abandoning James II at one stage during the late 1680s and making Ireland a French Protectorate. He simultaneously argues that his subject's life can be broken down into three phases. In the first Talbot was a typical courtier, exercising backstairs influence on events through his connection to the Duke of York, and cultivating tactical friendships and alliances. The second phase of the 'hero's' life dated to the late 1670s and was about surviving the threat posed by the Popish Plot. The final phase coincides with James II's reign and is summarised as one where Talbot proved himself to be a capable, if flawed, soldier and administrator. While evaluating the achievements of these three phases Lenihan concludes that his subject was a remarkably capable and successful figure, whose ultimate defeat by Williamite forces was not pre-ordained. Instead he can be credited with doing much to keep the Jacobite cause viable for so long.

Overall, this reviewer heartily recommends this book to students of both Ireland and Britain in the 17th century. It possesses considerable strengths and few flaws. Indeed, for this reviewer it achieves excellence at certain points in the text. One major value of this biography is that, by looking at mid-to-late 17th century events through the actions of an important, but hitherto understudied figure, it throws new light on that period. The value is only increased by the Talbot's rivalry with persons who themselves have been the

subjects of influential biographies, most notably James Butler, Duke of Ormond and Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon. By looking at events from Talbot's perspective, we get to see things from the point of view of someone who did not see eye to eye with these two colossi of Stuart-era Britain and Ireland. Indeed, a notable, and clearly deliberate, feature of the early part of this text is the author's willingness to challenge the perspectives on British and Irish events in the 17th century handed down to us by these two figures. Previous generations of historians have understandably, and justifiably, been attracted to the vast personal archives left behind by both Ormond and Clarendon. They have also relied heavily on the latter's personal histories of events and his autobiographies, as well as on Edmund Carte's voluminous, and somewhat hagiographical, biography of Ormond. Indeed, so reliant were many Stuart-era historians on these that one sometimes comes across older scholarly books that were completely dependent upon them for their reading of events. One could even say that it is still a feature of some Stuart-era research today. One unfortunate side effect of this has been a tendency to take much of the sources that Clarendon and Ormond left behind at face value.

Lenihan cannot be accused of this, however. He challenges this easy over-reliance upon those very manuscripts and works. This does not mean that he refuses to engage with the works and archives of either Clarendon or Ormond. It simply means that he recognises that both men had a very poor opinion of Talbot and of the political interests he represented, and thus cannot be counted on to be objective in their assessment of any of his subject's dealings. Consequently, he takes an understandably critical and more sceptical approach to these fonts of information, parsing their words and seeking to identify their biases when assessing what they say on the Talbot clan generally. Lenihan also sets them beside other sources for comparison and contrast. The result is undoubtedly interesting, leading to a more (though not completely) sympathetic picture of Richard, and the other Talbots.

The greatest strength of this book, however, lies in its last few chapters covering the Jacobite episode in Irish history. In these pages he makes a notable contribution to the scholarship of this war, dissecting and challenging aspects of the work of scholars like J. G. Simms, John Miller and John Childs. He presents Tyrconnell as someone who, in contrast to the traditional historiography, did not browbeat James II into supporting his (Tyrconnell's) policies and who was not opposed to the Gaelic Irish interest in the country. He also sees his subject as someone whose multi-kingdom approach to the Williamite war alienated him from many other leading figures in the Jacobite camp. He notably pays incisive attention to Jacobite sources, using them to subtly analyse James' leading adherents, and the divisions amongst them.

The book is not without its problems. The first of these arises from the aforementioned lack of sources on certain periods of Talbot's life. This, of course, is not the author's fault. Indeed, his uncovering of new source material has gone some way to remedying this. Nonetheless, the dearth of such fonts of information does lead to Richard Talbot being marginalised within the narrative from time to time, most noticeably in the fourth chapter. Lenihan generally compensates for this admirably, however, in one of two ways. For certain periods he traces out the activities of other members of the Talbot kin, Peter most frequently, assuming, reasonably enough, that their actions can be taken as a broad guide to Richard's thinking. For other periods Lenihan focuses on explaining the historical and political context in which Richard Talbot lived, placing particular emphasis to those policy areas likely to have concerned him.

Another fault arises from Lenihan's efforts to handle Talbot's courtly career. The courtly dimension to the activities of the early-modern Irish elite is frequently neglected and it is good to see an Irish historian pay due attention to what was a notable part of his subject's life. The treatment is somewhat uneven, however. When dealing with Talbot's court life in the 1660s and early 1670s, and his relationship with other courtiers, most notably his patrons, the book is filled with entertaining, well-told tales of deceit, duplicity and devilishness. Yet, these passages do not always convey a full sense of the courtly context in which these events take place, especially when it comes to the nature of patron-client relations in the Stuart world. Consequently, they sometimes come across as quasi-anecdotal in nature. Even here though one cannot be too critical. Unevenness implies good parts as well as bad, and certain things, Talbot's tendency to duelling for example, are well-covered. Moreover, in common with everything else on Jacobite Ireland, Talbot's courtly

intrigues during James II's reign are well-handled.

To sum up Lenihan succeeds in giving us a more rounded and nuanced understanding of his subject, throwing more light on his character. While he does not completely do away with the traditional image of Tyrconnell as a self-serving, bullying liar, the author does show that he was more than a one-dimensional stage villain, being also a politician of considerable ability, perseverance and consistency, who could be tactful and charming when required. He also shows Talbot to be someone whose political vision extended beyond Ireland's shores. While doing this the author succeeds in throwing new light on Irish affairs and Anglo-Irish relations in the 17th century, as well as on the phenomenon of Jacobitism; a movement which would have a major impact on Britain and Ireland well into the 18th century. To Lenihan's further credit those passages of text which review the historiography of late Stuart-era Ireland, and the assumptions that underpin some of the work on this period, manage to provide us with some interesting food for thought. This, in short, is a fine book.

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