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# Reaping the Turmoil Within: How Ireland's Kings Triggered The Anglo-Norman Invasion

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## REAPING THE TURMOIL WITHIN: HOW IRELAND'S KINGS TRIGGERED THE ANGLO-NORMAN INVASION

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By Catherine Hines

Around A.D. 1000, Brian Bóruma successfully fought his way to the throne, ending a line of dynastic high-kings. From then until the reign of Rory O'Connor (1166-1186), the high-kings of Ireland established their rule over the island's provinces through force and conquest—not strictly by line of succession or constitutional provision.<sup>1</sup> The term “high-king,” from the Irish *ard rí*, meant a “distinguished king who had enforced his power over external territories.”<sup>2</sup> Rory O'Connor,<sup>3</sup> king of Connacht in west Ireland and acknowledged as high-king of all Ireland, was the last of the island's high-kings due to the Anglo-Norman invasion.<sup>4</sup> This invasion began in 1169,<sup>5</sup> and, ironically, O'Connor had a part in initiating it. A chain of events led by the Irish themselves eventually resulted in the subjugation of their entire country. The two primary factors which led to the success of this conquest were the exile of Dermot MacMurrough,<sup>6</sup> king of Leinster, and MacMurrough's decision to request aid from Henry II, king of England. The Anglo-Normans had reasons, arguably both legitimate and illegitimate, to invade Ireland. However, Ireland's own weak political and social structure and, ultimately, her kings themselves made the conquest possible.

Whether or not the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland was justified and legitimate is a question that has been debated from both sides. The English found perfectly valid reasons to invade Ireland, ranging from religious to social justifications, while the Irish claim that the invasion was an unnecessary interference. What the Anglo-Normans saw at the time was chaos, a split nation, bloodshed, and, most importantly, an opportunity.<sup>7</sup>

One of the justifications for the invasion is found in the *Laudabiliter*, a bull from Pope Adrian IV apparently authorizing the attack, or, at the very least, not forbidding it. This bull granted Henry II the right to invade Ireland based on Henry II's desire to “enlarge the bounds of the church, to declare the truth of the

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<sup>1</sup> Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1973), 267, 261, 257.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Lalor, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Ireland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 492.

<sup>3</sup> Also spelled Ruairdri Ua Conchobair, Ruairdhrí Ó Conchobhair, Roderic.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Curtis, *A History of Medieval Ireland from 1086 to 1513*, rev. ed. (1938; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), xix.

<sup>5</sup> Goddard Henry Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans: 1169-1216* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1:145.

<sup>6</sup> Also spelled Diarmait Mac Murchada, Diarmaid Mac Murchu.

<sup>7</sup> The terms “English” and “Anglo-Norman” are used almost interchangeably in this essay to refer to the invaders. However, note that the Anglo-Normans did not come only from England but also from surrounding territories like Wales.

Christian faith to ignorant and barbarous nations,” and “to extirpate the vices that have there taken root...”<sup>8</sup> Although Ireland already had churches and was a “Christianized” nation, the *Laudabiliter* permitted Henry II to “align Irish Christianity with the emerging centralized papacy,” as the Irish church had been fairly independent up to that time.<sup>9</sup> By invading Ireland, Henry II could gain new lands and more money for the Church.<sup>10</sup> To the Anglo-Normans, the cleansing of the Irish church by bringing it under papal authority was legitimate. In addition, they saw their conquest as being in line with God’s will, even shouting as they charged O’Connor in battle, “Strike, in the name of the cross!”<sup>11</sup>

Second, the English also believed they were the ones bringing order to what they perceived to be a barbarous people,<sup>12</sup> and there was a certain amount of truth to this. For example, Irish kings would blind their opponents, and Rory O’Connor went so far as to imprison three and blind one of his own brothers.<sup>13</sup> This perception of the Irish needing a governing force beyond their own system has carried through the years: “We went to Ireland because her people were engaged in cutting one another’s throats; we are there now because, if we left, they would all be breaking one another’s heads.”<sup>14</sup> The Anglo-Normans saw themselves as more advanced—militarily, politically, spiritually, and culturally—than the Irish. Therefore, it was almost considered a kindness for the English king to bring order to chaos.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, as Ireland was divided into several provinces, so each one had its own *ri cóicid*, king of a province.<sup>16</sup> In “the twelfth century any province-king...who could battle-axe his way into sufficient acceptance could become High king when a majority of the seven underkings of Ireland had...done homage.”<sup>17</sup> This demonstrates how the weakness of the Irish political structure influenced the English to invade. Since the kings of Ireland came to power through military might, not necessarily succession, there was no reason to exclude the Anglo-Normans from this contest.

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<sup>8</sup> Lyttleton, “Life of Henry II,” in *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, ed. Ernest F. Henderson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 5:371.

<sup>9</sup> Carmel McCaffrey, *In Search of Ireland’s Heroes: The Story of the Irish from the English Invasion to the Present Day* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2006), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Lyttleton, 371.

<sup>11</sup> Peter W. Sposato, “The Perception of Anglo-Norman Modernity and the Conquest of Ireland,” *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 40 (September 2009): 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Orpen, 1:58-59.

<sup>14</sup> J. H. Round, “The Conquest of Ireland,” *The Commune of London and Other Studies* (1899): 168, quoted in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland: 400-1200*, ed. Steven G. Ellis (London: Longman, 1995), 272.

<sup>15</sup> Sposato, 27, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Byrne, 261.

<sup>17</sup> Curtis, xx.

To the Irish, however, these were not justifiable grounds for the occupation. As Brian Ó Cuív, Senior Professor for the School of Celtic Studies at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, points out, the religious leaders of Ireland had already seen the need and were taking the necessary steps to bring about reformation in the churches.<sup>18</sup> They had noted in their old monastic organization that there was a lack of priests available to lead the people. By 1152 the religious leaders of Ireland had successfully reorganized Ireland into thirty-six pastoral sees, thereby providing more widespread leadership in the church.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, there has been much argument about the validity of the *Laudabiliter* and, therefore, the legitimacy of the invasion. Apparently there is no original copy,<sup>20</sup> and the question is whether Pope Adrian IV actually wrote this bull or if it was a forgery simply used to give the conquest authority of church sanction. It is known that a contemporary historian, Gerald of Wales, wrote an introduction to the *Laudabiliter* in his “Expugnatio Hibernica,” and it was from him that the earliest copy of the bull comes. One hypothesis is that Gerald of Wales circulated the document to glorify the efforts of his kinsmen who were fighting the Irish, trying to gain this “desirable possession” of land.<sup>21</sup> Advocates of the Irish tend to say that it is a forgery, but many other historians cite the bull as if it were absolute fact.<sup>22</sup> Due to the disorganized and violent state of Ireland, with the constant feuding between kings, some argue the logic of the pope believing the Irish church needed reform.<sup>23</sup> Even if Pope Adrian did not write the *Laudabiliter*, his successor, Alexander III, later granted Ireland to Henry II.<sup>24</sup>

However, Irish sympathizers argue that not only was the church undergoing reform, but Ireland as a whole was on its way to becoming a unified nation. What appeared to be chaos was actually growing pains,<sup>25</sup> and some thought that when “Ruaidrí took the high-kingship in 1166 it looked as if the O’Connors might succeed in establishing feudal-style hereditary kingship which would be comparable to the dynasties in other countries.”<sup>26</sup> Ireland’s rulers may or may not have ever succeeded in creating a strong central government, but, whatever

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Ó Cuív, “Ireland in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” in *The Course of Irish History*, rev. ed., ed. T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1995), 116-120.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-120.

<sup>20</sup> Kate Norgate, “The Bull *Laudabiliter*,” *The English Historical Review* 8, no. 29 (January, 1893): 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-23.

<sup>22</sup> For a more complete description of this debate and the positions of specific historians, see Kate Norgate’s article, “The Bull *Laudabiliter*.”

<sup>23</sup> Norgate, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Curtis, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Byrne, 269.

<sup>26</sup> Ó Cuív, 121.

the reality, the foreigners saw only barbaric behavior and an opportunity.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of the validity of the claims from Irish sympathizers, there was inner turmoil and weakness that invited ambitious men to seek glory and new lands.

An ironic twist in this history is MacMurrough's expulsion from Ireland in 1166.<sup>28</sup> This exile developed from two main causes. First, MacMurrough, the provincial king of Leinster, had made a bitter enemy of one of O'Connor's closest supporters, Tighnernen O'Ruairc, by abducting O'Ruairc's wife years earlier.<sup>29</sup> Although he retrieved her, O'Ruairc never forgot this insult from MacMurrough.<sup>30</sup> Second, MacMurrough aspired to the high-kingship and challenged O'Connor for the title after the previous high-king had died.<sup>31</sup> Even when he returned to Ireland later, MacMurrough had not forgotten his designs on the throne of Ireland, and he plotted with the English to take the high-kingship from O'Connor.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not O'Ruairc, out of revenge, instigated MacMurrough's exile by encouraging O'Connor to be rid of him, it is certain that they fought MacMurrough. His own men deserted him, and he was forced to flee Ireland.<sup>33</sup> This feuding between kings and the attempt to display the power of the high-king led directly to the coming of the Anglo-Normans, who aided MacMurrough in his fight to regain his territory in Ireland.

From Ireland, Dermot MacMurrough went almost directly to appeal for foreign aid in reclaiming his lost province.<sup>34</sup> Enlisting the services of foreign aid was not uncommon,<sup>35</sup> and MacMurrough did not seem to hesitate in asking Henry II to help him regain his kingdom, especially since he had lent aid to Henry II the previous year for the king's campaign in Wales.<sup>36</sup> The irony then is, even though the invasion started small with an exiled king enlisting the aid of foreigners to reclaim his throne, it grew into an English takeover of the island.

At first, Henry II was too embroiled in his conflict with Thomas Becket to go to Ireland himself, so he sent a letter with MacMurrough entitling Henry II's subjects to help MacMurrough if they were willing. Ultimately, Richard Fitz Gilbert (Earl of Striguil in Wales, also known as "Strongbow") and many others answered the summons.<sup>37</sup> O'Connor and some of his subjects, including O'Ruairc, attempted to put an end to the invasion by besieging Dublin where the

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<sup>27</sup> Sposato, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Ó Cróinín, 285.

<sup>29</sup> Curtis, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Orpen, 1:56.

<sup>31</sup> Marie Therese Flanagan, *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship: Interactions in Ireland in the Late Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.), 79.

<sup>32</sup> Whitley Stokes, "The Irish Abridgement of the 'Expugnatio Hibernica,'" *The English Historical Review* 20, no. 77 (January 1905), 81.

<sup>33</sup> Curtis, 33-34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Byrne, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Ó Cróinín, 286.

<sup>37</sup> Orpen, 1:84-85; Stokes, 91.

invaders had settled. The high-king was unable to defeat them and was then forced to retreat.<sup>38</sup> Later, when Henry II decided to go to Ireland and claim lordship over the island, the provincial kings began yielding to him for various reasons.<sup>39</sup> It may have been from fear of the ambitions of Anglo-Norman invaders that they wished Henry II to take total control or even because they thought he would leave them alone once he established his rule.<sup>40</sup> Finally, after seeing all his sub-kings submitting, Rory O'Connor yielded to the king of England as well. The archbishop of Dublin pleaded with the two armies to make peace, and the Treaty of Windsor of October 1175 briefly halted hostilities. It granted O'Connor the continuance of his rule in the west over all lands not already taken by the Anglo-Normans under the condition that he recognized the over-lordship of Henry II and the English king's right to those territories already conquered in eastern Ireland.<sup>41</sup> However, Henry II eventually disregarded this treaty and did not stop his ambitious nobles from continuing their conquest of the island. Later, he even formally granted them more territory that had not been previously conquered.<sup>42</sup>

How did this attempt by one provincial king to regain territory evolve into such a complete change for Ireland? Assuredly, MacMurrough ushered the Anglo-Normans into Ireland, but the real answer lies in the weakness of the Irish kingship's structure. The first problem with this government was that there were no constitutional provisions for a high-king.<sup>43</sup> The law tracts written in the eighth century did not change with Irish politics to authorize a high-king.<sup>44</sup> Although there was a hierarchy of kings, and for several centuries one dynasty claimed the high-kingship,<sup>45</sup> after Brian Bóruma, this title was achieved through conquest more than through nationally recognized legislation.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the years leading up to the Anglo-Norman invasion, there was almost constant warring between the kings in an effort to gain the title of *ard rí*, and this is displayed in the subsequent and synonymous title "high-king with opposition."<sup>47</sup> A man could be high-king if he had subjugated enough tribes and collected tribute from enough of the provinces,<sup>48</sup> but there was usually another provincial king, such as MacMurrough, who did not accept the high-king's claim and sought to gain that title for himself.<sup>49</sup> The kingship of Ireland was not a stable

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<sup>38</sup> Stokes, 91; Ó Cróinín, 287.

<sup>39</sup> Lalor, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Curtis, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Stokes, 95, 97; Ó Cróinín, 289.

<sup>42</sup> Curtis, 69, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Byrne, 261-262.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>45</sup> Curtis, xix.

<sup>46</sup> Byrne, 261.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-70.

<sup>48</sup> Curtis, xx.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

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system. If it had been, Henry II may never have taken the measures granted him by the pope.<sup>50</sup> Due to the near impossibility of pointing to one man as the true power in Ireland, even though Rory O'Connor was high-king at the time, it could be inferred that when Henry II claimed lordship of Ireland, he was creating the much needed centralized government.<sup>51</sup>

The fractured nature of Irish government and the constant warring between the kings also provided the Irish people with little concept, much less the reality, of national unity. This, of course, made them vulnerable and easy prey for the Anglo-Normans. Although the *ard rí* technically had the right to call all the militia of Ireland together if need be, rarely did all of Ireland obey a summons of this kind.<sup>52</sup> If O'Connor had been able to gather the entire force of Ireland behind him in order to combat MacMurrough and the Anglo-Normans, it is unlikely that MacMurrough would have succeeded in taking back his region of Ireland.<sup>53</sup> All the provincial kings did not all follow O'Connor, however, and a country whose people will not band together for its own defense is a country easily conquered.

Thus, relatively quietly, Ireland came under the control of the king of England—an occupation of territory that has lasted for centuries and continues to cause tension and ill-will. The English nobles did not hold to their part of the Treaty of Windsor but expanded across the island, eating up the ground of the high-kings. The Anglo-Normans had come through a door opened by the Irish kings themselves. Whatever the initial intentions of MacMurrough were, his actions, coupled with the disorganization of the Irish kingship and the efforts of English subjects, brought about the end of an entire governmental system. The high-kingship died with the invasion, and the last *ard rí*, Rory O'Connor, died in 1199 almost forgotten.<sup>54</sup> One author recognized a striking connection between the few lines of a poem by Emily Dickenson and the end of the era of high-kings:

A great Hope fell  
You heard no noise  
The ruin was within.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ó Cuív, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Sposato, 32.

<sup>52</sup> Curtis, xxi.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Emily Dickenson, "A Great Hope Fell," quoted in Ó Cróinín, 290.