Published on *Reviews in History* (https://reviews.history.ac.uk)

God’s Executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland

Review Number: 777
Publish date: Friday, 31 July, 2009
Author: Micheál Ó Siochrú
ISBN: 9780571218462
Date of Publication: 2008
Price: £14.99
Pages: 336pp.
Publisher: Faber and Faber
Place of Publication: London
Reviewer: Jason Peacey

The civil wars that engulfed the three kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland in the mid-17th century remain a battlefield, and generation after generation they retain a capacity to provoke passionate debate and heated historical controversy. Within this field, however, there is probably no single individual more likely to generate historiographical heat than Oliver Cromwell, utterly convincing analysis of whose complex personality continues to elude even the greatest of scholars. And within scholarship on Cromwell and the Cromwellian period there is no more controversial topic than his attitude towards, and activity in, Ireland. Cromwell’s name retains the capacity to inflame passions, and in at least some quarters he has become synonymous with religiously inspired brutality and atrocity, with something little short of ethnic cleansing, and with tyranny and military dictatorship. At the same time, however, he is capable of making the ‘top ten’ in a 2002 BBC poll of ‘greatest Britons’. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that the 350th anniversary of Cromwell’s death in 1658 would be commemorated, and that it would revive questions about his reputation. This book represents one of the most substantial and very best pieces of history to emerge from this latest example of academia’s penchant for anniversaries. Ó Siochrú has produced the finest kind of popular history; a work that is both challenging for academic specialists and capable of reaching out to a wider audience. The book is, on the whole, written in a crisp and concise fashion, and makes an important historiographical contribution without becoming bogged down in historiographical debates. It also benefits from generous production values, with a number of valuable maps, a detailed chronology (albeit only covering 1649–53), and a healthy number of glossy portraits of Ó Siochrú’s main protagonists. Perhaps inevitably, however, such an attempt to traverse the scholarly and popular markets creates certain tensions, and it might even be suggested that there are actually two different books here; one a judicious reevaluation of a crucial and contested period of history, and the other a controversial and contentious reading of some of the most bloody episodes in English and Irish history.

This tension is aparent from the very outset, in terms of the very description of the book on the cover and the title page. The cover, with its reproduction of Robert Alexander Hillingford’s 19th-century portrayal of an intense, scowling ‘ironside’, reads *Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland*, something which is then dramatically sexed-up to become *God’s Executioner* on the title page. The latter hints at a provocative reading of Cromwell, but even the former might be considered a misleading guide to the content of Ó Siochrú’s book. In reality, this is not a book about Cromwell, or even the Cromwellian period. It is a book about the Irish aspect of the British civil wars, from 1641 to the mid-1650s, and the Cromwellian massacres

occupy amazingly little space. An alternative title might be *Civil War and Conquest in Ireland*, something which would do much more justice to the nature of Irish, as well as three kingdoms history during this period, and to what is an immensely important contribution to our understanding of a period which is not only contested, but also amazingly complex.

In *this* book, Ó Siochrú is at his best, guiding readers briskly but not at all simplistically through more than a decade of blood and politics. He makes intelligible Irish politics, in terms of the relations between gaelic Irish, Old English Catholics and New English (later 'Old Protestant') settlers, in terms of the tensions between different interests and different policies, and especially in terms of whether or not to strike a deal with Charles I, and on what terms. Ó Siochrú interweaves military and political history, analysis of factions and personalities, and events not merely within the three kingdoms but also across continental Europe, not least with a brilliant discussion of the Duke of Lorraine and possible foreign intervention in Irish affairs. This is a remarkable achievement, based upon a wealth of original research, and genuine expertise. This is not to say, of course, that Ó Siochrú has 'merely' produced the kind of brief and comprehensible narrative of the kind that generations of students and teachers have needed. Indeed, his book contains an original interpretation that builds upon recent scholarship (much of it by Ó Siochrú himself), and one that will not find universal agreement.

Firstly, of course, there is the vexed issue of 'nationalism', and the possibility of detecting nationalist inclinations in Irish politics in the early 1640s. Ó Siochrú is surely right to argue that historians have in the past overplayed the division between the Old English and the native Irish, and yet too much interpretative weight may be argued to have been placed upon comments like those made in 1644, to the effect that 'he that is born in Ireland, though his parents and all his ancestors were aliens, nay if his parents are Indians and Turks, if converted to Christianity, is an Irishman as fully as if his ancestors were born here for thousands of years' (p. 33). This sounds very much like a rhetorical flourish emanating from an attempt to build a political coalition, of the kind that historians should be wary of accepting at face value. Moreover, even though Ó Siochrú is careful enough to avoid the pitfalls of interpretations which either make early modern Irishmen sound too much like modern nationalists, or too quickly dismiss the possibility of 'nationalist tendencies', he nevertheless insists that it is possible to detect 'a sense of corporate or national constitutionalism', and 'a shared sense of patriotism between those living in Ireland and the exiles on the Continent' (p. 34). However, it is surely difficult to extend such analysis very far, given the necessity of also recognising that loyalty was at the same time being professed to the Stuart monarchy, as well as to Rome. Secondly, too much emphasis might be argued to have been placed upon role of the papal nuncio, Rinuccini, in hardening the factional divisions within the confederate Catholic community. Thirdly, even if Ó Siochrú is right to highlight the defects in Ormond's personality and policy, more probably needs to be done to justify the idea that Irish fortunes might have been very different with Owen Roe O'Neill in command of the army.

Contested though such arguments will obviously remain, they obviously constitute a very serious contribution to the scholarly literature, as well as a top quality example of how history can be targeted at a larger audience without too many compromises being made in terms of recognising complexity, and delivering uncomfortable truths, not least by recognising that some Catholics served in the New Model Army in the 1650s. There are grounds for arguing, however, that the same rigour and balance is not always maintained, and that the book occasionally becomes a rather different, and highly contentious treatment of English attitudes towards Ireland. This emerges to a degree regarding the 1641 rebellion, but much more obviously in relation to the Cromwellian conquest, and the massacre at Drogheda.

In many ways, Ó Siochrú's treatment of the Irish rebellion is incredibly valuable. He makes the important point of distinguishing between the aims and intentions of men like Sir Phelim O'Neill, who initiated the rising, and the actions of the forces which were mobilised in the process. Inspired in part by the Scottish covenanters, O'Neill and his allies were clearly engaged in plotting, in order to 'gain control of the kingdom and negotiate with the king from a position of strength' (p. 23), but only sought a 'limited strike' (p. 24), and quickly sought to distance themselves from the 'rabble' which committed atrocities against Protestants. This much is evidently true, as is the emphasis upon the way in which the atrocities were aggressively and

misleadingly spun to an English audience, who were inundated with cheap pamphlets containing sensational stories, dramatic illustrations, and stastistical estimates regarding the number of Protestants killed that were not only wild exaggerations, but literally incapable of being true. Ó Siochrú is also perfectly right to suggest that many more people died from exposure to the elements than from murderous attacks (although their having done so after being dispossessed and stripped of their clothes scarcely makes such behaviour less atrocious), to point out that violence escalated after the military response began to take shape and retaliatory attacks began to take place, and to stress that as many Catholics as Protestants may have died during the rebellion. Nevertheless, it is hard not to read these passages of Ó Siochrú's book without sensing that, while stressing the 'indiscriminate' nature of the anti-Catholic reprisals (p. 26), he has failed to do justice to the nature of anti-Protestant violence. He comments upon the existence of 'a number' of atrocities against settlers, but fails to indicate that these displayed visceral anti-Protestantism, rather than merely murderous lawlesness. Little room is found for the stories, apparently verified by both sides, of physical and verbal attacks upon copies of the vernacular Bible, that most potent symbol of the Protestant reformation.

Where this arguably leads is towards a picture of English attitudes towards the Catholic Irish that is rather caricatured, and very much at odds with the subtlety of Ó Siochrú's analysis of Irish politics. Thus, while it is certainly true that England abounded with 'wild rumours', and ridiculous stories, and that there was a deliberate and vicious campaign to exploit the rebellion, and to stir up support for a concerted military response, and indeed a land grab, it might be too much to argue that popular pamphlets 'fanned hysteria among the English population at large' (p. 28), and that 'a gullible public, horrified yet titillated by the gruesome tales emanating from Ireland, accepted uncritically these wildly exaggerated stories of death and mutilation' (p. 29). If only it were possible to be so confident about the ways in which readers responded to such material, or to make such confident generalisations about public opinion.

On these most contentious episodes in a contentious age, every word and sentence requires very careful choice and formulation, and Ó Siochrú's argument occasionally becomes rather too bold. This is also true of the Cromwellian campaign during 1649–50, where Ó Siochrú makes some brilliant observations – not least to build upon the idea that Drogheda reveals the complexities and difficulties of Cromwell's character – at the same time as some tendentious readings of evidence. For Ó Siochrú, Cromwell was a man who 'uncritically accepted' the horror stories regarding the rebellion, and the claim that the rebellion had no justification or back-story (p. 19), and who was determined to exact revenge upon the Irish Catholic population, irrespective of their involvement in the rising. It is obviously true that evidence from the depositions relating to 1641 was repackaged and recycled in 1649 (as it would be in 1652), as part of the process of developing English policy towards Ireland, and there clearly was a strand within English Protestant attitudes which held that 'God hath marked out that people for destruction', as William Hickman wrote in 1650 (p. 63). The difficulty, however, is in making sense of Cromwell's own comments, as well as of the evidence relating to Drogheda. What are we to make of Cromwell's August 1649 proclamation prohibiting soldiers from harming civilians, or his willingness to execute soldiers who engaged in pillaging, in the light of the events at Drogheda, and Cromwell's claim that the episode represented 'the righteous judgment of God upon those barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood' (p. 84)? Which is the real Cromwell? Ó Siochrú argues that the latter is more representative of Cromwell's attitude, and that the former represented 'prudent military practice', motivated by 'necessity' (p. 79).

However, Ó Siochrú also concedes that Cromwell was operating within the boundaries of accepted military practice by refusing quarter to a garrison which refused to surrender. There is also some mileage in the argument that Cromwell sought to use exemplary force prudentially at the start of his campaign, in the (naïve) hope that this would undermine the resolve of his enemy, and that he could prevent 'the effusion of blood for the future' (p. 85). Moreover, Ó Siochrú may be too confident about the possibility of separating 'fact from fiction, and reality from propaganda, be it parliamentarian or royalist' (p. 83), and some of the most disturbing evidence of atrocities – the apparent killing of Sir Arthur Aston by soldiers under Daniel Axtel *after* quarter had been given – comes from highly problematic sources, and does not directly implicate Cromwell.

As such, we are surely left with something of a puzzle. The nature of this mystery is not whether the campaign involved brutality, because that much is certain, and there is of course the evidence that unarmed civilians were killed in Drogheda. There must be some doubt over whether Cromwell himself wrote the list of those killed, with its now famous comment that 'many inhabitants' lost their lives, but no doubt at all that such evidence came from within Cromwell's camp, and was willingly published by sources close to the English government. Nor does the mystery involve whether or not the Cromwellian campaign revealed bigotry, because that much is plain too, from the pens of Cromwell and others. But what remains unclear is whether or not Cromwell was personally conflicted, and Ó Siochrú himself presents the evidence – not least the 'remorse and regret' expressed regarding Drogheda (p. 85), and the claim not to want to meddle with consciences – with which to construct such an interpretation. And this would, of course, fit very neatly with so much else that we now think about the man, as a result of the work of John Morrill and Blair Worden. Also unclear is whether or not the broader Cromwellian campaign was ever so simple as to be characterised as 'a war of extermination' (p. 85), in which 'the accepted military conventions did not apply in the case of the Catholic Irish' (p. 88).

There might be more mileage in arguing that the Cromwellian campaign reflected a complex mixture of military necessity and political prudence, which of course pulled Cromwell and his forces in different directions, as well as a large degree of anti-Catholic bigotry, which was both a matter of conviction and a rhetorical weapon for mobilising soldiers. Cromwell's response to the declaration in which the Irish bishops claimed that the New Model Army intended to 'extirpate the Catholic religion' from Ireland, and to do so through the 'massacring or banishment of the Catholic inhabitants' (p. 107), arguably revealed all three elements of this mixture. Cromwell insisted that Irishmen who laid down their arms could enjoy the liberties of Englishmen, that those who refused faced 'utmost severity', and that justice and fairness was something which had been 'endeavoured', if not always achieved (p. 117). This complexity is in many ways precisely what Ó Siochrú identifies in the period after 1650. Although he perhaps underestimates the degree of reticence about the conquest in radical and sectarian thought, and rashly proclams that 'the vast majority of opinion in England enthusiastically supported the enterprise' (p. 64), he nevertheless emphasises the very different visions displayed by different factions and different individuals, whether in terms of Charles Fleetwood and Henry Cromwell, or Vincent Gookin and Richard Lawrence. The policy of transplantation, like the brutal treatment of Catholic clerics, was genuinely terrible, but it did not secure complete support in English and Protestant circles, and there genuinely appear to have been some Englishmen who believed that Catholicism, and particularly the Catholic church, was much more of a problem than Irishmen in general, even if others, most obviously within the army, were apparently incapable of making such distinctions.

What would have made this excellent book a really great work, therefore, would have been a truly consistent application of the standards of scrupulous, judicious, open-minded and balanced scholarship that Ó Siochrú sets for himself, and demonstrates in the vast bulk of his analysis. On the most frightening episodes in the Irish theatre of war complexity sometimes gives way to overly crude characterisations of English attitudes, which bring out the undoubted brutality and bigotry of the age, while perhaps failing to recognise the extent to which men like Cromwell were conflicted, and demonstrating more than merely virulent anti-Catholicism. More broadly, it might have been worth supplementing a highly valuable appreciation of the Irish rebellion, which reveals its inherent comprehensibility, if not exactly inevitability, with a more vivid religious back-story, which would help readers to recognise that visceral intolerance and hatred – like military atrocities – existed on both sides, and already had a long heritage by 1641.

Other reviews:
Guardian
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/aug/24/history [2]
irish history
http://www.theirishstory.com/2010/08/29/book-review-god%E2%80%99s-executioner/ [3]

Links

[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/3755 [2] http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/aug/24/history
[3] http://www.theirishstory.com/2010/08/29/book-review-god%E2%80%99s-executioner/