

Contextualising the Ulster Plantation

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A Review of

Éamonn Ó Ciardha & Micheál Ó Siochrú (eds) *The Plantation of Ulster: Ideology and Practice.*

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This multidisciplinary collection of essays emerged from a conference marking the 400th anniversary of the Ulster Plantation. Numerous other plantation schemes had been implemented in Ireland during the previous century, but the end of the Nine Years' War, the union of crowns under King James I and VI, and the 1607 Flight of the Earls opened the gate for an Irish colonial project like no other. It was a massive venture in social engineering and one which would bring English, Scottish, and Irish peoples of Catholic and Protestant belief to live side and side. Fresh investigation into the momentous seventeenth-century plantation of Ulster has been long overdue and, fortunately, the essays included in this volume provide a great display of the scope and quality of research which can be done on this topic.

The editors' introductory chapter clearly establishes the aims of the collection and lays the important groundwork on which the succeeding essays build. Jenny Wormald's essay focuses on James's attitude towards Ulster and plantation through an assessment of his earlier experiences with projects in Scottish Gaeldom. She makes the case that James's approach to Ulster, Hugh O'Neill, and the continued practice of Catholicism was more lenient than his predecessor, Elizabeth I. In fact, James had hoped to use O'Neill as an agent for good government in Ulster much like the earls of Argyll and Huntly had been employed in the Scottish Highlands. His plans, however,

were scuppered in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot and the Flight of the Earls, which, Wormald argues, was the unfortunate outcome of O'Neill's misinterpretation of James's intentions for Ulster and its chief lords. Martin MacGregor also uses a Scottish perspective when tackling the Stuart approach to plantation and 'civilising' the Gaelic peripheries. In doing so, he asks the intriguing question: 'if Ireland was a laboratory for empire, then it is legitimate to ask if ... Gaelic Scotland was a laboratory for Ulster'.¹

Phil Withington's chapter addresses the 'paradox surrounding what has been called the Elizabethan "monarchical republic"'.² Assessing the many components which support the concept of monarchical republic, he adds a new dimension to the discussion by investigating the corporate character of colonialism. A corporate rhetoric is evident in the plantation projects and literature discussed, and it is clear this practical consideration influenced many who were charged with designing and implementing the plantation of Ulster. It is a smooth transition from Withington's discussion of urbanity and colonialism to Ian Archer's chapter on the city of London's colonial ventures in County Londonderry. Though the corporation of London was indicted for its failure to satisfy many conditions of plantation, it was not for lack of effort, but rather the limitations of finance, manpower, and political factionalism.

Raymond Gillespie addresses ideas of success and failure in the plantation by exploring its impact on power structures in Ulster and how this shaped the identities of the various ethnic and confessional groups involved. Colin Breen's essay is an insightful archaeological investigation of plantation, and his analysis of the 'unofficial' MacDonnell plantations reveals a structured and organised settlement

scheme which offers evidence ‘of a considerable level of native Irish integration and involvement’.³ Focusing on how the Catholic church in Ulster was reinvigorated by continentally-educated clerics after 1609, Brian Mac Cuarta explores ecclesiastical reform efforts and how certain factors, especially poverty, shaped Ulster Catholicism in different ways than what occurred in Ireland’s southern provinces.

Andrew Hadfield investigates the chicken-and-egg debate over Spenser’s influence on the colonial mind, positing that Spenser, and the arguments he advanced, were actually a product of the intellectual philosophies and rhetoric fostered at English grammar schools and universities. Although Ireland is evident in so much of Spenser’s work, Willy Maley explores the perplexing question of why, if so much of official records on the Jacobean period are consumed by the Ulster plantation, does Ireland feature so little in works of English literature and drama. Indeed, literary portrayals of Ireland and the Irish are largely limited to works of propaganda and images of the stereotypical stage Irishmen. Nicholas McDowell investigates the inconvenient Cromwellian opinions expressed by liberal thinker John Milton in his propagandist tract, *Observations*, and the perceived threat posed by Scottish Presbyterians.

Through analyses of Gaelic literature and letters, Marc Caball and Diarmaid Ó Doibhlin make valuable contributions by considering the plantation from the underexplored, and therefore historically underrepresented, Gaelic Irish perspective. Marc Caball’s investigation of the Gaelic Irish reaction through poetry reveals a sense of upheaval and loss with the Flight of the Earls and the resultant collapse of the old Gaelic order. From the perspective of the poets, all the cherished aspects of Gaelic

culture and society – nobility, religion, sport, agricultural production, and most importantly, scholarship – had ‘been usurped by arrogant arriviste interlopers of base origin from Scotland and England’.⁴ But, as Diarmaid Ó Doibhlin proposes, in lamenting the past and continuing to produce Gaelic manuscripts at home and abroad, the Gaelic learned classes were undergoing a process of transformation which involved modernising their letters to adapt to the emerging modern world of national languages. This development was undoubtedly a crucial element in the formation of an emerging Irish Catholic national identity.

An impressive first volume for Manchester University Press’s new series, *Studies in Early Modern Irish History*, Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Micheál Ó Siochrú are to be commended for editing this important collection. *The Plantation of Ulster: Ideology and Practice* makes a valuable contribution to a growing body of scholarship on the development and implementation of early modern colonial ideas and policies, but especially in terms of the implications for the English, Scottish, and Irish peoples who encountered one another through the Ulster plantation project. These essays do indeed go some way towards offering ‘important redress’ by ‘moving away from an exclusive colonial perspective, to include the native Catholic experience’ and will, no doubt, ‘stimulate further research into this crucial episode in Irish and British history’.⁵

¹ Martin MacGregor, ‘Civilising Gaelic Scotland: the Scottish Isles and the Stuart Empire’ in Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Micheál Ó Siochrú (eds.), *The Plantation of Ulster: Ideology and Practice* (Manchester, 2012), p 36.

² Phil Withington, ‘Plantation and Civil Society’ in Ó Ciardha and Ó Siochrú (eds.), *Plantation of Ulster*, p 56.

³ Colin Breen, 'Randall MacDonnell and early seventeenth-century settlement in northeast Ulster, 1603-30' in Ó Ciardha and Ó Siochrú (eds.), *Plantation of Ulster*, p 143.

⁴ Marc Caball, 'Responses to transformation: Gaelic poets and the plantation of Ulster' in Ó Ciardha and Ó Siochrú (eds.), *Plantation of Ulster*, p 177.

⁵ Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Micheál Ó Siochrú, 'Introduction' in Ó Ciardha and Ó Siochrú (eds.), *Plantation of Ulster*, p 12.