

Sir Henry Docwra, 1564–1631: Derry's Second Founder

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Sir Henry Docwra, first baron Docwra of Culmore (in the Irish peerage), personified those who rose thanks to the opportunities offered by Ireland in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Docwra shows how minor gentlemen of obscure but solid backgrounds prospered thanks particularly to soldiering. Less attractively, Docwra also belonged to the band of English, Welsh and Scots who struggled to subdue Ireland and bring it firmly under English rule. In historical writing, Docwra has been overshadowed by contemporaries less bashful about self-promotion and enrichment. Where others, such as Perrot, Mountjoy, Sir George Carew and Chichester, attracted contemporary memorialists, Docwra had to act as his own. He compiled a self-justificatory *Narration*, first edited and published by John O'Donovan in 1849 and recently reissued with a new introduction by Dr William Kelly (Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 2003). But he also wearied superiors with verbose despatches.

At first sight, neither the subject nor the materials look very auspicious for a full biography. Many of those with whom Docwra was involved – from Essex, O'Neill and Mountjoy to Chichester, Buckingham and Cork – have been studied recently and in detail. So, too, have the brutal episodes in which he participated. Of these, the Nine Years' War in Ireland is the chief. Despite the impediments, Dr McGurk has constructed a voluminous account, which in its length sometimes threatens to match its subject's notorious prolixity. The author comes to his subject with an unrivalled mastery of the technical history of Elizabeth's Irish wars. He can also utilise the researches, both published and unpublished, of other investigators of the period. He generously acknowledges his dependence on the interpretative structures supplied by Ciaran Brady on the Elizabethan administration in Ireland, by Hiram Morgan on the dynamics and course of the war in the 1590s, by John McCavitt on the activities of Sir Arthur Chichester in Ulster (and elsewhere), and by Victor Treadwell on the first duke of Buckingham's incorporation of Ireland into his patronage empire by the 1620s. Newer findings, such as the doctoral theses of Jason Dorsett and Rory Rapple, which set the military adventurers in Ireland in larger contexts, both physical (European) and intellectual, are not used. Nevertheless, the result of Dr McGurk's considerable labour is a methodical and convincing analysis of Docwra's career, the climax of which was the securing of the Foyle estuary and the re-founding of what would grow into the city of Derry.

Dr McGurk's particular strengths, like Docwra's, lie in the minutiae of military recruitment, supply, campaigning and tactics. These have been demonstrated already in his earlier work *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: the 1590s Crisis* (Manchester, 1997). He is also at home in the tricky terrain of north-west Ulster, which, bit by bit and at terrible cost, Docwra secured. Painstakingly, belated justice is done to

Docwra's often underestimated contribution to the war against Tyrone and Tyrconnell. Docwra's willingness to use the often controversial policy of making deals with locals is investigated fully. From this meticulous appraisal, the commander emerges as effective, personally courageous and yet wily. He is adjudged to have been less rapacious and corrupt than many of his colleagues in the English armies and administration in Ireland. This conclusion seems tenable: it is not simply that Docwra was better at covering his tracks than those now reputed to have been repulsively mercenary. However, as a politician, Docwra either blundered or bored.

Docwra did not shun the savagery that seems so often to have characterised Tudor and Stuart conduct in Ireland. Accordingly, Dr McGurk brings out the horrors of the warfare, and the severity of the accompanying famine and disease. The biography, with its quietly factual authority, amounts to a grim indictment of the cruelties inflicted on the combatants, particularly by the victors. The study carries greater conviction by avoiding a strident tone. Thereby it succeeds in reintroducing the trauma into the history of the Irish past, as Father Brendan Bradshaw pleaded back in 1989. Less gory are the illustrations. Often they show unfamiliar details of fortifications and strongholds taken from manuscript surveys and maps.

At the outset, Dr McGurk speculates about the formation of Docwra as a soldier, perhaps in the Low Countries and with the earl of Essex at Rouen and Cadiz. He also deals with the long coda of Docwra's service as treasurer at war during the 1620s. Here he makes effective use of the pioneering investigations of Victor Treadwell into the venal worlds of Dublin and Whitehall. However, it is primarily the measured investigation of Docwra as soldier and administrator in the north-west of Ireland that makes this work a welcome addition to the growing literature on the English subjugation of Ireland under Elizabeth I and James I.

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The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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